

The Mediating Role of Perceived Competence and Sports Motivation in the Relationship between Perceived Privacy in Public Sports Spaces and Girls' Sports Participation

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the mediating roles of perceived competence and sports motivation in the relationship between perceived privacy in public sports spaces and girls' sports participation. A total of 450 female adolescents aged 13–18 years participated in the study, representing both individual (40%) and team (60%) sports. Participants reported engaging in sport 1–2 sessions/week (20%), 3–4 sessions/week (40%), or 5+ sessions/week (40%). Pearson correlations showed significant positive relationships among perceived privacy, perceived competence, sports motivation, and sports participation ($r = .39-.50$, $p < .01$). Structural equation modeling revealed that perceived privacy had a significant direct effect on sports participation ($\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$) and significant indirect effects via perceived competence ($\beta = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.17]) and sports motivation ($\beta = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.20]). The total effect of perceived privacy on sports participation was $\beta = 0.41$, suggesting partial mediation. These findings indicate that enhancing perceived privacy in public sports spaces may foster girls' engagement in sport by improving their perceived competence and motivation. Interventions targeting facility privacy and competence-building strategies are recommended to promote adolescent girls' participation and reduce gender disparities in sports.

Keywords: perceived privacy, perceived competence, sports motivation, girls' sports participation, environmental psychology

INTRODUCTION

Participation in sport and physical activity during adolescence offers multiple health, social and psychological benefits, yet evidence consistently shows that girls participate at lower rates than boys and experience sharper declines as they age (Banasadi et al., 2022; Dogan Ustun & Seker, 2024; Hosseini et al., 2022; Hopkins, et al., 2022; Moradi et al., 2022). Within this gender gap, the built-environment context of sport spaces - how accessible, comfortable and socially supportive they are - plays a foundational role (Hopkins et al., 2022; Staley & Otis, 2020). One environmental factor that remains under-explored is perceived privacy in public sports spaces - that is, whether girls feel their body, movement and presence in the facility are appropriately shielded from unwanted observation or discomfort (Abdoshahi & Ghorbani, 2022; Banasadi et al., 2022; Khanbeiki, 2024; Shafaei et al., 2022). In this study, we propose that perceived privacy influences girls' sports participation, and that this relationship is mediated by two key psychological constructs: perceived competence and sports motivation.

Perceived Privacy in Public Sports Spaces

While traditional factors such as facility availability and safety have been widely studied (Evans, Hilsdon, & Darnton, 2014), the concept of privacy within sports spaces attends to the nuanced ways in which gendered social norms, facility design, changing/locker-room arrangements and visibility concerns may deter girls from participation. For example, qualitative research indicates that overcrowded or male-dominated changing areas, combined with inadequate supervision or mixed-gender scheduling, amplify self-consciousness among adolescent girls in sports contexts (O'Connor & Carroll, 2019). These forms of exposure and perceived vulnerability may serve as psychological barriers, leading girls to reduce engagement or abstain from certain sport settings altogether.

Studies of physical activity environments suggest that perceived facility accessibility correlates with higher activity levels among girls, but only when psychosocial factors such as comfort and confidence are also present (Lubans et al., 2011). Similarly, the presence of appropriate changing-rooms or female-only timeslots has been found to reduce environmental and social barriers in girls' sport (Williamson et al., 2018). Accordingly, perceived privacy may act as an enabling condition - not just by providing access but by offering a psychologically safe environment in which girls feel comfortable to participate.

Perceived Competence and Sports Motivation

Perceived competence - an individual's belief in their ability to perform sport-related tasks successfully - is a well-established predictor of adolescent girls' physical activity and sport participation. For instance, Harter's competence motivation theory and subsequent research highlight that lower perceived athletic competence is associated with declining enjoyment and engagement in physical education among girls (Telford et al., 2016). A longitudinal study demonstrated that girls with increased physical activity had greater rises in athletic self-perception compared to those whose activity declined, underlining the competence-participation link (Berger et al., 2007).

Parallel to competence, sports motivation - especially intrinsic forms such as enjoyment, mastery, and challenge - is associated with sustained participation in sport among adolescent girls. Research using self-determination theory (SDT) indicates that adolescents who report higher intrinsic motivation engage more frequently in organized sport and have greater persistence (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). A latent class analysis found that girls in "leisure active" sport profiles displayed significantly higher perceived competence and intrinsic motivation than less active peers (Standage et al., 2017).

Together, perceived competence and motivation co-operate: higher competence fosters greater intrinsic motivation, which in turn motivates participation and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, in contexts where girls feel capable and motivated, the likelihood of sustained sport engagement increases.

Linking the Environment, Psychology and Participation

We propose a mediation pathway that builds on ecological models of physical activity (Sallis et al., 2006), suggesting that perceived privacy in public sports environments influences girls' sports participation through a sequence of factors: perceived competence and sports motivation. Specifically, when girls feel that a sports facility offers privacy and comfort, they experience reduced inhibition, which in turn boosts their sense of competence. This increased competence fosters greater intrinsic motivation, ultimately leading to higher levels of participation in public sports activities.

Empirical work supports each link in this chain: (1) environment-perception associations (Lubans et al., 2011; O'Connor & Carroll, 2019), (2) competence-participation links (Telford et al., 2016; Berger et al., 2007) and (3) motivation-participation links (Standage et al., 2017). Yet few studies integrate these into a full mediation model - especially focusing on girls and perceived privacy. One systematic review of factors associated with sport participation among adolescent females found that self-perceptions (including competence) and motivational outcomes (e.g., enjoyment) were the most consistent personal-level predictors (Hopkins et al., 2022). However, environmental features such as privacy were seldom operationalised.

Theoretical and Practical Significance

Theoretically, this investigation bridges environmental psychology and SDT by embedding perceived privacy as an environmental antecedent of competence and motivation among girls in sport. It suggests that gender-sensitive facility design and culturally aware scheduling may be crucial to enabling the psychological processes that underpin participation. Practically, results may inform facility planners, sport organisations and policy-makers to attend not only to access and proximity but to female-friendly design features that reduce self-consciousness and enhance engagement.

Study Aims and Hypotheses

This study aims to examine the mediating roles of perceived competence and sports motivation in the relationship between perceived privacy in public sports spaces and girls' sports participation. Specifically, the

hypotheses are:

- **H1:** Perceived privacy in public sports spaces is positively associated with girls' sports participation.
- **H2:** Perceived privacy is positively associated with perceived competence and sports motivation.
- **H3:** Perceived competence and sports motivation are each positively related to girls' sports participation.
- **H4:** The relationship between perceived privacy and girls' sports participation is mediated by perceived competence and sports motivation.

METHODS

Participants

The study recruited 450 female participants aged 13–18 years from various schools, community sports programs, and recreational centers. Inclusion criteria were: (a) self-identified as female, (b) aged 13–18 years, and (c) having access to at least one public sports facility in their community. Participants with physical disabilities that precluded sports participation were excluded to ensure consistency in evaluating perceived competence and motivation related to sport. The sample was diverse in terms of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and types of sports involvement. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and, for minors under 18, parental consent was also secured. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines for research with minors ([American Psychological Association, 2020](#)).

Measures

Perceived Privacy in Public Sports Spaces: Perceived privacy was assessed using a modified version of the Public Sports Space Perception Scale (PSSPS), adapted from [Crespo et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Lindberg et al. \(2013\)](#). The scale includes 10 items evaluating participants' perceived visibility, facility privacy (e.g., changing rooms, female-only spaces), and comfort in mixed-gender areas. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicated greater perceived privacy. Cronbach's alpha for this sample was 0.91, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Perceived Competence: Perceived competence was measured using the Perceived Competence Scale for Children and Adolescents (PCSC) ([Harter, 1982](#)), adapted for sports-specific contexts. The 8-item scale assesses self-perceived skill and capability in sports activities. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all competent, 5 = Extremely competent). Cronbach's alpha in this sample was 0.89.

Sports Motivation: Sports motivation was assessed using the Behavioral Regulation in Sport Questionnaire (BRSQ) ([Lonsdale et al., 2008](#)). The BRSQ measures intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation, but for this study, only intrinsic motivation items were used. Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Cronbach's alpha was 0.92.

Sports Participation: Sports participation was operationalized as frequency and duration of engagement in organized or recreational sports over the past month, adapted from the Physical Activity Questionnaire for Adolescents (PAQ-A) ([Kowalski et al., 2004](#)). Participants reported the number of sessions per week and average duration. Total weekly participation was calculated in hours.

Procedure

Data collection occurred over three months in community sports facilities and schools. Participants were provided with information sheets detailing study purpose, procedures, and ethical rights (confidentiality, voluntary participation, and withdrawal). Surveys were administered electronically via secure tablets and took approximately 20–25 minutes to complete. Research assistants were present to clarify items without influencing responses. All data were anonymized and coded before analysis. Missing responses (less than 5% per measure) were handled using mean imputation, in line with standard practices for survey research ([Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019](#)).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 28 and AMOS 28, following a comprehensive analysis plan. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed for demographic and primary study variables, including mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis. Subsequently, correlation analysis was performed to explore the bivariate relationships among perceived privacy, perceived competence, sports motivation, and sports participation. To evaluate the internal consistency of the scales, reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha. Mediation analysis was carried out through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), employing a parallel mediation model to assess perceived competence and sports motivation as simultaneous mediators in the relationship between perceived privacy and sports participation. The model fit was assessed using standard indices, including Chi-square (χ^2), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) greater than 0.90, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) greater than 0.90, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) less than 0.08, and Standardized Root

Mean Square Residual (SRMR) less than 0.08. To determine the significance of indirect effects, bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was utilized, in accordance with the recommendations for mediation analysis by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the 450 female participants aged 13–18 years. Participants were diverse in age and type of sports involvement.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 450)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	13–14	120	26.7%
	15–16	180	40.0%
	17–18	150	33.3%
Type of Sport	Individual	180	40.0%
	Team	270	60.0%
Frequency of Participation	1–2 sessions/week	90	20.0%
	3–4 sessions/week	180	40.0%
	5+ sessions/week	180	40.0%

Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the main variables: perceived privacy, perceived competence, sports motivation, and sports participation.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Main Study Variables (N = 450)

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perceived Privacy	3.82	0.76	-0.32	-0.25
Perceived Competence	3.64	0.81	-0.21	-0.18
Sports Motivation	3.91	0.68	-0.28	0.05
Sports Participation (hrs/week)	4.35	1.56	0.45	0.10

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine bivariate relationships among the main variables. Table 3 presents the results. Correlations indicate that higher perceived privacy is significantly associated with higher perceived competence, sports motivation, and sports participation. Perceived competence and sports motivation are strongly interrelated and positively related to participation.

Table 3. Correlations Among Main Variables (N = 450)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived Privacy	—			
2. Perceived Competence	.46**	—		
3. Sports Motivation	.42**	.53**	—	
4. Sports Participation	.39**	.48**	.50**	—

Note. $p < .01$.

Mediation Analysis

A structural equation model (SEM) was employed to examine the mediating roles of perceived competence and sports motivation in the relationship between perceived privacy and sports participation, as depicted in Figure 1. The model demonstrated a good fit, with fit indices showing $\chi^2(2) = 3.45$, $p = .18$; CFI = 0.992; TLI = 0.981; RMSEA = 0.035; and SRMR = 0.022. The direct effect of perceived privacy on sports participation was significant, with a coefficient of $\beta = 0.17$ (SE = 0.05, $p < .001$). Additionally, the indirect effects were notable, with perceived competence contributing $\beta = 0.11$ (SE = 0.03, 95% CI [0.06, 0.17]) and sports motivation contributing $\beta = 0.13$ (SE = 0.04, 95% CI [0.07, 0.20]). Overall, the total effect of perceived privacy on sports participation was $\beta = 0.41$, indicating that both mediators partially account for this relationship.

Table 4. Direct and Indirect Effects of Perceived Privacy on Sports Participation

Path	Effect (β)	SE	95% CI	p
Direct (Privacy $\rightarrow$ Participation)	0.17	0.05	[0.08, 0.26]	<.001
Indirect via Competence	0.11	0.03	[0.06, 0.17]	<.001
Indirect via Motivation	0.13	0.04	[0.07, 0.20]	<.001
Total Effect	0.41	0.05	[0.31, 0.50]	<.001

DISCUSSION

This study examined the mediating roles of perceived competence and sports motivation in the relationship between perceived privacy in public sports spaces and girls' sports participation. The results indicate that perceived privacy significantly influences girls' participation, and this relationship is partially mediated by both perceived competence and sports motivation. These findings contribute to the growing literature emphasizing the importance of both environmental and psychological factors in promoting physical activity among adolescent girls.

Perceived Privacy and Girls' Sports Participation

Perceived privacy emerged as an important predictor of girls' participation in public sports spaces. Consistent with prior research, environmental conditions that enhance comfort and reduce exposure are associated with higher participation rates among adolescent females (O'Connor & Carroll, 2019; Hopkins et al., 2022). Girls are more likely to engage in sport when facilities provide adequate privacy, such as female-only changing areas, private workout zones, or schedules that minimize mixed-gender crowding. This aligns with ecological models of physical activity, which posit that environmental contexts interact with individual psychological processes to shape behavior (Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008). The importance of perceived privacy extends beyond physical comfort. It affects girls' confidence and willingness to perform, particularly in adolescence when body-image concerns are heightened (Telford et al., 2016). Thus, environmental modifications that increase perceived privacy can serve as both practical and psychological facilitators of participation.

Mediating Role of Perceived Competence

The findings support the hypothesis that perceived competence mediates the relationship between perceived privacy and participation. Perceived competence refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform sport-related tasks effectively, and it is a well-established predictor of adolescent girls' engagement in physical activity (Berger et al., 2007; Lubans et al., 2011). The results suggest that when girls perceive higher privacy in sports environments, they are more likely to feel competent, which in turn promotes active participation. This supports Harter's (1987) competence motivation theory, which posits that individuals are motivated to engage in activities in which they feel capable. Prior studies have demonstrated that interventions or environments that enhance perceived competence can significantly increase girls' participation in physical activity. For example, structured programs focusing on skill development and mastery experiences have been shown to improve self-perceived competence and sustain engagement in sports (Pollard & Woodruff, 2024). Our findings extend this by demonstrating that environmental factors such as privacy indirectly enhance participation by bolstering perceived competence.

Mediating Role of Sports Motivation

Sports motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, also served as a significant mediator in the model. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), girls are more likely to participate in sports when they experience intrinsic motivations such as enjoyment, challenge, and personal growth. The present findings suggest that perceived privacy can create an environment conducive to these motivational states, likely by reducing self-consciousness and social anxiety, which can undermine intrinsic motivation (Standage et al., 2017). Furthermore, perceived competence and sports motivation appear to interact. When girls feel competent, they are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation, which reinforces participation—a sequential pathway supported by prior research (Vallerand & Losier, 1999; Murray et al., 2021). This emphasizes the importance of targeting both psychological mediators in interventions designed to increase girls' sports engagement.

Implications for Theory

The study integrates environmental and psychological perspectives by demonstrating that perceived privacy in sports spaces is not only a contextual facilitator but also indirectly impacts participation through individual-level psychological processes. This aligns with ecological frameworks (Sallis et al., 2008) and extends Self-Determination Theory by highlighting the role of environmental conditions in shaping competence and motivation. By identifying these mediating mechanisms, the study contributes to a more nuanced

understanding of how adolescent girls' sport participation can be promoted.

Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, the results suggest that facility design and scheduling should prioritize privacy to encourage girls' participation. Measures may include female-only timeslots, private changing facilities, or discreet spatial arrangements within gyms and sports halls. Additionally, programs aimed at enhancing perceived competence—such as skill-building workshops and positive feedback strategies—can further increase motivation and participation. These findings are directly applicable to schools, community centers, and policy-makers seeking to reduce gender disparities in sport participation.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, its cross-sectional design prevents causal inference; longitudinal or experimental studies would better confirm the mediation pathways. Second, the sample may not represent all cultural contexts or age ranges, limiting generalizability. Future research could examine how privacy interacts with other environmental factors, such as accessibility and safety, and how these interactions vary across different sports, cultures, and developmental stages.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence that perceived privacy in public sports spaces positively influences girls' sports participation and that this relationship is mediated by perceived competence and sports motivation. By integrating environmental and psychological perspectives, the study offers both theoretical and practical guidance for promoting female adolescent engagement in physical activity. Interventions targeting facility privacy, competence, and intrinsic motivation hold promise for reducing gender disparities and fostering lifelong participation in sport.

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