

Motives for exercising among young adults with a moderately positive body image

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Abstract:

Background: People engage in exercise and sports due to several reasons, depending on factors such as age, sex and health or fitness status. These motives include enhancing health and fitness status, improving appearance and body image or enjoying in leisure time. **Aims & Methods:** Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study explored motives for exercising in healthy men and women 18 to 40 years old who were regular exercisers and held a moderately positive body image. They voluntarily completed an online survey on their exercise practice, body image and motives for exercising. **Results:** Contrary to previous SDT-based empirical findings, appearance improvement emerged as an important motive for exercising, and it was more frequently mentioned than health&fun-related motives by the whole sample and by subsamples of men and women and younger young and older young adults. **Conclusions:** Given that appearance management-related motives may have both positive and undesired outcomes on exercise behaviour and personal well-being, they should be carefully reviewed with women and men in their young adulthood who are exercise intenders, beginners or regular exercisers.

Keywords: appearance, health, exercise, motivation, Self-Determination Theory.

Received: 25/06/2013 Accepted: 18/10/2013

INTRODUCTION

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2002) sets out six motivational regulations underpinning exercise behaviour, from a motivation for exercising to the most self-determined, intrinsic, autonomous form of motivation, by way of several forms of controlled, extrinsic regulations which are progressively more autonomous (i.e., external, introjected, identified and integrated regulations) (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2007; Ryan et al., 2009; Teixeira et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2008). Research has revealed that exercising is mainly motivated extrinsically, or mostly determined by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motives, as many other intentional, volitional and controllable activities. Most frequently mentioned motives include health, well-being and fitness enhancement, body image and appearance management, and enjoyment and pleasure associated with exercising. This motives have been linked to better adoption and maintenance of active behaviour, volumes of practice and psychological outcomes (Brunet & Sabiston, 2011; Buckworth et al., 2007; Duncan et al., 2010; Ingledew & Markland, 2008; Moreno et al., 2007; Rodríguez-Romo et al., 2009; Sebire et al., 2009; Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Ntoumanis, 2006; Vartanian et al., 2012).

We explored the motives for regular active behaviour among exercisers with a moderately positive body image. According to previous research, we expected that participants reported both appearance- and health&leisure-related motives.

METHODS

Participants: After signing an informed consent, 157 Spanish, 18 to 40 years old ($M = 25.85$, $SD = 5.45$; 66.9% women), healthy adults voluntarily participated. They were regular exercisers (at least 1-2 times/week, 30 minutes/session, moderate intensity) and held a moderately positive body image ($M = 7.96$, $SD = 2.66$, in a 1-15 point scale; participants with extreme self-perceptions were excluded from the analysis).

Measures & Procedure: Participants completed an online assessment protocol (Ramírez et al., in press) including questions on their 1) exercise practice, including type, weekly frequency, session duration and intensity of practice (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008); 2) body image, using both a) silhouettes corresponding to proportionally different values of body mass index and muscularity, and b) questions about body size and composition (Damasceno et al., 2011; El Ansari et al., 2010); 3) their motives for exercising (Brunet & Sabiston, 2011; Standage et al., 2008; Vartanian et al., 2012), grouped into autonomous, health&leisure-related motives and extrinsic-introjected, body image management-related motives (Yes= 0, No= 1; a mean score for the two motivational regulations was calculated); and 4) demographic data.

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RESULTS

Among the motives for regularly exercising reported by the participants, those related with enjoyment, health and appearance control were referred to; on the contrary, social engagement motives were less reported (Table 1). When the motives were grouped into body image-related and health and leisure-related motives, 62.4% of participants chose all the motives concerning appearance control, while 45.2% chose all the motives concerning health and enjoyment. Both men and women and younger young and older young participants reported more frequently motives related to appearance management than to health and enjoyment (Table 1). Moreover, men (51.9%) and older (50.6%) participants chose more frequently all the health & leisure-related motives than women (41.9%) and younger (39.2%) participants.

DISCUSSION

Supporting previous findings, participants reported motives corresponding to intrinsic, identified and introjected motivational regulations but, contrary to most research, they demonstrated higher levels of body image-related reasons for exercising than other type, as others have also informed (e.g., Buckworth et al. 2007, study 1; Rodríguez-Romo et al., 2009).

As some have previously noted, holding controlled motiva-

tions is not necessarily problematic, motivationally speaking, as long as self-determined regulations are also held or the former shift to an autonomous form of motivational regulation (Teixeira et al., 2012). Consequently, appearance management-related motives may have a positive impact on exercise behaviour in terms of initiation, adherence and outcomes. Nonetheless, they also can lead to undesired outcomes such as lower adherence and dropout (Ingledeu & Markland, 2008) or excessive exercise behaviour (Fortier & Farrell, 2009), as well as body image concerns and disordered eating behaviour (Vartanian et al., 2012). Thus, motives related to body image should be reviewed carefully with intenders, beginners and regular exercisers, particularly, although not only, with young and middle-age women (Teixeira et al., 2012).

On the contrary, social engagement-related motives were the less reported, as other have also found (Ingledeu & Markland, 2008; Moreno et al., 2007).

Despite the limitations of our study, our findings have important derived practical applications for promoting exercise behaviour. The SDT suggests that, in order to promote behavioural change in the case of healthy behaviours, it is core to endorse more intrinsic motivation and other forms of autonomous motivational regulation, as well as to ensure the satisfaction of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan et al, 2008; Teixeira et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2008). Appearance-related motives may enhance the adoption (i.e., initiation and maintenance)

Table 1: Motives for exercising reported by younger young (18-26 yr. old) and older young (27-40 yr. old) men and women.
 † The higher the score, the lower importance conceded to each motive.

Motives	Sample	♀	♂	Young	Older
	N=157 % M† (sd)	N=105 % M (sd)	N=52 % M (sd)	N=74 % M (sd)	N=83 % M (sd)
1 Muscle development and toning	84,1 0,16(0,37)	79,0 0,21(0,41)	94,2 0,06(0,24)	79,7 0,20(0,40)	88,0 0,12(0,33)
2 Weight management and loss	77,1 0,23(0,42)	80,0 0,20(0,40)	71,2 0,29(0,46)	77,0 0,23(0,42)	77,1 0,23(0,42)
3 Appearance improvement	91,1 0,09(0,29)	91,4 0,09(0,28)	90,4 0,10(0,30)	95,9 0,04(0,20)	86,7 0,13(0,34)
4 Health protection and improvement	93,6 0,06(0,24)	93,3 0,07(0,25)	94,2 0,06(0,24)	87,8 0,12(0,33)	98,8 0,01(0,11)
5 Doing something enjoyable you like	77,7 0,22(0,42)	72,4 0,28(0,45)	88,5 0,12(0,32)	75,7 0,24(0,43)	79,5 0,20(0,41)
6 To be with or to meet people	51,0 0,49(0,50)	45,7 0,54(0,50)	61,5 0,38(0,49)	45,9 0,54(0,50)	55,4 0,45(0,50)
7 Mood enhancement	85,4 0,15(0,35)	86,7 0,13(0,34)	82,7 0,17(0,38)	81,1 0,19(0,39)	89,2 0,11(0,31)
Appearance Motives 1,2 & 3	62,4 0,16(0,23)	61,9 0,17(0,24)	63,5 0,15(0,21)	60,8 0,16(0,22)	63,9 0,16(0,23)
Health & Leisure Motives 4,5,6 & 7	45,2 0,23(0,26)	41,9 0,25(0,26)	51,9 0,18(0,24)	39,2 0,27(0,28)	50,6 0,19(0,23)

of active behaviour, along with health & enjoyment motives, when they all become autonomous, self-determined forms or behaviour regulation.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported with financial assistance provided to the “Psicología de la Salud & Medicina Conductual” Research Group (CTS-0267) by the Consejería de Innovación, Ciencia y Empresa, Junta de Andalucía (Spain). We are grateful to all those who made this study possible.