

Motives of Long-Term Participants in Recreational & Fitness Sport from a Socio-Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Original Research Article

In order to achieve competitiveness and a long-term establishment in the market, fitness studios need sustainable product and service innovations. This is of crucial importance, as customer satisfaction can be achieved through the targeted servicing of customer expectations, resulting in a positive influence on customer loyalty and economic success. All value-added processes of the fitness studio must be geared without restriction to the fulfilment of customer expectations. Findings from studies on motives in fitness sport can help, on the one hand, to take into account the special wishes of the athletes in the design of the offers and, on the other hand, to implement their marketing more effectively due to the more specific target group orientation. The present study provides a motive-related orientation framework for the field of fitness sport on the motivation of long-term participants to exercise. Members of a health-oriented fitness club in a large city were surveyed. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items that can be grouped into seven motivational areas. The questionnaires were available in the fitness club and could either be filled out directly on site or taken home and filled out at home. A total of 350 questionnaires were handed out, 278 of which were completed and returned. The response rate was 79.4 percent. The respondents were members who trained exclusively on equipment. The gender distribution is almost equal with a slight surplus (just under 53%) of male respondents. The mean age of respondents is 56.6 years, with a spread around the mean of 13.1 years. Among respondents with a membership of more than one year, the mean length of membership is 11.6 years (dispersion: 7.5 years). The results show that there is a very differentiated picture of the motives for fitness training. The spectrum ranges from motives named by more than 90% of the respondents to motives named by significantly less than 10% of the respondents. The various 15 motives account for a total of 1763 motive mentions. With 278 respondents, this means that on average 6.3 motives were named per respondent. These data indicate that the information on the motives was indeed provided by the respondents in a very specific and detailed manner. The main motive of all respondents (almost 92%) is "General improvement of physical fitness". More than three quarters (75.5%) of the respondents name the motive "Pleasant and relaxed training". Almost two thirds of the respondents (62.6%) named "positive influence on physical complaints" as a motive. Within this group of respondents with physical complaints, more than 80% specified "orthopaedic complaints". However, "cardiovascular complaints" was only mentioned by 16.7% as a specific complaint. The motives "compensation for everyday and professional stress" (58.3%) and "weight reduction" (50.7%) were mentioned by more than half of the respondents. It can be concluded that the strong intrinsic motive of "pleasant and relaxed training", which was mentioned in second place, was decisive for the long average membership duration of 11.6 years. Therefore, it is important to seriously and seriously determine the motives of customers, to know and classify them and to make corresponding personal recommendations for action and fitness in order to achieve long-term customer loyalty. The insights gained also contribute to paving the way for the long-term success of fitness clubs as well as to improving the image of fitness sports in general.

Keywords: Motives, Motivation, Customer loyalty, Recreational & Fitness Sport.

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INTRODUCTION

Alienation from work, growing prosperity and the change in traditional social values are leading to a noticeable shift in the meaning of the two central spheres of life, "work" and "leisure". Sport, as a subsystem of leisure, is not spared from these profound changes. New trend sports are emerging that satisfy the hunger for fun, experience, adventure and enjoyment, but also the concern for health. A prime example is

fitness sports. All human addictions and cravings are concentrated in it: youth mania, finding one's personality, self-expression, but also the striving to preserve and promote health (Zarotis, 1999).

Sport providers need to know those motivational-psychological factors that influence the leisure-sport behaviour of individuals in order to meet the needs and desires of people with their offer.

Motivational research can provide instructive information and at the same time shed light on motives in sport in general as well as in recreational sport (Zarotis *et al.*, 2002).

The general starting point of motivational psychology is the question of why, because it deals with the external and internal conditions of human action. To explain the diversity of this human behaviour, it uses the terms motive and motivation from sociology and psychology, which in turn are terms for a hypothetical construct. This hypothetical construct is based on behavioural observations and theories and is used to explain a phenomenon that is not directly recognisable and measurable (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2010; Zarotis, 2020). The subject of motivational psychology is goal-directed behaviour. Motivation determines which goals are pursued or which states are avoided and how much effort and perseverance are expended to achieve them. It arises from an interaction between organism variables (motives or needs) and situation variables (incentives).

Motives sharpen the perception of situations, stimuli and events that are suitable for satisfying needs. Emotions are particularly addressed by such incentives. Motives are latent evaluative dispositions that are stimulated or activated by incentives and only then become motivation and visible in behaviour (Puca & Schüler, 2017). Motivation can be extrinsic and intrinsic in nature. Extraneous components, such as avoiding punishment, social prestige or material values, are characteristic of extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic means here that the satisfaction of needs that finally results from the extrinsically motivated behaviour is not derived directly from this behaviour itself; it is only achieved with the help of substitutes. The actual satisfaction of needs has only an indirect connection to the original behaviour. Rewards (stimuli), which are usually the sole determinants of work effort, are intrinsically worthless because they do not allow for immediate satisfaction of needs (Kroehler & Berti, 2014). With intrinsic motivation, the incentive is initiated by the thing itself, it is therefore factual. Intrinsic motivation only unfolds its stimulation potential when extrinsic basic needs have been satisfied to a certain extent. Thus, people only strive for new immaterial experiences when they are relatively well provided for materially (Reinhardt, 2018; Zarotis, 2020). Intrinsic motivation, according to Csikszentmihalyi, thus depends on the optimal balance between performance demand and performance competence. This optimal level, that challenges but does not overburden people and thus brings about a sense of achievement is the realm of flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow stands in the field of tension between environmental demands and individual ability and skill levels. Intrinsic motivations are not externally determined, i.e. the satisfaction of intrinsically motivated action arises from the behaviour itself.

Behaviour and need satisfaction occur simultaneously. Since the satisfaction of needs takes place independently of external rewards, intrinsic behaviour promotes a positive feeling of freedom. Consequently, the same work can be experienced as difficult and frustrating under the pressure of extrinsic rewards or as easy and fulfilling with intrinsically motivated behaviour. Csikszentmihalyi therefore concludes in his study of intrinsically motivated behaviour that any activity can be intrinsically rewarding, provided it is suitably structured and our abilities are adapted to its challenges (Csikszentmihalyi & Jackson, 2000; Schueler *et al.*, 2020).

Of particular importance for those involved in sport is the question of the motives for a sporting action. The answer to this question not only promotes the comprehensibility of human behaviour, but in this way also allows new conclusions to be drawn for the methodology and didactics or the design of an offer in sport. Motives in recreational sport are not monocausal phenomena, because they are based on complex, multi-motivated structures that can have physical, psychological, social and historical origins. (Beckmann *et al.*, 2009; Elbe, 2020).

The growth of fitness sports has been driven by changes in preferences. Competition and performance were replaced by motives such as health, fitness, fun, relaxation and well-being (Dilger, 2008). The knowledge of motives in a sport-related context is of great importance in various scientific fields of sport. On the one hand, economic interests in motives can be identified as starting points for control processes in fitness studios. On the other hand, from the perspective of training science, different motivational characteristics in the sense of under- or over-motivation can be decisive for performance development. Psychologically, the inner motives of the action are important, also in comparison to other actions. Orientation towards the customer's motives is a basic prerequisite for individual training design on the one hand, and for targeted product Design or target group marketing on the other (Hackfort, 2001).

The motives of fitness sports participants have been the subject of repeated studies in recent years, so that in the meantime there seems to be a distinct picture of existing motives for fitness sports. However, even if the motivational orientation of the individual is considered to be relatively stable, it is still subject to change, e.g. due to social changes or personal circumstances. In addition, varying motivations cannot be ruled out at longer intervals or when the focus of the studies varies, which can be justified not only by social aspects but also, for example, by trends in the industry. From this review, accompanying the psychological interest, the need for repeated analyses of motivational orientations also becomes clear from an economic point of view. In order to be able to better take individual

motives into account in the design of the offer or in training support, the actual motives or individual prerequisites should be found out (Middelkamp & Steenbergen, 2012). From a psychological point of view, the motivational phase is linked, among other things, to an expectation of results from action; initially, there is a specific state that is associated with a certain motive, the satisfaction of which is expected through the taking of specific measures (Nitsch, 2004). Studies on motives in fitness sport provide a good overview of their characteristics and significance. They generally reflect why people turn to fitness sports and thus allow differentiation of various fitness motives in different groups of people (Zarotis & Tokarski, 2005). In this context, it should be noted that a distinction can be made between motives for turning to fitness, motives for continuing fitness and motives for turning away from fitness. Thus, it can happen that original motives for deciding to join a fitness club change over time, or

even completely fade into the background, and other motives or a complex of motives determine one's actions instead (Gabler, 2002; Hackfort et al., 2004). Knowledge of these recreational sport motives of the population is always the starting point for the development and planning of target group-specific offers that can contribute to retaining members as well as attracting new fitness athletes.

A total of 278 members of a fitness club in a large city were surveyed. In addition to socio-demographic information, such as age and gender, and information regarding the membership duration in the specific club as well as about previous memberships in other clubs, a total of 15 motives for fitness club membership were asked in the form of multiple-choice questions. These 15 motives can be grouped into the following 7 dimensions:

Fitness/Health	General improvement of physical fitness
	Cardiovascular training with emphasis on endurance
	Positive impact on physical problems Cardiovascular problems Orthopaedic problems
Appearance	Weight loss (general fat loss) Specific Body-Training (Body shaping) Muscle building (bodybuilding)
Psychological experience	Compensation for daily routine and occupational stress Pleasant and relaxed training
Cognitive dimension	Continuous guidance and training control Information about exercise effects and anatomical background knowledge
Social dimension	Being able to plan and control training independently Training with a partner
Performance	Specific sporting performance
Motor dimension	Supplement to my own sport Preparation for my own sport

If the motive "positive influence on physical complaints" was given, it was also asked - also as a multiple choice answer - whether these complaints were "cardiovascular complaints" or "orthopaedic complaints".

The following analyses will examine whether certain motives for using a gym were mentioned particularly frequently in the respondent group compared to other motives and whether other motives, on the other hand, were mentioned less frequently or possibly played almost no role at all.

The presentation is initially limited to purely descriptive statistics, i.e. the description of the frequency distributions in the total group of respondents. Within the framework of these evaluations, no hypotheses regarding possible correlations - whether between the motives or regarding the dependence of the motives on other characteristics - are made or tested (Willimczik & Ennigkeit, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Survey methodology

Members of a fitness club in a large city were surveyed. The questionnaire consists of 15 items that can be grouped into seven sub-dimensions.

The questions on the motives for fitness training in this studio consist of a total of 15 answer options in multiple-choice format, whereby in one case (the question on physical complaints as a motive) two additional sub-questions on specific complaints were provided. This means that there are a total of 15 or, with sub-questions, 17 pieces of information about motives, whereby each motive can be chosen or not chosen by the respondents.

The questionnaires were available in the fitness club and could either be filled out directly on site or taken away. A total of 350 questionnaires were handed out, 278 of which were completed and returned. The response rate was 79.4 percent. Members who

trained exclusively on equipment were surveyed. The respondents were members who had only been with the club for 6 months and long-term members who had been attending the club for 26 years.

The frequency distributions for the individual motives with the answer alternatives "chosen" and "not chosen" are evaluated. The absolute and relative frequencies are reported (Willimczik & Ennigkeit, 2018).

RESULTS

Sample description

The sample consists of N=278 respondents. The gender distribution is almost even with a slight predominance (just under 53%) of the male respondents. The average age of the respondents is 56.6 years, with a deviation of about 13.1 years from the mean value. The age distribution shows a clear accumulation of respondents belonging to the middle up to the old age group, while younger respondents are comparatively rarely represented.

Table-1: Age and gender distribution in the sample

Feature	Expressed as	Number	%	Mean Value	Std. Deviation
Gender	female	131	47,10%		
	male	147	52,90%		
	other	0	0,00%		
	Total	278	100,00%		
Age groups	up to 40 years	31	11,20%		
	41 to 55 years	81	29,10%		
	56 to 65 years	94	33,80%		
	older than 65 years	72	25,90%		
	Total	278	100,00%		
Age in years		278		56,6	13,1

The question about the training frequency was not answered by 3 people. So, there are 275, out of 278 respondents, with valid values in this item (89.9%)

Table-2: Frequency distribution. Training frequency total

Training Frequency	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
< 1 * per week	2	0,7%
1 * per week	26	9,5%
2 * per week	90	32,7%
3 * per week	120	43,6%
> 3 * per week	37	13,5%
Total	275	100,0%

The membership duration in 96.4% of the respondents (268 out of 278) is over a year. In two cases (0.7%) it is less than 1/2 year and in 8 cases (2.9%) between half a year and a year. Respondents with membership of more than one year have a median

membership period of 11.6 years (dispersion: 7.5 years). 107 respondents stated that they had previously been a member of another fitness club. The average duration of these previous memberships is 6.5 years (dispersion: 5.7 years).

Table-3: Duration of membership(s)

Feature	Expressed as	Number	%	Mean value	Std. Deviation
Membership period in this fitness club	< 6 months	Female	0	0,0%	
		Male	2	100,0%	
		Total	2	0,7%	
	6-12 months	Female	4	50,0%	
		Male	4	50,0%	
		Total	8	2,9%	
	> 12 months	Female	127	47,4%	
		Male	141	52,6%	
		Total	268	96,4%	
Total		278	100,0%		
Membership period in this fitness club (if > 12 months)	Female	127		12,4	8,2
	Male	141		10,9	6,8
	Total	268		11,6	7,5
Membership period in previous fitness club	Female	50		5,6	5,9
	Male	57		7,2	6,3
	Total	107		6,5	5,7

Descriptive Statistics - Frequency Distributions

The reference frequency distributions of the different motives are shown in Table 2. Figure 1 shows the same information as a bar chart.

Almost all respondents (just under 92%) indicate as a motive for the training that they want a "general improvement of their physical fitness". More than three quarters of the respondents want "Pleasant and relaxing training". Almost two thirds of the

respondents (62.6%) are motivated by the "Positive impact on physical problems". Within this category of respondents who have "physical problems" as motivation over 80% mention the specific motivation "Orthopaedic problems", but "Cardiovascular problems" as specific problems are mentioned only by 16.7%. The motives "Compensation for daily routine and occupational stress" as well as "Weight loss" are mentioned by more than half of the respondents.

Table-4: Reference frequency distribution of the motives

Motive	Not mentioned Absolute value	Not mentioned %	mentioned absolute value	mentioned %	Total absolute value
Motivation area: Fitness / Health					
General improvement of physical fitness	23	8,3%	255	91,7%	278
Cardiovascular training with emphasis on endurance	153	55,0%	125	45,0%	278
Positive impact on physical problems	104	37,4%	174	62,6%	278
Of which: cardiovascular problems	145	83,3%	29	16,7%	174
of which: Orthopaedic problems	32	18,4%	142	81,6%	174
Motivation area: Appearance					
Weight loss (general fat loss)	137	49,3%	141	50,7%	278
Specific Body-Training (Body shaping)	220	79,1%	58	20,9%	278
Muscle building (Bodybuilding)	157	56,5%	121	43,5%	278
Motivation area: Psychological experience					
Compensation for daily routine and occupational stress	116	41,7%	162	58,3%	278
Pleasant and relaxed training	68	24,5%	210	75,5%	278
Motivation area: Cognitive Dimension					
Continuous guidance and training control	173	62,2%	105	37,8%	278
Information about exercise effects and anatomical background knowledge	192	69,1%	86	30,9%	278
Motivation area: Social Dimension					
Plan and regulate training independently	142	51,1%	136	48,9%	278
Training with a partner or other people	235	84,5%	43	15,5%	278
Motivation area: Performance					
I am interested in this particular athletic performance	198	71,2%	80	28,8%	278
Motivation area: Motor Dimension					
Supplement to my own sport	232	83,5%	46	16,5%	278
Preparation for my own sport	257	92,4%	21	7,6%	278

Each time, less than a quarter of the respondents mention motives related to a particular sport ("Supplementing to or preparing for a sport") as well as "training with a partner/other people" or "specific body training".

As regards the motivation areas, the overall focus is on the motivation dimensions "Fitness/Health" and "Psychological Experience", followed by "Appearance" and "Social Dimension". Only from a minority of respondents, however, are "motor

dimension" and "performance dimension" considered important.

Within the motivation dimensions, there are large differences in the individual items that belong to these dimensions. For example, in the motivation area "Appearance", half or almost half of the respondents have mentioned "weight loss" or "Muscle building (bodybuilding)" as a motive, but only one-fifth of the respondents mention "specific body-training (body shaping)" as a motive.

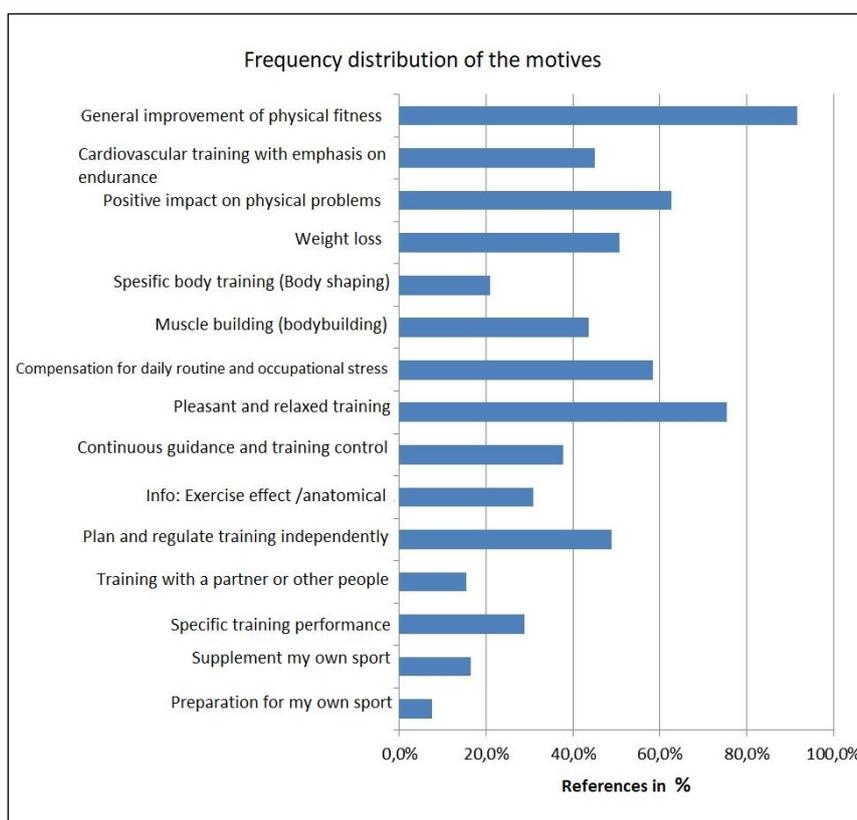


Fig-1: Frequency distribution of the motives' reference

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Overall, a very differentiated picture of the motives for fitness training emerges. The spectrum ranges from motives named by over 90% of the respondents to motives named by significantly less than 10% of the respondents. A total of 1763 motives were named for the 15 different motives. With 278 respondents, this means that on average 6.3 motives were named per respondent. These data indicate that the information on the motives was indeed very specific and detailed by the respondents.

There is a clear dominance of the motives "general improvement of physical fitness", "pleasant and relaxed training" and "positive influence on physical complaints". The results clearly showed the dominance of certain motivational aspects in fitness sport. In particular, it was shown that aspects of health maintenance and well-being are included in the motivation of men and women in fitness sport. Thus, all three top motives can be assigned to the motivational areas "health" and "well-being". This suggests that the participants are not only extrinsically but also intrinsically motivated. This high intrinsic motivation ultimately leads to the participants sticking with it longer and explains their long average membership duration of 11.6 years in the fitness club.

In an older study on motivation to join fitness sports from the 1990s (Zarotis, 1999), on the other hand, the top three motives came exclusively from the extrinsically dominated motive complexes "health" and

"appearance". Thus, while the affection motivation tends to be extrinsically dominated, the exercise motivation tends to change in the direction of intrinsic nature. In the intrinsic motivational mode, the intention to act is that the action should be performed for its own sake (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seelig & Fuchs, 2006). The intrinsic motivational mode indicates that fitness athletes are motivated by the fact that fitness training itself gives them pleasure and by the fact that fitness training is in line with internalised values. This finding can be seen as rather positive for the commitment to fitness training. Purpose-oriented extrinsic motives are not sufficient in the long run to remain loyal to fitness sport. This may explain the relatively high turnover in the fitness industry. Intrinsic motivations can only fully develop their incentive potential when extrinsic motives have been fulfilled for the most part.

Another survey of a sample of 163 male and female fitness athletes also showed that aspects of health maintenance, well-being and appearance play a role in the motivation of men and women in fitness sports. In contrast, athletic performance goals or improvements in a specific sport are relatively unimportant (Enders, 2007).

In a large-scale study with 10,481 test persons, Breuer et al. (2013) found health to be the most important goal for people to start fitness training, in addition to the desire to improve endurance and performance. In a study with 1,000 fitness club

members, the age-group-specific training goals are analysed (IHRSA, 20121). This also shows that in the age groups from 31 years onwards, the motive of maintaining health is relevant for most exercisers. Ebben & Brudzynski (2008) record "improve health", "stay fit", "reduce stress" and "have fun" as motives for participating in a fitness programme.

It is not surprising that in both studies by Zarotis (1999 and 2020), a health motive comes first in the top three rankings. In view of the increase in diseases of civilisation due to lifestyle in modern industrialised societies, the majority of fitness athletes feel threatened by health issues and strive to maintain and promote their health as far as possible through appropriate recreational sports measures (Zarotis et al., 2011; Zarotis, 1999). Scientific research also continues to prove the positive health-promoting effect of regular fitness training on the human organism (Zarotis & Tokarski, 2020). This health-promoting effect, especially of combined strength and endurance training, is also proven in the scientific study by Riess et al. (2014). Other studies also prove the preventive effect with regard to back problems (Stephan et al., 2001).

Another finding from the top three motive ranking is that fitness sport is becoming an essential means of compensating for everyday and occupational stress for many people. Professional involvement is becoming more and more of a burden due to the high performance requirements and the working atmosphere, which is often perceived as oppressive, as well as the lack of recognition at work. The result is a lack of psychological balance and frustration. This can be seen as the main reason why the top three motive ranking includes the single motive of "balancing everyday and work stress" (Zarotis et al., 2002; Zarotis, 1999). Physical activity promotes stress regulation, reduces anxiety and improves cognitive performance (Battaglia, 2014).

Overall, it can be confirmed that traditional motives such as performance or competition are being replaced by new motives such as health, fun, well-being, appearance, figure or compensation for stress. None of the traditional motives can be found in the top three motive rankings of the present study.

The increasing awareness and willingness of people to take active preventive measures for their own health is a good basis for the future development of the sector. Cooperative approaches between the fitness and wellness market and service providers of the primary health care market, such as hospitals or doctors, offer good opportunities to meet this growing demand. As is the case in other countries where the fitness industry is more widely recognised as a service provider for people's health. With a progressive shift towards health-oriented services, older age groups are increasingly

being tapped, which have so far been less in the focus of the industry.

The goal for all providers must therefore be to bind the customer as intensively as possible to their club from the beginning through suitable customer relationship measures. While a high fluctuation in a fast-growing market can be compensated relatively easily by attracting new market participants, this is much more difficult in a slower-growing or even stagnating market. It is important to actively use the opportunities that arise in a changing environment and to take the development into one's own hands. Perhaps fitness providers in Germany will succeed in ridding themselves of the image of the "gym around the corner" once and for all in the future through consistent positioning, professional marketing and, last but not least, consistent self-perception as service providers for their customers. Basically, a quality concept has to be customer-oriented, it has to focus on the customer and his individual goals. Quality certification as an isolated control measure does not go far enough, as it is only perceived to a limited extent by the customer. Instead, a holistic process must be initiated that, on the basis of customer and provider quality analyses, justifies the planning of measures that continuously improve the core service of a fitness studio, namely training support. From this process optimisation, results in the form of training successes can be positively influenced. Detached from the fitness club setting, Lehnert et al. (2011) claim that exercise programmes must take into account the diversity of needs so that they can also build loyalty. One reason for members dropping out is probably that needs, desires and goals are not satisfied or achieved. Health-oriented fitness training should therefore be based on intrinsic motivation from the very beginning. Furthermore, the sports-related consequence experience should be optimised by reinforcing positive experiences with fitness training and minimising negative experiences (Zarotis et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

Desires, intentions and resolutions can inevitably be linked to motivations and motives to engage in sport. There is a wide range of possible motives for turning to sport. Basically, they can be summarised under physical aspects (such as health, physical fitness, prevention, rehabilitation), social aspects (such as socialising, doing sport with friends and in the community) as well as psychological aspects (such as stress reduction, relaxation, balance). Over the years, the social image of fitness sport has also changed. Today, physical fitness is an expression of an active, health-oriented and body-conscious lifestyle. The industry has succeeded in stopping the downward trend, among other things, through a strong focus on health. This gives gym-goers the opportunity to combine the motives of physical fitness, preventive health care and relaxation under one roof in a meaningful way.

The survey of gym members shows a very differentiated picture of the motives for fitness training. The motive of "general improvement of physical fitness" stated by almost all respondents is very clearly in the foreground, followed by the motive of "pleasant and relaxed training" and the motive of "positive influence on physical complaints". Specific training goals with regard to performance or certain types of sport play only a subordinate role, as does the social aspect of training. It is undisputed that only satisfied customers actually commit to a fitness provider. While some fitness providers completely refrain from dealing with the satisfaction of their customers, other providers attempt, sometimes quite successfully, to systematically survey their customers and members. Apart from the fact that the basics of empirical survey methods should be observed, some fitness providers find it difficult to evaluate and interpret the data obtained. In particular, the derivation of sensible action measures from the survey results can contribute to sustainably influencing the satisfaction and thus the willingness of customers to remain loyal. The insights gained contribute to offering people an individual and demand-oriented leisure sport fitness offer, to paving the way for the long-term success of fitness clubs and to improving the image of fitness sport in general.

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