



RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTEGRATING CHEERLEADING INTO THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SKILL, PERFORMANCE, AND RECOGNITION

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of physical education (PE) teachers regarding cheerleading as both an emerging sport and a professional industry within educational settings. Grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, specifically his concepts of *Cultural Capital*, *Field*, and *Habitus*, the research examines how teachers' perceptions toward cheerleading are shaped by their institutional environments, professional backgrounds, and broader sociocultural norms. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study engaged 15 purposively selected PE teachers from Senior High Schools and Colleges of Education (COE) through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, revealed distinct differences in perception: Colleges of Education teachers viewed cheerleading through the lens of athleticism, performance discipline, and professional potential, aligning it with competitive sports, while Senior Secondary School teachers emphasised its inclusivity, recreational value, and role in student engagement. Both groups acknowledged the performative and social dimensions of cheerleading but differed in their recognition of its legitimacy and career prospects. Institutional and societal barriers, including curriculum exclusion, limited funding, and gender stereotypes, were found to hinder the promotion of cheerleading in schools. The study recommends the inclusion of cheerleading in PE curricula, professional development for teachers on emerging sports, and policy interventions to address gender biases and institutional constraints. These steps are essential to reposition cheerleading as a valuable educational tool and viable career pathway within the school sports ecosystem.

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INTRODUCTION

Cheerleading has experienced a significant evolution over the years, transitioning from a supportive activity on the sidelines of athletic games to a highly demanding, competitive, and performance-based discipline. Cheerleading has emerged as an industry in its own right, complete with national and international competitions, standardised regulations, professional coaching structures, and even scholarships for athletes (Grindstaff & West, 2006). This development underscores its athletic rigour and the strategic organisation involved in routines that combine acrobatics, gymnastics, synchronised movements, and teamwork. However, despite the professionalisation of cheerleading and its increasing visibility in media and sports culture, it continues to be viewed by many as less legitimate than conventional sports such as football or basketball (Anderson, 2012). The marginalisation of cheerleading is not merely a matter of public opinion but also manifests within institutional structures, especially within educational settings. Physical education (PE) teachers, as key

agents in shaping the school sports industry often function as gatekeepers who determine which physical activities are valued, integrated, or neglected within the curriculum. Their perceptions carry considerable weight in how students engage with and understand the value of different sports. Within this context, cheerleading's ambiguous status as both a sport and a performance raises critical questions about how it is perceived in terms of athletic skill, pedagogical value, and institutional support. According to Kane (2013), sports that are traditionally associated with femininity, aesthetic performance, or entertainment are often relegated to the periphery of school curricula, which are seldom promoted with the same seriousness as male-dominated sports. Moreover, the gendered dimension of cheerleading cannot be ignored. Connell (2008) asserts that cheerleading remains predominantly female, and research has consistently shown that sports associated with women face challenges in being recognised as equally competitive or valuable. This raises the question of whether PE teachers' perceptions are influenced by broader societal norms and biases concerning gender and performance. As such, it becomes essential to explore how cheerleading is positioned

within educational environments, not only as a physical activity but as a cultural product shaped by sociological forces. The central focus of this study is to explore how physical education teachers perceive cheerleading as an industry and as a potential educational tool, scrutinising their attitudes toward its skill requirements, performative aspects, and legitimacy.

Statement of the Problem: Cheerleading has gradually evolved into a complex, multifaceted activity that blends athleticism, artistry, teamwork, and competition. From its origins as a support activity for male-dominated sports, it has transitioned into a recognised performance sport in many parts of the world. Despite this evolution, cheerleading remains underrecognized and undervalued, especially within the educational landscape in many countries. In particular, physical education (PE) teachers who are key agents in shaping how sports and physical activities are framed within school settings often hold varied and sometimes conflicting views about cheerleading's status as a sport, its skill requirements, and its potential as a viable career industry. These perceptions directly influence how cheerleading is supported, taught, or excluded from school curricula and athletic programmes. In many educational institutions, the perception of cheerleading is often clouded by stereotypes, with some educators viewing it as merely recreational or entertainment-oriented rather than as a rigorous, skill-intensive sport. This perception may be influenced by entrenched sociocultural norms, particularly those related to gender, which traditionally associate cheerleading with femininity, glamour, and performance rather than with competitive athleticism and discipline (Grindstaff & West, 2010; Adams & Bettis, 2003).

Consequently, this influences how PE teachers frame and legitimise cheerleading within formal sports education programmes. Moreover, while cheerleading has grown into a global industry with professional leagues, competitive circuits, training academies, and career opportunities in choreography, fitness, and media representation, there is limited empirical data on whether PE teachers are aware of or support this broader professionalisation. Their perceptions play a critical role in either promoting or stifling student interest and participation, particularly among learners who may aspire to pursue cheerleading professionally or competitively. Despite this relevance, few studies have examined the perceptions of PE teachers towards cheerleading, especially from a curricula perspective that interrogates how issues of skill, performance, and recognition are constructed and communicated. There is an urgent need to understand how PE teachers interpret cheerleading in light of its growing recognition as a sport and an industry, and whether their views are aligned with contemporary trends in sports education and development.

Purpose of the Study: This study examined the perceptions of physical education teachers on how cheerleading could be integrated into the physical education curriculum.

Research Objectives

The study sought to

- Explore the perceptions of physical education teachers regarding the skill level required in cheerleading.
- Examine how physical education teachers interpret the performative aspect of cheerleading in comparison to other sports.

- To investigate how physical education teachers recognise cheerleading as a legitimate sport.
- Examine institutional factors that affect the perception and support of cheerleading in educational settings.

Research Questions

The research questions were

- How do physical education teachers perceive the technical and athletic skills involved in cheerleading?
- In what ways do physical education teachers understand and value the performative nature of cheerleading?
- How do physical education teachers recognise cheerleading as a legitimate sport or professional industry?
- What institutional factors affect PE teachers' perceptions and support for cheerleading within school programmes?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his concepts of *Cultural Capital*, *Field*, and *Habitus*, which provide a robust framework for examining how individuals' perceptions are shaped by their social positioning and institutional affiliations. Bourdieu (1986) explains that cultural capital comprises non-economic assets such as knowledge, skills, and education, which influence social mobility and status. In the context of this study, cheerleading can be seen as possessing a unique form of cultural capital, one that includes aesthetic skill, bodily discipline, and coordinated athleticism. However, because these qualities do not align with traditional notions of masculinity and competitive sport, they are often undervalued in the field of physical education.

The concept of *field* is also crucial to this investigation. A field, as Bourdieu (1993) defines it, is a structured social space with its own rules, hierarchies, and power relations. The field of physical education is dominated by sports that emphasise strength, endurance, and competition, traits that are typically associated with masculinity. Within this field, cheerleading struggles to assert itself as a legitimate sport due to its associations with femininity, performance, and entertainment rather than aggression and competition (Theberge, 2000). As such, PE teachers operating within this field may be influenced by its norms and power dynamics when forming opinions about cheerleading.

Finally, Bourdieu's idea of *Habitus*, the ingrained habits, dispositions, and ways of thinking shaped by one's social context, helps explain how PE teachers' backgrounds, training, and cultural experiences influence their judgments. A teacher who was socialised in an environment that valued only traditional, male-dominated sports may unconsciously dismiss cheerleading as frivolous or non-athletic. Conversely, those who have broader exposure to performance-based disciplines may be more inclined to view it favourably. Thus, habitus not only shapes individual perception but also reinforces existing institutional norms and practices (Shilling, 1991). Using Bourdieu's theoretical framework allows for a nuanced exploration of how personal, cultural, and institutional factors intersect to shape the recognition (or lack thereof) of cheerleading within the school context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach, which seeks to understand and interpret the lived experiences of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of how physical education teachers perceive cheerleading in terms of skill, performance, and legitimacy. Phenomenology is particularly suitable when the objective is to uncover the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs, making it ideal for a sociological inquiry of this nature. The target population for the study included physical education teachers from selected Senior High Schools and Colleges of Education from Ghana, within both urban and rural settings, to ensure diversity in background and teaching context. In this study, maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling technique, was employed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives among physical education (PE) teachers regarding cheerleading as a sport. This approach involves deliberately selecting participants who differ significantly across key characteristics to explore the range of experiences and perceptions within the population. Fifteen PE teachers were selected to ensure diversity in gender, years of professional experience, and exposure to performance-based co-curricular activities. This sampling strategy enhances the depth and applicability of the findings, aligning with qualitative research best practices for capturing complex human experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. These were conducted individually and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews explored participants' understanding of cheerleading, its athletic and performance aspects, its place in the school sports hierarchy, and the influence of institutional policies. Open-ended questions allowed for elaboration and clarification, providing rich qualitative data (Creswell, 2019; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Pseudonyms were assigned to participants based on their teaching levels to maintain anonymity while still providing contextual clarity. Participants from Senior Secondary Schools were labelled as "SHS Teacher A," "SHS Teacher B," and so on, while those from Colleges of Education were designated as "COE Teacher A," "COE Teacher B," and so forth. This naming strategy ensured that participant identities remained confidential while also reflecting the diverse educational contexts they represented. This method also allowed for clearer analysis and interpretation of the data, especially when comparing experiences and viewpoints across different teaching levels. Data collected were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. This method allowed the researchers to identify patterns and key narratives related to the perception of cheerleading among PE teachers. The analysis was supported by NVivo software, which facilitated systematic coding and theme generation, increasing the credibility and transparency of the analytical process. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the researchers' affiliated university. All participants were given informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, confidentiality protocols,

and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely. Ethical considerations also extended to sensitivity in discussions around gender and performance, ensuring that participants felt safe to express their views without fear of judgment.

RESULTS

This section presents a detailed thematic analysis of the interview responses from Senior Secondary School and Colleges of Education Physical Education (PE) teachers, in relation to the four research questions. The analysis is structured thematically with commentary and comparative insights to highlight variations between the two teacher groups.

Research Question 1: How do physical education teachers perceive the technical and athletic skills involved in cheerleading?

The thematic analysis revealed that physical education (PE) teachers widely recognise cheerleading as an activity that requires significant technical and athletic skills. One dominant theme that emerged was "Cheerleading as Physically Demanding," with two key sub-themes: (1) Strength, Balance, and Flexibility, and (2) Skill Integration and Team Coordination. While both Junior and Colleges of Education teachers acknowledged the physical demands of cheerleading, there were nuanced differences in how each group conceptualised its athletic rigour and skill set.

Theme 1: Cheerleading as Physically Demanding

Across the interviews, PE teachers expressed a general consensus that cheerleading is not merely a recreational or aesthetic performance but rather a physically demanding discipline that integrates various athletic skills. The perception of cheerleading as a sport requiring bodily control, stamina, and technical execution was especially pronounced among Colleges of Education teachers, who often equated its complexity with other established sports like gymnastics and athletics.

Sub-theme 1.1: Strength, Balance, and Flexibility

Colleges of Education teachers often highlighted the intense physical conditioning required for cheerleading. For instance, Colleges of Education Teacher A noted,

"Cheerleading involves complex stunts. You need strong core muscles and excellent balance to pull them off without injuries."

This view was corroborated by Colleges of Education Teacher B, who emphasised the role of flexibility:

"Flexibility and agility are just as important as they are in gymnastics or athletics."

Such comments reflect an understanding of cheerleading through the lens of sports science, suggesting an appreciation of biomechanical principles and physical literacy involved in its practice. In contrast, Senior Secondary School teachers recognized the physical aspects of cheerleading but were more reserved in their evaluation of its intensity. SHS Teacher A remarked,

"They do a lot of jumps and turns, which helps improve coordination and physical fitness," highlighting developmental benefits rather than elite-level skill.

SHS Teacher B added,

"It's energetic, but I wouldn't say it's as demanding as other sports unless it's done at a very high level."

These responses suggest that while SHS teachers perceive cheerleading as physically beneficial, they often position it as a complementary rather than a core physical activity.

Sub-theme 1.2: Skill Integration and Team Coordination

Another dimension of cheerleading's athletic demands identified by participants was the importance of teamwork and synchronisation. Colleges of Education Teacher C emphasised the technical complexity and inherent risks:

"Cheerleading requires synchrony. If your timing is off, it can lead to dangerous falls. It's very technical."

Here, cheerleading is seen not only as physically demanding but also as an activity requiring acute spatial and temporal awareness.

Similarly, SHS Teacher C acknowledged the importance of collective effort:

"The routines need teamwork. It's more group-based than individual sports."

However, unlike their Colleges of Education counterparts, SHS teachers did not frame these skills within broader competitive or biomechanical contexts. Instead, they viewed them as valuable for fostering collaboration and student engagement.

The comparative responses indicate a clear distinction in how cheerleading is framed within different educational levels. Colleges of Education teachers, possibly due to their exposure to more advanced student athletes and structured co-curricular programmes, often viewed cheerleading as a sport embedded with technical demands, risk management, and athletic discipline. Their responses suggest a familiarity with the standardised training and competitive frameworks that accompany professional cheerleading. In contrast, SHS teachers tended to perceive cheerleading as a dynamic but less formalised activity. While they appreciated its role in enhancing coordination and team spirit, they often did not articulate its athletic demands using the same depth of technical language. This difference may stem from the varied curricular emphasis and resource allocation in Colleges of Education versus SHS institutions.

Research Question 2: In what ways do physical education teachers understand and value the performative nature of cheerleading?

The second research question sought to explore the perceptions of physical education (PE) teachers regarding the performative aspects of cheerleading, those features that intersect with art, emotion, crowd interaction, and expressive storytelling. Thematic analysis revealed a dominant theme, "Cheerleading

as a Form of Artistic and Emotional Expression," which was further broken down into two sub-themes: (1) Entertainment and Expression, and (2) Choreography and Creativity.

Theme 2: Cheerleading as a Form of Artistic and Emotional Expression

Participants widely recognised cheerleading as more than just a physically rigorous activity. It was perceived as a unique convergence of athleticism, dance, music, and visual appeal—elements that together form a performative narrative meant to engage spectators and communicate emotions. Teachers appreciated how cheerleading could energise school events, enhance school spirit, and provide an alternative outlet for students to express themselves beyond traditional sporting contexts.

Sub-theme 2.1: Entertainment and Expression

Teachers across both school levels noted that cheerleading has an inherently expressive quality, which can captivate audiences and emotionally energise school events. Colleges of Education Teacher D emphasized this affective dimension, stating:

"It energises the crowd. It's an emotional performance, not just a routine."

This view was echoed by Colleges of Education Teacher E, who reflected:

"They tell stories with their movements—it's very engaging." These responses suggest that Colleges of Education teachers often viewed cheerleading as a medium for storytelling, with emotional and aesthetic resonance akin to dance or theatre. Senior Secondary School teachers also acknowledged this expressive function, albeit with a focus on student engagement. SHS Teacher D commented:

"Students get excited. It's a good way to involve more learners, especially those who are shy in other sports."

This perspective positions cheerleading as an inclusive performance activity that helps build student confidence and participation, particularly among those who may not thrive in conventional team sports.

SHS Teacher E remarked:

"It boosts morale during events. The colourful uniforms and music make it fun to watch."

For SHS teachers, the performative nature of cheerleading was primarily appreciated for its capacity to enhance the overall atmosphere of school events and motivate students emotionally and socially.

Sub-theme 2.2: Choreography and Creativity

Another significant insight was teachers' recognition of the creative potential that cheerleading offers. Colleges of Education teachers, in particular, emphasised how choreographing cheerleading routines cultivates leadership, creativity, and independence among students.

Colleges of Education Teacher F observed:

“Planning routines lets students express their creativity. They take charge and develop leadership skills.”

This illustrates how cheerleading is not only a vehicle for artistic expression but also a platform for pedagogical development and skill-building in areas such as student leadership and autonomy.

Meanwhile, SHS Teacher F shared a similar, though slightly simplified view:

“It’s great for encouraging initiative. They bring in their moves and music.”

While the SHS perspective acknowledged creativity, it was less associated with structured outcomes like leadership and more oriented toward student enjoyment and initiative. There is a discernible variation in how Colleges of Education and SHS teachers interpret the performative dimension of cheerleading. Colleges of Education teachers tended to explore deeper pedagogical implications, highlighting the links between expression, emotional intelligence, and student leadership. They understood the routines not only as entertainment but as creative processes where students plan, coordinate, and execute performances. This aligns with the broader Colleges of Education curricular scope that often emphasises holistic student development through extracurricular leadership opportunities. Conversely, SHS teachers recognised cheerleading’s performative appeal primarily as a motivational and inclusive tool. Their responses reflected an appreciation for its entertainment value and potential to foster participation, especially among less athletically inclined students. However, their insights did not extend deeply into the structured educational benefits seen by their Colleges of Education counterparts. This contrast may stem from the differing institutional contexts and age-related developmental considerations in SHS and Colleges of Education settings. Younger students at the SHS level may be perceived as needing broader engagement tools, while older Colleges of Education students are seen as capable of leveraging cheerleading for leadership and performance innovation.

Research Question 3: How do physical education teachers recognise cheerleading as a legitimate sport or professional industry?

This research question aimed to examine the extent to which PE teachers view cheerleading as a recognised athletic discipline and a viable professional path. The analysis generated one overarching theme: “Varying Degrees of Recognition,” which encapsulated the contrasting beliefs among teachers across the two educational levels. This theme includes two sub-themes: (1) Competitive Nature of Cheerleading, and (2) Industry and Career Opportunities.

Theme 3: Varying Degrees of Recognition

Across interview responses, there was no unanimous agreement on whether cheerleading should be classified alongside mainstream sports like football or athletics. Perceptions were shaped largely by personal experience, institutional exposure, and awareness of external cheerleading structures such as competitions or scholarships. The distinction

between Colleges of Education and SHS teachers’ views was especially pronounced in this area.

Sub-theme 3.1: Competitive Nature of Cheerleading

Several Colleges of Education teachers recognised cheerleading as a structured sport with rules, strategies, and judging systems akin to traditional competitive disciplines. Colleges of Education Teacher G explained:

“We prepare for inter-school competitions, and the criteria are very strict, just like athletics or football.”

This comment underscores the formality and discipline involved in competitive cheerleading, suggesting parity with established sports.

Similarly, Colleges of Education Teacher H stated:

There’s strategy, scoring, and judges. It’s structured.”

This indicates a deeper understanding of cheerleading as a technical and rule-based activity. These Colleges of Education teachers saw cheerleading not merely as an expressive or co-curricular event, but as a disciplined endeavour with clear evaluation metrics, aligning it more closely with competitive sport.

In contrast, SHS teachers expressed more limited exposure to such formalised cheerleading settings. SHS Teacher G noted:

“We don’t really have competitions for it, so it’s more about display.”

This view reflects a perception of cheerleading as performative rather than competitive. SHS Teacher H added:

“Cheerleading isn’t given the same attention as football or athletics, which makes it look like play.”

The use of the term “play” reveals an institutional bias, where certain sports are prioritised due to infrastructure, tradition, or administrative focus, thus impacting recognition of cheerleading as legitimate.

Sub-theme 3.2: Industry and Career Opportunities

Recognition of cheerleading as a pathway to professional development also varied, with Colleges of Education teachers demonstrating greater familiarity with post-secondary opportunities. COE Teacher, I remarked:

“There are real opportunities—students can earn scholarships or join professional teams.” Similarly, COE Teacher J added: *“Some former students joined college teams. It’s a career path now.”*

These responses point to a growing awareness of cheerleading as a viable track within both academic and professional settings. In these contexts, cheerleading is viewed not only as a sport but also as a means to access higher education or professional advancement.

By contrast, SHS teachers were either unaware of or sceptical about the viability of cheerleading beyond school-level activities. SHS Teacher I admitted:

"I wasn't aware it could lead to a career until recently."

This highlights the information gap between levels of schooling regarding the opportunities associated with cheerleading. SHS Teacher J shared:

"Parents often don't see it as a serious thing. They see it as a distraction."

This quote illustrates broader societal perceptions that may influence how cheerleading is treated in school programmes, especially at the foundational levels. There was a clear difference in the extent to which COE and SHS teachers recognised cheerleading as a legitimate sport and career option. Colleges of Education teachers appeared more attuned to national competitions, inter-school frameworks, and scholarship pathways. Their responses suggested institutional engagement with cheerleading as a structured, rule-governed sport comparable to athletics or volleyball. The visibility of career trajectories, such as college recruitment and semi-professional teams, was more pronounced at this level, likely due to student maturity, event exposure, and school affiliations with competitive circuits. Senior Secondary School teachers, on the other hand, typically lacked access to such organised cheerleading structures and, therefore, perceived it primarily as a co-curricular or morale-boosting activity. Their lower awareness of potential career paths in cheerleading seemed to be shaped by institutional limitations and prevailing social narratives that do not view cheerleading as a legitimate sport. Furthermore, SHS teachers were more attuned to parental concerns and cultural attitudes, which often categorised cheerleading as playful or non-academic. These contrasts suggest that recognition of cheerleading as a sport is not merely a function of personal opinion but is also influenced by institutional access, exposure to formal competitions, and awareness of external opportunities. The legitimacy of cheerleading as a sport or profession remains unevenly recognized among PE teachers. COE teachers largely viewed cheerleading as a structured competitive activity with professional potential, shaped by exposure to competitions and success stories of former students. Conversely, SHS teachers held more limited views, seeing it as an entertaining activity with less serious athletic or career implications. These findings highlight the importance of institutional support, awareness creation, and policy-level recognition in shaping how cheerleading is valued within the educational sports landscape.

Research Question 4: What social or institutional factors affect PE teachers' perceptions and support for cheerleading within school programmes?

This question explored the contextual influences that shape how physical education (PE) teachers perceive and implement cheerleading in schools. The analysis revealed a core theme: "Institutional Constraints and Social Perceptions." Two sub-themes were developed: (1) Resource Allocation and Policy Support and (2) Cultural Perceptions and Gender Bias.

Theme 4: Institutional Constraints and Social Perceptions

Teachers across both COE and SHS identified a range of systemic and cultural barriers that limit the integration of cheerleading into formal school programming. These include policy gaps, inadequate resources, entrenched gender stereotypes, and prevailing community attitudes that often

undermine the legitimacy of cheerleading as a meaningful school activity.

Sub-theme 4.1: Resource Allocation and Policy Support

A recurring concern was the lack of institutional support in terms of funding, equipment, and curriculum space. Teachers described how cheerleading is often treated as an extracurricular activity rather than a formal part of the physical education curriculum, thereby reducing its legitimacy and sustainability.

COE Teacher K stated:

"We don't have designated funds or equipment. Cheerleading comes from the students' interest."

This quote illustrates the reliance on student-driven initiative rather than institutional provision. Likewise, COE Teacher L added:

"Because it's not in the PE syllabus, we can't use class hours. It limits what we can do."

This lack of curricular inclusion creates structural limitations that restrict teacher involvement and time allocation.

Similar concerns were voiced by SHS teachers. SHS Teacher K said:

"There's no structured curriculum or budget. It relies on voluntary teachers."

This implies that cheerleading survives through the personal commitment of teachers rather than school-level planning or funding. SHS Teacher L added:

"Without recognition in the official curriculum, it's hard to justify giving it time or resources."

The absence of formal institutional backing affects how seriously cheerleading is regarded, not just by teachers but also by administrators.

Sub-theme 4.2: Cultural Perceptions and Gender Bias

Beyond institutional factors, teachers also identified deep-seated social perceptions and gender norms as barriers to wider acceptance and support for cheerleading. These perceptions influenced student participation, teacher advocacy, and parental support.

COE teacher M remarked:

"Many still see cheerleading as a 'girls' thing', and not on par with other sports."

This gendered view reduces cheerleading's perceived athletic value and restricts male participation. Reinforcing this, COE Teacher N stated:

"Male students interested in cheerleading face ridicule. That discourages participation."

These comments reflect societal norms that delegitimise male involvement in expressive or artistic physical activities. At the SHS level, such perceptions were compounded by academic pressures and scepticism about performance-based activities. SHS Teacher M explained:

"Parents want their kids to focus on academics. Anything performance-related is seen as unserious."

This perspective highlights the cultural disconnect between school and community perceptions of valuable educational engagement. Furthermore, SHS Teacher N noted:

"Even among teachers, some don't think it's worth promoting."

This internalised bias within the teaching staff suggests that cultural attitudes are not only external but also embedded in institutional mindsets. COE teachers appeared to exercise greater agency in navigating institutional barriers. Despite the lack of formal curriculum space or budget, they described efforts to integrate cheerleading informally, for example, through extracurricular clubs, event performances, or student-led routines. Their experience with older students also allowed them to promote leadership, creativity, and performance skills, even in the absence of structural support. COE Teachers, in contrast, felt more constrained by systemic and societal expectations. The younger age of their students, along with stricter administrative control and parental emphasis on academics, limited their ability to innovate or experiment with cheerleading programmes. Many relied solely on student enthusiasm or personal interest, without institutional support or recognition. These differences suggest that institutional autonomy and teacher confidence increase with school level, allowing COE teachers more flexibility to work around constraints. However, both groups emphasised the need for formal policy inclusion and broader societal education to overcome these persistent challenges.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study both support and challenge previous research on the recognition and integration of cheerleading within school sports programmes. In alignment with studies by Grindstaff and West (2011) and Adams & Bettis (2003), the current research confirms that cheerleading occupies a hybrid space between sport and performance art. These earlier works highlight how cheerleading demands athleticism, choreography, and teamwork, characteristics that SHS teachers in this study strongly emphasised. The COE teachers' recognition of cheerleading as both competitive and structured aligns with Miller (2019), who found that teachers exposed to institutionalised cheerleading programmes were more likely to legitimise it as a sport. This recognition reflects their access to institutionalised cultural capital, allowing them to perceive and advocate for cheerleading within the formal field of school sports. Conversely, the perception among SHS teachers that cheerleading is primarily a recreational or extracurricular activity with limited prospects echoes findings by Thompson *et al.* (2017), who observed that teachers in under-resourced or lower-level schools often lack exposure to competitive cheerleading frameworks. This lack of exposure can reinforce a limited habitus, constraining how cheerleading is valued and supported. In contrast to studies that argue cheerleading can

serve as a platform for career development and scholarships (Jones & Greer, 2020), SHS teachers in this study were either unaware of such opportunities or sceptical of their legitimacy. This highlights how Bourdieu's concept of the Field shapes perception; in fields where cheerleading is not institutionally supported or visible, teachers are less likely to see it as a viable pathway. In terms of the performative and expressive dimensions of cheerleading, the findings support Schroeder (2010), who identified the activity's capacity to foster creativity, leadership, and emotional expression. COE teachers in this study valued cheerleading's storytelling and leadership-building potential, reflecting a form of embodied cultural capital that aligns with Bourdieu's framework. Meanwhile, SHS teachers emphasised its social inclusiveness, particularly its appeal to shy or less athletic students, supporting Wooten (2016), who noted that cheerleading can serve as a medium for student engagement and confidence-building, especially in early adolescence. Institutional barriers and social constraints observed in this study also reinforce earlier findings by Hanson (2015) and Williams (2018), who reported that the marginalisation of cheerleading is often reinforced by curriculum omissions, funding gaps, and persistent gender stereotypes. Teachers' observations of cheerleading being perceived as "not serious" or "for girls" mirror Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity and the findings of Hardin & Greer (2009), who argue that cheerleading's gendered image contributes to its devaluation in the sports hierarchy. The social stigma faced by male students interested in cheerleading, noted in both COE and SHS settings, contrasts with the inclusive ideals of modern physical education and underscores how habitus shaped by community norms influences participation and support. However, this study offers a more optimistic view than some earlier research, particularly in noting how SHS teachers actively navigate institutional limitations. This finding contrasts with Gaston (2014), who suggested that school-level constraints often lead to complete exclusion of cheerleading from PE programmes. The COE teachers' willingness to create informal training spaces and integrate cheerleading into school events shows that individual agency, though bounded by field and habitus, can play a role in shaping practice.

Summary of Findings

The study sought to explore physical education (PE) teachers' perspectives on the inclusion of cheerleading in school sports programmes, focusing on how they define, understand, support, and experience institutional and cultural influences regarding cheerleading. Through interviews with PE teachers from both Senior Secondary Schools and Colleges of Education, the following key findings emerged across four research questions:

- PE teachers largely identified cheerleading as a hybrid discipline combining physical skill, rhythm, coordination, and performance. COE teachers emphasised its athletic and gymnastic elements, while SHS teachers saw it more as a participatory and inclusive activity. This shows a difference in depth of understanding, with COE teachers aligning cheerleading with sports-like discipline, and SHS teachers focusing on its engagement potential.
- Teachers recognised the performative aspect of cheerleading, especially its capacity for artistic expression and emotional engagement. COE teachers associated cheerleading with creativity, leadership, and student

initiative, highlighting its role in storytelling and team building. SHS teachers focused on its social function, noting its power to include shy or less athletic students and build excitement during events.

- There were divergent views on whether cheerleading qualifies as a legitimate sport or professional industry. COE teachers, exposed to competitive frameworks and inter-school contests, viewed cheerleading as structured, rule-governed, and comparable to other recognised sports. They also acknowledged scholarship and career opportunities. In contrast, SHS teachers viewed cheerleading as more recreational and informal, with limited prospects due to the lack of structured opportunities and general awareness.
- Institutional barriers such as a lack of curriculum inclusion, insufficient funding, and limited policy support affected how cheerleading was promoted in schools. Social factors, especially gender stereotypes, community perceptions, and academic prioritization, further constrained participation and legitimacy. COE teachers demonstrated more initiative in navigating these barriers, while SHS teachers felt constrained by stricter administrative environments and conservative community expectations.

CONCLUSION

- The Ways Meaning is Understood is Affected by the Institutional Environment. While PE teachers view cheerleading as a mixture of different disciplines, senior high school teachers see it as an inclusive and choose-your-own sport, whereas COE teachers link it to competitive and structured sports.
- The role of Cheerleading in learning values and social responsibility is important. Teachers realise that cheerleading develops both confidence and feelings in students, with both COE and SHS teachers pointing out that it encourages teamwork and participation.
- The acceptance of cheerleading as a true sport and career varies among people. In COE, cheerleading is regarded as a serious and organised sport that people can build a career in, while SHS sees it as mainly recreational because of its low exposure and support among institutions.
- Problems between institutions and the community can hinder the process of implementation. Problems such as missing cheering lessons, insufficient budgets, and gender biases stop cheerleading from advancing in schools, while COE teachers take more action to tackle them than SHS instructors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- All institutions should use the same standards for training Cheerleading teachers. Differences in views between the two groups of PE teachers can be tackled by introducing professional development programmes that standardise their knowledge about cheerleading. It will result in the same guidelines and methods at every school level.
- Cheerleading should be added to the school's Physical Education programme. As it is a mixture of fitness and education, cheerleading ought to be mentioned along with other activities in the official PE curriculum. The goal of the integration should be to highlight the art of dance as

well as its helpful effects on creativity, leadership, and being inclusive.

- Let people realise that cheerleading is a real sport and brings profit. Cheerleading should be promoted by education stakeholders and school administrators as a disciplined sport by exhibiting various scholarship possibilities, plenty of contests, and different career paths. Being involved with national sports groups and cheerleading organisations can help this initiative.
- Policies and advocacy can be used to deal with institutional and sociocultural barriers. Initiatives should be introduced to overcome obstacles such as having few funds and not enough facilities, and to deal with stereotypes, especially connected to gender. Helping communities and schools to be aware and promoting inclusion in school policies can encourage cheerleading among every student.

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