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# The Effect of Gender on Fitness Motivational Factors: An Examination of St. John Fisher College Undergraduate Students

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# The Effect of Gender on Fitness Motivational Factors: An Examination of St. John Fisher College Undergraduate Students

## **Abstract**

Gender and the effect it has on physical fitness motivational factors for St. John Fisher undergraduate students was examined, in the context of factors such as reasons for participation (health/functioning, appearance, achievement, social) factors that contribute to commitment (feeling in control, seeing physical changes, social) and qualities important in a fitness facility (location, staff and training aids, extra amenities, operating hours, quality/type of equipment, group classes offered, membership prices/packages). Significant gender differences were found in health and functioning, achievement, social reasons, location, and group classes.

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The Effect of Gender on Fitness Motivational Factors: An Examination of St. John Fisher

College Undergraduate Students

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**Abstract**

Gender and the effect it has on physical fitness motivational factors for St. John Fisher undergraduate students was examined, in the context of factors such as *reasons for participation* (health/functioning, appearance, achievement, social) *factors that contribute to commitment* (feeling in control, seeing physical changes, social) *and qualities important in a fitness facility* (location, staff and training aids, extra amenities, operating hours, quality/type of equipment, group classes offered, membership prices/packages). Significant gender differences were found in health and functioning, achievement, social reasons, location, and group classes.

## **The Effect of Fitness Motivational Factors on Gender: An Examination of St. John Fisher College Undergraduate Students**

Despite the many clear benefits of an active lifestyle, the lack of physical activity within Americans is concerning (Kilpatrick, Hebert, Bartholomew, 2005). Evidence shows that physical activity improves physiological and psychological health. Given this evidence one would expect that participation in fitness would be a normal activity (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). However evidence indicates that physical activity levels have decreased from high school to college and activity patterns in college populations are generally insufficient to improve health and fitness. Only 38% of college students participate in regular vigorous activity with only 20% participating in moderate physical activity (Kilpatrick et al., 2005).

Fitness and exercise can take many forms. One of the forms that individuals can exercise through is fitness centers. There are a plethora of fitness centers around the United States ranging from major corporations like Gold's Gym, World's Gym, and Planet Fitness, but there are also locally owned fitness centers along with fitness centers located in most colleges and universities. "Over 41 million Americans belong to private and public health clubs and fitness centers; of those members, the attrition rate is 34.5% per year" (Mullen & Whaley, 2010, p. 24). In addition, Mullen and Whaley state that "50% of people who begin structured exercise programs drop out within six months" (2010, p. 24). It is possible that non-participation in a fitness center has been one factor in the rising obesity rates. During the past 20 years only Colorado and The District of Columbia had a prevalence of obesity less than 20 percent ("Overweight," 2009). Also nine states have an obesity rate of equal or greater than 30 percent and the obesity rate in New York State is 24.2 percent ("Overweight," 2009). These statistics are very interesting and serve as an

overall challenge for all fitness centers to not only increase the amount of new members, but to also increase their customer retention rate.

To conceptualize this concept of self-determination one must understand the theory behind self-determination. Self-determination theory is an influential theory on human motivation (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009). The theory explains motivation and psychological well-being on the basis of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009). Autonomy refers to the need that a person needs to be the initiator of their actions. Competence refers to producing outcomes, but understanding how one reached those outcomes and relatedness refers to the need of having supportive relationships with others in order to better meet personal goals (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009).

## **Literature Review**

### **Motivational Studies**

When it comes to being a successful fitness center knowing what motivates the audience, will help one understand how to market their product. As far as motivation there are many research studies and publications that address motivation on the broad level, but there are far less specific studies on physical activity motivation. The study that provides the greatest insight to specific motivational factors is titled “Age, gender, and fitness club membership: Factors related to initial involvement and sustained participation.” In their study they used a cross-sectional design to calculate the means and standard deviations for motivational factors by gender (Mullen & Whaley, 2010). They found that health and functioning and appearance were rated highest in importance for reasons of participation for males and females (Mullen & Whaley, 2010). These two factors will be important to address because both genders want to participate in shaping their body and to improve health, but to also look good. In a similar study which specifically studied

college students motivation to exercise it was found that challenge, competition, social recognition, strength and endurance, and weight management were most important in men, while women valued weight management the most (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). In terms of actually committing to fitness it was found that perceiving physical change and feeling a sense of control were the most important factors in retaining commitment to a fitness center (Mullen & Whaley, 2010). Feeling a sense of control is the notion that a person is in charge of themselves, they feel confident, and feel like they are being productive by going to the gym (Mullen & Whaley, 2010). The more feeling of sense of control the more likely that person will stay immersed in fitness.

An older study, which is just as significant today expanded on reasons for committing to fitness. This study looked at three predictor variables to leisure commitment. The first is demographics, followed by attitudes and the participation in leisure pursuits (Granzin & Olsen, 1989). As far as demographics it was found that youth and health had an effect on commitment and this was based on their attitudes. Granzin and Olsen concluded that; “Persons who are fit are perhaps not afraid to join formal programs place themselves in situations where they can be compared to others. They need not worry about what others think of their level of fitness” (1989, p. 123). Lastly Granzin and Olsen found that persons who are committed to fitness programs are influenced to join new fitness programs by their friends (1989). For example it is concluded that they may be joining programs because friends persuade them to join. At the same time those who do not commit themselves may be influenced by their friends who do not participate (Granzin & Olsen, 1989).

Similar to Mullen and Whaley’s study Chu-Hsin, Li-Yeuh, and Man-Ling designed a study that assessed personality traits and how it impacted exercise motivation. A quota sampling method was used in which respondents were selected from the United States, Taiwan, and

Europe (Hsin, Yeuh, & Ling, 2007). Two hundred participants were studied and were given a survey (Hsin et al., 2007). This survey found that higher levels of emotional stability, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness have higher levels of both physical and psychological motivation towards exercise participation (Hsin et al., 2007). A similar study addressed one personality trait, extroversion (Ying-Chao, Lily Shui, Shih Tse, & Ming Sung, 2007). Overall extroversion qualities were correlated with fitness participation which included qualities like “have a good time with friends,” “build friendships,” and “discover new places and things.” It was concluded that extroversion is positively correlated with fitness participation and therefore fitness managers should promote intellectual, social, competence-mastery, and relaxing factors to attract extroverted clients (Ying-Chao et al., 2007). Unlike Mullen and Whaley’s study this study was more focused on the personality of individuals and how different personality traits impacted their exercise motivation.

### **Factors that Determine Fitness Motivation**

In addition to personality traits the facility plays a big role in motivation to participate and stay committed to fitness as well. One study looked at why persons prefer sports clubs or why persons prefer fitness centers. Ann-Lene Bakken Ulseth said that commercial fitness centers constitute a relatively new trend within the fitness and sport club industry (Ulseth, 2008). The finding was that persons who are motivated by pleasure, social factors, and achievement are more attracted to sports clubs and persons who are motivated by fitness, mental recreation, and appearance are motivated to participate in fitness centers (Ulseth, 2008). In a similar study college students were measured in terms of motivation to play sports as a form of exercise versus strictly exercising in a gym or fitness center. It was found that motivation to participate in sports was more desirable in both genders (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). This states that college students



would rather enjoy their exercise through a sport rather than follow the stringent guidelines to scheduled fitness. Although this study must be recognized, it failed to study gender. Gender was not a factor in participation in whether college students preferred a sports club or fitness center, it was merely based on the factors that were stated earlier. Motivation to join a fitness center in different age groups has been studied more than gender as the previous studies suggest. The studies on motivation in gender have been sparse which leads to the notion that studying gender will discover new results that have not been discovered before which can be used for fitness centers around the globe, but motivation may not be the only factor when it comes to participation. Other barriers are present according to the following study.

Time and a busy schedule can be barriers to participating in fitness, especially for college students but creating that time to exercise helps one stay healthy and fit. This next article looks at barriers to leisure-time physical activity. For this study surveys were collected in order to obtain results on personal, social, and environmental barriers (Cerin, Sugiyama, & Owen, 2010). They found that perceived barriers of lack of motivation and time were associated with Leisure-Time Physical Activity (LTPA) and lack of motivation, poor health, and lack of facilities were associated with non-participation (Cerin, Sugiyama, & Owen, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to assess key motivating factors for why St. John Fisher undergraduate students participate in fitness, what factors motivate them to stay committed to fitness, and what qualities are most important in a fitness facility. Previous research has focused more on age as determining particular motivational factors, but this study will *only* focus on gender. Focusing on gender will gather useful data that has not been commonly studied in many periodicals pertaining to motivation to participate in fitness. The goal of this study is to gain a

better understanding of what motivates men and women from St. John Fisher College to participate in fitness. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the most important motivating factors for men and women students at St. John Fisher College to participate in fitness?
2. Is there a significant difference in the motivating factors for men and women at St. John Fisher College?

Using an electronic survey, this research attempted to answer the first two questions by asking the following questions:

1. What motivates St. John Fisher students to participate in fitness? Is it appearance, is it health and functioning, is it reaching one's goals, is it exercising with family or friends or is it a combination of the four?
2. What motivates St. John Fisher students to stay committed to fitness? Is it feeling in control, seeing physical changes, or social factors?
3. Thirdly, what qualities do St. John Fisher students enjoy the most in a fitness center? Is it the televisions that are mounted on the ceiling in front of the cardio machines? Is it the trainers and their unique expertise? Or is it the location and operating hours? These are some questions that need to be asked and must be solved in order to adequately determine what qualities are most important for St. John Fisher undergraduate students.

### **Method**

For this study a cross-sectional design will be used through the implementation of a survey. The usage of this design is the most feasible for this study. By conducting a survey it allows the students to voice their opinion on how they are motivated to participate in fitness

(Gratton & Jones, 2010). It also allows the students to voice their opinion on what they dislike and like in a fitness facility (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

### **Participants**

A sample of 356 respondents was collected via a survey that was sent to all St. John Fisher undergraduate students. Skip logic reduced the number of usable data to a sample size of 302. In addition, 74 participants had missing data which had to be excluded resulting in a final sample size of 228. All participants were sent an email/consent form stating what the survey entailed. Respondents included 182 females and 46 males. Participants were equally distributed between classes (17.2% freshman, 17.9% sophomores, 17.2% juniors, 23.2% seniors) and sixty six of participants were transfer students. All of the participants were non-athletes due to the fact that this study only addressed motivation to exercise in non-athletes. Any athlete was eliminated from the survey by using skip logic.

### **Materials and Procedure**

A survey was distributed using Qualtrics Survey Software. A cover letter, consent form, and a link to the survey were sent to all undergraduate students at St. John Fisher College. A total of 10 questions were asked. These questions focused on demographics and motivational aspects to participate in exercise. The questions that assessed motivation looked at *reasons for participation in exercise, factors that contribute to commitment in exercise, and qualities important in a fitness facility*. Three motivational survey questions were asked in ranking form with 1 being the most important and the largest number being the least important. Within *reasons for participation*, health and functioning, appearance, achievement, and social motivational factors were studied. The next factors are feeling in control, seeing physical changes, and exercising with family and friends which are *factors that contribute to commitment*. Lastly the

factor of *qualities important in a fitness facility* is also a factor in exercise participation and commitment.

### **Analytic Techniques**

Descriptive statistics and frequencies were looked at for many of the questions. Chi-square analysis was done to determine two things; (1) to see if there is a significant relationship between gender and motivation to participate and stay committed to exercise and (2) to assess differences in groups or populations of individuals (Field, 2005). Chi-square analysis cannot determine why these populations are behaving differently, but from the results chi-square can assess the difference in motivation between men and women. Chi-square tests are useful for this research due to the fact that the data is non-parametric and nominal (Gratton & Jones, year). It will be important to see if particular motivation factors have a relationship with each other in order to determine similarities or differences between male and female motivational factors (Gratton & Jones, year).

If significance is found it can be determined that men and female participants are motivated differently to exercise (Field, 2005). Factors that have insignificant findings explain that the null hypothesis is false. Significant findings explain that the null hypothesis is true. (Gratton & Jones). For example if there is chi-square significance between gender and appearance, one would conclude that motivation for men and women to exercise in order to look good is different.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

It was found that 37.4% of participants exercise 1-2 days a week and 31.4% exercise 3-4 days a week. 72.5% of participants do not pay for a gym membership and 24.8% pay for a

gym/fitness center membership. 70.9% of the population is attending St. John Fisher for the four full years and 29.1% are transfer students from other colleges/universities. Appearance was rated highest in both genders in motivation to participate in fitness with 42.1% of the participants ranking this factor as the most important. Both genders were motivated most to stay committed to fitness by seeing physical changes (59.3%). Finally, location, quality of equipment, and operating hours were the three most important qualities in a fitness center for both genders.

### **Inferential Statistics**

Aside from descriptive statistics, inferential statistics were also used to compare gender and the motivation to participate in fitness. There was significance between gender and motivation to participate in fitness in terms of *health and functioning* and *Achievement* (see Table 1). It was found that *appearance* was not a significant relationship as well as *social reasons* to participate in fitness (see Table 1). Although appearance is not considered significant, the significance level ( $p < .065$ ) of appearance states that appearance could be a different motivating factor for men and women.

For factors that contribute to commitment in exercise *social reasons* was the only significant factor (see Table 2). There was no significance between genders for *feeling in control* and *seeing physical changes* (see Table 2). The significance of social factors emphasizes the importance of immersing oneself in social settings, in this case fitness centers in which St. John Fisher College undergraduate students attend.

Significance for qualities in a fitness center were found in *group classes offered*  $\chi^2 = 29.433, p < .000$ . *Location*  $\chi^2 = 12.168, p < .058$  approached significance, but did not quite reach the threshold of  $p < .05$ . Although location did not approach significance it seems to still be an important factor in motivation in males and females. Overall these results show that male and

female St. John Fisher students are motivated differently by location and group classes. The majority of female participants in the survey could be a reason why group classes have such a relevant significance. The five other factors were found to be insignificant (see Table 3).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the different motivational factors males and females value when participating in exercise, committing to exercise, and determining important qualities within a fitness center. Findings revealed that there is statistical significance between gender and motivation for health and functioning, achievement, social reasons (under reasons for commitment), location, and group classes offered. In other words males and females are motivated differently to want to be healthy, achieve their goals, and socialize with friends. Both genders are motivated differently by location and group classes offered as well. With the majority of the population being females it could be said that females are more motivated by group classes than males. As far as location, both genders are motivated differently by travel time to and from the fitness center.

From this analysis we can conclude that men and women are motivated differently in certain aspects to participate in fitness, stay committed to fitness, and value certain qualities within a fitness center differently. Appearance and seeing physical changes was rated the most important for men and women in terms of participation and commitment which can be helpful to fitness centers in improving their consumer retention. One reason why participants drop out of fitness programs is because they see a lack of physical change because new exercise participants often have unrealistic goals (e.g. expecting to lose weight quickly) (Mullen and Whaley, 2010). Fitness centers must provide clear, contingent, and regular feedback to participants that may foster more realistic expectations (Mullen and Whaley, 2010).

Although the findings suggest gender differences between males and females for the factors that were stated previously, the sample size of 182 females and 46 males could have skewed the results. A more equal balance of females and males within the sample size would have more than likely provided different results. Another weakness of this study was that it was limited to college students from ages 18 to around 22. It was not the intention to study age within this study, but a more diverse sample size in terms of age could have effected motivation within both genders.

The findings within this study are useful for fitness centers to acquire baseline knowledge of motivation in different genders, but further research needs to be done to expand on these results. An ideal study to determine motivation to exercise in fitness will need to asses gender and age. Studying age and gender simultaneously with a more adequate sample size will provide results that can be more useful for a variety of fitness centers, which attract different audiences. As there has been previous studies that have addressed age and gender, there needs to be more, so fitness centers around the globe can better market to their customers in an attempt to attract new members and retain members over a long period of time.

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Appendix A

*Cover Letter Sent to St. John Fisher Undergraduate Students*

Sent on behalf of Daniel Lippa ([djl08682@sjfc.edu](mailto:djl08682@sjfc.edu))

Dear Student,

My name is Daniel Lippa and for my senior thesis I am exploring the relationship between gender and motivation to participate in fitness centers. As a student of St. John Fisher College, your opinion is critical for me to obtain the information I need to complete my research project.

The linked survey will take no more than ten minutes to complete. The information you provide is kept confidential. Your participation to the survey will allow me to understand the most important motivational factors in participation in fitness centers.

**Link to survey:** [https://sjfc.us2.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_b3FIYRUob6bVt2c](https://sjfc.us2.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_b3FIYRUob6bVt2c)

In order to complete my research on time, I ask that you complete this survey by Friday November 4, 2011. Thank you for your time; your participation is greatly appreciated. Please feel free to contact me at [djl08682@sjfc.edu](mailto:djl08682@sjfc.edu) or my supervising professor Dr. Emily Dane at [edane@sjfc.edu](mailto:edane@sjfc.edu) if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Daniel Lippa

Sport Management

St. John Fisher College

[djl08682@sjfc.edu](mailto:djl08682@sjfc.edu)

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 Appendix B
*Survey*

Welcome and thank you for taking time to complete this survey. Completion of this survey will take no more than 10 minutes. Your responses are greatly appreciated and will be kept confidential.

Do you currently pay for a gym membership? (eg. Gold's Gym, World Gym, Planet Fitness, etc.)

- A. Yes
- B. No

What motivates you most to participate in exercise? Click and drag to rank in importance from 1 being the most important and 4 being the least important.

Being healthy (Health and functioning)	1
Looking your best (Appearance)	2
Meeting your fitness goals (Achievement)	3
Exercising with family and/or friends (Social)	4

How many days do you exercise per week?

- A. 1-2 days
- B. 3-4 days
- C. 5-6 days
- D. 7 days

Which factors motivate you most to stay committed to fitness? Click and drag to rank in importance from 1 being the most important and 4 being the least important.

Feeling in control with your health	1
Seeing Physical Changes	2
Exercising with family and/or friends	3

What qualities in a fitness center do you find most important? Rank in importance from 1 being most important and 7 being the least important.

Location	1
Staff and Training Aids	2
Extra Amenities (eg. TVs, Day Care, Smoothie bars, merchandise etc.)	3
Operating Hours (eg. 5am-10pm, Open 24hrs)	4
Quality and type of equipment	5
Group classes offered	6
Membership prices and packages	7

Are you an athlete at St. John Fisher College? This does NOT include club sports.

- A. Yes
- B. No

Please indicate your Gender below?

- A. Male
- B. Female

What class are you at St. John Fisher College?

- A. Freshman
- B. Sophomore
- C. Junior
- D. Senior

Are you a transfer student?

- A. Yes
  - B. No
-

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Table 1  
*Gender and Motivation for Reasons of Participation*

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Factor	X <sup>2</sup>	p
Health and Functioning	8.336	.040*
Appearance	7.225	.065
Achievement	14.276	.003**
Social	3.068	.379

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Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

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Table 2  
*Gender and Motivation for Reasons of Commitment*

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Factor	$X^2$	$p$
Feeling in Control	2.231	.328
Seeing Physical Changes	.526	.769
Social	9.374	.025*

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*Note:* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 3

*Gender and Motivation: Qualities in a Fitness Center*

Factor	$X^2$	$p$
Location	12.163	.058*
Staff and Training Aids	5.146	.492
Extra Amenities	9.746	.136
Operating Hours	3.361	.762
Quality and Type of Equipment	4.919	.554
Group Classes Offered	29.433	.000**
Membership Prices and Packages	4.234	.645

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$