



**2026**

# Post-Pandemic Participatory Patterns of Women & Girls in Ultimate

WHY WOMEN & GIRLS ARE NOT RETURNING

## A Note from USA Ultimate

The following whitepaper, published by Clemson University and distributed by USA Ultimate, was commissioned by the Youth Department in response to a post-pandemic trend of girls' and women's ultimate programs not recovering at a pace consistent with other aspects of the sport. While subsequent research from the broader sports world confirms this is not a problem unique to the sport of ultimate, the study's findings provide a potential roadmap for future efforts to engage and retain girls and women within our sport.

An [overview of the study's findings](#) with additional background information is available on USA Ultimate's website.

# **Post-Pandemic Participatory Patterns of Women & Girls in Ultimate**

Prepared for USA Ultimate  
January 2026

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Why Women & Girls Are Not Returning to Ultimate**

This study examined women's and girls' participation in Ultimate through a comprehensive mixed-methods approach that included national participation data from 2014–2024, qualitative interviews with former players, focus groups with current collegiate, club, and professional players, a parent interview, survey responses from nearly 1,800 participants, and a social media analysis spanning one year of online content. Across all data sources, findings converge on a clear and consistent conclusion: women and girls are not leaving Ultimate because they lack interest, motivation, or enjoyment. Instead, disengagement occurs when participation environments fail to provide sustained belonging, physical and psychological safety, and viable long-term pathways—challenges that have become more pronounced in the post-COVID landscape.

Participation data reveal persistent gender disparities and a weakening youth pipeline, particularly for girls. While overall Ultimate participation has remained relatively stable, girls' participation has declined more sharply than boys' participation over time, and high school participation has not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. In contrast, mixed-gender formats and league-based participation have grown, reflecting broader post-COVID youth sport trends in which flexible, lower-commitment formats recover more quickly than traditional, high-stakes competitive pipelines. These patterns suggest that Ultimate's existing youth structures may no longer align with how girls and families engage with sport in the current context.

Qualitative interviews with women who discontinued participation demonstrate that engagement is sustained primarily through social belonging and erodes following social disruption. Women rarely described quitting as an abrupt or emotional decision; instead, disengagement was typically gradual and rational, shaped by changes in social connection, life transitions, or the increasing difficulty of re-entering the sport. The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a critical

turning point by interrupting routines, weakening peer ties, and undermining confidence during key developmental periods. Mixed-gender participation frequently emerged as an exit point when women felt undervalued, physically unsafe, or pressured to adapt to men's styles of play. Injury—particularly lower-body injuries and fear of re-injury—served as a legitimate and often permanent exit ramp. Structural barriers, including unclear re-entry pathways and limited women-centered opportunities, further constrained women's ability to return after stepping away.

Survey findings reinforce these qualitative patterns at scale. Women reported motivation and enjoyment levels equivalent to men, directly contradicting narratives that women disengage due to lack of interest. However, women demonstrated a significantly greater reliance on community and social support for continued participation and were substantially more likely than men to report feeling overlooked or excluded while playing. This pattern highlights a critical disconnect between Ultimate's inclusive values and women's lived experiences within participation settings. Financial costs functioned as cumulative friction rather than absolute barriers, and fewer women than men envisioned themselves in long-term leadership or coaching roles within the sport.

The social media analysis adds important context to these findings. While sentiment toward Ultimate on social platforms was overwhelmingly positive, visibility and engagement were heavily skewed toward men's teams, elite competition, and male-centered narratives. Women's participation, leadership, and developmental pathways were comparatively underrepresented. This imbalance may unintentionally signal who belongs and who is celebrated within Ultimate culture, reinforcing the same patterns of marginalization identified in interviews and survey responses.

Taken together, these findings indicate that Ultimate's participation challenges are structural rather than motivational. Issues related to visibility and representation, access and seasonality, injury prevention, roster and competition design, and unclear re-entry pathways shape whether women and girls return after disengagement. Addressing these challenges represents an opportunity—not a critique—to align Ultimate's stated values with participation structures that foster belonging, safety, flexibility, and longevity across the life course. By intentionally redesigning how and when women and girls are welcomed, supported, and celebrated, Ultimate can strengthen its youth pipeline and build a more sustainable and inclusive future for the sport.

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## Comprehensive Report

### Youth Sport Participation in the Post-Pandemic Context

Youth sport participation in the United States was profoundly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with effects that extended far beyond temporary program closures. School shutdowns, cancellations of organized sport, and limited access to community facilities led to widespread declines in structured sport participation among children and adolescents (Do et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2021). While many programs resumed as public health restrictions eased, emerging research makes clear that the pandemic altered youth sport participation pathways rather than merely interrupting them. Patterns of disengagement, delayed reentry, and uneven recovery have reshaped who participates in organized sport and under what conditions.

National data suggest that youth sport participation has rebounded modestly since pandemic-era lows but remains below pre-2020 levels. According to the National Survey of Children's Health, approximately 54% of children ages six to seventeen participated in organized sports or sport lessons in 2022, reflecting partial recovery but not a full return to prior participation rates (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2023). Importantly, this recovery has been uneven. Youth from higher-income households and communities with greater access to organized sport infrastructure have returned at higher rates, reinforcing longstanding disparities in sport participation. These findings underscore that post-pandemic participation trends are shaped more by structural access and opportunity than by individual motivation or interest.

School-based sport participation follows a similar trajectory. National high school participation data show steady increases following the return to in-person schooling, signaling renewed opportunities for adolescents to engage in athletics (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2023). However, gains vary widely by sport, gender, and region, indicating that recovery has not been uniform. Scholars emphasize that adolescence is a critical developmental period in which sport participation becomes more selective and competitive, making disruptions during middle school and early high school particularly consequential for long-term engagement (Johnson et al., 2023).

Across peer-reviewed studies, declines in youth sport participation during and after the pandemic are not attributed to diminished interest in sport or physical activity. Rather, barriers such as reduced program availability, increased costs, transportation challenges, loss of peer connections, and uncertainty about returning to group-based environments have played central roles (Do et al., 2022; Hardiman et al., 2023). Adolescents frequently report concerns about perceived skill loss, confidence, and social belonging, which influence decisions about whether to return to organized sport. These concerns are especially pronounced among girls, who often face additional social pressures related to competence, peer evaluation, and gendered expectations within sport settings.

Adults and institutions also play a pivotal role in shaping post-pandemic participation. Parents, teachers, and coaches act as gatekeepers to reentry, with their own perceptions of safety, familiarity with specific sports, and access to resources affecting whether youth are encouraged to return (Hardiman et al., 2023). Sports lacking strong school-based visibility or established youth development pipelines have been slower to recover participation, suggesting that newer or

nontraditional sports face additional challenges in rebuilding post-pandemic. Collectively, this literature highlights that post-COVID youth sport participation patterns reflect social and structural barriers rather than individual disinterest, reinforcing the need for intentional strategies that support access, confidence, and belonging during adolescence.

### **Generation Z, Generation Alpha, Girls, & Organized Sport Participation**

Generation Z and Generation Alpha currently occupy middle school and high school sport spaces, and their distinct generational contexts have important implications for organized sport participation. Generation Z, typically defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, experienced adolescence amid rapid growth in social media use, increasing academic and social pressures, and heightened awareness of mental health and well-being (Pew Research Center, 2019). Generation Alpha, generally defined as those born from 2010 onward, is the first cohort to experience pervasive digital immersion from early childhood and to have formative educational and social experiences shaped directly by the COVID-19 pandemic (McCrindle, 2020). These generational conditions influence how youth perceive risk, competence, social belonging, and time use during critical developmental years, all of which shape sport participation decisions.

Across the youth sport literature, girls' participation in organized sport declines more sharply than boys' beginning in early adolescence, regardless of sport type (Hopkins et al., 2022). Systematic reviews consistently demonstrate that girls disengage from organized sport due to a combination of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors rather than a lack of interest in physical activity itself (Duffey et al., 2021). Commonly cited barriers include perceived lack of competence, fear of negative evaluation, reduced enjoyment, limited peer support, and gendered expectations related to athletic ability and appearance (Hopkins et al., 2022; Moreno-Vitoria et al., 2024). These factors align closely with developmental characteristics of both Generation Z and Generation Alpha, particularly heightened self-awareness and sensitivity to peer judgment.

Digital technology plays a central role in shaping the lived experiences of both cohorts and has significant implications for organized sport participation. Adolescents in Generation Z report high levels of daily screen time, which has been associated with reduced physical activity, sleep disruption, and increased anxiety and depressive symptoms (Zablotsky et al., 2025). For girls, social media environments that emphasize appearance, comparison, and performance can intensify body dissatisfaction and self-consciousness, making organized sport settings feel more exposing and emotionally risky (Czubaj et al., 2025). These pressures may be particularly salient in sport contexts involving uniforms, public performance, or mixed-gender participation, contributing to girls' reluctance to enter or remain in organized sport environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these generational dynamics by disrupting access to organized sport during a critical developmental window. Research indicates that pandemic-related closures led to widespread reductions in youth sport participation and that adolescents — particularly girls — were slower to return when opportunities resumed (Do et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2023). Many girls experienced declines in perceived skill, confidence, and social connection during periods of interruption, increasing the psychological barriers associated with reentry (Johnson et al., 2023). For Generation Alpha, whose early sport experiences were shaped by pandemic instability, organized sport may feel unfamiliar or intimidating rather than routine.

Importantly, the literature also points to organized sport structures themselves as contributors to adolescent dropout, particularly among girls. As youth progress into middle school and high school, sport environments often become increasingly competitive, evaluative, and performance-oriented, prioritizing early specialization and selection over exploration and social belonging (Moreno-Vitoria et al., 2024). These conditions disproportionately disadvantage girls who enter sport later, lack prior exposure, or do not align with traditional athletic norms. A recent systematic review of interventions targeting female adolescents highlights the limited availability of evidence-based strategies designed specifically to support girls' sustained engagement in organized sport, underscoring a persistent gap between participation research and program design (Kay et al., 2025).

Taken together, the literature suggests that Generation Z and Generation Alpha girls navigate organized sport participation within a context shaped by digital saturation, heightened social evaluation, pandemic-related disruption, and increasingly selective sport systems. Their underrepresentation in organized sport should therefore be understood not as a reflection of disinterest, but as the result of cumulative social, developmental, and structural barriers. These findings highlight the importance of intentional, developmentally appropriate sport programming that prioritizes confidence, belonging, and accessible entry points during middle school and high school years.

## **Findings**

### **Part I – Ultimate Sport Participation Patterns, 2014–2024**

#### ***Overview of Data & Analytic Approach***

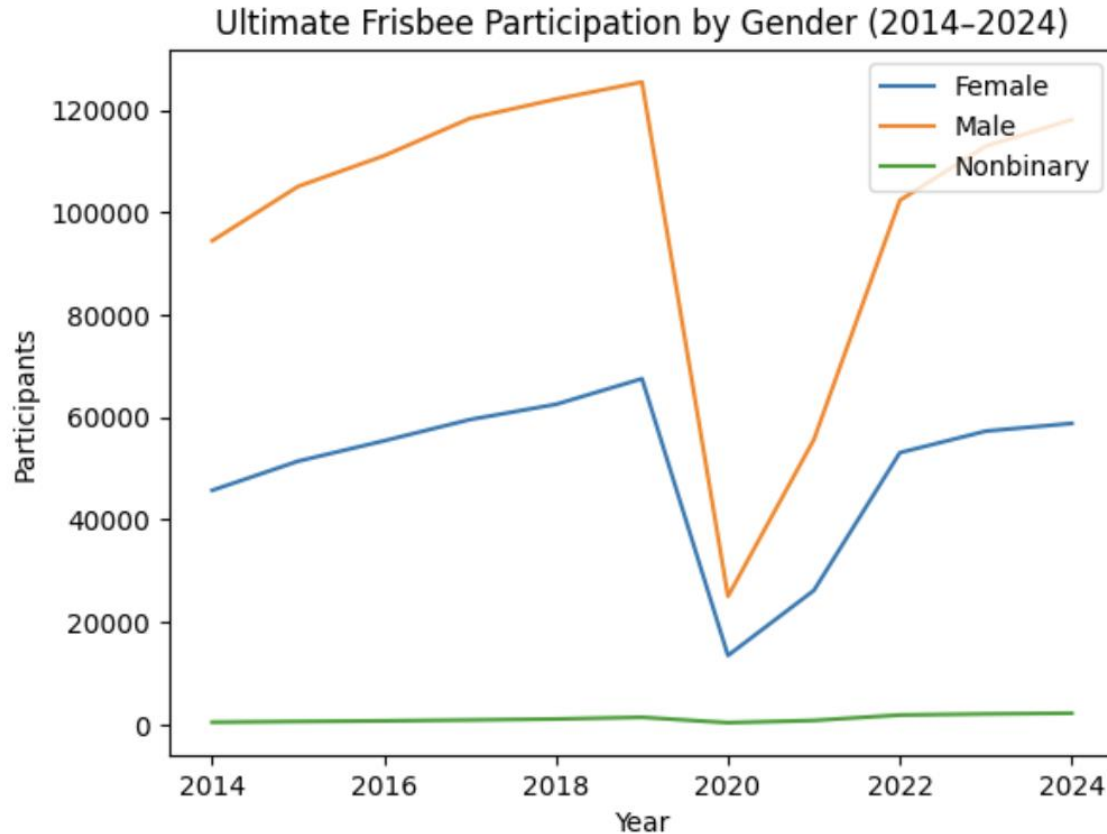
USA Ultimate provided participant demographic and registration data spanning 2014–2024 to examine longitudinal patterns in Ultimate participation. A frequency distribution analysis was conducted to assess the number and percentage of participants across key demographic and participation variables over time. Variables were selected based on their relevance to understanding participation trends and structural dynamics within the sport and included gender, race, membership state, competition level, gender division, team competition level, and event type. While the datasets contain additional variables, the selected categories offered the clearest insight into participation pathways and potential areas of vulnerability within the Ultimate ecosystem.

Across all analyses, results are presented descriptively to highlight stable patterns, emerging trends, and notable shifts over the eleven-year period.

#### ***Gender Representation in Ultimate Participation***

Across the full period of analysis, Ultimate participation demonstrates a persistent and substantial gender imbalance. From 2014 to 2024, male participants consistently outnumbered female participants by approximately two to one. On average, 65.7% of participants identified as male, while 33.2% identified as female. A comparatively small proportion of participants identified as nonbinary, selected “prefer not to report,” or were categorized as UN, with these categories collectively accounting for a minimal share of total participation (see Table 1).



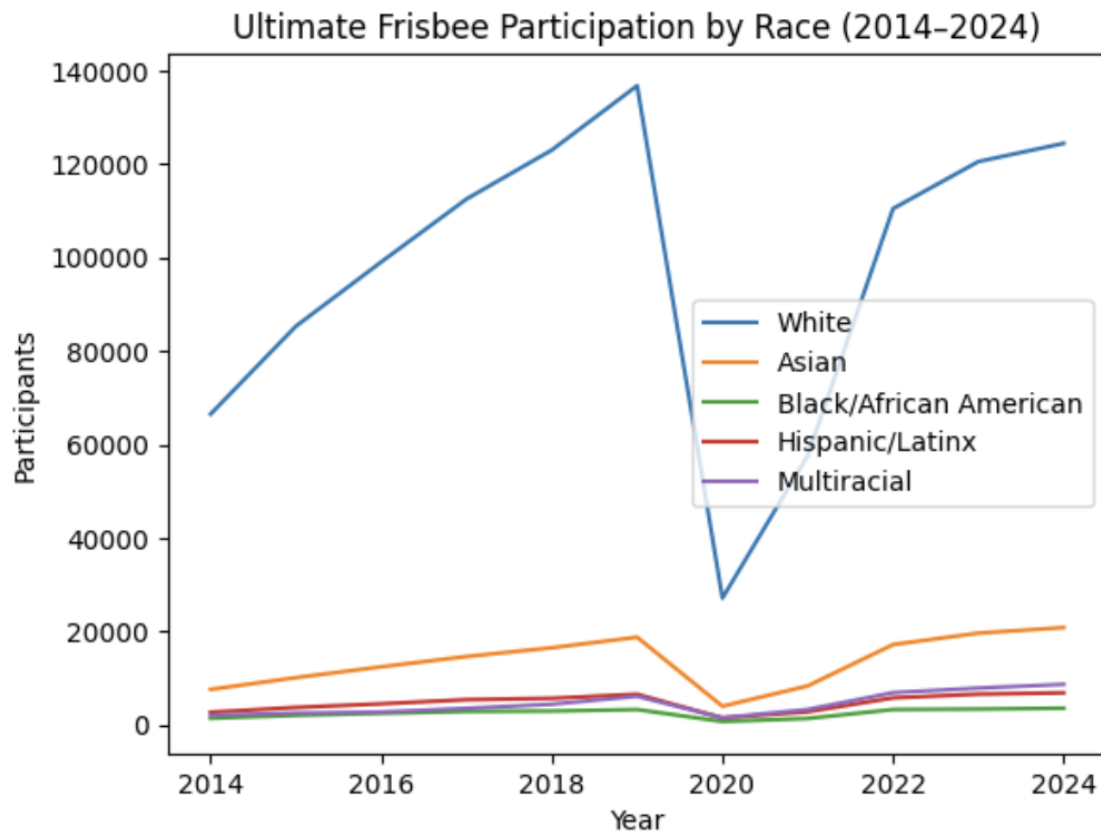
**Table 1***Ultimate Participation by Gender (2014-2024)*

This gender distribution remained remarkably stable across the eleven-year period, suggesting that gender disparities in participation are not the result of short-term fluctuations but reflect enduring structural patterns within the sport. Despite broader growth in mixed-gender formats and increasing public discourse around gender inclusion in sport, the overall gender composition of Ultimate participants has changed little over time.

### ***Racial Composition of Ultimate Participants***

Analysis of race-based participation data reveals that Ultimate participation is predominantly White, with limited diversification over time. Across all years, White participants accounted for an average of 64.3% of total participation. Notably, the proportion of White participants increased substantially over the period examined, rising from 47.2% in 2014 to approximately 70% in peak years such as 2019 and 2022 (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Ultimate Participation by Race (2014-2024)*



Among other racial groups, Asian participants represented the second-largest share of participants, with an average participation rate of 9.1%. Unlike several other groups, Asian participation showed a steady upward trend, increasing from 5.4% in 2014 to 11.6% in 2024. Participation rates among other racial categories also increased modestly over time, but these gains remained comparatively small and did not meaningfully alter the overall racial composition of the participant base.

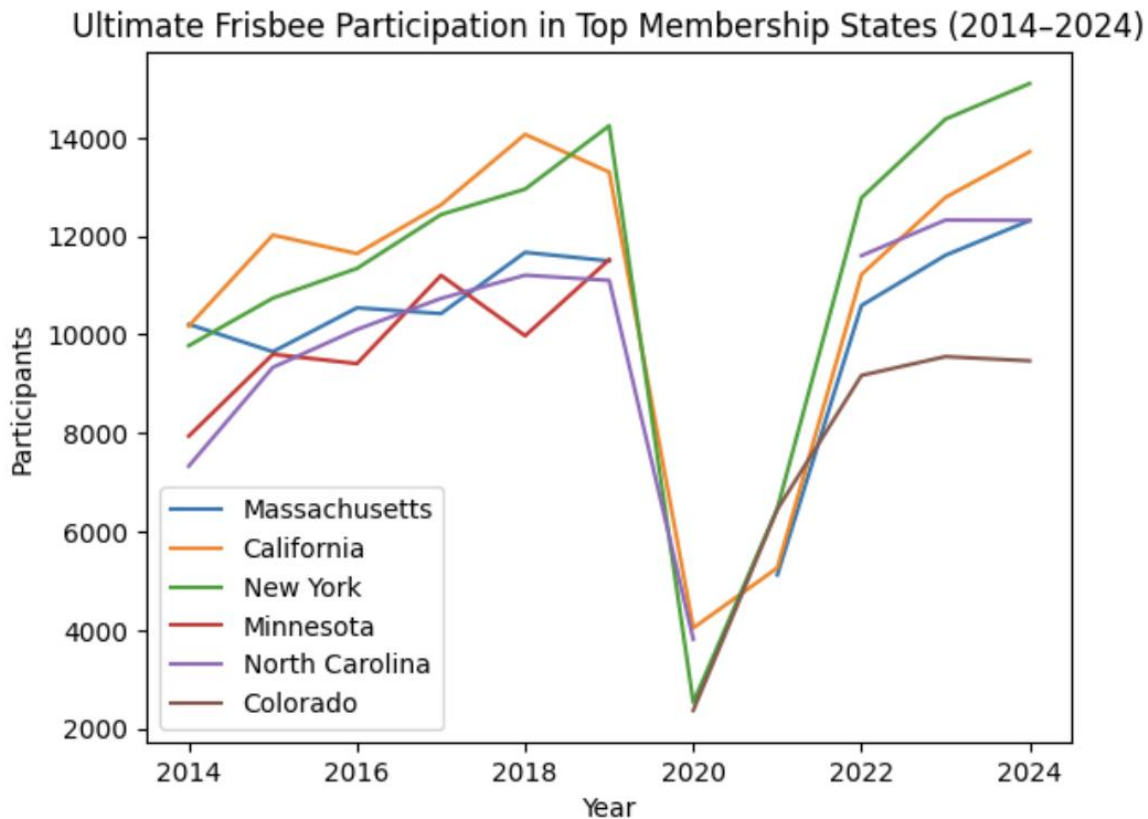
Taken together, these findings indicate that Ultimate has not experienced broad-based racial diversification during the past decade. Instead, growth appears concentrated within already-represented populations, reinforcing concerns about differential access, exposure, and entry points across racial and ethnic groups.

### ***Geographic Concentration of Participation***

Participation in Ultimate is highly geographically concentrated. Across all years, a small number of states consistently accounted for a disproportionate share of total participants, while the majority of states contributed less than 1% of participants annually (see Table 3). Depending on the year, between 34 and 40 states fell below the 1% threshold, highlighting substantial regional disparities in participation density.

**Table 3**

### *Ultimate Participation in Top Membership States (2014-2024)*



California and New York ranked among the top five membership states in every year from 2014 to 2024. Massachusetts and North Carolina also appeared in the top five for all but one year, underscoring the stability of participation hubs over time. Minnesota ranked among the top five states in seven of the eleven years analyzed, while Colorado emerged as a top-five state for five consecutive years (2020–2024). Georgia appeared in the top five in a single year.

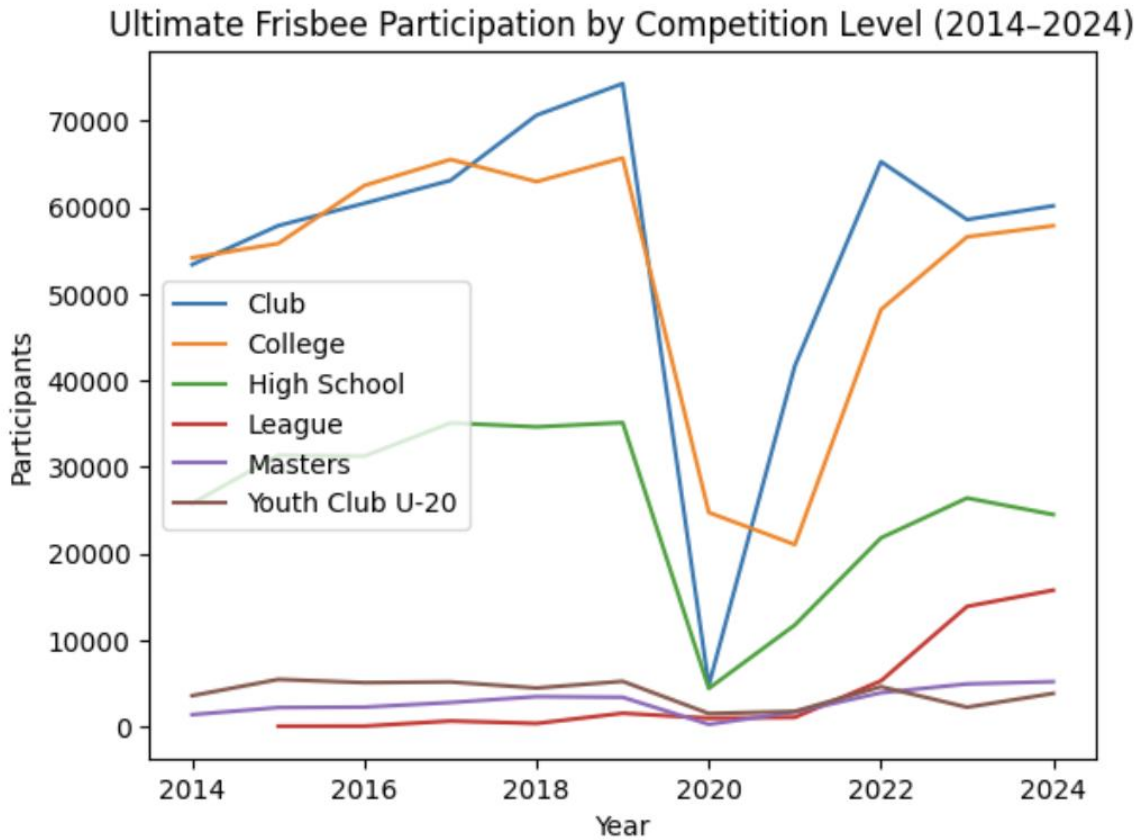
These patterns suggest that Ultimate participation remains anchored in a limited number of established regions with strong infrastructure, institutional support, and historical presence of the sport. Conversely, participation remains sparse across much of the country, potentially limiting access and visibility for youth in less-established Ultimate regions.

### ***Participation Across Competition Levels***

Participation patterns across competition levels reveal both stability and gradual diversification. In 2014, participants were distributed across 10 competition levels. By 2024, this number had expanded to 20 available levels, reflecting increased structural differentiation within the sport. However, not all competition levels were available every year, and participation remained heavily concentrated within a small subset of levels (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

### *Ultimate Participation by Competition Level (2014-2024)*



Club, college, and high school competition levels consistently accounted for the majority of participants, with average participation rates of 35.7%, 36.3%, and 16.4%, respectively. All other competition levels attracted substantially smaller shares of participants, with several accounting for less than 1% of total participation.

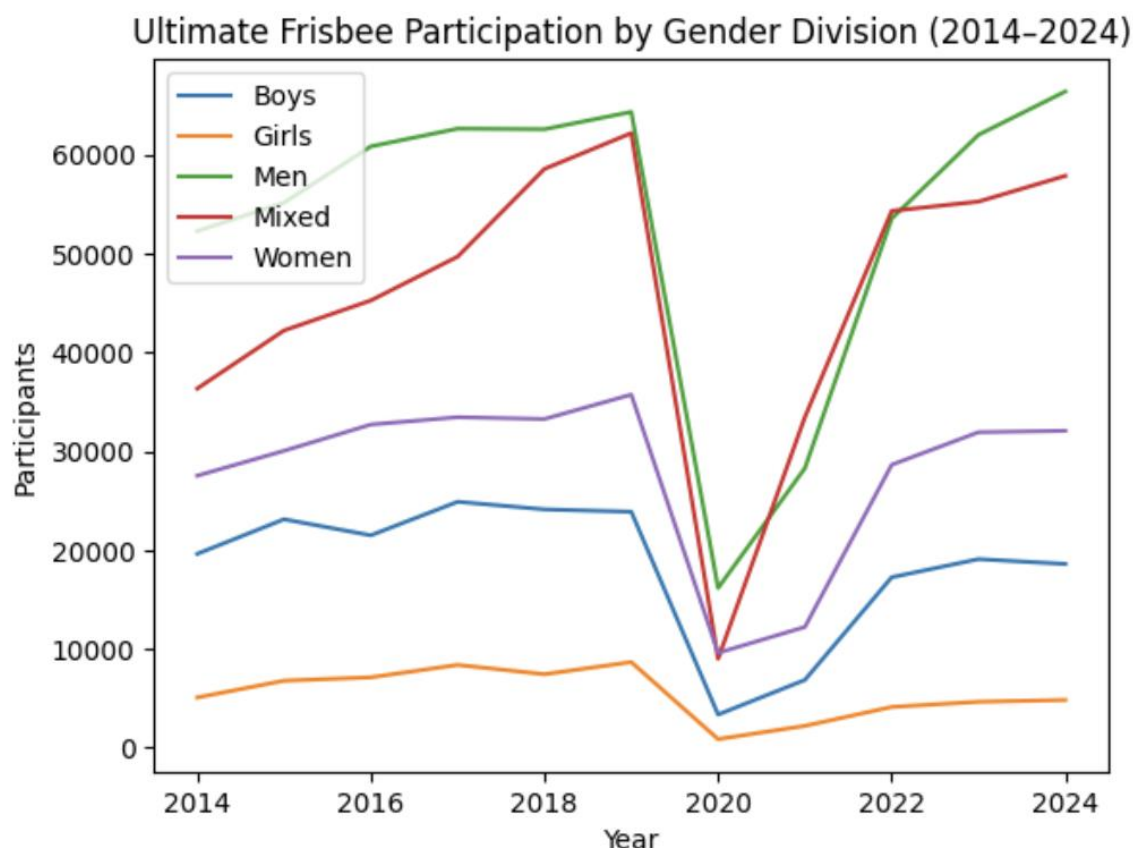
One notable exception to this pattern is the “league” competition level. While league participation accounted for less than 1% of participants in 2015, it increased steadily over time, reaching 8.8% of total participation by 2024. This growth suggests increasing demand for competition formats that may offer greater flexibility, lower barriers to entry, or reduced commitment compared to traditional club and tournament-based structures.

### ***Gender Division Participation Patterns***

Analysis of participation by gender division highlights pronounced and persistent disparities, particularly within youth divisions (see Table 5). Across all years, participation in the boys’ division exceeded participation in the girls’ division by a factor of three to four. On average, boys accounted for 11.7% of total participants, while girls accounted for just 3.4%.

**Table 5**

*Ultimate Participation by Gender Division (2014-2024)*



Importantly, both divisions experienced declines over time. Participation in the boys' division decreased from 13.9% in 2014 to 10.3% in 2024. Similarly, girls' division participation declined from approximately 4.3% in 2015–2016 to 2.7% by 2024. These parallel declines suggest a contraction of the youth participation base overall, with girls experiencing consistently lower representation throughout the period.

Gender imbalances persist into adult divisions as well. The men's division averaged 35.6% participation, nearly double the women's division average of 18.7%. In contrast, the mixed division represented a substantial and growing share of participation, averaging 30.2% overall and increasing steadily from 25.8% in 2014 to 32.2% in 2024. By the latter years of the dataset, men's and mixed divisions together accounted for the majority of all participation.

### ***Team Competition Levels & Youth Participation Trends***

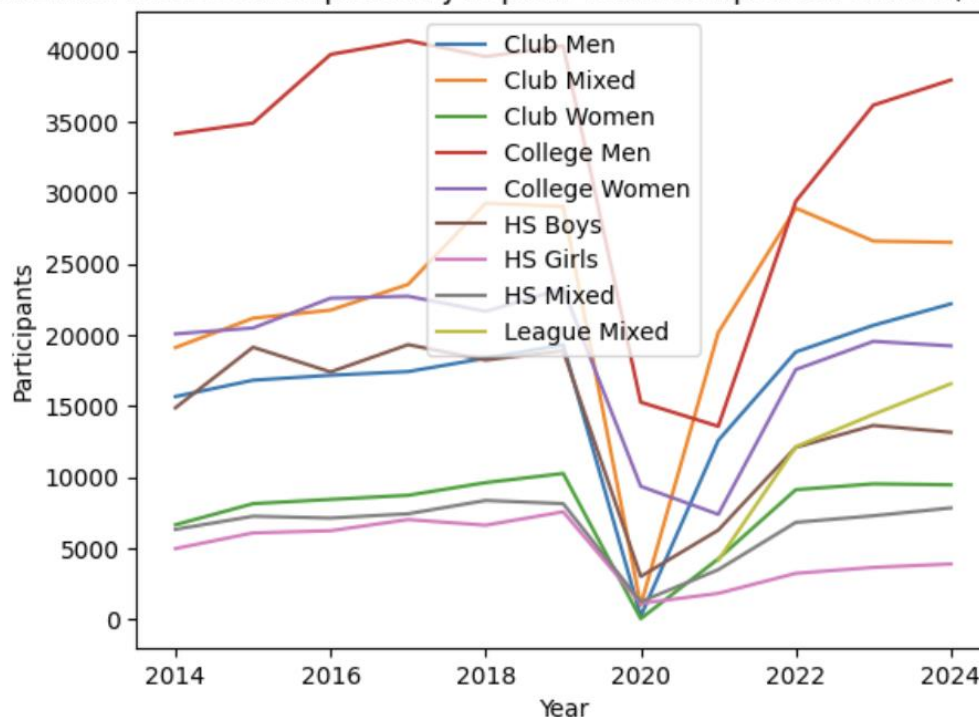
Examining team competition levels provides a more granular view of gender disparities within specific participation contexts (see Table 6). Consistent with patterns observed across gender

divisions, participation rates for boys and men were approximately two to three times higher than those for girls and women at both the high school and club levels. At the college level, men's participation remained nearly double that of women's participation.

**Table 6**

*Ultimate Participation by Popular Team Competition Levels (2014-2024)*

**Ultimate Frisbee Participation by Popular Team Competition Levels (2014-2024)**



Youth participation trends at the high school level are particularly noteworthy. High school boys' participation declined sharply from a peak of 12.2% in 2015 to 7.3% in 2024. High school girls' participation followed a similar but lower trajectory, decreasing from nearly 4% between 2015 and 2019 to approximately 2% from 2021 through 2024. These declines indicate a sustained contraction in youth participation that extends beyond short-term fluctuations.

At the same time, newer team competition formats show emerging growth. League mixed teams, introduced more recently, demonstrate increasing participation over the past four years, suggesting shifting preferences toward formats that may be more accessible, socially oriented, or flexible. Other team competition levels showed year-to-year variation, though trends were generally less pronounced.

### ***Participation by Event Type***

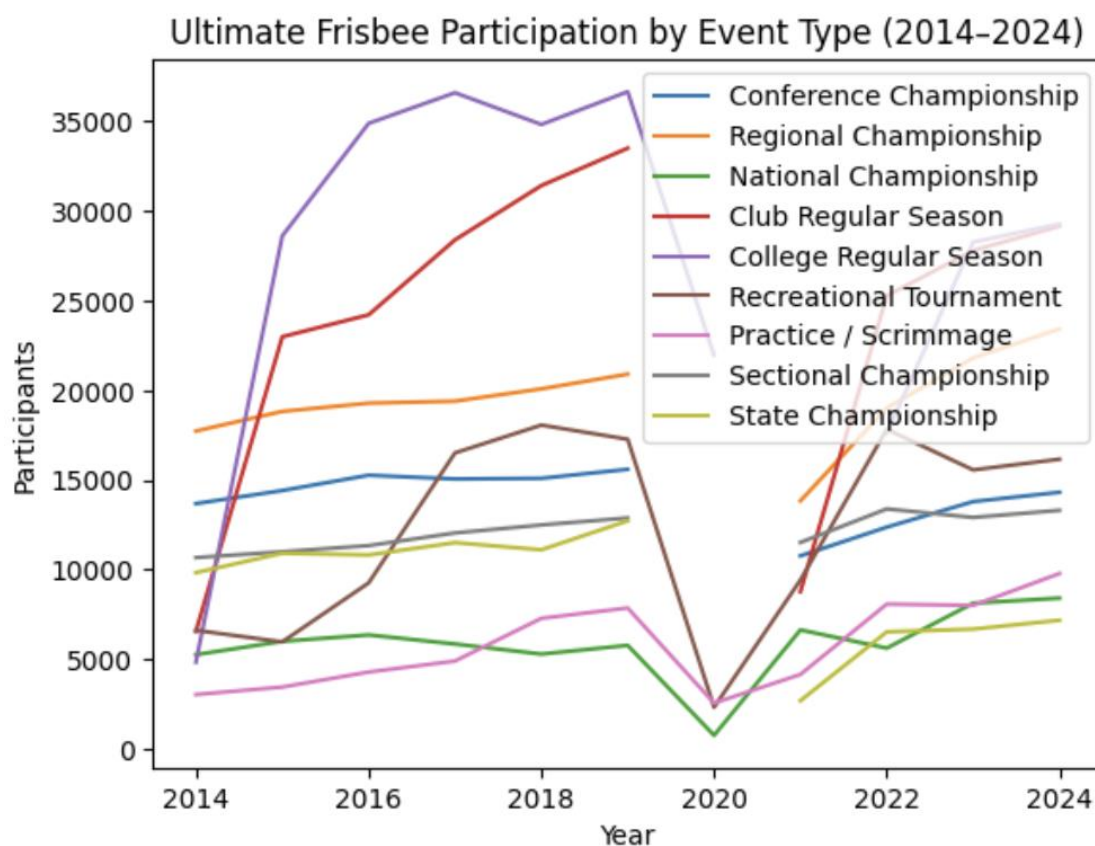
Participation also varies meaningfully by event type (see Table 7). Regional championship tournaments, sanctioned club regular season tournaments, and sanctioned college regular season



tournaments consistently attracted the largest shares of participants, with average participation rates of 11.1%, 12.9%, and 18.2%, respectively.

**Table 7**

*Ultimate Participation by Event Type (2014-2024)*



By contrast, insured practices, tryouts, and scrimmages (4.0%), national championship tournaments (3.9%), and state championship tournaments (4.9%) accounted for smaller proportions of total participation. Several event types also exhibited notable shifts over time. Participation in conference championship tournaments declined modestly, decreasing from approximately 9.7% in 2014 to 8.0% in 2023–2024. State championship participation showed a more pronounced decline, falling from 7.0% in 2014 to 4.0% in 2024.

Conversely, participation in insured practices, tryouts, and scrimmages increased from roughly 2% in 2014–2015 to 5.4% in 2024. National championship tournament participation also increased slightly over time. Other event types did not exhibit clear directional trends.

### ***Summary of Key Participation Patterns***

Taken together, these findings reveal several consistent patterns in Ultimate participation from 2014 to 2024: persistent gender imbalance, declining youth participation, geographic concentration, and growing interest in lower-commitment and mixed-gender formats. While Ultimate has expanded structurally through the addition of competition levels and event types, this growth has not translated into a strengthened or more equitable youth pipeline. These patterns provide important context for understanding how broader post-COVID youth sport trends may be interacting with existing structural characteristics of Ultimate—a connection explored in greater depth in the following section.

## **Part II – Qualitative Perspectives on Girls’ & Women’s Attrition from Ultimate**

### ***Overview of Qualitative Sample & Analytic Focus***

This section presents findings from in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with fourteen women who previously participated in Ultimate and subsequently discontinued their involvement. One additional interview was conducted with a parent of a player who left the sport during adolescence. Interviews focused on participants’ entry into Ultimate, their experiences over time, and the factors shaping their decisions to disengage.

Across interviews, participants’ narratives revealed consistent patterns regarding when and why girls and women exit Ultimate. Attrition was rarely described as abrupt or driven by loss of interest. Instead, disengagement emerged as a gradual, rational process shaped by social dynamics, structural barriers, physical risk, and life transitions. Collectively, these findings highlight that women’s attrition from Ultimate reflects issues of timing and fit rather than motivation.

### ***Entry Pathways & Timing of Disengagement***

Participants in this study typically entered Ultimate during adolescence or early adulthood rather than in early childhood. Most first encountered the sport in middle school, high school, or the early years of college, often through school-based teams, physical education classes, or peer networks. Very few participants described long-term youth specialization or sustained involvement beginning in childhood, indicating that Ultimate often functions as a late-entry sport for girls and women.

Because entry frequently occurred during adolescence, early experiences—particularly in middle school and high school—were highly formative. Several participants described negative early encounters involving mixed-gender dynamics, loss of social belonging, or feeling overlooked or marginalized. In some cases, a single adverse experience during adolescence effectively ended their participation pathway before college.

For women who continued playing beyond adolescence, discontinuation most often occurred during major life transitions, including late high school, college graduation, or the early post-college years. Importantly, participants emphasized that leaving Ultimate was rarely a sudden decision. Instead, disengagement unfolded gradually as participation became more difficult to



sustain in the context of changing priorities, injuries, disrupted social networks, or unclear reentry pathways.

Across all interviews, women expressed continued affection for Ultimate even after discontinuing participation. None described leaving because they stopped enjoying the sport. Rather, participation became unsustainable when social belonging eroded, structural access diminished, physical risk increased, or Ultimate no longer fit their lives.

### ***Social Belonging Sustained Participation, & Attrition Followed Social Disruption***

Social belonging emerged as the most consistent driver of both sustained participation and eventual disengagement. Participants described Ultimate as a central source of friendship, identity, and community, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood. When these social ties weakened or disappeared, continued participation felt less meaningful.

One participant described Ultimate as her primary social outlet during a formative period:

“That was basically my only social activity... like, everything I did socially was connected to Frisbee.” (Participant 6)

Others emphasized that their participation depended more on people than on the sport itself:

“Once those upperclassmen girls graduated, it got harder. They were the reason I stayed.” (Participant 3)

“I think I stayed because of the people more than anything else.” (Participant 11)

After college, the loss of structured team environments made sustaining belonging more difficult:

“I was trying to find something that felt like my college team... and I just couldn’t.” (Participant 10)

“When you don’t automatically have a team anymore, it’s way easier to just... not go.” (Participant 1)

These narratives illustrate that when social continuity was disrupted—through graduation, relocation, or team dissolution—attrition often followed.

### ***COVID-19 Functioned as a Turning Point That Disrupted Momentum Rather Than Motivation***

Participants consistently identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a pivotal moment in their Ultimate trajectories. Rather than directly causing dropout, the pandemic disrupted routines, halted development, and fractured social structures in ways that made returning more difficult.

For some, Ultimate became especially important during the pandemic:

“During COVID, that was basically my only social outlet.” (Participant 6)

This participant described the period as her highest level of engagement:

“That was probably the peak of me being involved in Frisbee.”

However, as normal activities resumed, Ultimate became harder to prioritize:

“Once everything else came back, it just wasn’t the same priority anymore.” (Participant 6)

Other participants described COVID as erasing participation infrastructure entirely:

“The team didn’t exist anymore... and then the inertia was gone.” (Participant 12)

“My senior year got cut short, and it felt like there was no real ending.” (Participant 7)

Several participants emphasized that reentry felt daunting after the disruption:

“It felt like everyone else moved on, and I didn’t know how to get back in.” (Participant 8)

These accounts suggest that COVID functioned less as a motivational barrier and more as a momentum-breaking event that increased psychological and structural barriers to reentry.

### ***Mixed-Gender Participation Created Ongoing Confidence and Safety Challenges***

Mixed-gender participation emerged as a complex and often discouraging aspect of women’s experiences in Ultimate. While some participants valued mixed play in principle, many described mixed environments as physically risky, socially marginalizing, or reflective of men’s styles of play.

One participant summarized this dynamic succinctly:

“A lot of times when playing mixed, you’re kind of just playing men’s ultimate.” (Participant 13)

Others described persistent mismatches in mixed or open play:

“I never had a chance to be a good matchup. It just felt unfair.” (Participant 4)

Participants also linked these experiences to longstanding gendered patterns:

“Boys never threw to girls.” (Participant 13)

“You could tell who was trusted with the disc, and it wasn’t us.” (Participant 11)

For some women, mixed participation raised safety concerns:

“I was always worried about getting run into.” (Participant 2)

“I just felt like I had to be more careful than everyone else.” (Participant 7)

Collectively, these experiences positioned mixed formats as barriers rather than bridges to sustained participation for many women.

### ***Injury and Fear of Re-Injury Functioned as Legitimate Exit Points***

Physical injury emerged as a decisive factor shaping attrition, particularly when coupled with perceptions of long-term risk or inadequate support. Several participants described injuries as moments that fundamentally altered their relationship with the sport.

One participant recounted a traumatic injury:

“A guy ran straight into me, and I tore my ACL completely. It was really traumatic.” (Participant 4)

Reflecting on this experience, she added:

“Once you realize how common ACL tears are for women, it just doesn’t feel worth it anymore.”

Another participant described stepping away after a concussion:

“I had a concussion, and I still felt pressure to be at practice.” (Participant 11)

Others framed disengagement as a rational, self-protective decision:

“I just don’t want to continue to injure myself.” (Participant 6)

“At some point you have to think about your body long-term.” (Participant 14)

Rather than viewing injury-related attrition as failure, participants framed these decisions as thoughtful recalibrations of risk and well-being.

### ***Increasing Competitive Pressure Undermined Enjoyment & Mental Wellbeing***

Many participants described a shift over time from Ultimate as enjoyable and flexible to Ultimate as stressful and demanding. As competition intensified, enjoyment diminished.

One participant explained:

“It wasn’t fun anymore if I felt bad going to practice.” (Participant 5)

Another described the cumulative toll of competitive demands:

“My body was being pushed to the brink in an unhealthy way.” (Participant 14)

Emotional exhaustion was also common:

“Sometimes you’re just sad at tournaments, and you don’t really know why.” (Participant 9)

For some, declining team culture contributed directly to disengagement:

“The culture just wasn’t supporting my mental health anymore.” (Participant 11)

These accounts suggest that competitive intensity, when paired with insufficient attention to well-being, can undermine long-term engagement.

### ***Structural Barriers Limited Sustainable Reentry, Particularly After College***

Participants consistently identified structural barriers that made returning to Ultimate difficult, especially following major life transitions such as graduation or relocation. These barriers included unclear entry points, inconsistent commitment norms, limited women-centered opportunities, and high time and travel demands.

One participant contrasted college and club environments:

“Club just didn’t feel as legitimate... no coach, variable commitment.” (Participant 1)

Another described difficulty finding an appropriate level of play:

“Pickup was either way too intense or not serious at all.” (Participant 10)

Several participants noted limited women-only opportunities:

“There just weren’t a lot of women’s options where I lived.” (Participant 10)

“Mixed felt like the default, but it wasn’t what I wanted.” (Participant 13)

These structural constraints compounded over time, making disengagement more likely even among women who expressed interest in returning.

### ***Parental Perspectives: Developmental Vulnerability & the Role of Adult Leadership***

The parent interview reinforced and extended themes identified across athlete interviews. Without prompting, the parent identified the same mechanisms driving her daughter’s disengagement, emphasizing that participation was motivated by belonging rather than skill development.

She described how mixed-gender dynamics at the middle school level actively pushed girls out and highlighted the absence of adult culture-setting. In her account, no coaches or program leaders intervened to establish expectations, norms, or values that supported inclusion and safety.

Notably, her daughter did not explicitly “quit” Ultimate. Instead, after one negative experience, she simply reallocated her time to other activities. This mirrors patterns observed across the qualitative and quantitative data, in which attrition is rarely an active rejection of the sport.

This perspective underscores the importance of middle school as a critical leverage point and highlights the outsized role of adult leadership in shaping whether girls remain engaged in Ultimate.

### **Summary of Qualitative Interviews**

Across fourteen interviews, women’s attrition from Ultimate reflected a convergence of social disruption, pandemic-related instability, gendered participation dynamics, physical risk, and

structural barriers rather than a lack of interest or enjoyment. Participants consistently expressed affection for Ultimate while articulating why continued participation no longer aligned with their social needs, health priorities, or life circumstances.

Together, these findings suggest that reengaging girls and women in Ultimate requires intentional attention to social belonging, physical and psychological safety, flexibility across life transitions, and clear, accessible reentry pathways. These qualitative insights provide essential context for interpreting participation trends and inform the strategic considerations discussed in the following section.

### **Part III – Qualitative Perspectives on Women’s Sustained Participation in Ultimate**

#### ***Overview of Focus Group Sample & Analytic Focus***

This section presents findings from nine focus groups conducted with women actively participating in Ultimate across college, club, and professional contexts. In contrast to the interview participants described in Part II—who had discontinued participation—focus group participants were currently engaged in the sport and articulated why they continued to play.

Across focus groups, women described Ultimate as uniquely capable of meeting their social, athletic, and identity-based needs across different life stages. Continued participation was not attributed to convenience, habit, or lack of alternatives. Rather, women remained engaged when Ultimate provided social belonging, personal affirmation, flexibility, and a visible future within the sport. These findings illuminate the conditions under which retention occurs and offer an important counterpoint to the mechanisms of attrition identified in earlier sections.

#### ***Community and Belonging Are Central to Retention***

Across all focus groups, women identified community and social connection as the primary reasons they continued to play Ultimate. Participation was consistently framed as relational rather than transactional, with Ultimate functioning as a core site of friendship, identity formation, and mutual support.

One club player described Ultimate as her primary social anchor:

“My Frisbee friends are the only friends that I have.” (Club focus group)

Others emphasized the role of Ultimate in facilitating connection during major life transitions:

“I didn’t go to college with friends... I was kind of desperate to find friends and find a community.” (Club focus group)

College players echoed this sense of belonging, often contrasting Ultimate with more rigid or performance-driven sport environments:

“Nobody knew what they were doing, so it was just a bunch of people learning all at the same time.” (College focus group)

Across age groups, women emphasized that continued participation was less about the sport itself than about the people with whom they played:

“Playing Frisbee was really just a means to an end... that end being social connection.” (Club focus group)

These narratives mirror attrition findings in reverse: when belonging is sustained, participation endures.

### ***Ultimate Balances Meaningful Competition With Life Flexibility***

Women consistently described Ultimate as offering a rare balance between serious competition and flexibility. This balance was especially important for women navigating academics, careers, relationships, and caregiving responsibilities.

One club player explained:

“Club Frisbee feels really unique... it’s competitive, but you’re not professional. You still work your nine to five, but you’re pouring your heart into it.” (Club focus group)

Another participant highlighted the importance of flexibility during college:

“I wanted something serious, but a little bit more lenient, because I really wanted to focus on my academics.” (College focus group)

Professional players similarly emphasized that participation was internally motivated rather than externally imposed:

“People are doing this because they love it, not necessarily to get to the highest peaks.” (Pro focus group)

Participants did not reject competition; instead, they valued Ultimate’s ability to accommodate ambition without demanding total life domination. This balance emerged as a key differentiator between Ultimate and other sports women had played.

### ***Women-Centered Spaces Enable Confidence, Development, & Longevity***

Across focus groups, women emphasized the importance of women-centered teams and environments in sustaining participation. These spaces were described as affirming, developmentally supportive, and emotionally safer than mixed-only contexts.

One participant described intentionally seeking women’s teams:

“I didn’t want to do intramurals. I wanted more of a bond with other females.” (College focus group)

Another club player highlighted the ease of entry in women’s spaces:

“I have no barriers to entry with women... every single girl I play with, I’m like, we should be best friends.” (Club focus group)

Several participants described women’s teams as environments where trust replaced constant self-justification:

“They trust me. I don’t have to prove how good I am.” (Club focus group)

These findings stand in direct contrast to attrition narratives, where women described disengaging after losing access to women-centered environments or being pushed into mixed settings where they felt undervalued.

### ***Mixed-Gender Participation Supports Retention Only When Women Are Intentionally Valued***

Unlike women who discontinued participation—who often described mixed play as a barrier—women who continued playing described mixed participation as rewarding only when it was intentionally structured around women’s involvement.

One participant described a transformative mixed team experience:

“That team broke my brain in terms of how they used and respected women... the way to succeed in mixed was through your women.” (Club focus group)

At the same time, participants were clear that such experiences were not guaranteed:

“It’s exhausting to have to prove myself to every new man that I meet.” (Club focus group)

Another participant acknowledged that her own positive experiences were shaped by prior athletic confidence, while recognizing the broader implications:

“That isn’t possible for all levels of women... and I’ve watched girls not come back.” (Club focus group)

These narratives underscore that mixed play is not inherently inclusive and that its impact on retention depends heavily on team norms, role clarity, and intentional design.

### ***Alignment Between Ultimate’s Culture & Women’s Values Sustains Engagement***

Participants repeatedly emphasized that Ultimate’s cultural norms—particularly Spirit of the Game, integrity, and mutual respect—aligned closely with their personal values and identities.

One participant reflected:

“I really liked the spirit of the game... there’s a lot of integrity and humility.” (College focus group)

Others highlighted emotional safety and encouragement:

“People don’t get mad if you mess up... they’re always like, it’s okay, shake it off.” (College focus group)

For many women, Ultimate was not only a sport but a community of people they admired:

“Everybody I played with was really smart... kind... interesting.” (Club focus group)

This alignment between sport culture and personal values reinforced trust, identity connection, and long-term commitment.

### ***Perceived Longevity & Adaptability Support Participation Across the Life Course***

Women who continued to play Ultimate described seeing a future for themselves in the sport, even as their lives changed. Opportunities across league, club, pickup, and professional contexts allowed women to adapt their participation rather than exit entirely.

One participant described layering participation:

“League, club, pickup... I try to fill Frisbee with any season of the year.” (College focus group)

Others emphasized adaptability as essential for longevity:

“I’m getting old enough that my body can’t handle just playing once a week... so I travel to play where it fits.” (Club focus group)

Participants also discussed caregiving and motherhood as challenges that were manageable when community support was present:

“We were holding babies on the sideline all league... we do what we can.” (Club focus group)

These narratives highlight that sustained participation depends not on static commitment, but on the sport’s ability to flex with women’s lives.

### **Summary of Retention Findings**

Across nine focus groups, women who continued to play Ultimate described the sport as uniquely capable of meeting their social, athletic, and identity-based needs across life stages. Sustained engagement was driven by strong community bonds, a balance between competition and flexibility, access to women-centered environments, intentional mixed-gender participation, cultural value alignment, and adaptable pathways for long-term involvement.

When considered alongside findings from Parts I and II, these results suggest that women’s retention and attrition are shaped by the same underlying mechanisms—belonging, safety, fit, and visibility of future pathways. Women remain engaged when Ultimate affirms their value, adapts to their lives, and offers a meaningful place for them within the sport over time.

## **Part IV – Quantitative Survey Results on Participation, Belonging, & Barriers in Ultimate**

### ***Overview of Survey Sample & Analytic Approach***



An electronic survey (see Appendix A) was administered to Ultimate participants, yielding a total of 1,793 respondents, with a small number of missing cases depending on the item. The sample included 924 males, 905 females, 50 non-binary or third-gender participants, and 13 respondents who preferred not to disclose gender. Participants were primarily White (74%), followed by Asian (12%) and multiracial (6%). The average age of respondents was 29.01 years ( $SD = 12.03$ ), and participants reported playing Ultimate an average of 2.7 days per week ( $SD = 1.27$ ). Notably, 329 respondents (176 females and 152 males) reported that they no longer participated in Ultimate at the time of the survey.

The survey included validated scales assessing sense of community, social capital and support, and motivation and enjoyment, each measured using five-point Likert-type items. Additional items assessed perceived inclusivity, gender barriers, financial barriers, awareness and marketing, attitudes toward self-officiating, participation patterns, dropout history, future intentions, and leadership aspirations. Data were analyzed using independent-samples t-tests, cross-tabulations, and frequency distributions to examine gender-based patterns in participation experiences.

### ***Sense of Community, Social Support, & Motivation***

Independent-samples t-test analyses revealed statistically significant gender differences on two of the three validated scales. Female participants reported significantly higher sense of community ( $M = 37.51$ ,  $SD = 5.90$ ) than male participants ( $M = 36.90$ ,  $SD = 6.36$ ),  $t(1727) = -2.04$ ,  $p < .05$ . Females also scored significantly higher on social capital and support ( $M = 30.33$ ,  $SD = 4.43$ ) compared to males ( $M = 29.62$ ,  $SD = 4.84$ ),  $t(1727) = -3.15$ ,  $p < .05$ .

In contrast, no statistically significant gender difference was observed for motivation and enjoyment. Male ( $M = 26.59$ ,  $SD = 4.04$ ) and female participants ( $M = 26.37$ ,  $SD = 4.00$ ) reported comparable levels of enjoyment and intrinsic motivation,  $t(1727) = 1.14$ ,  $p > .05$ .

These results indicate that women's continued engagement in Ultimate is not driven by higher motivation or enjoyment relative to men, but rather by stronger perceptions of community and social support—findings that parallel and reinforce qualitative accounts of retention.

### **Perceived Barriers to Participation**

#### ***Inclusivity Barriers***

Crosstab analyses revealed a notable contrast in how inclusivity was experienced by male and female participants. On one hand, a strong majority of both males (84.4%) and females (85.7%) somewhat or strongly agreed that Ultimate is “an inclusive community.” On the other hand, 53.8% of female participants reported that they somewhat or strongly agreed that they had felt “excluded or overlooked when playing Ultimate,” compared to only 32% of male participants.

This discrepancy suggests that while Ultimate is broadly perceived as inclusive at a cultural or ideological level, women are substantially more likely than men to experience exclusion at the interpersonal or interactional level. These findings mirror qualitative narratives in which women endorsed Ultimate's inclusive values while simultaneously describing moments of marginalization within teams and mixed-gender play.

### ***Financial Barriers***

Responses to financial barrier items revealed a more nuanced pattern. For items reflecting acute financial exclusion, male and female responses were largely similar. Most participants strongly or somewhat disagreed that they had missed tournaments or events due to financial reasons (72.7% of males; 68.4% of females), and most did not worry about affording continued participation (75.3% of males; 67.5% of females).

However, gender differences emerged on items related to full engagement rather than outright exclusion. Specifically, 34.4% of females compared to 21.5% of males somewhat or strongly agreed that the cost of participation limited their ability to fully engage in Ultimate. Similarly, nearly half of female participants (49.7%) reported that they would play more often if costs were reduced or covered, compared to 30.9% of males.

These findings suggest that financial barriers function less as absolute participation blockers and more as cumulative constraints—particularly for women—limiting frequency, intensity, or longevity of engagement.

### ***Awareness & Marketing Barriers***

Male and female participants reported similar experiences related to awareness of Ultimate. Most respondents discovered Ultimate through word-of-mouth rather than formal outreach or advertising (81.9% of males; 86.7% of females). Responses were mixed regarding whether most people in their social networks had heard of Ultimate, suggesting uneven public visibility.

A substantial proportion of respondents indicated uncertainty about Ultimate's use of social media, with approximately half of both males (49%) and females (54.4%) selecting “neither agree nor disagree” when asked whether Ultimate utilizes social media effectively. At the same time, a majority of respondents agreed that improved marketing and outreach would help increase participation (66% of males; 56.4% of females).

Together, these findings indicate limited exposure to formal marketing efforts and suggest that awareness of Ultimate continues to rely heavily on interpersonal networks.

### ***Gender-Specific Barriers (Gathered from Female Respondents Only)***

Items assessing gender barriers were directed exclusively to female participants. Overall, most women did not report overt gender-based discouragement. A majority somewhat or strongly agreed that Ultimate is inclusive of girls and women specifically (71.3%), and large majorities strongly or somewhat disagreed that they had been discouraged from playing due to their gender (85.8%) or that people in their social circles believed Ultimate was not for girls (89%).

At the same time, when considered alongside inclusivity findings, these results suggest that women's challenges in Ultimate are less likely to take the form of explicit exclusion and more likely to manifest as subtle, situational, or cumulative experiences of being overlooked or undervalued.

### ***Attitudes Toward Self-Officiating***

Across all genders, participants expressed generally favorable attitudes toward self-officiating. Most respondents strongly or somewhat disagreed that they avoided leagues or tournaments because of self-officiating (88.6%), and a majority somewhat or strongly agreed that they appreciated Spirit of the Game and believed competition works well without referees (75.8%).

One item produced a more ambivalent response pattern: 19.5% of participants neither agreed nor disagreed that they would be more likely to participate if games had official referees. This suggests that while self-officiating is broadly supported, a meaningful subset of participants remains uncertain about alternative officiating structures.

### ***Dropout Patterns, Future Participation, & Leadership Intentions***

Crosstab analyses of dropout patterns indicated that annual dropout rates were historically low but increased in recent years. Notably, the number of female participants discontinuing participation exceeded that of males in both 2024 (42 females vs. 21 males) and 2025 (35 females vs. 21 males).

Despite this increase, overall indicators of engagement and commitment remained high. Most participants reported plans to continue playing over the next 12 months (84.2% of males; 80.9% of females), encouraged others to play Ultimate (86.9% of males; 85.9% of females), and felt more connected to Ultimate now than when they first began playing (79.4% of males; 77.1% of females).

A notable gender difference emerged in leadership aspirations. While 70% of male participants indicated that they would consider a leadership or coaching role within Ultimate, only 58.7% of female participants reported the same. This gap suggests that women may face additional barriers to envisioning long-term leadership pathways within the sport.

### **Summary of Quantitative Findings in Relation to Qualitative Results**

Overall, the quantitative findings strongly reinforce and contextualize the qualitative interview and focus group results. Women reported significantly higher levels of community and social support than men, while reporting equivalent motivation and enjoyment—confirming that women’s disengagement from Ultimate is not driven by lack of interest or intrinsic motivation.

At the same time, survey results revealed a critical tension echoed in qualitative narratives: although most women view Ultimate as an inclusive community, a majority also report feeling excluded or overlooked during play. This pattern suggests that inclusion is widely endorsed as a value, while exclusion persists at the interpersonal and structural levels.

Quantitative data also clarified the role of financial barriers as cumulative constraints rather than singular exit points, particularly for women. Finally, recent increases in female dropout, combined with lower leadership aspirations among women, align closely with qualitative accounts describing COVID-related disruption, challenges re-entering the sport after life transitions, and difficulty envisioning long-term futures within Ultimate.

Taken together, the quantitative findings confirm that women's attrition from Ultimate is shaped not by reduced enjoyment or commitment, but by social and structural conditions that influence whether participation feels inclusive, supported, and sustainable over time.

### **Comparison of Quantitative & Qualitative Findings**

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data tell a highly consistent story about women's participation in Ultimate. Across both datasets, women did not disengage due to lack of motivation or enjoyment. Quantitative results showed no gender differences in motivation or enjoyment, which aligns directly with qualitative interviews in which both current and former players consistently expressed love for the sport, even after discontinuing participation. This convergence allows the study to rule out disinterest as an explanation for women's attrition.

Both datasets also underscore the centrality of belonging and community for women. Quantitatively, women reported significantly higher sense of community and social support than men, indicating that relational factors are especially salient for women's participation. Qualitatively, women who continued to play described community, friendships, and feeling valued as the primary reasons they stayed, while women who quit often cited the loss of social connection as a turning point. Together, these findings suggest that belonging is both a key retention mechanism and a vulnerability point for women.

At the same time, the quantitative data revealed a paradox that was clarified through qualitative interviews. Although a large majority of women agreed that Ultimate is an inclusive community, more than half reported feeling overlooked or excluded while playing. Qualitative interviews explain this contradiction by highlighting that exclusion is rarely explicit; instead, women described subtle, interactional experiences—such as limited touches in mixed play, reduced leadership opportunities, or feeling physically mismatched—that are difficult to capture through survey items alone. Thus, the qualitative data illuminate how inclusion can exist as a shared value while exclusion persists in everyday practice.

Financial barriers showed a similar pattern across methods. Quantitatively, cost was not a primary reason for missing participation, but women were more likely than men to report that costs limited full engagement and that they would play more if costs were reduced. Qualitative interviews reinforced this finding by framing cost as cumulative friction rather than a single cause of dropout, often interacting with time demands, travel fatigue, and life transitions.

Finally, both datasets point to challenges in long-term sustainability and leadership. Quantitative results showed that fewer women than men expressed interest in future leadership or coaching roles. Qualitative data contextualized this gap by revealing uncertainty about long-term pathways, lack of visible role models, and perceptions that leadership roles were demanding or insufficiently supported. Together, these findings suggest that retention and leadership are interconnected and that women's continued participation is shaped not only by current experiences, but by whether they can envision a future within the sport.

## Part V – Social Media Analysis of Ultimate’s Public-Facing Culture

### *Overview of Social Media Data*

A social media analysis was conducted across Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook to examine the volume, sentiment, and gendered visibility of Ultimate-related content. Data were collected over a 12-month period (December 2024–December 2025). During this period, Ultimate-related content generated approximately 12,460 mentions, with an estimated potential reach of 57.7 million users.

The analysis focused on overall sentiment, dominant themes, content formats, gendered patterns of visibility and engagement, key advocates, and geographic distribution. Together, these metrics provide insight into how Ultimate is publicly represented and whose participation is most visible within the sport’s digital ecosystem.

### *Overall Sentiment & Dominant Content Themes*

Social media sentiment toward Ultimate was overwhelmingly positive. Across platforms, 97.1% of mentions were classified as positive, with fewer than 3% classified as neutral or negative. Positive content most frequently emphasized competition, athletic highlights, team identity, tournaments, fitness, and enjoyment of play.

Commonly used terms included *ultimate*, *frisbee*, *team*, *sport*, *fun*, and *play*, reinforcing a narrative of Ultimate as an exciting, communal, and enjoyable sport. Content was predominantly visual, with video posts accounting for approximately 42% of engagement and photo-based posts accounting for an additional 30%. These formats largely featured game highlights, athletic plays, tournament moments, and team celebrations.

Overall, social media representations of Ultimate consistently portrayed the sport as vibrant, competitive, and socially rewarding.

### *Gendered Patterns of Visibility & Engagement*

Despite the high volume and positive sentiment of Ultimate-related content, visibility and engagement on social media skewed heavily male. Content associated with male players, men’s teams, or men’s competition generated substantially more mentions (635) than content associated with female players or women’s teams (274). This imbalance indicates a significant gender gap in who is most visible and amplified within Ultimate’s digital narrative.

Analysis of top advocates and prolific users further underscored this pattern. The most influential accounts were overwhelmingly organizational accounts, professional teams, or men’s teams, with relatively limited representation from women-centered, girls-focused, or women-led accounts. While women’s teams and initiatives were present, they were far less likely to drive large-scale engagement or shape dominant narratives.

These findings suggest that social media visibility within Ultimate does not reflect proportional participation or interest among women, but instead privileges men’s participation—particularly at competitive and elite levels.

### ***Geographic Distribution of Engagement***

Geographically, Ultimate-related social media engagement was concentrated primarily in the United States. Mentions originating outside the U.S. were comparatively limited, indicating that Ultimate’s dominant digital narratives are largely shaped by U.S.-based organizations, teams, and cultural contexts.

This concentration suggests that perceptions of Ultimate—particularly regarding competitiveness, pathways, and visibility—are disproportionately influenced by U.S. norms and structures, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences or development models present in other regions.

### **Social Media Findings in Relation to Qualitative & Quantitative Results**

When considered alongside the qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data, the social media analysis helps explain a critical disconnect between Ultimate’s public-facing culture and women’s lived experiences within the sport.

First, the overwhelmingly positive sentiment observed on social media aligns closely with survey findings showing high motivation and enjoyment among both women and men, as well as with qualitative accounts from current players emphasizing joy, connection, and passion for Ultimate. Social media content reinforces these narratives by consistently portraying Ultimate as fun, exciting, and socially rewarding.

At the same time, the gender imbalance in visibility mirrors patterns identified in both the survey and interviews. Quantitative results showed that women report higher sense of community and social support than men, yet are also significantly more likely to report feeling overlooked or excluded during play. The social media findings help contextualize this paradox: while women value and experience community strongly, they are underrepresented in the most visible and celebrated portrayals of the sport.

Qualitative interviews further illuminate how this imbalance may shape participation trajectories. Women who discontinued participation often described feeling marginalized in mixed-gender environments or struggling to envision long-term futures within Ultimate. A digital landscape dominated by men’s teams, elite competition, and male-centered highlights may unintentionally reinforce perceptions about who “belongs,” who is valued, and whose participation is most legitimate.

Finally, although women-centered hashtags and initiatives—such as campaigns focused on women in Ultimate or girls’ leadership—were present in the dataset, they represented a relatively small proportion of overall engagement. This pattern aligns with quantitative findings showing lower leadership aspirations among women and qualitative accounts describing uncertainty about long-term pathways in the sport. Together, these findings suggest that while Ultimate’s stated values emphasize inclusion, its digital representation does not consistently foreground women’s participation, leadership, or developmental trajectories.

## ***Summary of Social Media Findings***

Overall, the social media analysis reveals a highly positive and visible digital culture surrounding Ultimate, but one that remains gender-imbalanced in terms of representation and amplification. While online content reinforces enjoyment, competition, and community—values echoed across qualitative and quantitative findings—it simultaneously centers men’s participation and elite performance. This imbalance helps explain why women may feel both connected to Ultimate and yet overlooked within it.

Taken together, the social media findings underscore that visibility functions as a structural component of belonging. When women’s participation, leadership, and pathways are less visible in public-facing narratives, it may shape expectations, confidence, and perceptions of long-term fit—contributing to the same patterns of attrition and uncertainty identified across interviews, focus groups, and survey data.

## **Action & Recommendations**

### **Designing Ultimate So Women and Girls Can Stay**

The findings from this study point to a clear and consistent conclusion: women and girls are not leaving Ultimate because of a lack of interest, enjoyment, or commitment. Instead, attrition occurs when participation environments fail to provide belonging, safety, visibility, and flexibility across key developmental stages and life transitions. Retention, therefore, should not be framed as a motivation problem or a recruitment challenge, but as a structural and cultural design issue. The following recommendations translate the study’s quantitative and qualitative findings into actionable strategies for USA Ultimate and its affiliated organizations to rebuild and sustain participation among girls and women.

### **Designing for Belonging Rather Than Participation Alone**

Across interviews, focus groups, survey data, and participation trends, belonging emerged as the single most powerful driver of retention for women and girls. Participants consistently described continued engagement as dependent on feeling socially anchored, valued in play, psychologically safe, and able to envision a future within the sport. Conversely, disengagement followed moments when these conditions eroded, such as leadership turnover, graduation, pandemic-related disruptions, or loss of social connection. These findings suggest that belonging should not be treated as an incidental benefit of participation, but as a core program outcome.

To address this, Ultimate programs should intentionally design for social integration rather than assuming it will occur organically. This includes requiring structured onboarding for new and returning players, formalizing mentorship relationships between older and younger girls and between collegiate and high school players, and training captains and coaches to prioritize community-building alongside tactical and technical instruction. Leadership continuity plans are also essential to ensure that belonging does not disappear when influential players or leaders leave. When belonging is intentionally cultivated, participation becomes socially anchored rather than fragile or optional.

## **Creating Women-Centered Entry & Re-Entry Points at Every Level**

The data consistently show that women most often disengage when re-entry into the sport feels intimidating, unclear, or overly evaluative. Interview participants rarely described quitting Ultimate as an abrupt or emotional decision; instead, disengagement occurred gradually when participation no longer felt accessible or welcoming. Focus group participants who remained engaged, by contrast, emphasized the critical role of women-only environments in building confidence, skill development, and long-term commitment.

These findings highlight the importance of creating women-centered entry and re-entry points across the participation pathway. Ultimate organizations should offer returner-friendly women's leagues and clinics specifically designed for players coming back after time away, as well as non-tryout-based opportunities that reduce performance pressure and confidence barriers. Expanding girls-only programming at the middle school and early high school levels is particularly important, as these years represent a critical leverage point for long-term engagement. Women-centered opportunities should not disappear as participation levels increase; rather, they should expand alongside competitive pathways to signal that women's participation is valued at every stage.

## **Reframing Mixed Play as a Design Challenge Rather Than a Default Solution**

Mixed-gender participation emerged as one of the most complex and consequential factors shaping women's engagement with Ultimate. For women who discontinued participation, mixed play was frequently described as physically risky, socially marginalizing, or reflective of men's styles of play. For women who continued playing, mixed participation was meaningful only when teams were intentionally structured to value women's contributions and rely on their involvement.

These findings suggest that mixed play is not inherently inclusive and should not be treated as a default developmental pathway. Instead, Ultimate should establish clear standards for mixed participation that address equitable disc distribution, role clarity, and safety expectations. Captains and coaches of mixed teams should receive explicit training on gender dynamics and inclusive team design, rather than relying on informal norms. Importantly, women's-only options must exist alongside mixed opportunities at all levels of play. When mixed participation is intentionally designed rather than assumed to be neutral, it can support retention rather than accelerate attrition.

## **Building Flexibility Into Competition Structures**

Women's sustained participation was closely tied to Ultimate's ability to adapt to their lives rather than demand total commitment. Across data sources, attrition clustered around major life transitions—such as late adolescence, college graduation, and early adulthood—rather than around declines in motivation or enjoyment. Post-COVID participation patterns further underscore the importance of flexible, locally based, and lower-commitment formats, particularly for women balancing multiple responsibilities.

To improve retention, Ultimate organizations should build flexibility directly into competition structures. This includes offering shorter seasons, reduced travel options, and flexible attendance



norms that allow participants to remain engaged without an all-or-nothing commitment. Tiered participation models that facilitate movement between league, club, and competitive play without stigma are particularly important. Clear messaging that stepping back temporarily does not equate to quitting can also help women remain connected during periods of transition. When participation is modular rather than rigid, women are more likely to stay engaged over time.

### **Investing in Safety & Injury Prevention for Women & Girls**

Injury emerged as a decisive and often permanent exit point for many women. Interviews revealed that ACL injuries, concussions, and unsafe mixed-play dynamics fundamentally altered women's relationships with the sport, particularly when injuries were paired with inadequate support or pressure to continue playing. These decisions were framed not as failures, but as rational recalibrations in the interest of long-term health.

To address this, Ultimate should prioritize safety and injury prevention as central retention strategies. This includes implementing evidence-based ACL injury prevention programming, particularly for youth and women's teams, and educating coaches and captains about gendered injury risk and safer mixed-play practices. Just as importantly, organizations should normalize stepping back, modifying participation, or prioritizing recovery without stigma. Women should not be placed in a position where continued participation requires sacrificing physical well-being.

### **Changing What Ultimate Celebrates & Amplifies**

The social media analysis revealed a clear disconnect between Ultimate's inclusive values and its digital representation. While overall sentiment toward the sport was overwhelmingly positive, visibility and engagement skewed heavily toward men's teams, elite competition, and male-centered narratives. Women's participation, leadership, and developmental pathways were comparatively underrepresented. Because visibility functions as a powerful signal of belonging, these patterns may unintentionally reinforce perceptions about who "belongs" in Ultimate.

To align digital representation with inclusive goals, Ultimate should intentionally elevate women's teams, women leaders, and women returning to the sport. Social media content should highlight joy-based, community-centered participation alongside elite performance and showcase women across the life course, including youth players, adult athletes, coaches, and parents. Women-centered initiatives should be amplified as integral to Ultimate's identity rather than positioned at the margins. When women can see themselves reflected in the sport's public narrative, they are more likely to envision a future within it.

### **What Belonging Means for Women & Girls in Ultimate**

Across all data sources, belonging was not described as simply being on a roster or having access to competition. Instead, belonging consisted of four interrelated elements: being socially anchored through friendships and mentorship, feeling valued and trusted in play, experiencing psychological safety around mistakes and injuries, and seeing a viable future in the sport as life circumstances change. Crucially, women did not experience belonging as automatic. It had to be intentionally cultivated, and when it disappeared, participation often followed.

**Final Takeaway**

Women and girls are not leaving Ultimate because they lack interest or commitment. They leave when belonging erodes, mixed play becomes exclusionary, re-entry feels risky, and participation structures no longer align with their lives. Retention is not about motivating women to stay; it is about intentionally designing Ultimate so women and girls can.

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## Appendix A

### *Ultimate Survey*

#### Analyzing Women and Girl's Participation Trends

#### Survey Instructions

#### PROMPT

Please answer all items as honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your experiences as a participant in Ultimate Frisbee. Unless otherwise specified, please think about your current team/club or your most recent ultimate-frisbee participation.

#### [SURVEY START]

#### *Demographics & Participation Background*

1. What is your gender identity? [male, female, other, prefer not to say]
2. What is your current age?
3. Are you currently an active participant in Ultimate?
  1. [IF NOT] In what year did you stop participating?
4. What is your race?
5. In what state(s) do/did you participate in Ultimate?
6. How many miles do you travel to participate in Ultimate?
7. At what age were you exposed to Ultimate Frisbee? [SLIDER SCALE]
8. For how many years have you played Ultimate Frisbee? [SLIDER SCALE]
9. Are you currently a member of a club/recreational Ultimate Frisbee team? [Y/N]
  1. [IF YES] Which best describes the competitive level you currently play? [recreational, competitive amateur league, professional league, college/university, other, not sure]
  2. How did you first learn about your current Ultimate Frisbee team? [OPEN RESPONSE]
  3. On a scale of 1-5, how welcoming was the team when you first joined? [SLIDER SCALE – 1=not at all; 5=very welcoming]
10. How many days per week do you play Ultimate Frisbee? [1-7 SLIDER SCALE]
11. Do you follow USA Ultimate Frisbee accounts on social media? [Y/N]
12. How often do you search for news or competitive results from USA Ultimate Frisbee sanctioned events? [SLIDER SCALE – 1=not at all; 5=very often]
13. Do you play any sports other than Ultimate Frisbee? [OPEN RESPONSE]

*Sense of Community in Ultimate Frisbee (modified from Warner et al. (2013) Sense of Community in Sport (SCS) Scale).*

\*5-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)

When considering your participation in Ultimate Frisbee:

- I feel like I belong when playing Ultimate Frisbee.
- I can rely on other Ultimate Frisbee players to support me when needed.
- I feel my opinions are valued among Ultimate Frisbee players.
- Ultimate Frisbee players treat everyone fairly regardless of skill level.
- I often socialize with other Ultimate Frisbee players outside of practice or games.
- Ultimate Frisbee players share common interests and goals.
- I feel comfortable and safe when playing Ultimate Frisbee.
- The competitive atmosphere within Ultimate Frisbee motivates me to improve.
- I would describe Ultimate Frisbee as “my community.”

*Social Capital & Support in Ultimate Frisbee (modified from Paldi et al. (2021) study on social capital as a mediator in team sport environments).*

\*5-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)

When considering your participation in Ultimate Frisbee:

- I have made new friends through participating in Ultimate Frisbee.
- Because of Ultimate Frisbee, I am more connected to people in my community.
- I trust Ultimate Frisbee players to treat me with respect.
- I feel I can ask other Ultimate Frisbee players for help or advice.
- I participate in social activities with Ultimate Frisbee players (e.g., meals, socializing).
- Ultimate Frisbee players look out for one another.
- Ultimate Frisbee helps me feel like I matter and am contributing to something bigger than myself.
- I feel judged or misunderstood by others when I tell them I play Ultimate Frisbee.
- I worry about how I will be perceived socially as an Ultimate Frisbee player.

*Motivation & Enjoyment of Ultimate Frisbee (modified from McDonough & Crocker (2005) study on participant motivation in sport).*

\*5-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)

When considering your participation in Ultimate Frisbee:

- I play Ultimate Frisbee because I genuinely enjoy it.
- I feel excitement to go play Ultimate Frisbee.
- Even without a formal competitive structure, I would continue playing Ultimate Frisbee.

- Playing Ultimate Frisbee makes me feel physical competent and confident.
- The friendships I have built playing Ultimate Frisbee keep me engaged in the sport.
- If I had to quit playing Ultimate Frisbee, I would miss it tremendously.

*Barriers, Inclusion, and Feelings towards Ultimate Frisbee Participation (modified from Eagleman (2013), Eime et al. (2015), and Hopkins et al. (2022) studies on factors associated with sport participation).*

\*5-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)

When considering your participation in Ultimate Frisbee:

### *INCLUSIVITY BARRIERS*

- My peers encourage me to participate in Ultimate Frisbee.
- I feel Ultimate Frisbee is an inclusive community.
- There are times when I have felt excluded or overlooked when playing Ultimate Frisbee.
- My family and/or friends support my participation in Ultimate Frisbee.
- I face fewer barriers to participate in Ultimate Frisbee than others in my community.

### *GENDER BARRIERS (If indicated they were a girl/woman in demography section)*

- I sometimes feel unsure if I *fit in* with Ultimate Frisbee players because of my gender.
- I feel Ultimate Frisbee is inclusive of girls and women, specifically.
- I am confident that Ultimate Frisbee provides equal opportunities for girls and women to participate and lead within the sport.
- Some people in my social circle think Ultimate Frisbee is “not for girls.”
- There are stereotypes about girls and women who play competitive or contact sports like Ultimate Frisbee.
- I have been discouraged from playing Ultimate Frisbee because of my gender.
- I feel empowered to challenge traditional gender roles through my participation in Ultimate Frisbee.

### *FINANCIAL BARRIERS*

- The cost of participating in Ultimate Frisbee (e.g., equipment, travel, fees) limits my ability to fully engage.
- I would play Ultimate Frisbee more often if financial costs (e.g., registration, travel) were reduced or covered.
- I have missed Ultimate Frisbee tournaments, practices, or events due to financial reasons.
- Ultimate Frisbee offers enough financial support (e.g., scholarships, gear lending) to make participation accessible.
- I often worry about being able to afford continued participation in Ultimate Frisbee.

## *AWARENESS BARRIERS*

- Most people I know have never heard of Ultimate Frisbee.
- It's difficult to find local opportunities to join an Ultimate Frisbee team.
- Ultimate Frisbee is not well represented on social media.
- I discovered Ultimate Frisbee through word-of-mouth, not through public outreach or advertising.
- USA Ultimate Frisbee utilizes social media effectively to promote Ultimate Frisbee.
- Better marketing or social media outreach would help more players get involved in Ultimate Frisbee.

## *Future Participation & Intentions*

1. I intend to continue playing Ultimate Frisbee in the next 12 months. (Y/N)
  1. [IF NO] Please explain why you do not intend to continue playing Ultimate Frisbee in the next 12 months.
2. I encourage others to play Ultimate Frisbee with me. (Y/N)
  1. [IF NO] Please explain why you do not encourage others to play Ultimate Frisbee.
3. Compared with when I first began playing, I feel more connected now to Ultimate Frisbee. (Y/N)
  1. [IF NO] Please explain why you do not feel more connected to Ultimate Frisbee now compared to when you began playing.
4. If I was offered a leadership or coaching role within my Ultimate Frisbee community I would consider accepting it. (Y/N)
  1. [IF NO] Please explain why you would not consider accepting a leadership or coaching role within your Ultimate Frisbee community.
5. What are the best things about participating in Ultimate Frisbee? [OPEN ENDED]
6. What are the main challenges you face when participating in Ultimate Frisbee? [OPEN ENDED]
7. If you could change one thing about Ultimate Frisbee to make it more inclusive or supportive, what would you change? [OPEN ENDED]

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The survey has concluded. Thank you for your time in completing this survey. Please reach out to the principal investigator Dr. Sarah Stokowski ([stoko@clemson.edu](mailto:stoko@clemson.edu)) should you have any further questions or comments regarding the study.

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