

# ANALYZING GENDER DYNAMICS: A COMPREHENSIVE INVESTIGATION INTO SPORTS DROPOUT PHENOMENA

## ANALISI DELLE DINAMICHE DI GENERE: UN'INDAGINE COMPLETA SUI FENOMENI DI ABBANDONO SPORTIVO



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### ABSTRACT

This study explores gender differences in sports dropout, analyzing the complex, gender-specific factors behind quitting sports. Using a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaires and focus groups, we identify unique social, psychological, and physical reasons affecting males and females differently. Findings suggest the need for gender-sensitive interventions in sports, highlighting the importance of tailored strategies to enhance long-term participation and equity for all genders.

Questo studio esplora le differenze di genere nell'abbandono sportivo, analizzando i fattori specifici e complessi che portano alla rinuncia. Utilizzando un approccio misto con questionari e focus group, identifichiamo le ragioni uniche sociali, psicologiche e fisiche che influenzano diversamente maschi e femmine. I risultati suggeriscono la necessità di interventi sensibili al genere nello sport, evidenziando l'importanza di strategie mirate per migliorare la partecipazione e l'equità a lungo termine per tutti i generi.

### KEYWORDS

Physical activity, strategic skills, gender difference, sport participation, education  
Attività fisica, abilità strategiche, differenza di genere, partecipazione sportiva, apprendimento

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## Introduction

Engagement in organized sports is widely recognized as a fundamental component for promoting physical health, psychological well-being, and social cohesion among young individuals. Despite these benefits, the phenomenon of sports dropout during adolescence presents a significant challenge, with marked disparities observed along gender lines. This gender-specific attrition from sports activities can have long-term implications on individual health and social development. The current study aims to examine the underlying gender-related factors that contribute to sports dropout, focusing on the Italian context through a dual approach of standardized questionnaires and focus group discussions.

Extensive research has been conducted to understand the multifaceted reasons behind sports dropout, revealing that gender plays a critical role in shaping these dynamics. For instance, studies by Colley et al. (2005) have indicated that while boys often cite competitive pressures and a preference for unstructured play as reasons for leaving sports, girls are more likely to withdraw due to social stigmatization, body image concerns, and a perceived lack of competence or enjoyment. Furthermore, Eime et al. (2013) emphasize that the social support system within the sport, including coaches, teammates, and family, significantly impacts girls' continued participation, more so than for boys, where the emphasis might be on performance and competition.

Our research leverages a detailed methodological approach, beginning with the distribution of questionnaires through the Centro Sportivo Italiano (CSI) to a broad demographic of young athletes. These questionnaires were meticulously designed to capture diverse aspects of sports participation, including personal motivations, barriers to continued engagement, and the social contexts of the athletes. This quantitative data collection was complemented by qualitative insights derived from focus groups conducted in various middle schools across Italy. These discussions were aimed at delving deeper into the personal narratives and experiences of the participants, providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing sports dropout.

By integrating findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how gender influences sports dropout. It also explores the potential regional variations within Italy, which could affect sports participation due to economic, cultural, and infrastructural differences. The outcomes of this research are expected to inform policymakers and sports organizations, leading to the development of more targeted interventions that address gender-specific needs and barriers.

This introduction sets the stage for a detailed investigation into the gender dynamics of sports dropout, highlighting the complexity of this issue and underscoring the necessity for research that is sensitive to gender differences and contextual nuances. Through this study, we aim to offer actionable insights that could significantly impact the development of strategies intended to keep young individuals engaged in sports, thereby fostering a healthier, more inclusive future for sports in Italy.

## **1. Theoretical background**

Sport is one of the highly specialised spheres of human activity that plays an important role in the formation of personality. According to the principle of unity of personality and activity, it is in activity, including sports, that personality is formed, and manifests itself (Vygotsky L.S., 1960) singled out a number of specific features of sporting activity: 1) its subject is the person engaged in sport; 2) the essence of sport as an activity is competition; 3) it is characterised by unusual intensity and intensity. 3) it is characterised by physical and mental strains of unusual intensity and duration; 4) the product of this activity is a sporting achievement.

The research about sport and personality trait development are various. Mainly the researches can be divided in the research that considers the influence of sport activity or sport exercise on personality development (Rico-González, 2023, Halian, 2023); and researches that viceversa are focused on the influence of the personality traits on sport (O'Connor, 2020)

The sport activity positively impact on cognitive process development and on the development of the personality characteristics (Klein, M et al 2017, Conzelmann, A et al., 2023). According to the reviewed scientific literature the psycho biological-processes that are developed in the sport activities are: intellectual, providing reception and processing of information, decision-making; psychomotor, determining the quality of motor actions (Muñoz-Arroyave et al., 2020); emotional, influencing the energy and expressive characteristics of activity( Alcaraz-Muñoz et al., 2020, Muñoz-Arroyave et al., 2020, Alcaraz, 2021, Kliziene, et al 2021); volitional which ensure overcoming of arising obstacles (Méndez-Giménez et al. 2014); communicative, which are aimed at interaction with others people( Zelenin et. al 2016); moral and those that determines the motivation of activity (Moradi et al., 2014, Tárrega-Canós, et al 2018, Akyol, P., & Imamoglu, O. ,2019).

From academic literature it is possible to deduct that there are different scientific orientations argues that the achievement of success in sport is most often associated with certain personality characteristics. According to the scientific

literature this characteristic, include aggressiveness (Vissek & Watson, 2015) dominance, persistence, motivation, persuasiveness, self-confidence, extroversion, and introversion (Zitek & Jordan, 2011, González-Alemañy et al., 2023).

Gender as a category consists of two major components: biological gender and social gender. Sex differences are genetically determined and continue to be shaped in the socio-cultural environment. How the gender can influence the sport? Analyzing the research literature, it is possible to find literature on gender influence on sport performance (Hunter et al., 2023). According to the data obtained from the various research studies on gender and sport, women are more engaged in sporting activities and are more aware of their interoceptive signals than men. (Rogowska et al., 2024) However, men are better at sporting techniques than women and are better at not worrying about and trusting their bodies. (Rogowska et al., 2024, Alfano et al 2023 Prentice et al 2022 This difference is also explained from a biological point of view, i.e. the biological differences relate to the structure and function of the brain related to the processing of emotions (Alfano et al 2023). The observation that women often score higher than men in emotional awareness can be attributed to a combination of biological, social and cultural factors (Rogowska et al., 2024).

The sport and influence of gender has also been analysed in awareness of emotion-related body states and has been shown to depend on internal physiological cues as well as external situational cues (Rogowska et al., 2024). In fact, according to research data, women differ from men in that they prefer to use different cues to define their emotional state, particularly in a manner consistent with cognitive evaluations.

The gender biases and cultural gender norms and social pressure have a high impact on gender discrimination in sport activities. According to de Jesus *"Data from a pooled analysis 298 school-based surveys from 146 countries showed that 87.4% of girls aged 11–17 years were insufficiently physically active compared to 77.6% of boys."* Social norms and gender cultural influence dropout sport. This is due to the fact that some sports are seen as boys' sports as they are steeped in assertiveness girls run the risk of experiencing conflict between the adoption of the dominant values of competition and assertiveness and the norms of femininity (Guillet et al. 2006; Slater and Tiggemann 2010). This conflict positively impacts on girls' abandonment of sporting activity.

This short introduction highlights the importance on research on gender influence on sport dropout. Sports drop-out is a phenomenon that concerns the abandonment of sporting activity by young people.

According to data from the Ordine degli Psicologi del Lazio obtained during the social campaign launched in the summer months, entitled 'Equal opportunities, great results!', carried out as part of the 'Disparities in Sport' project and then presented during the round table on 16 October 2023, it can be seen that the female population is more inclined to give up sporting activity. With advancing age, the drop-out rate increases, marking a significant gap compared to boys. As far back as 2012, the Italian Society of Pediatrics on Adolescents' Habits and Lifestyles indicated that almost 40% of Italian adolescents, in the 13-14 age group, do not engage in any sporting activity. The percentage rises to 57% for girls. Although participation in sport and physical activity is becoming more equal in recent years the focus on sport dropout should be high and intense.

Research on sport and gender shows that sport is more decisive for boys' sporting identities than for girls and offers different experiences and social relationships for boys and girls. Other research focuses on the fact that boys receive more recognition than girls for their participation in sport. Consequently, if (organised) sport conveys less status to girls, this will lead to girls' participation in organised sport being lower than that of boys or, when it does occur, will result in a higher participation threshold requiring more effort and/or motivation. And as Seippel, Ø., & Bergesen argue, *“girls have to be more committed than boys, otherwise they will drop out”*.

## **2. Research Design**

The aim of the research was to analyze whether there were gender differences on dropout sport. The research objective is best explained in the following research questions.

RQ 1 Is there a gender difference in youth dropout sport?

RQ 2 Are their gender differences in dropout sport motivations.

To answer these questions, it was chosen to investigate by means of the quantitative research method. The study adopted a systematic approach to questionnaire development. Initial items were generated in alignment with identified constructs, and subsequent expert review and pilot testing refined the instrument. Items underwent item analysis, leading to the construction of scales for improved reliability.

With regard to the construction of the sample, the snowball method was used. As it is shown in the figure 1

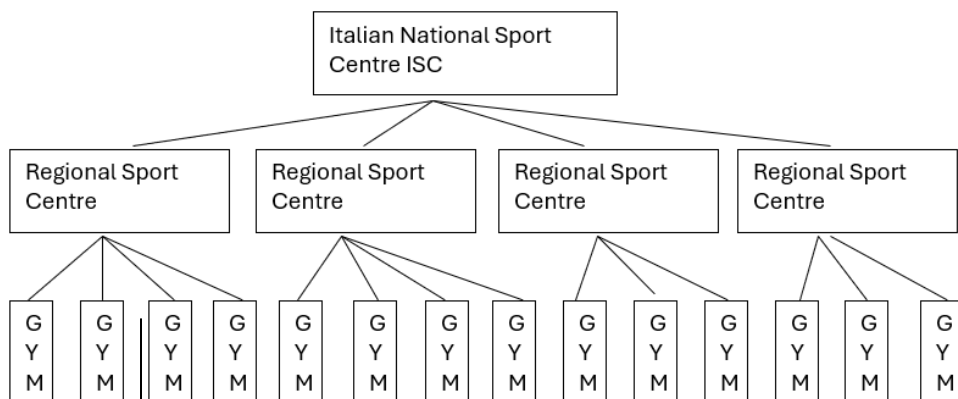


Figure 1 Sampling model

Firstly, it was contacted the Italian Sports Centre (ISC). The Italian National Sport Center contacted the regional Sport Center and the Sport regional Centers contacted GYMS which distributed the questionnaire among young people. This in turn created a network with the regional clubs and a network with the territorial GYMs. As a result, the sample comprised 6,783 Italian students, representing gender, socioeconomic, and geographic background. The sample composition was 3449 boys and 3325 girls 9 youngsters did not specify their gender. The distribution of the sample was almost in the middle with a slight tendency towards the male gender a difference of almost 1 %. Figure 2

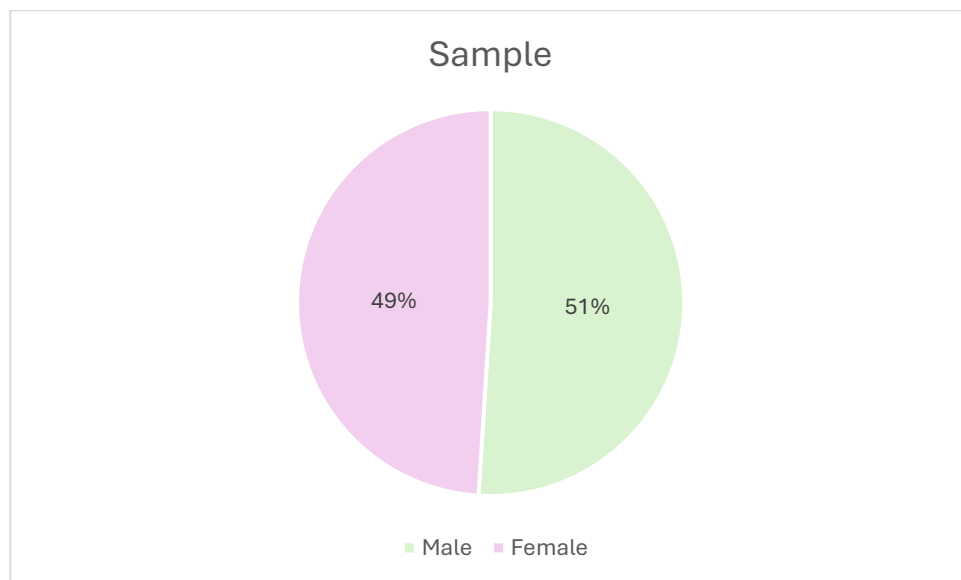


Figure 2 Sample

### 3. Research results and Discussion

The data collected was subjected to a rigorous processing and analysis process. This phase involved organizing, coding, and synthesizing the data to identify significant trends, patterns, and relationships. The main objective of this analysis was to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, allowing meaningful conclusions to be drawn based on solid empirical data.

Firstly, we start to investigate among young people if they do practice sport or not or they did but stopped.

	<b>Totale</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>
Yes	75%	80%	70%
No	11%	9%	13%
I did but I stopped	14%	11%	17%

Table 1 Do you currently play any sports?

From the obtained data there is possible to notice the impact of gender on practicing sport and on sport dropout in fact the girls that practices sport is less than boys and the difference is of 10%. While at the situation of sport dropout the girls are more than boys and the difference are of 6%. Only with this investigation we did reply to our first research question.

For to reply to our second research questions we did more detailed investigation.

Firstly, we went to investigate on motivation of sport practicing. At the Question why young people practice sport (a question wit multiply responses, there is a big difference between males and females on motivation in fact 62 % of males say they would like to be a champion while females are only 40 %.

There is also a difference in the motivation to be with my friends in fact the males who also indicated this as motivation are 62,6 % while the females are 52,4 %.

There is also a 10 % difference in seeing sport as a tool for socialising. In fact, in the motivation to be with my friends, the males who also indicated this as a motivation are 62.6 % while females are 52.4 %.

There is an 8% difference in the motivation to improve my physical appearance in fact females who chose this option are 39.2% while males are 47.5%.

The motivation for To improve my mind/character has a minimal difference in fact males who chose this option are 52.1 % and females are 48.7%.

Analyzing the positive answers of the answer Because I am a professional athlete there is a difference of 8% between males and females in fact the girls who chose this answer are 27.4% while the boys are 34%.

While it can be stated that there is no difference in the motivation to practice sport because it is compulsory if in fact both the responses and the boys who chose this answer are 4% males and 3% females

To investigate the social aspect, the question was explored further by asking. Who do you play sport with? As can be seen from Table 2, we can see that there is a difference in the gender choice of who you practise sport within your team, the boys 71% who chose this answer are while the girls are 59%. While on the answer on my own girls are 6% more than boys. There is a difference of 3% in the answer with friends in fact boys who chose this answer are 30 % while girls are 27 %. We see that more boys 11% participate in sports with their families than girls 9%. There are no significant differences for choosing to do sport with occasional groups of people 4,6 % boys and 5,5 girls.

		M	F
Q24: With whom do you play sport? (multiple answers possible max. 3)'	On my own	16 %	22 %
	In the company of my teammates/organised team	71 %	59 %
	With my friends (free and unstructured sports team)	30 %	27 %
	With my family	11 %	9 %
	With occasional groups of people (e.g. free courses in the gym)	5 %	6 %

Table 2 with whom young athletes prefer to practice sport.

Once the social aspect of sport has been investigated and the impact of gender showed we focused on understanding the causes of sport non practice From the table 3 is possible to see that more girls do not like the playing sport than boys the difference is on 4%. More girls than boys do not feel inclined the difference is 7%

While the boys are more than girls on:

- spaces motivation "Because I have no way of getting to the spaces where I can practise" we see 47% boys and 40% girls
- cost motivation Because the sport I would like to practise is too expensive (registration, equipment, etc.) we see 47% boys and 40% girls
- parents influence: "Because my parents prefer me to do other activities" we see 29% boys and 24% girls

We found small difference 1% on time motivation and friends implication and no difference on not doing sport because of commitment both 41% boys and 41% girls do not practice sport because "Because the sport I like requires too much commitment".

		M	F
Because I don't like playing sport	Positive reply	38%	42%
	Negative reply	63%	58%
Because it is too tiring	Positive reply	38%	35%
	Negative reply	62%	65%
Because I don't have time for it	Positive reply	70%	71%
	Negative reply	30%	29%
Because I have no way of getting to the spaces where I can practise	Positive reply	47%	40%
	Negative reply	53%	60%
Because I don't feel inclined	Positive reply	45%	52%
	Negative reply	55%	48%
Because my parents prefer me to do other activities	Positive reply	29%	24%
	Negative reply	71%	76%
Because none of my friends practise	Positive reply	21%	19%
	Negative reply	79%	81%
Because the sport I like requires too much commitment	Positive reply	41%	41%
	Negative reply	59%	59%
Because the sport I would like to practise is too expensive (registration, equipment, etc.)	Positive reply	47%	40%
	Negative reply	53%	60%

Table 3 Motivation of not sport practices.

In investigating the impact of gender on sport dropout we indicated different motivations: Curiosity about different disciplines; My friends played sports other than my chosen one and I wanted to be with them; My family wanted me to try different sports; You changed sports for medical/health reasons (doctor's advice, injuries, etc.); I didn't feel suited to the sport I had chosen; I didn't feel involved enough with the coach

I didn't feel involved enough with my teammates; The times I played the sport did not fit in with my lifetime; The commitment required by the sport I played had become excessive; I was only interested in learning the basics of the sport for occasional practice. We found a statistically significant relationship between Gender and "My friends played sports other than the one I had chosen, and I wanted to be with them" the Q square has  $p = 0,04$  and this is confirming us that the socialization and gender has a high impact on sport dropout. This data are confirmed by the research of De la Torre-Cruz et al conducted in 2019 and Izorna Folgar et. Al conducted in 2013.

## **Conclusions**

The motivation for sporting activity not only encourages a person to play sport but also gives subjective and personal meaning to the activities. Understanding one's motivation is the way to effective learning and efficient activity. Knowing what drives a person, what motivates them to activity, and what motivations underlie their actions is it possible to develop an effective system of forms and management methods. To this end, it is necessary to know how these, or those motivations arise or are caused, how and by what means motivations can be put into action, how people are motivated. However, above all, it is important to know the content of the motivational sphere of a particular community of people. And what are the gender differences on motivation of not sport practice firstly and the gender motivation of sport dropout.

It is important to address the sports drop-out phenomenon with a holistic view, considering both technical, psychological, and social aspects. In order to most likely identify the potential abilities of children and adolescents, it is advisable to determine not only the initial level of their preparation, but above all its rate of growth. In the selection system, control tests should be conducted in such a way as to determine not only what the candidate is already capable of doing, but also what he or she will be able to do in the future, i.e., to identify his or her ability to solve motor tasks, the emergence of motor creativity, and the ability to control one's movements. Sports instructors and families can play a crucial role in keeping young people's interest in sport alive, ensuring a balance between commitment and enjoyment. When discussing the agents that can influence the sport activity and sport dropout it is important to consider the agents of socialization (family, school, friends, and media). The media influence on sport activity promotion as we saw from our results the girls are influenced also by social networks. The friend and teammates have more effect on boys choose of sport activity another aspects on

sport and gender should be psychobiological boys choose to do sport practice for to improve the physical performance.

Our research can serve as a start for new researchers, probably by explaining physical motivation on sporting activity in more detail. As far as sport dropout is concerned, we have focused on the classic motivations found in the scientific literature, and here we should supplement this list in order to highlight how gender difference may impact on sport dropout. The added understanding of these complex interactions between gender and motivational factors is essential for designing interventions that not only prevent dropout but also enhance engagement and satisfaction in sports among different gender groups. This deeper insight could drive more nuanced policy and program development, ensuring that sports environments are adaptive and responsive to the diverse needs of participants.

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