

Motives and barriers to regular physical activity and exercise

Regular physical activity is essential for maintaining both physical and psychological health, yet a significant proportion of adults remain insufficiently active. This suggests that knowledge of the benefits alone is not enough to drive behaviour change, and that participation in exercise is shaped by a range of underlying motives and barriers. This assignment will examine these factors through my participant, exploring how influences such as intrinsic motivation, and perceived obstacles affect their engagement in exercise. These findings will be critically evaluated against existing research to identify broader trends and inconsistencies. Finally, evidence-based strategies will be proposed to promote sustained exercise behaviour, both for the individual and for a wider population group, such as students, where similar challenges to participation are often observed.

Participants results

The participant demonstrated a consistently positive relationship with physical activity and reported swimming twice a week while remaining physically active on a daily basis, primarily through walking, which reflected an already established and active lifestyle supported by intrinsic motivation and routine behaviour. For this individual, exercise was strongly associated not only with physical health but also with improvements in mental wellbeing, particularly increased concentration, emotional regulation, and overall mood, suggesting that psychological benefits were a primary driver of engagement rather than appearance-based or performance-focused goals. Although the participant recognised potential risks such as injury, these concerns were relatively minor and were managed proactively through sensible warm-up practices, which indicated a realistic and informed attitude towards safe participation in exercise. Previous injuries had occasionally presented temporary barriers; however, they were described as manageable and did not significantly disrupt long-term engagement with physical activity. Motivation occasionally fluctuated due to feelings of laziness or low energy, but the participant reported relying on discipline to maintain consistency, demonstrating an ability to self-regulate behaviour when intrinsic motivation temporarily decreased. Environmental and social factors also influenced participation, particularly experiences of discomfort in crowded exercise spaces dominated by men, which sometimes created discouraging conditions and highlighted the importance of inclusive exercise environments for sustained engagement. Despite this, the participant reported feeling comfortable and safe using the university swimming pool, and transport was not a barrier when accessing campus facilities, although off-campus exercise locations required driving and therefore slightly reduced accessibility. Family support played a significant reinforcing role, as all immediate family members regularly exercised and provided encouragement, which contributed positively to the participant's exercise identity and motivation. The participant reported feeling fairly confident about starting new activities, although confidence increased when exercising with a partner, suggesting that social support enhanced engagement. Setting small, incremental goals

was also identified as a useful strategy for maintaining consistency within exercise routines, alongside the value of social connections within exercise communities. Significant life events or challenges were described as increasing the perceived importance of exercise and strengthening its role as a form of self-care. The participant identified a short-term goal of exercising twice weekly for longer durations over the following month, and defined success over a six-week period as successfully maintaining these planned goals. Finally, the participant reported feeling comfortable and satisfied with the interview process and expressed no concerns regarding the questions asked or any influence from the interviewer.

Participants results linked to existing research

The participant's exercise behaviour broadly aligns with existing research on physical activity motivation and adherence, particularly in relation to intrinsic motivation and perceived barriers. Their strong association between exercise and mental wellbeing reflects findings within Health Psychology (NHS,2026), which suggest that individuals who are intrinsically motivated and engaging in exercise for enjoyment or psychological benefit which are more likely to sustain long-term participation. This is supported by Self-Determination Theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), which emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in maintaining behaviour. In this case, the participant demonstrates autonomy through self-directed activity (e.g. swimming and walking), and competence through goal-setting and gradual progression, both of which are associated with higher adherence rates.

The emphasis on mental health benefits such as improved mood and concentration is also well-supported in the literature, with studies consistently showing that physical activity can reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Wanju et al, 2023). This reinforces the idea that psychological outcomes can be a stronger motivator than physical appearance or performance-based goals, particularly among young adults and student populations. The participant's positive attitude towards exercise therefore reflects a key predictor of sustained engagement, as identified in behavioural models such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Bosnjak,2020). Despite these positive factors, the participant still experiences barriers that are commonly identified in research. Fluctuations in motivation, described as feeling "lazy" at times, are consistent with evidence suggesting that even intrinsically motivated individuals are not immune to lapses in behaviour. This highlights the role of self-regulation and discipline, which the participant actively employs, aligning with research that emphasises habit formation and routine as critical components of long-term adherence (Arlinghaus,2018). Additionally, previous injury acting as a minor barrier reflects that physical limitations can reduce confidence and participation, even when individuals are otherwise motivated. Environmental and social barriers are also evident, particularly discomfort in crowded or male-dominated exercise spaces. This aligns with research indicating that gym environments can be

perceived as intimidating, especially for women, potentially reducing participation. The participant's preference for the university pool, where they feel safe and comfortable, supports the importance of perceived environment in influencing exercise behaviour. Similarly, their negative experience in overly advanced group classes reflects the role of perceived competence; when individuals feel unable to meet the demands of an activity, motivation and enjoyment can decrease.

Social influences play a dual role in this case, acting primarily as a facilitator. Family support and shared exercise behaviours reinforce participation, consistent with research highlighting the importance of social support in promoting physical activity. Furthermore, the participant reports increased confidence when exercising with a partner, supporting the concept of relatedness within Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000). This suggests that social connection not only enhances motivation but may also buffer against periods of low discipline. Overall, the participant's behaviour reflects a pattern widely supported in previous research: strong intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes can promote regular physical activity, but do not eliminate the impact of psychological, social, and environmental barriers (Buchan et al, 2012). The findings highlight the importance of supportive environments, realistic goal-setting, and social reinforcement in sustaining exercise behaviour, particularly within student populations.

Relating the findings to relevant motivation theory

The participant's exercise behaviour can be effectively understood through key motivation theories, particularly Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Bosnjak, 2020), both of which provide insight into why individuals initiate and maintain physical activity.

According to SDT, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), motivation exists along a continuum from extrinsic to intrinsic, with long-term adherence most strongly associated with intrinsic motivation. The participant demonstrates a clear intrinsic orientation, as their primary reason for exercising is to improve mental wellbeing, mood, and concentration rather than external rewards such as appearance or social recognition. This form of motivation is considered highly self-determined and is linked to greater persistence, which is reflected in their consistent engagement in swimming and daily walking.

SDT (Deci and Ryan, 2000) also proposes that motivation is strengthened when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this case, autonomy is evident in the participant's ability to independently choose activities they enjoy, such as swimming, rather than feeling pressured into specific forms of exercise. Competence is reflected in their use of small, achievable goals and their confidence in starting new activities, although this is somewhat challenged in situations where exercise classes feel too advanced (Martín-Rodríguez et al, 2024). This

supports the idea that perceived ability plays a crucial role in sustaining motivation; when competence is undermined, engagement may decrease. Relatedness is also a key factor, as the participant reports increased confidence when exercising with others and highlights family support as a strong influence (Li et al, 2024). This aligns with SDT's assertion that social connection enhances motivation and reinforces behaviour.

The participant's experience of fluctuating motivation, described as occasional feelings of laziness, can also be interpreted through SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000). While intrinsic motivation is present, it is not constant, and therefore requires support from self-regulation strategies such as discipline and routine. This reflects the transition from motivated behaviour to habitual behaviour, which is often necessary for long-term adherence (Michaelsen and Esch, 2023). In addition, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Bosnjak, 2020) provides further explanation of the participant's exercise patterns. TPB suggests that behaviour is predicted by three key factors: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. The participant demonstrates a highly positive attitude towards exercise, particularly in relation to its mental health benefits, which strengthens their intention to engage in physical activity. Subjective norms are also supportive, as family members regularly exercise, creating a social environment where physical activity is normalised and encouraged. This reinforces the participant's behaviour and increases the likelihood of continued participation. Perceived behavioural control is another important component, referring to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a behaviour. The participant generally reports high levels of control, as they have access to facilities, feel safe in their exercise environment, and are confident in initiating new activities (Martinez and Lewis, 2016). However, this is somewhat reduced in specific contexts, such as crowded or male-dominated environments and overly advanced group classes. These situations may lower perceived control and, in turn, reduce motivation to participate.

Overall, both SDT and TPB help to explain the participant's exercise behaviour as a balance between strong intrinsic motivation and situational barriers. While their psychological needs are largely met, supporting regular engagement, moments where these needs are challenged such as reduced competence or discomfort in the environment which highlight why motivation can fluctuate. These theories demonstrate that sustaining physical activity is not solely about having motivation, but about maintaining the conditions that support it over time.

How my participant will maintain exercise behaviour in the future.

To maintain and further develop the participant's exercise behaviour, strategies should focus on strengthening existing habits while addressing minor motivational and environmental barriers. A key approach is to build consistency around their current routine of swimming and daily walking, as these activities are already associated with enjoyment and positive mental wellbeing. According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), maintaining activities that are intrinsically rewarding

supports long-term adherence. Therefore, rather than introducing entirely new forms of exercise, behaviour change should centre on progression within these preferred activities, such as increasing the duration of swimming sessions while keeping frequency consistent at twice per week.

To support this progression, the participant should continue using an incremental goal-setting approach. Setting small, realistic targets such as extending each swim by 5–10 minutes, this can enhance feelings of competence and provide a clear sense of achievement. This is particularly important given that overly challenging environments, such as advanced group classes, have previously reduced confidence. By ensuring goals remain achievable, the participant is more likely to sustain motivation and avoid discouragement. Tracking progress, either mentally or through a simple log, may further reinforce commitment and highlight improvements over time. Another effective strategy is the introduction of a workout partner to increase motivation and accountability. Exercising with others can enhance enjoyment and consistency, particularly during periods of low motivation. This aligns with the concept of relatedness within Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), which emphasises the importance of social connection in sustaining behaviour. A partner may also help the participant feel more confident in potentially intimidating environments, such as busy or male-dominated spaces, thereby reducing a key psychological barrier to participation.

In addition, establishing a structured but flexible routine can help address occasional lapses in motivation. Planning specific days and times for swimming sessions (e.g. twice weekly at consistent times) can reduce reliance on momentary motivation and instead promote habit formation. This reflects principles within the Theory of Planned Behavior (Bosnjak, 2020), particularly by strengthening behavioural intention and perceived control. Choosing familiar and comfortable environments, such as the university pool, will further support adherence by minimising feelings of discomfort or intimidation.

Overall, by continuing enjoyable activities, gradually increasing exercise duration, incorporating social support, and maintaining realistic goal setting, the participant is likely to sustain and enhance their exercise behaviour. These strategies build directly on existing strengths while addressing minor barriers, making long-term adherence both practical and achievable.

Ideas for future research

Future research should explore how intrinsic motivation, particularly mental health-related drivers, influences long-term exercise adherence in student populations. While theories such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) highlight the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, further investigation is needed into how these needs fluctuate over time and across different environments. Additionally, more research could examine the impact of gendered or intimidating exercise spaces on participation, as well as the effectiveness of peer-based interventions, such as workout partners, in improving consistency.

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