

(Dis)Joining Fitness Gyms Membership: Sustained Participation and Deterred Mindset amongst Female Teachers in Singapore

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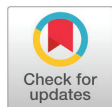
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Received: November 14, 2019
Accepted: February 8, 2020
Published online: April 30, 2020

Keywords:

Decision-making
 Deterrence
 Female Teachers
 Fitness Gym Membership
 Participation
 Singapore



ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVES The purpose of this study was to examine the key decision making elements of why female teachers join and disjoin a fitness gym membership.

METHODS The participants of the study comprised of ten healthy female teachers, aging from 34 to 45. Out of the ten participants, five of them were members of fitness gyms while five of them were non-members of fitness gyms. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. Each interview was audio-recorded, before being transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis approach was used for data analysis and higher-order themes were identified for each group of participants.

RESULTS The key elements to sign up for a gym membership included keeping body and mental health, group synergy and peer influence, instructors' guidance and convenience of gym facilities. The key elements for deterrence included the high cost of membership, lack of time, dislike for long term commitment and inconvenience of schedule.

CONCLUSIONS The study discusses the controllable and uncontrollable factors associated with signing up for a gym membership including, the cost of membership and the occupations of teachers such as working hours and teachers' circumstances. The results of this study enable gym operators to better understand how to cater and engage a specific target audience.

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Introduction

Physical activity is an important aspect when it comes to maintaining an individual's health. The lack of physical activity has been identified as one of the top leading risk factors for global mortality, accounting for 6% of deaths, globally. It also contributes to a significant level of breast and colon cancers, diabetes and heart diseases [1]. Regular physical activity also contributes to individual's psychological well-being. Studies

have shown that there is a reduction of stress, anxiety and depression levels amongst individuals through exercise [2]. However, despite the health benefits that comes along with physical activity, according to the Sports Index Participation Trend 2016 by Sport Singapore, 29% of participants do not engage in physical activities still [3].

According to the Sports Index 2015, young and middle-aged females were the least physically active age groups [3]. 30% of young females and 36% of middle-aged females did not participate in any sports or recreational physical activity in the past year. In another study conducted in 2015, findings also showed that middle-aged females were amongst the group of

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participants who were less likely to exercise frequently [4]. The exercise levels between Taiwanese and Singaporeans were also compared and the results reflected the same idea that middle-aged participants were part of the group that exercised least regularly.

In a study to understand the decision to join or cancel a fitness membership in Canada [5], it was found that among the general public, factors like social support, time, family commitments and cost have been reported as perceived barriers to leisure time physical activity. Older adults, women in particular, also continued to be less active in exercise activity as they grew older and they faced multiple barriers to initiating and maintaining physical activities [6]. Only 15% of Canadian adults meet the healthy guidelines for physical activity which is 150 minutes of moderate-vigorous activity per week [7].

Exercising is one form of physical activity and attending a fitness gym or fitness programs are one of the few alternatives of exercising. Fitness gyms provide an ideal exercising location for almost one-third of women who exercises [8]. Within fitness gyms environment, many different types of group fitness classes are offered – strength and conditioning, weight-based, cardio-based, yoga and Pilates. There is an increase in group training classes' popularity amongst Singaporeans, and this is especially so for working adults who are looking for short, intense workout sessions. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) has identified group workouts offered by gyms, as one of 2017 top fitness trends [9].

Customer characteristics are crucial to any commercial organization when it comes to attracting new and retaining existing members [10]. For this reason, social factors and other characteristics that are related to the environment and use of fitness gyms, may also affect the signing up of membership. The type of fitness gyms attended and the fitness classes participated by members are related with the assessment of the gyms' service quality.

Ajzen's [11] Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that a person's beliefs about a behavior, paired with their intention to engage in a behavior, will influence their actual behavior. In this case, an individual's intention to join a fitness gym and to become more physically active is formed by her attitude

towards the behavior itself, perceptions of social pressure, and perceptions of personal control over the behavior. Hence, various controllable and uncontrollable elements related to the fitness organization, may influence the individual's decision to sign up or not for a fitness membership [12].

Other studies were also done to examine the purpose of joining and quitting fitness gyms. In a study that looked at the reasons amongst various age and gender of members, results showed that the feeling of being in control was chosen as the most important factor by middle-aged adults [13]. The study also revealed that female members rated social outcomes, as an important factor for joining fitness gyms, higher than male members. Another study that examined the reasons for quitting membership at fitness centers, revealed that cost and financial reasons, were the main factor for deterrence and drop out [14]. However, these studies were done overseas, and the findings and results are not generalizable to individuals based in Singapore. Furthermore, the participants study were all from the same fitness center, and hence differences in experiences and branding strategies of other centers were not accounted for [14].

Many previous studies' findings reflected individuals who were members or ex-members of fitness gyms. This may not be a good representation of individuals who have never been a member of any fitness gyms, which this present study is also concerned with. Past studies also focused and explored more on the reasons behind participants' reasons for joining, or quitting fitness gyms. However, limited studies have been done on the elements that deter individuals from signing up for a fitness gym membership in the first place.

Seeing that the fitness gyms and programs industry are growing in Singapore [9], understanding the motivation or deterrence factors behind fitness gym members, and non-members, will allow fitness gyms companies to have a better understanding of their target audience, and how else to better attract a new group of audience, especially among those who do not engage in much physical activity.

Furthermore, with the growing emphasis of education today, the role of a teacher is essential for the country's educational outcome. According to Varkey Foundation Global Teacher Status Index 2018 [15], teachers in Singapore have the

second longest working hours, a global survey of 35 countries have found. To ensure that teachers are in top condition to form the core of Singapore's education system, the well-being and health of them are very crucial and significant from the Government's perspective. Of Singapore's 191 primary school in 2017, three-quarters have women principals and more than 80 per cent of nearly 15,000 teachers in primary schools are women [16]. Understanding the health and physical activity level of female teachers, will allow an insight of the work-life balance and health of teachers and how it can be further improved. Hence, this research studies a specific group of participants, female teachers, which will allow a better understanding of the characteristics and circumstances of teachers and how better can fitness gym operators cater to this particular group.

This research aims to examine the factors that influence members to sign up for fitness gyms membership, and factors that deter people from signing up for such memberships, via a qualitative approach. It aims to understand the following research questions:

- What are the key decision making elements that impact female teachers on signing up for fitness gyms membership?
- What are the key decision making elements that deter female teachers from signing up for fitness gyms membership?

Methods

Participants

Participants of this study comprised of ten healthy female teachers, age 34 to 45. Among the ten female teachers, four of them were teaching in primary schools and six of them were teaching in secondary schools. Out of the ten participants, five of them were members of fitness gyms or programs (e.g. F45, Classpass, Guavapass) while five of them were non-members of any sort of fitness gyms or programs.

Members of fitness gyms referred to individuals who owned a membership with one or more fitness gyms and exercised at the gym or attend fitness programs organized by gyms, more than once a week, for the past four months from the time of the interview. The gyms' membership period

of these participants spans from the shortest period of 6 months, to the longest membership period of 2 years. These participants signed up for a gym membership after being introduced by friends and family or trying it out for themselves during the trial periods offered by gyms. The location of the gyms are determined based on the proximity of the gym from the participants' workplace and also the availability of exercise sessions based on their personal and work schedules.

Non-members referred to individuals who did not own a membership with any fitness gyms or programs. The members of fitness gyms were identified as M1 to M5, and non-members were identified as N1 to N5.

Data Collection

Permission to carry out the study was first obtained from the Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board before any interview was conducted. Upon the IRB approval (NTU IRB-2018-08-035), participants were recruited through word of mouth by the researcher. Interested participants were then informed that the participant's involvement in the study is voluntary and they are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, with no penalty. Participants were also given a brief overview on what the study is about and the objective of conducting the interviews. The venue and time for the interview were decided based on the participants' convenience. Prior to the start of the interview, participants were asked to sign a consent form. All interviews were recorded with a voice recorder.

A semi-structured, in-depth, one-one-one interview with open ended questions was conducted with each participant. An interview guide was crafted prior to the start of the interviews, ensuring that key questions would be asked. Inductive reasoning was used in structuring the interview questions to allow a better understanding and to generate meanings from participants' shared experiences [17]. Interviews were conducted by the researcher and each interview was audio-recorded with an iPhone XS and a verbatim transcription of each interview was produced.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The first step of the thematic analysis process was for

the researcher to familiarize with the data and have a sense of the experience shared by participants, by reading through each transcript several times [18]. After which, initial codes were generated. Important sections of the transcript were identified, tentative labels and short phrases were noted down at the side as the researcher relate them to a theme [19]. Short quotes and significant words were also taken note of to help in the understanding and interpreting specific ideas and experience.

The third step was carried out after all data have been coded and collated and a list of different codes that were identified throughout the data has been developed [20]. The codes developed were then sort and collated into overarching themes, which captures something important, in relation to the overall research question [18]. Once a set of themes has been developed, the researcher reviewed the coded data for each theme, to consider if they appeared to form a coherent pattern. After each theme were determined, names were assigned to each theme. After the data were analyzed by the researcher, it was checked by a third party who provided feedback and confirmed the accuracy of it.

Results

The results were arranged according to its significance and frequency of it appearing across all interviews. Four higher order themes were identified for each group of participants.

Members

Body and Mental Health

Participants were asked on the reason why they signed up for fitness gyms membership and all participants answered that it was to ensure that they have an exercise regime going on and to keep them healthy and fit. Some participants joined fitness gyms to 'maintain a certain level of fitness' (M3), while others joined due to their doctor's advices. M4 explained:

I was hospitalized during that period (2017 December) due to my gallstone issue. Then my doctor thought that my cholesterol level was bad and that is why he recommended me to exercise more often. (M4)

Aside from health benefits, participants also mentioned that exercising at a gym helped built a healthier and more positive lifestyle, in terms of their mental and personality. Two

participants mentioned that they grew more confident after attending fitness classes.

I definitely am more confident now. Like at least I feel fitter and healthier, so I am more confident about myself, instead of feeling shy and embarrassed about my not so good body. (M3)

Other participants shared that attending fitness gyms and classes helped with stress relief and a more positive outlook at work. M5 explained:

I also think in terms of happiness, in general I feel happier also because like in a way, it helps me reduce stress and I look forward to going to the gym. (M5)

Social Integration

Group synergy refers to an individual exercising with a group of other individuals, especially in fitness classes. Three participants shared that this was one main reason why they prefer to work out at a fitness class setting. They revealed that working out in a fitness class setting provides a higher level of motivation and drive. M5 shared her experience on how she gained motivation to work out in her fitness class:

I definitely feel the push more, like the motivation to work out more especially in like this particular gym setting because everyone is doing it. So, you feel very stress and you should do it also. But if I am on my own, I can run just five rounds and tell myself like 'okay that is enough for today' even though I know that I have strength to continue but I just do not want to do it anymore. (M5)

The remaining two participants mentioned that peer pressure was also an important factor that kept them going in a fitness gym. They attributed their enjoyment in fitness gyms to their peers' company as well. M4 shared the good thing about having a friend exercising with her:

When there is a friend, then she exercises longer, then I will have to stay at the gym also. And because she is very active and fit, then she will say 'eh why you so fast stop, go and do some more!' and then I will just follow to do. (M4)

Instructors' Guidance

A significant reason that contributes to why participants choose to sign up for memberships at fitness gyms and for fitness classes is due to the presence of an instructor's guidance. Participants that attended fitness classes commented that the instructor's guidance plays an important role in monitoring

their process and pushing them. M5 explained:

I also always tell him (boyfriend) about this trainer at my gym and say like how this trainer is from hell, and he really forces you to carry very heavy weight ... So, I think the benefit is there, is like the motivation to work harder. (M5)

One participant also mentioned that one factor that may result in her to stop the membership was if 'they change the instructor and I feel like she is not as good as the previous.' (M3)

Convenience of Gym Facilities

The convenience and accessibility of gym facilities was also one of the reasons that participants signed up for a membership with one or more gyms. The cleanliness and spaciousness of a fitness gym was something that attracted many participants to their respective gyms. A participant shared the advantages of having a membership with a gym:

On rainy days, I cannot exercise outdoor. So, I think that is one of the biggest reasons why I join Fitness Gym A. Another reason I think, the shower facilities. Is like I anytime I can go if I need somewhere to shower or sit on a hot day. (M2)

Non-members

The themes that deters non-members from signing up for fitness gyms or programs membership were: High Cost of Membership, Lack of Time, Dislike for Long Term Commitment and Inconvenience of Schedule.

High Cost of Membership

Three out of five participants agreed that the high cost of membership was a crucial factor that deterred them from signing up as a fitness gym member. Most of them shared that they did had the intention to try out a membership or fitness class but turned down the idea after searching about the price.

But then when I actually when to check Gym B packages and pricing, I realized it is too expensive. It is like, \$100 I think for like one month, and they give you like 45 credits to book up to maybe 8-9 classes only. That's super expensive to be honest. (N3)

Some also mentioned that they were against paying to exercise at fitness gyms simply because they can 'always get

fit and do exercises at home, free of charge' (N2). Another participant also shares similar thoughts:

I feel that most of the time, the body weight exercises I can actually do it at home. And I also have certain weights that I can do at home on my own, as I also have my dumbbells and lights weights at home. (N1)

Lack of Time

Three participants shared that they do not sign up for fitness gyms membership due to busy work-life commitments and a lack of time. One of them was a netball player who shared that in a week she was 'fully occupied with body weight gym exercises, court work as well as competitions'. She also mentioned that she will not consider signing up for a membership currently, as she had 'a lot of commitment in netball training' (N1).

Another participant also shared that her fluctuating work schedule was the reason why she was deterred from signing up for a fitness gym membership as she may not have as much time to visit the gyms when she is busy.

I do not really have the time to do so also. Like my busy period fluctuates as a teacher, like I can be quite free during the school holidays but super busy during the term exam period. (N2)

Dislike for Long Term Commitment

Two participants mentioned that they were not keen to sign up for any sort of fitness gym membership due the long-term commitment required.

I do not really like the long-term commitment when I get a membership.... But what if I do not like it, then I have to continue going for a year. And especially when I have signed up, then I feel like there is a need for me to go like throughout the year to make my money worth. (N2)

N3 also shared similar thought as reflected in the following:

So, signing up for a membership can be quite a bit of commitment because most places require you to have a membership that is quite long. (N3)

Inconvenience of Schedule

Two participants attributed the inconvenience of fitness classes' schedules and location of the gym to the reason that they will not sign up for a fitness gym membership.

Participants felt that given that a teacher's working hours, differ slightly from other working adults, classes schedule may not fit into their schedule as nicely as they hope.

Plus is actually not very easy to find classes suited for my working hours. Like many of the classes are either from 7am to 9am, if not it starts like after 6pm. But I have to report to work by 7, and sometimes I can end at like 3pm, or 4pm. So, the timing of classes offered are a bit off to be honest. (N2)

N4 also shared that the early working hours of teachers result in her only having the option of exercising after work.

But now because I am a teacher right, so you have to be in school at 7:30am. If I wake up at 5, I cannot last myself through the day. (N4)

Discussion

This study aims to understand the key elements that impact the participation or deterrence of female teachers when it comes to fitness gyms' memberships. After analyzing the interviews, four themes were developed for elements behind participation for members, and four themes were developed for elements behind deterrence for non-members. This segment will further discuss and examined the reasons behind these.

Health Promoting Behaviours

Consistent with literature, the primary factor given for fitness gym membership participation was improving one's body and mental health. Research has consistently found that health-related reasons for exercise, increases with age and that the use of health-promoting behaviors is higher in older adults than younger adults [21]. Study by Sherwood and Jeffrey [22] also mentioned that weight loss and management is the primary reason why many adults engaged in physical activity.

From the results of this study, female members were found to be the most motivated by weight management, appearance, positive health and stress management. Female members' concern for health and weight appears appropriate based on past studies that indicate that women are more likely to be overweight than similar aged males [23]. These findings may be due to the pressure that female teachers often faced in

their life, due to contemporary societal standards of their body shape and size. Understanding the importance of exercising and how it provides stress relieve for female members, can allow fitness gyms to understand what type of classes to better cater to their members. Personal trainers at fitness gyms can also tap on these knowledge to design appropriate fitness programs for their female clients.

Perceived Support from Social Integration

Social integration that included both group synergy and peer influence, was found to be a significant element that contributes to members' participation at fitness gyms and classes in this present study. One study's findings showed that fostering relatedness is important to attract women, as they are more prone to seeking emotional support than men [24]. Another study also revealed that participants who perceived relatedness support have a higher chance of continuing their sport, as they derived affirmation and support from others [25]. These support the findings of this research that social integration that includes both group synergy and peer influence, plays a significant role in female teacher's participation at fitness gyms.

Another study also showed that social factor is an important factor when it comes to initiating physical activity in women [26]. Ryan and Deci [27] explained that an individual might first be introduced to an activity by external regulation like social factors, and it might later allow the individual to experience intrinsically interesting properties which then lead to motivation. Therefore, social integration is a significant factor that can attract potential members. Fitness gyms operators should tap on these aspects, to allow new members to experience various benefits from working out at the fitness gyms, which can then lead to self-internalized motivation over time.

Membership Cost on Customer's Purchasing Power

One of the main elements of deterrence for non-members from signing up for fitness gyms' membership was due to the high cost of membership. This finding in the present study is consistent with literature that reviewed that financial reasons were also the main reasons for membership drop out

[14]. Another study also found that there was a significant negative association between price and repurchase or purchase intention [12] and the present study findings also show that non-members, expect value for their dollar and are unwilling to pay for something that could be done on their own.

Another study also found out that financial factor is one of the main causes for individuals to quit a physical or sports activity, whether formally organized or not [28]. The costs of service offered by sports centers are higher than physical or sports activities in other contexts, thus explaining the greater importance that the female teachers as members and non-members placed on financial factors. Financial conditions not only affect the purchasing power of individuals, it also limits the ability for fitness gyms to reduce prices [14]. Hence, instead of lowering prices of membership, fitness gyms should consider and focus on coming up with various marketing strategies and pricing tiers that can better attract potential members.

Teacher's Restrictions and Circumstances

In another study, the results showed suggested that a high level of passion in teaching can results in teachers to invest a large amount of time into their work and engaging more in it. This thus caused conflict with other life domains [29]. However, another study did mentioned that there was an absence of significant relationship between obsessive passion for teaching and teacher's leisure time physical activity (LTPA), which was explained with the fact that LTPA is an optional activity, and teachers are free to engage in it, or not [30].

In line with the results of previous studies, findings from this study did show that many female teachers as non-members, and even members, attributed their work schedule as a reason for not signing up for gym membership or attending various fitness classes. Some participants brought up the fact that the lack of flexible break time and not being able to leave the school during working hours, resulted in them not being able to patronize fitness gyms outside school for a short workout. Others shared that most fitness classes timings are catered mainly to the normal working adults timing, but not teachers, who tend to start work earlier and end work earlier than others.

Conclusion

In Singapore, there is a huge range of exercise and sporting facilities for everyone. The public sports and exercise facilities offer something for most Singaporeans of any age and sporting ability. These public facilities include fitness gyms, swimming pools and soccer fields and managed by the Sport Singapore. Through these infrastructures and facilities, its goal is to turn Singapore into the center of sports in Asia. [31]

However, despite the availability of such sporting and exercise facilities that come at a minimal cost (\$1.50 - \$3.00 for excess to a public fitness gym at any ActiveSG site), there is still an increase participation rate among Singapore in private gyms facilities. Private gym facilities include boutique fitness studios and also big established gyms company like Fitness First, Platinum Yoga etc.

The difference between the private gym facilities and public exercise facilities provided in Singapore will be the variety of fitness equipment and classes offered, and the all-in-one pricing structure. Most of the private gym facilities provide a greater variety of fitness equipment, group fitness classes, small group training and personal training. Boutique studios have also been growing very quickly in Singapore. These studios are usually small, and specialized. Some of which include activities like spinning, high-intensity interval training (HIIT) classes, Pilates, yoga etc. While they generally have a higher price point as compared to the big common gyms or public facilities, the selling points of these boutique studios are their centralized locations, activity specialization and also the strong camaraderie fostered by the smaller group and environment. [32]

This research study has identified the elements that impact members participation at fitness gyms, and non-members deterrence of signing up for a membership. It also focuses on a specific group of target audience, female teachers, and identify that certain characteristics and components of their profession does affect their decision when it comes to signing up for a fitness gym membership. These findings could help fitness gyms operators understand this target group better and help plan their business and marketing strategies that are targeted at this new potential group.

For members, many are aware of the health benefits associated with physical activity and it is primarily the main reason why they sign up for a membership. Other elements that contribute to their decision to sign up for a membership include social integration, instructors' guidance and the convenience of gym facilities. On the contrary, non-members are most deterred by the high cost of membership. The inconvenience and mismatch of fitness class timings is also something that female teachers, that are non-members, find hard to make do with as well. Other factors include a lack of time and the dislike for long term commitment.

This study thus suggest that fitness gyms should reconsider sales and marketing strategies and to better attract potential members. Applied strategies and programmes that are being launched and designed should also take into consideration of group of clients of different profession, that possess different characteristics. Results of the study also suggest that making use of social integration factors can be a good way to attract them to sign up for membership too.

One limitation in this study is the size of the sample group. As a small sample size was used in this study, the findings are not generalizable to the Singapore population of female teachers. Moreover, given that interviews were only conducted amongst ten female teachers for a set age group, there might be additional factors that were not brought up. Another limitation for the data collection of this study was gathering suitable female teachers that met the requirements of age and had a fitness membership.

Based on our qualitative findings, future research on fitness gyms membership participation and deterrence is merited in several areas. Quantitative research method will allow researchers to draw findings from a wider sample size. With a larger sample size, more themes can be identified, and this will enable more trends to be identified. On top of that, the characteristics and work circumstances of teachers should be taken into consideration when future researchers consider understanding more on their decision of fitness gym participation and deterrence.

Further research should also identify and consider teachers of different age groups such as teachers over middle aged (45 years old) or retired teachers, seeing that the pool of citizens,

aged 65 and above is growing in Singapore. Understanding the participation and deterrence of fitness gym membership among this group can help researcher study and understand health and physical activity of senior citizens more in depth.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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