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Research Paper

Positive Deviance and Adolescent Physical Activity: Understanding Factors That Promote High Engagement

Jyoti Singh[1]*, Dr. Manju[2]

ABSTRACT

Adolescent physical inactivity is a growing public health challenge with serious implications for long-term health outcomes. While many youths struggle to meet recommended physical activity levels, a subset known as positive deviants maintain exceptionally high engagement despite facing similar environmental and social barriers. This study explores the distinguishing factors that set positively deviant (physically active) adolescents apart from their less active peers. By using positive deviance theory, the present research highlights two main influences: positive body image, and higher level of general self-efficacy. The findings also indicate that personal drivers like enjoyment and resilience, strong support from family and friends, and proactive habits such as self-monitoring and goal-setting help maintain physical activity. Understanding these natural behaviors gives important insights for creating more relatable and effective health programs for youth. Future interventions should aim to strengthen existing positive behaviors in communities to encourage more young people to participate in active lifestyles.

Keywords: *Positive Deviance, Adolescent Physical Activity, General Self-Efficacy, Social Support, Behavioral Strategies, Youth Health Promotion*

In recent years, the drop in physical activity among adolescents has become a serious public health issue. This pattern has contributed to increasing rates of obesity, mental health problems, and chronic diseases in the later stages of life. As adolescents are influenced by digital distractions and changing social norms, they lead sedentary lives; even after the awareness being spread through social media & other platforms. However, each community has individuals who challenge these trends. These adolescents are known as "positive deviants," who consistently engage in high levels of physical activity, despite facing the same challenges as their less active peers. Positive deviance has been taken as a concept from social and health sciences. It describes the behaviors and strategies of individuals who achieve better outcomes than others in similar situations. Conducting research on these adolescents can reveal sustainable, community-based solutions to physical inactivity. By studying about the strengths, rather than only focusing on the lack, positive deviance shifts the conversation toward empowerment and practicality. This paper aims to

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India
[2]Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India
*Corresponding Author

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answer the question: What sets positively deviant adolescents, who maintain high levels of physical activity, apart from their less active peers? Analyzing general self-efficacy, body image, supportive social environments, and adaptive behavioral strategies among these adolescents will provide insights into their success. It will also help identify ways to encourage such behaviors in the wider youth population.

Positive deviance (PD) is a theoretical approach based on the idea that within any community, there are individuals or groups who adopt uncommon but effective behaviors or strategies. These behaviors allow them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, even when facing similar constraints (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010)[1]. The theory began with nutrition and public health work in the 1990s, particularly in Vietnam, where certain families managed to raise well-nourished children despite widespread poverty. These families were seen as "positive deviants" because their practices, while not typical, led to much better outcomes. PD is built on four main principles: (1) solutions already exist within the community, (2) communities are the best at solving their problems, (3) solutions are more sustainable when they come from within, and (4) behavior change can happen without outside resources. These ideas stress the importance of using existing successful behaviors instead of imposing outside models.

Over the past twenty years, PD has been used in health behavior research, including studies on hand hygiene, maternal care, HIV prevention, and dietary habits. It has proven effective in finding behavior-driven solutions that are practical and replicable because they are already used by community members facing the same challenges (Pascale et al., 2010)[1]. In the area of adolescent physical activity, positive deviance provides a useful perspective, shifting the research focus from average behavior and risk factors to exceptional cases—those adolescents who remain active despite societal norms, time limits, or environmental barriers. Instead of asking why adolescents are inactive, PD asks how some manage to stay active. This approach fits well with strengths-based public health models and can lead to more relevant, culturally sensitive, and practical interventions.

Characteristics of Positively Deviant Adolescents

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy plays an important role in determining the levels of physical activity among adolescents. Adolescents who believe in their ability to be physically active are more likely to set and go after activity-related goals (Dishman et al., 2005)[3]. The ability to deal with uncertain situations or keep going in the face of challenges i. e. Resilience is a common attribute found among positively deviant youth. Such adolescents adapt quickly and tend to focus, even under untoward situations. This helps them in consideration of a long-term perspective on their health and fitness goals.

Another key characteristic of positively deviant adolescents is their strong intrinsic motivation, which is closely related to self-efficacy. As per Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation is the internal drive to engage in activities for their own enjoyment rather than for external rewards (Deci & Ryan, 1985)[7]. These adolescents often pursue physical activity because they find it enjoyable, meaningful and connected to their personal goals.

Positive Body Image

Adolescents who were labelled as positively deviant in the research presented a pattern involving general satisfaction with their body image. They have well-formed routines and strategies for regulating those behaviour that help them stay active. These include setting a goal, observing & monitoring the behaviour, and forming good habits. For example, they might plan exercise sessions on a regular basis, track the workout progress, and adjust their routines to stay involved and motivated. These actions reflect research showing that adolescents who use self-management strategies tend to be more active and maintain these habits over time (Dishman et al., 2005)[3]. Unlike peers who may participate occasionally or depend on outside motivators, positively deviant adolescents often adopt these behaviors as part of their identity—seeing themselves as "fit," "athletes" or "active people"—which helps maintain their consistency.

Social and Environmental Influences

Family Support

Family plays a significant role in shaping adolescent activity. Positively deviant adolescents usually come from homes where physical activity is encouraged and practiced. Active parents who provide rides to sports events and show support can greatly influence their children's activity levels (Sallis, Prochaska, & Taylor, 2000)[9]. Families that focus on active lifestyles—like weekend hikes, bike rides, or physical chores—create a household where movement is valued. Even in families with fewer resources, emotional support and encouragement can help set positively deviant youth apart from others.

Peer Networks

Adolescents are heavily impacted by their social circles, and positively deviant youth often spend time with active peers. Peer influence comes into play through direct encouragement, shared activities, and reinforcement of positive attitudes towards movement and health (Jago et al., 2009)[8]. For instance, adolescents with friends who regularly play sports are more likely to get involved in physical activities themselves. Positive deviance may also involve selective friendship where active adolescents seek out peers with similar interests, creating a supportive cycle that promotes engagement and motivation.

School and Community Resources

Schools offer physical education, extracurricular sports, or informal play areas tend to provide essential chances for physical activity. When there are parks, playgrounds, and walking paths in vicinity, it greatly affects adolescents' willingness to participate in outdoor activities (Seabra et al., 2011)[5]. Positively deviant adolescents may take advantage of these resources quite often as compared to their less motivated peers.

Comparison with NPD peer group

As suggested by Sallis et al.[9] in a study conducted in 2000, though positively deviant adolescents flourish in comparable surroundings to their less active counterparts, the distinctions between the two groups highlight significant obstacles and aids. Non-positive deviants (NPD) adolescents frequently attribute their lack of activity to poor motivation, reduced self-confidence, bad peer influence and pressures related to academics. Conversely, positive deviant teenagers perceive or tackle these obstacles differently. An adolescent exhibiting positive deviance may favor solitary activities such as running or dancing, over team sports. Significantly, positively deviant teenagers frequently perceive difficulties as

challenges to overcome rather than as motives for retreat. They may depend more on their personal coping mechanisms, such as resilience and goal-setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescents who are positive deviants in this research or who are quite regular in doing physical activities, even when the situations are not very supportive have shown different psychological, social, and behavioral characteristics that separate them from their peers. Research is increasingly emphasizing the significance of higher self-efficacy, positive body image, effective behavioral strategies, support from others, and intrinsic motivation as critical differences.

Studies in psychology and exercise science indicate that a favorable body image significantly motivates involvement in and adherence to physical activity. Individuals content with their physiques are inclined to engage in exercise more regularly, select a variety of activities, and express more enjoyment. Conversely, body dissatisfaction correlates with exercise avoidance, negative emotions during physical activity, or engagement primarily motivated by beauty concerns, which may diminish sustainability. Martin Ginis, K.A., & Bassett [21] in 2011 found body satisfaction to be a major determinant of exercise initiation and persistence, especially in women and adolescents.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)[7] emphasizes that intrinsic motivation, which is the enjoyment of activities for their own sake rather than for external rewards, is a significant predictor of continued physical activity among adolescents. In comparison to their less active peers, active adolescents frequently experience a greater sense of independence, greater self-confidence, and authentic joy in exercise (Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2003)[10]. This internal motivation enables them to surmount external obstacles such as peer pressure, resource constraints, or time constraints. Another pivotal factor is the support provided by family and friends. Research suggests that adolescents who are active are more likely to have parents who promote healthy lifestyles and encourage their participation in sports and recreational activities (Sallis et al., 2000)[9]. In the same vein, adolescents are positively motivated to maintain their physical activity levels by peer groups that prioritize physical activity (Jago et al., 2009)[8]. These activities are further bolstered by the availability of school programs, sports teams, and community facilities, which offer social encouragement and opportunities.

A study conducted by Dishman et al., 2005[3] shows that active adolescents frequently implement effective strategies such as self-monitoring, time management, and goal-setting. They are inclined to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines and modify their plans in response to changes in circumstances. They may pursue alternative activities during difficult weather or use alternative locations for exercise. Conversely, adolescents who are less physically active frequently identify obstacles such as inadequate motivation, inadequate familial support, restricted access to secure environments, and detrimental peer pressures (Seabra et al., 2011)[5]. Without any strong internal or external motivations, these adolescents are more likely to adopt sedentary lifestyles and gradually abandon physical activity. In summary, adolescents who are actively engaged are distinguished by their proactive, adaptable behaviors, strong intrinsic motivation, and robust support networks. By comprehending these components, interventions can be developed that prioritize real-world efficacy over merely theoretical concepts.

Objectives

Understanding the factors leading to high physical activity among adolescent boys & girls. Positively deviant adolescents who maintain high levels of physical activity differ from their less active peers through a combination of intrinsic motivation, supportive social environments, and adaptive behavioral strategies. This paper analyzes the role of body image & general self efficacy in maintaining a high level of physical activity.

1. To examine the relationship between physical activity and body image satisfaction.
2. To examine the relationship between physical activity and general self-efficacy.
3. To examine the relationship between body image satisfaction (ABISS) and general self-efficacy (GSE).
4. To explore the predictors of physical activity.

Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis 1** There will be significant positive correlation between consistent physical activity and adolescent body image satisfaction.
- **Hypothesis 2** There will be significant positive correlation between level of physical activity and general self- efficacy.
- **Hypothesis 3** There will be significant positive correlation between the body image satisfaction (ABISS) and general self-efficacy (GSE).
- **Hypothesis 4** Body Image satisfaction and self-efficacy would be the significant predictors of physical activity.

METHODOLOGY

Sample for data acquisition

Data was collected from 93 participants, comprising 49 females and 44 males, who were identified as positive deviants after using the standardized questionnaires. The questionnaire included was the Physical activity questionnaire & Locus of control questionnaire to identify positive deviants. To understand the factors promoting physical activity, ABISS (Adolescent body image satisfaction scale), GSE (General self-efficacy scale) were used. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling method, with strict inclusion criteria specifying adolescents aged between 13 to 17 years. They were divided into two groups based on their level of physical activity- positive deviants & non-positive deviants.

Instrument

The Adolescent body image satisfaction scale, as developed by James E. Leone, Elizabeth M. Mullin, Suanne S. Maurer-Starks, and Michael J. Rovito[11] in 2014, consists of 16 items and is a self-report questionnaire aimed at measuring body image satisfaction among adolescents. Each item in the scale was to be responded to on the 4-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The subjects were required to tick the option to each statement which best describes their feeling. Higher scores equate to a stronger level of body image dissatisfaction.

The General Self Efficacy scale developed by Matthias Jerusalem and Ralf Schwarzer in 1981. It is a self-report measure of self-efficacy. The total no. of items in this test are ten. The General Self-Efficacy Scale indicates a positive correlation to emotion, optimism and work satisfaction. Each item in the scale was to be responded to on the 4-point scale from "

Not at all true" to "Exactly true". Total score for an individual is calculated by calculating the sum of the all items. The total score in this scale ranges between 10 and 40, where the higher score indicates higher self-efficacy.

Procedure

To study the factors that affect levels of physical activity among adolescents, standardized questionnaires were used as the method of data collection. Informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was ensured. The survey was designed with clear instructions to reduce response bias. Data collection adhered to ethical standards, including privacy and confidentiality protocols. Rigorous data cleaning procedures were implemented to remove incomplete or invalid responses, ensuring the quality and integrity of the research findings. This rigorous screening resulted in a final dataset of 93 responses consisting of 49 females and 44 males. Excel and SPSS were employed to perform descriptive and inferential analyses (regression). In the final stages of the research, the results of statistical analysis are reported. These findings were presented with supporting statistics tables.

RESULTS

Table 1.1 Inter-correlational matrix of selected variables

Variables	PAQ	ABISS	SE
PAQ	1.000	-.237*	.166*
ABISS	-.237	1.000	-.327
SE	.166	-.327**	1.000

*p>.05 **p>.01

The aim of the present research is to see the relationship among selected variables. For that, Pearson's Product moment method was used & the results revealed a negative relation between physical activity and body image satisfaction which means positive correlation as higher score on adolescent body image satisfaction scale means body dissatisfaction. The individual who were dissatisfied with their body image were more involved in physical activities. The correlational coefficients have been shown in Table-1.1. Hence, it confirms the first hypothesis of this research paper which states that "There will be significant positive correlation between consistent physical activity and adolescent body image satisfaction." It has been proven by an earlier study that individuals with higher body satisfaction report stronger intrinsic motivation for exercise, linking positive body image to sustainable physical activity (Sabiston, C.M., Pila, E., Vani, M., & Thogersen-Ntoumani, C. (2019)[20]. Another study conducted by Ciccolo et. al. (2004)[22] showed increased body satisfaction following structured exercise, which predicted longer-term activity adherence. Homan and others (2014)[23] found that exercising for enjoyment and health (rather than appearance) strengthened the link between body satisfaction and frequent activity.

Second objective was to check the relationship between PAQ & GSE. A **positive correlation** is exhibited between **PAQ** and **GSE**. This suggests that as **general self-efficacy (GSE)** increases, **PAQ** scores also tend to increase. Research shows that physical activity tends to enhance confidence in one's ability to handle challenges (self-efficacy) or vice-versa. Studies across various samples from adolescent populations confirmed that while physical activity supports psychological outcomes, general self-efficacy improvements are modest compared to domain-specific self-efficacy (e.g., self-efficacy leading to physical exercise). Research conducted by Rodriguez-Romo, G., et al. (2009)[24] on Physical activity, self-efficacy and self-esteem in adolescents also established a weak positive correlation ($r \approx$

0.21) between physical activity and general self-efficacy in adolescents. Another study conducted by Pu et al. (2017)[27] based on the relationship between physical activity and self-efficacy among Chinese university students reported a weak positive correlation (r ≈ 0.18) between weekly physical activity and self-efficacy. Shen et al. (2007)[28] conducted the research on the relationship between self-efficacy and physical activity in adolescent girls and identified significant positive correlations**.**

The third objective was to examine the relationship between ABISS & Self-Efficacy. As higher score on adolescent body image satisfaction scale means body dissatisfaction. The individual who were dissatisfied with their body image were having lower self-efficacy or vice-versa. Hence, it confirms the third hypothesis of this research paper. A study titled 'Self-efficacy, self-esteem and body image as psychological determinants of 15-year-old adolescents' physical activity levels' conducted in 2012 by Kołoło, Guszkowska, Mazur & Dzielska[33] also proved this relationship.

Predictors of Physical activity

The last objective of the present analysis was to examine the predictors of physical activity among adolescents. Stepwise regression analysis was used, and the results are presented in Table 1.1.

Table 1.2 Summary of Regression analysis for physical activity

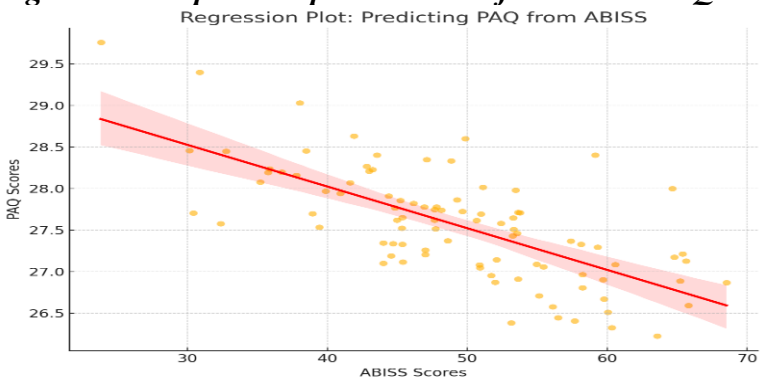
	R	R Square	R Square Change	Beta	F	Sig. F
ABISS	**.237[a]**	**.046**	**.056**	**-0.237**	**5.408**	**.022**

a. Dependent Variable: PAQ

The regression analysis showed that **Adolescent body image satisfaction (ABISS)** emerged as a significant positive predictor of physical activity. The regression model was mildly significant, F (1, 91) =5.40, p = .05. The multiple R value of 0.237 and R^2 value of 0.046 revealed that ABISS explains only 5.6% variance in physical activity. The regression coefficient (β = 0.237, p < .05) indicates that adolescents with higher body satisfaction reported slightly higher levels of physical activity. However, the effect size was modest, suggesting that body image satisfaction contributes positively, to adolescents' engagement in physical activity.

A graph presenting the regression plot of ABISS as predictor of consistent physical activity is plotted.

Figure 1.1 Graphical representation of ABISS & PAQ



Across many regression models, adolescent body image satisfaction is positively associated with engagement in physical activity.

A study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health titled 'Body image and physical activity in adolescence: Longitudinal associations in regression models' revealed **body image predicted physical activity significantly**, accounting for less than five percent of variance. Another research conducted by Neumark-Sztainer, D., Paxton, S. J., Hannan, P. J., Haines, J., & Story, M.[12] in 2006, using longitudinal regression concluded that higher body satisfaction predicted more physical activity, though effect sizes were weak. A similar study conducted by Menzel, J. E., & Levine[31] also predicted the same pattern.

As only body image emerged as a sole predictor of physical activity denying the role of self-efficacy. So, the fourth hypothesis got rejected.

Limitation and Scope

This study is subject to few limitations, notably relying on self-report measures vulnerable to biases like social desirability and cultural biases in questionnaire interpretation may compromise cross-cultural validity, and the sample's homogeneity, regionally and educationally, limits broader generalizability. Conducting the study with a larger and more diverse sample would improve the generalizability of the results. Employing mixed methods approaches, such as incorporating in-depth one-on-one interviews alongside quantitative surveys, would offer a better understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Moreover, expanding the age range of participants beyond adolescents and exploring translated versions of assessment tools would enhance cross-cultural validity and broaden applicability.

CONCLUSION

Positive deviance (PD) is a framework first organized by researchers like Zeitlin et al. (1990) and later expanded by Pascale, Sternin, and Sternin (2010)[1]. It suggests that in every community, some individuals succeed against the odds by showing unusual but effective behaviors. These individuals have the same resources and limitations as their peers, yet they find different solutions to common problems. This approach has been widely used in health research, especially in areas like nutrition (Lapping et al., 2002), infectious disease control (Friedman et al., 2008), and child development. Recently, it has also been applied to behavioral health, including adolescent physical activity, where it identifies young people who stay active despite common cultural and environmental challenges. Ruggeri and Folke (2022) argue that PD is not used enough in psychological science. They see it as a strong alternative to approaches that focus on deficits. PD highlights solutions that come from the community and can be replicated, and it focuses on the ability to change behaviors rather than on fixed models. This makes it a useful framework for examining physical activity patterns during adolescence, a time marked by social and cognitive changes.

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Conflict of Interest
The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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