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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

ALMALIK, Sara, POLYAKOVA, Olga, LUO, Shiyi, ANAGNOSTOPOULOS, Christos and ALEXANDRIS, Kostas (2026). Towards a “Sport for All” Policy in Saudi Arabia: A Theory of Planned Behaviour Perspective [Abstract only]. In: EASM Conference 2025: Sustainability in Sports Management. Abstracts. Hungarian University of Sports Science, 705-707. [Book Section]

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Towards a “Sport for All” policy in Saudi Arabia: A theory of planned behaviour perspective

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Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to examine the factors influencing the intentions of the general population in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to participate in physical activity. The research objectives are: a) to apply the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) to the general population in the KSA, and b) to explore how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control contribute to the intention to participate in physical activity.

Background and Literature Review

Amid the recent developments within Saudi Arabia’s sporting ecosystem, the Sport for All (SFA) Federation aims to inspire sustainable social change nationwide through the power of physical activity and community sports. Despite these efforts, empirical studies (e.g., Althumiri et al., 2020; Alqahtani et al., 2021) consistently report low levels of physical activity among Saudis. According to a 2019 national survey by the Saudi General Authority for Statistics, 78% of Saudis were inactive. The World Health Organization (2024) identifies physical inactivity as a significant contributor to diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and certain cancers. To assist policymakers in mitigating these health issues and to gain a deeper understanding of the Saudi population, this study adopts the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) as its

framework. The research utilizes Ajzen's TPB to predict individuals' intentions to engage in physical activity, providing a systematic approach to evaluating cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses, thus making it a highly suitable framework to assess the population's reactions to policy directives.

The TPB is widely used to study consumer perceptions and intentions in various leisure contexts, including recreational sports and tourism (Alexandris et al., 2022). In the context of physical activity and fitness, successful applications of TPB have been employed by Ulker-Demirel and Ciftci (2020) and Rhodes et al. (2018). TPB posits that behaviours are driven by an individual's intentions to act, which are influenced by three key factors: 1) attitudes toward the behaviour, 2) subjective norms, and 3) perceived behavioural control. Attitudes are shaped by beliefs about the consequences of an action, while subjective norms involve the social acceptability and opinions of significant others. Perceived behavioural control refers to an individual's perception of their ability to perform the behaviour, considering internal and external constraints such as resources, time, skills, and access to sports services.

Alharbi et al. (2024) utilized TPB in a qualitative study to examine young Saudi women's beliefs about physical activity. They identified barriers such as hot weather, lack of social support, limited public transportation, and traditional clothing. Currently, no quantitative TPB studies have been conducted on the general population in KSA.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

Out of 500 telephone questionnaires conducted in Riyadh, 340 valid responses were obtained after excluding incomplete and incorrect entries, resulting in a 68% response rate. After further removing 10 duplicate responses, 330 valid responses remained for analysis. The sample slightly favored males (54.2%) over females (45.8%). Most respondents had a bachelor's degree (59.4%), were single (57.9%), and were employed (71.5%). Regarding exercise frequency, 82.4% engaged in physical activity more than twice per week, with the most common frequency being three times per week (21.8%). The research instrument, adopted from Courneya et al. (2006), assessed attitudes toward physical activity, subjective norms, perceived control (using semantic differential scales), and intention (using a 7-point Likert scale). AMOS was used to test the measurement and structural models.

Results/Findings and Discussion

The tests for item reliability, construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity all showed satisfactory results. The measurement model demonstrated a good fit with the following indices: $\chi^2/df = 419.07/160 = 2.62$, IFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07, and SRMR = 0.06. Similarly, the structural model also indicated a satisfactory fit: $\chi^2/df = 445.70/161 = 2.77$, IFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06. The analysis showed that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control were significant predictors of intention. Specifically, attitudes ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$) and perceived control ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$) positively influenced intention, whereas subjective norms had a negative effect ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < .05$).

Conclusion, Contribution, and Implications

The results highlight the usefulness of TPB as an explanatory perspective and confirm the scale's applicability in studying physical activity within the KSA. They also highlight that attitudes and perceived behavioural control can positively drive the intention to exercise, while subjective norms, shaped by family, society, and social media influencers, may deter participation by sometimes conveying disapproval of physical activity. These insights underscore the need for policy initiatives to reshape sociocultural norms and enhance public perception of physical activity. By promoting positive influences and mitigating negative perceptions, policymakers can foster a supportive environment for exercise. The study advocates for developing innovative, culturally appropriate national programs to increase physical activity participation, supporting the successful implementation of Vision 2030's objectives related to health and wellness.

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