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Exercise Routines of Busy Young Professionals: A Qualitative Study of Motivations

Abstract

The objective of this research is to provide an understanding of the factors that influence young people's compliance with their personal exercise routine. This pilot study used semi-structured in-depth interviews of four young people in their early 20s with jobs in major cities in the United States. The interviews were then coded and thematically analysed. The findings highlight that personal appearance and health improvement, positive self-realization, accountability to a third party and enjoyment of sporting activities are key positive factors in maintaining an exercise routine. On the other hand, logistical reasons such as accessibility of exercise facilities, long work hours, frequent travel schedule, and finances were deterrents for young people with busy schedules. The results of this study will be relevant to fitness organizations such as gyms looking to design programs and incentives to reduce dropout rates and healthcare providers trying to increase exercise compliance amongst young people so as to reduce medical care burdens in the future.

Keywords: exercise motivation, young people, limitations

Introduction

Young adults are entering a key transitional phase of life. During this period many “personal, social and environmental changes” (Ashton 2015) take place such as “moving away from home, starting higher education, and beginning employment” (Poobalan 2010). These changes can be associated with unhealthy lifestyle behaviours such as weight gain, poor eating habits and sedentary lifestyles (Keating 2005). While there is a strong desire amongst young people to have a consistent exercise routine however, they struggle to go through with their plans. The research aims to study why people are able to or not able to stick to their routines. Once we have an understanding of these reasons, solutions can be designed by the relevant stakeholders to increase compliance and achieve more favorable outcomes.

Literature Review

Ample research has been done to understand exercise compliance in people with diseases like arthritis, diabetes (Casey 2009) as well as the geriatric population at large (Kosteli 2016) due to the immediate and drastic consequences of non-compliance in that condition. Additionally, to improve physical activity in schools and colleges, there have been numerous studies that have implications of educational institutions to improve their facilities and offerings (Hassandra 2003). However, not much research has been done to explore motivations for exercise amongst young busy working professionals. A study commissioned by the NHS UK looked at motivation and

facilitators of physical activity amongst South Asian adults who had families which had the context of a much older demographic with distinct gender and cultural needs when it came to engaging in exercise (Harris 2012). For example, women preferring to exercise indoors unlike men would not be commonly observed among young metropolitan women.

Young people have unique needs and hinderances when it comes to engaging in the consistent physical activity. They do not have access to the same facilities and leisure time that younger students have nor the impending need and spare time that older population has. They are just about starting their careers and that takes top priority for them. Hence, health is often neglected even though it is critical for people to engage in preventive health measures from a young age to prevent medical burdens at older and more susceptible ages. A Danish study explored the motivations and barriers to physical exercise at the workplace. (Bredahl and Saervoll 2014) However, the study looked at it from the limited point of view of reducing musculoskeletal disorders. It is imperative to incentivise younger people to exercise regularly and consequently, it is important to explore their existing motivations for exercising to design better solutions to promote compliance with preventive health measures, specifically exercising regularly. It is also important to broadly understand young people and their motivations as a whole before exploring gender-specific factors (Ashton 2015). Hence my research question for this pilot study is: ***What factors affect the motivation of young people to maintain their personal exercise routine?***

Method

To answer the research question I interviewed four young people with busy schedules for about forty minutes each. To code these interviews, I read through each response of the interview questions and created a primary cycle code using invivo language. The unit of analysis was a meaning unit consisting of a motivating factor for exercising. After identifying the primary cycle codes, I then developed overarching themes to describe the primary cycle codes. Through this process, I identified 5 themes describing factors affecting the motivation of young people to maintain their personal exercise routine. I then organized them into a schema containing positive and negative factors. The 5 themes include: personal appearance, positive self-realization, accountability, love for sports and logistical inconvenience.

Sampling

I tried to find a typical instance sample for my interviews, so I decided to choose two males ('1' and '2') and two females ('3' and '4') of ages 24-26 so as to maintain gender diversity in the demographic segment being studied. Two of the interviewees are in corporate jobs in New York City while two are graduate students in Washington D.C., who are working part time and have but have worked full time corporate jobs in the past. Thus, they represent a population of busy young professionals. All interviewees are personally known to me and hence, it was a convenience or opportunistic sample as well.

Research Instrumentation

My interview guide contained a variety of questions touching on different aspects of exercise routines. This would allow me to really understand what their routines were like at different phases in their lives and why they thought the situation was such. I also wanted to better understand how their routines and exercise in general made them feel and other unintended ways in which exercise routines had affected their lives. The working questions were:

Table 2: Interview guide containing sample questions and rationale

Objective	Sample Question
Background	When did you begin exercising?
Current situation	Can you describe your routine for me please?
General Motivations	Why did you begin this routine?
Intrinsic motivations	How does exercise make you feel?
Future	Do you have any goals that you are working towards? Please elaborate.
External Influencers	Where do you get your fitness inspiration from?

Analysis

Since these was an in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended guiding questions as opposed to a highly structured interview with short responses, my unit of analysis was a meaning unit. Having strong background knowledge about the research subject, I was able to interpret what the respondents meant and code whenever a motivating factor or an example of a reason was stated in the interview.

Table 1 : Code Table with description and two exemplars

Theme	Code	Code Description	Exemplars
Logistical Inconvenience	Accessibility	Refers to ease of getting to the location of exercise	"Gym is in my office building (2), "Ten minute drive" (1)
	Work Hours	Refers to busy and long work hours	"I was working 10-11 hours on the cruise ship so I hardly went to the gym" (1); "When I have long days at work, its tough to go exercise in the evening" (2)
	Travel Schedule	Refers to frequent travelling	"As a consultant when I travel five days of the week, its impossible to workout everyday" (3) "I travel twice a week and my sleep and routine goes for a toss" (4)
	Spare time	Refers to time not spent at a job or studying	"I had time before and after work to go to the gym"; (1) "I have no commitments in the morning and so its perfect to exercise" (3)
	Cost	Refers to the financial burden of maintaining an exercise routine	"Free membership at YMCA" (1) "Personal training is an expensive affair" (2) "I love Pilates but it is too expensive" (4)
Positive Self-Realization	Sense of accomplishment	A positive emotion induced by improving at or completing a task/goal.	"It feels rewarding when I start to see the results and feel good about it" (2); "I feel proud that at the end of the day I've done something good" (1)
	Avoid bad habits	If you spend time exercising, you automatically do not engage in bad habits like sleeping late, eating junk, etc.	"When I exercise, I don't feel like eating junk food because I'm working so hard in the gym" (2), If I didn't exercise I would have stayed home all day and watched TV (1)
	Physical energy	Feeling energized post exercise	"feel less groggy" (2), "gives me a lot of adrenaline"(1), "I'm more productive at work." (3)
	Enjoyment	Feeling happy or excited in relation to exercise.	"Organic joy of working out like an alcohol high but healthier"(3) , "I'm more likely to go do an exercise I enjoy" (1)

Physical Appearance and health	Weight loss	The motivation to exercise came from weight gain a particular stage in life.	"Put on a lot of weight in my first year of college" (1); "I wanted to avoid Freshman15 when I moved to New York" (3)
	Appearance	Relating to body size and shape	"I have some old clothes that I'd want to fit into more comfortably" (1) "I feel the need to look a certain way" (3)
	Health	Improvement in medical indicators of health	"I have a family history of heart disease and diabetes" (4), "By being healthy today, I can avoid illnesses and diseases in the future when I'm older" (2)
	Goal	An end result that the respondent wants to achieve by exercising.	"Losing fat and getting lean, that's what my goal is" (2), "I've wanted to lose weight for the last 15 years" (4)
Accountability	Online influencers	Online sources of motivation/inspiration to maintain an exercise regime.	"My trainer would like me to do a yoga and a cardio class additionally". "I am accountable to my trainer now so I feel the need to comply" (2)
	Offline Influencer	Known people as motivation/inspiration to maintain an exercise regime.	"I look at workout videos a lot. I see people can do really cool things and that inspires me. I want to get there." (3), "My dad made sure I did a training run every Sunday" (4)
	Social media	Motivation to work out that comes from then need to share on social media	"I need to keep up good content for people following me" (3), "I like putting up pictures of me doing cool workouts" (3)
Love for Sports	Sports	Enjoying sport activities	"I used to swim competitively from the age of 3" (3) "I loved playing basketball in high school" (2) "Sports are a lot more engaging and fun" (2)

Findings

The themes that emerged while exploring the factors that motivation to maintain an exercise routine were:

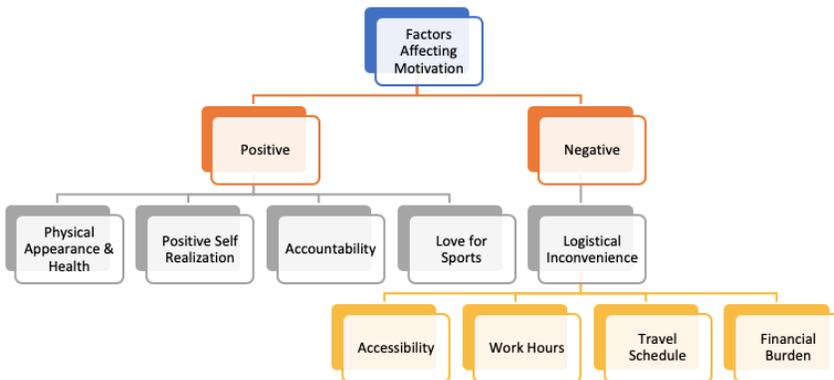


Chart 1: Interpretive schema of themes

Positive Factors

1. Physical health and appearance improvement

This is the primary reason for starting an exercise routine. All interviewees referred to “*freshman 15*” and excessive weight gain as a big reason to focus on maintaining an exercise regime. ‘**Weight loss**’ was the primary ‘**goal**’ (it was mentioned multiple times by all) along with ‘**health**’ improvements such as fewer diseases in old age and a “*better cardiovascular system*”. Interviewee 1 placed high importance on “*fitting into smaller sizes of clothes*”, “*arms getting bigger*” and explicitly said it was important for him to be happy about his personal ‘**appearance**’.

“The sole motivation is healthier lifestyle. I want to prevent medical problems in the future.” (2)

“My main motivation is to look better, fit into certain clothes. Seeing changes in my body makes me feel very good about myself. I like looking at myself in the mirror in the mirror.” (4)

“And I was really fit because of swimming so I didn’t really put on weight so I looked fine and so I wasn’t bothered.” (3)

2. Positive self-realization

The interviewees noted having been surprised by the changes exercise brought in their lives beyond the physically visible benefits. They mentioned “*progress*”, “*pride*”, and a sense of purpose and achievement that maintaining the exercise routine brought to their lives. It made them feel ‘**energized**’, “*less groggy*” and more alert and felt that the pursuit of an exercise routine automatically helped the ‘**avoid bad habits**’ like lethargy, sleeping in late, watching excessive television, eating junk food. Both interviewees said that they ‘**enjoyed**’ exercise a lot more than they thought they would, and it had become something they “look forward to”. There was a sense of pride and ‘**accomplishment**’ to achieving goals.

“I also realized when I went to the gym I felt much better that day for a longer period of time as well. It also triggered better eating habits. It had a ripple effect on my lifestyle generally. It motivated me to eat healthier.” (2)

Commented [SP1]: After effects

“Sense of pride in accomplishing a pull up that you couldn’t do before.” (3)

“I feel like I did something good today.” (1)

3. Enjoyment of Sports

All interviewees engaged in sporting activities when they were in school and reported to have enjoyed them very much and wished to continue them in their present stage of life. They ultimately gave up on them due to academic pressure. They were motivated by the team spirit and **'sense of achievement'** of competing.

"I've been playing sports since I was a kid. Tennis, football, dance. I loved playing" (4)

"I missed the feeling of accomplishment that I felt at the end of a swimming competition, the winning, the excitement, belonging to a team" (3)

"I played basketball seriously in high school but stopped towards the end due to academics. I tried to resume it in New York but it was difficult to book a court, get a group together, etc" (2)

4. Accountability

External parties like **'online influencers'** and **'offline and influencers'** help young people stick to routines. Influencers like online bloggers, **'social media'** followers, personal trainers and family members are a source of exercise motivation. They provide a sense of "accountability" to people so they do not slack off or fall out of the routine.

"Instagram motivates me to keep up my routine. There are days when I don't want to work out but I want to keep up my content posting. Keep up the reputation that I've established. Peer pressure kind of situation." (3)

"Especially because I have a trainer and I'm committed to a schedule with that trainer. On the days that I don't have them, just because I am accountable to someone else, my trainer, I'm more motivated to go. When there were no expectations from anyone, it was a lot more difficult" (2)

"My best friend and I would go to the gym at 5am" (1)

Commented [SP2]: Accountability

"My dad helped me stick to my running schedule and it was only because of him running next to me that I could complete the half marathon." (4)

"Find a reliable workout buddy. You can call each other when one of you doesn't want to go. You will be accountable to each other." (3)

Limiting Factor

1. Logistical challenges are the biggest hurdle

Logistical challenges appeared to be most significant deterrent to maintaining an exercise routine. All four interviewees mentioned multiple times that their ability to stick to their exercise schedule is highly dependent on their **'Work schedule'** and **'Spare time'**. In multiple phases of their lives the sole determinant of their ability to maintain their exercise routine were their work hours. The interviewees were unable to maintain their exercise commitments when they were in jobs that required long hours and travel. Additionally, **'Accessibility'** like a "10 minute drive" and financial **'Cost'** of exercising were important factors in determining their exercise routine.

"I need my gym to be very close to where I live, or else I won't go." (2)

"I wasn't working out after work, lots of work happy hours so I would make all these excuses." (3)

"I got a free membership from work to the YMCA. That was probably big factor of why I went to the them. Because I had that membership. If I didn't have that membership, I might have not gone as regularly." (1)

Commented [SP3]: Financial commitment

"Classes that I enjoy such as dance, boxing, rock climbing, Pilates are very expensive. So I have to settle for the gym, that I find very boring and tend to skip often." (4)

Summary of findings

I found that the factors affecting the motivation of people to maintain their exercise routines can be broadly categorized into the themes of logistical challenges, physical health and appearance improvement, positive self-realization, accountability and enjoyment of sports. The primary reason for initiating and maintaining an exercise regime was health and appearance improvement (largely weight loss). However, it was also discovered that after sticking with the routine for a while, there was an unanticipated consequence, i.e., the self-realization that exercise was benefitting them in so many more ways than the goal they had set out to achieve. This was a motivating factor to continue with exercise currently as well as in the hypothetical future when their current physical goals would have been achieved. Additionally, aspects of sporting activities such as team spirit and competitiveness were strong motivators for people to be regular. They would all prefer to engage in sports as they did during their student years as opposed to gym type activities commonly available in cities. Lastly, it was also seen that online and offline influencers play an important role in helping the interviewees stick to their schedules and as well as improving on them.

Discussion

The study builds on the existing bank of research that explores exercise motivations and facilitators but narrows its focus on young busy people. The findings from this pilot study can encourage organizations like educational institutions, fitness organizations,

healthcare providers, and employers to engage in further research with a larger sample to understand how they can better the experience

Gyms and other fitness programs can provide more attractive offerings by incorporating aspects of sports into their offering such as individual and team challenges, rewards, team gear and merchandise, etc. This will likely increase the enjoyment factor and increase loyalty. These organizations can also convert the need for accountability into services such as a buddy-tracking system with another member and personal chat with a trainer to increase attendance rates and hence spending in their facility. The results also provide support for company policies that incentivise employees with time, financial support and facilities for maintaining a regular fitness routine. If they succeed in implementing successful policies, they are likely to be able to secure lower premiums from insurers. Exercise is critical to health and well-being (Paraskevi 2013) and these measures could improve the quality of life of a generation at large.

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