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Objectification and Self-Determination in Fitness: A Qualitative Investigation of Women's Motivations for Physical Exercise

Cara Deininger [1], Akorede A. Teriba [2,*] and Megan Foley-Nicpon [3]

[1] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 1 Veterans Drive, Minneapolis, MN 55417, USA
[2] College of Education and Human Development, University of North Dakota, 231 Centennial Drive, Grand Forks, ND 58202, USA
[3] College of Education, University of Iowa, 600 Blank Honors Center, Iowa City, IA 52242, USA; megan-foley-nicpon@uiowa.edu
* Correspondence: akorede.teriba@und.edu

Abstract

This qualitative study explored physically fit women's physical, psychological, and societal reasons for engaging in exercise through the lenses of objectification theory and self-determination theory. A phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth examination of the complexity of women's experiences, including the challenges and successes associated with physical exercise. The participants' narratives ranged from accounts of perseverance in exercising, despite societal expectations and gendered stereotypes, to expressions of a desire to live long, happy, and healthy lives. Eight key themes were identified: initial motivators for physical exercise, benefits of physical exercise, perseverance, definition of a successful workout, gendered barriers to physical fitness, physical fitness identity, cost of physical fitness pursuit, and appearance motives. The findings highlight how physical exercise fosters empowerment and psychological well-being, with benefits such as self-assurance and self-love supporting sustained motivation over time. This study deepens understanding of how women navigate fitness within a broader sociocultural context and illustrates how external motivators can evolve into intrinsic motivation centered on autonomy, competence, and personal well-being.

Keywords: physical exercise; motivation; objectification theory; self-determination theory; psychological health

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1. Introduction

Engagement in physical exercise is associated with numerous physical health benefits, including decreased risk of cardiovascular and chronic diseases, bone and muscle strengthening, and increased longevity (Bonekamp et al. 2023). Physical exercise is also associated with psychological health benefits, such as enhanced positive mood and reduced depression, anxiety, and stress (Yew et al. 2022; Yoon et al. 2023). Despite the positive benefits of engaging in exercise, some women report experiencing poor body image and self-esteem as a result, which can lead to low engagement in exercise (Serier et al. 2018; Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2015). Women report lower rates of engagement in physical activity and higher rates of dropout from physical activity programs compared to men (Enoksen 2011). Increased investigations of women's experience in and adherence to physical exercise seek to understand what factors contribute to women's health habits and overall well-being (e.g., Roberts et al. 2018).

To understand psychological outcomes for women who engage in exercise, researchers have focused on women's motivations and their gender socialization (e.g., Clark 2019; Vartanian et al. 2012; Watt and Konnert 2020). Women's motivations for exercise have been investigated through the lens of self-objectification, which refers to the internalization of society's sexual objectification of women's bodies (Hewitt and Murray 2024). Studies (e.g., Jankauskiene and Baceviciene 2022; Tiggemann and Slater 2015) have found women with low scores of self-objectification are less likely to experience negative psychological consequences, such as body dissatisfaction and disordered eating symptoms, and more likely to exercise for health-based reasons. Others (e.g., da Silva et al. 2020) have found women who are motivated to exercise as a means of improving their appearance, as opposed to improving their health, tend to have higher body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem. Exercising for health-related reasons has been associated with positive psychological consequences, such as increased body satisfaction, enjoyment of exercise, and self-esteem (O'Hara et al. 2014; Walters et al. 2023).

The current study qualitatively investigated the experiences and motivators of women who have maintained an exercise regimen. To understand exercise research more deeply, it is important to clarify the definitions of physical exercise and physical fitness. Physical exercise is defined as planned, structured, and repetitive physical activity that is intended to improve or maintain physical fitness levels (Pinheiro et al. 2024), whereas physical fitness relates to the ability to perform physical activities (Leso et al. 2024). This qualitative investigation not only helps us understand factors associated with successful adherence to exercise, but also allows for a deeper understanding of women's experiences with exercise and the means by which exercise has a meaningful role in their lives. To build on prior research, motivation (e.g., self-determination theory [SDT]; Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Deci 2022) and sociocultural experiences (e.g., objectification theory; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Hurst et al. 2024) serve as frameworks for conceptualizing women's motivations for exercise.

Objectification Theory

Western culture can complicate women's motivation for exercise, as societal norms suggest the ideal woman is slender and toned, and the culture promotes physical exercise to women as a way of losing weight and increasing muscle tone (Daniels et al. 2020; Huellemann et al. 2021). The impact of society on women's desire to be physically fit has been explained through objectification theory (Frederick et al. 2022; Roberts et al. 2018). This theory employs a feminist sociocultural model to describe how the sexualization of women in society and their exposure to it affects their sense of self by leading them to habitually view themselves as objects from a third-person perspective (Skowronski et al. 2021). Westernized culture pressures women to have thin bodies as a means to be attractive, and body evaluation norms stem from these societal expectations of thinness (Clark 2019). Self-objectification then occurs when women internalize society's standards that their bodies are sexual objects and, in turn, treat their body as an object to be scrutinized and evaluated (Choi and DeLong 2019; Prichard and Tiggemann 2008). As a result, women tend to have lower self-esteem and higher body dissatisfaction and eating concerns (Prichard and Tiggemann 2012; Terán et al. 2020), which further increase their appearance-based motivations to engage in physical exercise.

2. Self-Determination Theory

SDT (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Deci 2022) has been applied to physical exercise, and researchers have utilized the SDT framework to help explain women's motives for physical exercise (Salvador et al. 2023). SDT describes the continuum of motivation that ex-

plains why people participate in activities, with an individual's sense of self-determination ranging from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation to amotivation. The degree to which behavior is considered self-determined involves the autonomous nature of the behavior, with intrinsic motivation being the most self-determined. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in a behavior because the activity itself is enjoyable and provides inherent satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation reflects a range of autonomy from low (e.g., receiving external rewards/punishments) to high (e.g., behavior is congruent with values and needs). Amotivation refers to a lack of motivation to participate at all (Rodrigues et al. 2019).

One of the premises of SDT is humans possess psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness. These needs then facilitate which behaviors and activities one engages in to achieve psychological well-being (Deci and Ryan 2013; Vasconcellos et al. 2020). SDT suggests that when people meet these three psychological needs, self-determined (e.g., intrinsic) behaviors are more likely to occur. Researchers have found persistent physical exercise participation to be significantly more associated with intrinsic than extrinsic motivation (Geller et al. 2018; Schneider and Kwan 2013). Furthermore, researchers have identified health-related motives for physical exercise to be intrinsic and physical appearance motives to be extrinsic (e.g., Nam et al. 2023). According to SDT, women are more likely to have persistent and meaningful engagement in physical exercise when they feel autonomous, competent, and secure in their fitness activities.

Aligning SDT with objectification theory provides enhanced contextualization of women's experiences with physical exercise and body image (Cox et al. 2019; Paulisova and Orosova 2023). The extent to which women internalize the sociocultural expectations of femininity (e.g., dependence, sexualization) that objectify the body of a woman is indicative of the number of objectifying experiences women endure. However, one's positive sense of self and developed coping strategies may mitigate the impact of sociocultural expectations (Barbeau et al. 2022; Godoy-Izquierdo and Díaz 2021), such that women with high self-esteem and self-compassion have a decreased likelihood of engaging in body shaming and experiencing body dissatisfaction (Mosewich et al. 2011; Wollast et al. 2020). SDT describes how, if a woman's basic needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and social relatedness) are met, she may be less likely to internalize the observer perspective and more likely to engage in self-determined physical exercise (e.g., to "feel good") rather than be extrinsically motivated to engage in physical exercise (e.g., to "look good"). Researchers (e.g., Cox et al. 2019) have found women are less likely to internalize sociocultural pressures about body image when they are more self-determined.

The purpose of this study is to provide a qualitative understanding of how physically fit women experience their physical exercise engagement and their experiences of maintaining a healthy adherence to exercise. This study investigates the unique sociocultural experiences of women and how it effects exercise motivation. To deepen our understanding of women's experiences of exercise, this study examined the motivators of women who adhere to and have maintained an exercise regimen. This study furthers our understanding of women's motivations for physical fitness by utilizing objectification theory and SDT.

3. Materials and Methods

A phenomenological research design (Alhazmi and Kaufmann 2022; Creswell 2013; Sundler et al. 2019) was utilized to qualitatively investigate women's motivations for physical exercise. Phenomenological research seeks to understand complex phenomena through analysis of lived experiences (Creswell et al. 2007; Englander and Morley 2023). We implemented the transcendental, or psychological phenomenological approach, which seeks to increase the meaning derived from analysis by centering the description of participants' experiences (Yee 2019; Zahavi 2021).

We recruited participants through purposive, snowball sampling, which is a common strategy in phenomenological research (Chegini et al. 2021; Eklund et al. 2021). Purposive sampling aligns with the phenomenology analysis, as it sets specific, predefined criteria (i.e., phenomenon) to be met by participants (Padilla-Díaz 2015) and, therefore, helps to obtain information-rich cases. Snowball sampling is a type of purposive sampling in which the researcher first identifies cases of interest and expands the sample by asking initial participants to identify other participants with similar characteristics (Palinkas et al. 2015). This recruitment method was best suited for our study because we were able to capture the predefined phenomenon in our participants (i.e., engagement in exercise). Participants engaged in the study via telephone and/or email. All participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: adult women who had been regularly engaged in physical exercise for an extended period and did not consider themselves novices, and who currently engaged in physical exercise at least five days per week in a minimum of two domains (e.g., running and weightlifting).

Following IRB approval, the first author conducted 30–60-min interviews with the 11 participants. This sample size is justified by previous recommendations for phenomenological research (Bartholomew et al. 2021). The interview process consisted of an informed consent procedure, a demographic questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview was purposefully open-ended to allow participants to express their experiences. The semi-structured interview comprised the following topics: the role of physical exercise in life, definition of physical fitness and a successful workout, previous and current motivators for physical exercise, constraints/barriers for women to be physically fit, and the relationship between mental and physical health. The interview items were developed using SDT and objectification theory, as the questions were intended to ascertain participants' overall values, experiences with, and motivators for exercise. The items were also based on previous qualitative research investigating physically fit women (Clark 2019; Rupprecht and Matkin 2012). Two members of the research team transcribed each audio-recorded interview consecutively.

The data was analyzed using phenomenological qualitative research procedures (Englander and Morley 2023; O'Neill 2019). The research team consisted of a White American woman who is a licensed psychologist, a Black American man who is an assistant professor of counseling psychology, and a White American woman who is a licensed psychologist and professor of counseling psychology. The two women actively engage in physical exercise, and the man is a casual participant in physical exercise. The research team members discussed their experiences, biases, and assumptions related to the possible findings of the study and women's engagement in physical exercise. This process of epoché or bracketing is an important component of phenomenological research, as it increases awareness of research team members' theoretical presuppositions to help prevent these expectations from affecting the analysis (Dörfler and Stierand 2021).

After transcribing each interview, two research team members read the transcripts line by line and set apart significant statements from each of the participants' interviews. These statements were then used to summarize the content into meaningful units/themes (Creswell 2013). This is referred to as horizontalization, which is the textual analysis of phenomenological inquiry (e.g., what are the participants saying). The team members independently labeled the meaningful units by creating an initial theme, referred to as structural analysis (e.g., what the participant means). Researchers revisited the transcripts, meaningful units, and themes throughout data analysis to ensure and enhance familiarity with the data. We developed 68 initial themes, which were collapsed into a final set of eight through discussion and agreement among team members. Team members then identified representative quotes for each theme.

We attempted to attain methodological rigor through triangulation, credibility, and dependability. Triangulation occurred through analyst triangulation, which is utilizing team members' varying perspectives towards the phenomenon, and theory triangulation, which is using multiple theories or perspectives to interpret the data (Durrant and Gillum 2021; Kawar et al. 2024). To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, we invited all participants to complete a member check (Vella 2024). We asked participants to review and validate that their transcription accurately depicted their experiences. Of the 11 participants, 5 responded and reviewed their transcript. Four were satisfied, and one participant provided a brief comment to clarify her experience. To enhance dependability (Cypress 2017), one author served as an external auditor and analyzed the data by reviewing the analysis process and results, including summaries of texts, themes and subthemes, theme definitions, and corresponding quotes. Two team members discussed the auditor's suggested edits and changes were made.

4. Results

The final sample included 11 participants ranging in age from 21 to 55 years (M = 37.1, SD = 13.74). The majority of participants engaged in physical exercise an average of 5 days a week (63.6%) for 60–90 min (81.2%), and four participants exercised more than 5 days a week (See Table 1 for more details). The study obtained a sample of women of varying ages, number of children, and employment status.

Table 1. Summary of Participants' Demographics.

Name [a]	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Relationship Status	Children	Physical Fitness Activities
Mary	50	White	Married	5	Running, walking, weight training
Patricia	34	White	Married	2	Running, walking, strength training
Linda	25	White	Single	0	HIIT, boxing, barre/yoga, weight training
Jessica	21	Asian/Pacific Islander	Committed relationship	0	Running, HIIT, boxing, weight training
Elizabeth	21	White	Committed relationship	0	Running, HIIT, boxing, weight training
Sarah	23	Hispanic	Committed relationship	0	HIIT, boxing, barre/Yoga, weight training
Maria	50	White	Married	2	Running, barre/yoga, walking, racquetball, strength training
Sharon	55	White	Married	2	Running, walking, weight training, crossfit, swimming, biking, hiking
Karen	48	White	Married	2	Running, HIIT, walking, weight training, crossfit
Dorothy	51	White	Single	3	Running, HIIT, walking, weight training
Lisa	30	White	Married	0	Running, HIIT, barre/yoga, walking, weight training, crossfit

Note. [a] Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants.

Through our analysis of the interview data, eight themes were developed with accompanying subthemes to describe physically fit women's motivation and values towards

physical exercise. The themes include initial motivators for physical exercise, benefits of physical exercise, perseverance, the definition of a successful workout, gendered barriers to physical fitness, physical fitness identity, cost of physical fitness pursuit, and appearance motives. We define and describe each theme and subtheme below and include verbatim quotes to provide further contextualization of the participants' views and experiences.

4.1. Initial Motivators for Physical Exercise

The basis for participants' involvement in exercise appeared to evolve across their fitness journey. That is, participants' initial motivators for exercise continued to be important but were no longer their primary motivators for maintaining physical exercise. The initial motivators theme refers to events and values that led to participants' current physical exercise engagement. Three subthemes emerged in participants' initial motivators: experiencing a traumatic event, fear of weight gain, and aging.

4.1.1. Fear of Weight Gain

Participants talked about the difficulty of accepting their bodies after transitioning out of their adolescent active lifestyle and the fear they experienced about gaining weight as a reason for engaging in exercise. For example, Jessica stated, "I played volleyball in high school and then I went to college and I didn't work out for like a year. I definitely gained like the freshman 15. I like hated how I looked, so then I got into power lifting my sophomore year of college."

Lisa stated:

> I played sports in high school, and then I played my first two years of college, and then after that I kind of took a little bit of a break. I put on some weight in college, graduated from college, and then got a job. And then really decided I wanted to take control of my journey as far as my weight and my health.

Patricia explained:

> I had a pretty terrible eating disorder when I was in high school. So, I had an obsession with being thin. And working through that, I think the obsession with being thin became a more healthy relationship with food, with physical fitness, and just with mental well-being. So, I went from wanting to be thin to just healthy—physically and mentally.

Elisabeth described:

> When I started working out, it was mostly because I didn't want to gain weight . . . So, freshman year I was very concerned with how I looked, that's why I worked out, because I didn't want to gain the freshman-15 that everyone talks about, and I was like, I am not going to be that person . . . And then I realized that I kind of felt more negative about myself, felt more tired, not as happy as often, found it harder to focus and be productive throughout the day.

4.1.2. Traumatic Event

The experience of a scary or life-altering event emerged as an initial motivator for women to engage in physical exercise. For instance, Linda was informed she had connective tissue disorder, and she explained, "I literally had to learn how to walk again . . . Not anything I ever want to go through again, but it had me respect my body." Mary shared that her husband had passed away and explained how it affected her life moving forward:

> Tragedy in my life just made me focus more on fitness and taking care of myself. So, at that point, I increased the importance of fitness and actually started to

take up running. I was a runner, but I wasn't a distance runner. And I started to compete. So, it's kind of like how I took care of myself and challenged myself.

4.1.3. Aging

Women also described an increase or change in their physical exercise regimen due to growing older. For instance, Karen started lifting more weights as she has aged and stated, "I used to be all cardio when I was younger [but] the older you get, you start losing muscle tone." Maria similarly stated, "I started losing my muscle mass, and so then I decided because I was getting older I needed to strengthen my muscles." Sharon shared that when she turned 40 years old, she thought, "You lose muscle with age, and it was important to me to maintain some muscle mass as I age. So it wasn't about being big and bulky, it was just maintaining strength to be healthy as I continue to age."

4.2. Benefits of Physical Exercise

Participants described how their knowledge and experience of the benefits of exercise was motivational. This theme reflects the perceived benefits that help participants sustain their engagement in physical exercise. Six subthemes emerged among these benefits: mental health, companionships, empowerment, happiness, quality of life, and autonomy.

4.2.1. Mental Health

Women spoke to the sense of clarity, calmness, and passion among the range of psychologically positive benefits they receive from physical exercise. Exercise was described as a way to "clear your mind and help you get rid of stress, and better focus" (Elizabeth) and to "feel much better . . . take on so much more . . . a crisis or an issue at home, [because] they're not so daunting when you've exercised" (Mary). In identifying exercise as a form of mental health treatment, Patricia described, "I can kind of get lost in my thoughts and I think that's my own therapy session." Sarah was previously diagnosed with depression, and with the combination of nutrition and fitness, she shared she is no longer depressed and explained, "I found something that I love, and it inspires me every day."

4.2.2. Companionship

Physical exercise helped participants enhance social connections with friends and family due to a shared value of physical fitness and an increased ability to be physically active with others. For example, on family vacations, Maria described herself as "one of the parents that are actively engaged in whatever [the] kids are doing, whether it's skiing, whether it's boating and waterskiing . . . I'm able to keep up with the kids and do what they like doing." Patricia reported she enjoys making exercise a part of her family's life in that they are often "out riding bikes or walking or running." Dorothy stated her daughter and her daughter's friends often work out with her, and she reflected, "I am so blessed, all these girls want to work out with me. Are you kidding me? How lucky am I? So, I feel like it's really benefited me because it makes me bond with a lot of people."

4.2.3. Empowerment

An increased sense of confidence, power, and becoming physically and mentally stronger were means of achieving empowerment due to participants' acquired fitness being applicable across life domains. Mary described, "it's amazing what you can do when you're out by yourself [running]. You can solve the world." Lisa finds there is a "confidence and self-esteem piece of it" and she explained, "I think, just when overall you can do anything to build it [physical fitness], it kind of bleeds into every aspect of your life." Sharon shared she climbed her first "fourteener" (a mountain over 14,000 feet) and stated, "I zipped right up there like nothing, and it wasn't as much about, 'Wow look at me, I did this,' it was this

really awesome feeling like I can do anything physically." She went on to explain, "There are days when you have this awesome run or go out and have a great [bike] ride, you're on top of the world and that is the ultimate feeling."

Linda explained:

> You realize what your body is capable of, or you go from not being able to do a pushup to doing five [and] you're like, 'I can do something!' There's always a tangible accomplishment . . . You become more confident in your abilities and what your body is capable of. It allows me to do anything and everything I want to.

4.2.4. Happiness

Participants denoted happiness in multiple domains of life because of engagement in physical exercise, and related their happiness to increased self-compassion and self-love. The women noted a change in their views towards physical exercise. For instance, Elizabeth stated, "Now I've realized it's not something that has to be done. It just is something that is enjoyable. It's a supplement to everything else going on in my life . . . [I] feel like I found my best self." Moreover, Patricia described exercise has helped her "love my own body and be comfortable in my own skin." Linda shared what self-love means to her, "It's not necessarily like, 'Oh I love myself.' . . . But it helps you get there. Because you're like, 'I love that I'm capable of doing this.'"

4.2.5. Quality of Life

Regardless of the age, participants saw value in maintaining a healthy lifestyle with hopes of preventing illnesses and physical impairments. Participants sought to increase their lifespan and sense of fulfillment through physical fitness. Women reported that engaging in physical exercise provided more control over their health, as Sharon stated:

> I think I fear cancer or getting sick, and this is one way I can control it, or I believe I can control it, and I will do what I can to live a longer and healthy lifestyle . . . I think even if I were worse at some point . . . part of me just thinks for every day I exercise I'm adding time.

Further, Patricia described, "If you make physical fitness a part of your everyday life, I feel like some of those illnesses or sicknesses you keep them at bay." Mary shared, "As I age, I want to continue to enjoy life. That's why I think fitness is so important." Similarly, Maria stated, "I want to be active. I have a lot of things I still want to do!"

4.2.6. Autonomy

Engaging in physical exercise serves as an outlet for the women to act on self-motives, to pause from social responsibilities, and find ways to meet their needs. Patricial described exercise as a way to create a break in life, such that, "You have kids, I work around the public, I have a husband . . . life just pulls you in a thousand different ways that it's the only time I'm just solitary and I really like it." Linda explained that engaging in physical exercise is "time that you give yourself, and how can that whole process not be better? Because you're allocating time to yourself."

Further, Sharon shared:

> Giving up so much of yourself for other people, and to find something that is important to you again, and that you can focus on your own goals and your own life . . . Exercise has been a huge part of kind of coming full circle at 55 and finding who I am again.

Dorothy identified the flexibility she achieves in finding time for herself, and described:

> It is very, very hard to carve out time for that [exercise] . . . That's why I started the morning thing. When I started having babies and started having a family, I'm like, 'There's no time, and I have no energy.' So, I started to get up at 5:30 in the morning because that was the only time I had to be me.

4.3. Perseverance

This theme encompasses responses related to the persistence of effort necessary in exercise to achieve fitness goals and the experience of completing challenging fitness goals that provides increased self-efficacy in one's physical fitness capacity and other life domains. Jessica explained:

> You have to be accountable to yourself, and you have to put in the work if you want to see changes. You're not just going to take a magic pill and become fit or skinny or whatever the social norm is. I think it's just hard work, and I think it's accountability and just showing up and relying on yourself.

Similarly, Karen shared, "I didn't get muscles overnight, it took many years . . . I think a lot of women have a goal in mind, 'Oh I need to lose 20 pounds.' They lose their 20 pounds and they kind of give up, they don't maintain." Sharon perceived it as mind over matter:

> Because it's so easy to stop doing something that's physically hard. But to finish, and then go back and do it again . . . There's something mental about going back when you've had one crappy run after the next . . . You just gotta get through the tough spots. It's always striving for that euphoria, it's worth it to keep going.

Lisa described how her commitment to exercise translates into her work life:

> Sometimes when it comes to weightlifting, I feel like you don't get the results you want right away. But if you stick with it, you'll get there eventually. So, I feel like it's that grinding through things, and that's helped me attribute that to work. If something's not working, then 'Okay, let's go back to the drawing board and figure out why and try to just dissect it.'"

4.4. Definition of a Successful Workout

Participants acknowledged the various degrees of performance and physical fitness among those who engage in exercise. Regardless of the type of preferred exercise, women noted they want to sweat and increase their heart rate to feel they have had a successful workout. Dorothy described a successful workout as, "I'm probably swearing under my breath, my face is beat red, and my clothes are drenched and I'm almost crying [laughing]." Other participants described it as, "I feel like my heart has to be racing and pumping and I feel muscles have to be engaged" (Patricia); being able to "accomplish what you said you were going to do" (Jessica); "finishing a workout and not quitting . . . even if you have to take breaks, just getting a good sweat and knowing you've tried your best through the end" (Sarah).

Participants also discussed their experience of implementing strength training into their aerobic workouts. For example, Lisa explained:

> When I first started working out, I was just doing cardio . . . So, with that, I dropped a lot of weight . . . But when I really got into weightlifting, what I enjoy the most is that it's like taking your body composition and it's changed things . . . Before, I just wanted to lose the weight and that was it, that was my goal . . . Now I've shifted and it's always like I'm trying to beat what I am now, always making improvements.

4.5. Gendered Barriers to Physical Fitness

Experiences of sexism, judgement, and heterosexual norms emerged as prominent components of women's experiences in physical exercise. Participants described frustration with the expectations society places on how a women's body should look, including the acceptability of muscle on women, as well as frustration with expressions that women don't belong in exercise spaces. Linda described her self-consciousness when she first attended the university weight room:

> I was really embarrassed because I was already a bit unsure of what I was doing. So, for them [men] to all be looking at me, the typical downward spiral of, 'Why am I even here?' Like 'I don't know what I'm doing, this is clearly a guys' zone. Why should I be here? I should probably go upstairs, do something different.' So, it was just a lot [of] self-doubt about myself, about my abilities, about what type of workouts I should be doing.

Patricia reflected on the changes in her beliefs of physical fitness:

> I think sometimes people still think about it how I did—being fit is being skinny . . . I think there are constraints [on women], meaning like, it's really cool to be strong now and I think that's a really awesome thing, [but] obviously, that's not the norm. So, I think until it kind of becomes the norm, it's going to be hard.

Maria shared the impact of gendered expectations on women's ability to exercise:

> The demands for family in society where the women does everything, the cooking and all the cleaning . . . It seems like you have to fulfill those demands before you can take time for yourself. If you take time for yourself when you have those demands, people kind of look at it negatively, or like even spouses. Like, 'Why are you doing that when you're supposed to be doing laundry or doing something else.' I think that makes it more tough for women to be able to juggle the demands of their life and working out that often, that's where it gets shoved to the side.

4.6. Physical Fitness Identity

Participants embodied a physically fit lifestyle, characterized by a significant amount of time dedicated to maintaining their physical exercise regimen. The effort to maintain their exercise regimen resulted in exercise becoming an important part of their life. The women explained, "To me, it's not just I have to work out, it's I want to work out to continue with the rest of my day" (Patricia) and "To me, I don't even think about it, I don't have to think about 'Oh if I want to exercise today.' It's just, 'I'm exercising today. I'm doing something'" (Karen). Dorothy added, "I think it [physical exercise] leads me actually, it's big, it's like a part of me." Mary shared:

> Physical fitness is pretty much on my schedule. I'm always looking ahead to when I am going to get my run in or my weights in. If there is a day I know I'm not going to be able to exercise, then I will plan to do it before or after work . . . It's ingrained in me to 6 days a week. I'm going to make sure I'm gonna get a workout in."

Linda discussed her physical exercise journey from casual engagement to becoming a trainer:

> Getting the confidence to switch over to an instructor I think just kind of helped solidify that—yes, it's [physical fitness] always been important to me. But like that was a big step in saying like, this is incredibly important to me and just further solidifying that this is a key and vital part of my life.

4.7. Cost of Physical Fitness Pursuit

Although women reported obtaining many benefits from physical exercise and fitness, their continuous engagement at times led to increased stress and dietary restrictions when they were unsuccessful in achieving their exercise goals. Jessica described, "I'm so cranky, and I'll feel like kind of depressed. I'm just like, 'I feel fat, I feel'—you feel bloated, and you just don't feel like yourself. You don't feel like doing anything." Lisa explained, "I get more tired throughout the afternoon, I feel like I'm more stressed out, I put more stress on myself . . . I'm disappointed in myself because I didn't make it there."

When she misses a scheduled workout, Patricia described feeling, "anxious, almost like it looms over my head, like, I didn't do it. I'm disappointed in myself. It's like brushing your teeth." Elizabeth described the difficulty in pursuing achievement goals and her struggle with identifying healthy motivators:

> It's hard, I think there's times where I know that I work out because I want to be healthy but then other times it's hard because I need to work out so that I look good. Like, if I eat pizza, I think, 'Ugh I need to work out otherwise I didn't deserve it.' Or I'm like, 'Ugh I need to skip my next meal.' So, trying to fight those thoughts is really difficult. And then when I can't, it leads to a snowball effect of being down about myself in other aspects. So, then I'll be like, 'Well you didn't work out blah blah blah and You're just wasting your time, you're not being productive in other ways to compensate for that.'"

4.8. Appearance Motives

Appearance-based exercise motives emerged, such that participants desired the positive effects of cardio and strength training on the visual appearance of their body. Participants spoke of how the differential effects of cardio and strength training on their appearance influenced their method of exercise. For instance, Patricia discussed her appearance-based rationale for maintaining engagement in both cardio and strength training. She explained, "I have a body type that puts on muscle easily, so I always try to be mindful that I don't get too bulky, only because I don't want to look a certain way." Sarah explained that one reason she enjoys physical exercise is "just to be able to be self-confident in any situation like with clothes and just like, having that good self-esteem and not being worried about any of that, like body image." Lisa explained her preference for weightlifting:

> What I enjoy the most about it [weightlifting] is that it's like taking your body composition and it's altering it. Whereas with just the cardio I lost weight. But when I started lifting weights, things started repositioning . . . When I was heavier, it [hips] curved out more. But once you start lifting weights, it's flatter. It was crazy, the body changes I saw from lifting weights . . . It takes things that maybe you're not excited or happy about with your body and you can kind of change them more or less than just losing weight.

5. Discussion

This qualitative investigation sought to understand the physical, psychological, and societal reasons for exercise engagement among physically fit women. This phenomenological inquiry allowed us to explore the complexity of women's experiences with physical exercise and revealed meaningful implications for psychological health. The participants' personal experiences suggest motivators (i.e., intrinsic, extrinsic) for exercise influence the effects of objectification on body image and self-esteem (LePage and Crowther 2010; Mulgrew et al. 2018), such that women's levels of self-determination mitigate the internalization of sociocultural pressures related to body image (Guertin et al. 2017; Winn and Cornelius 2020).

Initial motivators for engaging in physical exercise included fear of weight gain, traumatic experiences, and aging. Although these initial motivators varied, continued engagement resulted in similar self-determined motives. While extrinsic motivators may have prompted participants to begin exercising, intrinsic motivators ultimately sustained their engagement (Paulisova and Orosova 2023; Segar 2015). Intrinsic motivators are more sustainable and attainable, as the immediate feedback of reduced stress and improved mood foster a greater sense of well-being, whereas extrinsic motivators can lead to disappointment and poor adherence.

Current motivators that maintain exercise engagement include increasing quality of life, psychological health, and autonomy. The shift in motivation can be conceptualized through the intersection of feminism, mental health, and physical exercise. Initially, many women were driven by extrinsic factors, such as fear of weight gain, external appearance standards, or responses to traumatic events, reflecting societal pressures and objectifying norms that framed exercise as a means to meet external expectations. Over time, however, as women gained competence, autonomy, and social connectedness through their fitness journeys, these external motivators were internalized and transformed into intrinsic motivations centered on self-defined well-being, empowerment, and fulfillment. This evolution illustrates how meeting basic psychological needs described by self-determination theory, coupled with resisting objectifying cultural messages, fosters a transition from exercising to "look good" for others to exercising to "feel good" for oneself. Participants noted that physical exercise had therapeutic benefits and believed that working out relieved stress, provided personal time to process their thoughts, and improved their mood. Their perceived benefits of, and current motivators for, exercise (e.g., feelings of empowerment, autonomy, and happiness) appeared to enhance their mental health and contribute to their overall well-being.

Discussions of feminist values emerged throughout participants' narratives. Feminism is defined as "a philosophy and a practice that embodies equality, empowerment, and social change for women and men and that seeks to eliminate the invisibility of women" (Henderson 1991, p. 364). Participants disclosed that they continued to exercise despite encountering gendered stereotypes related to muscle mass, gym norms, and traditional familial and heteronormative roles. Researchers have found that overcoming gendered barriers to exercise often leads to increased self-efficacy, self-esteem, flexibility, and agency (Chrisler and Palatino 2016). The women in this study reported greater confidence not only in their physical fitness abilities but also in other domains, such as career success and family responsibilities, as a result of regular exercise.

Participants described a shift in their enjoyment and perceived benefits of exercise, particularly when they began supplementing their cardio routines with strength training. Researchers (e.g., Ginis et al. 2014; Seguin et al. 2013) have suggested that strength training can heighten women's awareness of their body's capabilities, often decreasing concerns about physical appearance. Strength training has also been shown to increase women's resilience to body image pressures and promote self-determined motives for exercise (Kelly et al. 2023). Effortful engagement in physical activity fosters both physical and psychological independence, which is particularly important for women navigating traditional gender roles and femininity-related expectations (Clark 2019; Walters and Hefferon 2020).

Appearance was a meaningful motivator for participants to engage in exercise, and improvements in appearance were related to feeling good about themselves. However, failure to adhere to strict exercise regimens aimed at appearance goals was linked to psychological difficulties. While appearance-focused motivation can lead to self-objectification, our findings indicate a distinction between avoidance-based appearance motives (e.g., fear of developing masculine features, fear of weight gain) and health-based appearance

motivates (e.g., striving for a healthy appearance). This supports prior research suggesting that appearance motives are not inherently rooted in self-objectification; women can pursue health-based appearance goals for their own well-being without being driven by avoidance, sexualization, or shame (Bailey et al. 2016; Greenleaf and Rodriguez 2021). Participants discussed consequences of not adhering to their exercise routines, such as negative self-talk, disappointment, and depressed mood. When women focus on external goals (e.g., societal acceptance) as the primary drivers of their exercise engagement, their motivation becomes less autonomous and self-determined, which can negatively affect mood. The persistence and impact of gender norms as motivators for exercise engagement highlight the pervasive influence of these expectations on women's experiences with physical activity.

Limitations

Although the study included women across the lifespan, a key limitation is the lack of diversity among participants, who were predominantly White, and the narrow scope of the sample, which consisted solely of women already highly engaged in physical exercise. As such, the findings may not be generalizable to all women, as motivational dynamics can differ significantly across racial/ethnic groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, age cohorts, and exercise modalities. The use of purposive sampling may have contributed to this limited diversity, and future research with a broader and more inclusive sampling would provide deeper insight into the psychological and physical health motives of women with varied identities and experiences. Additionally, because this was a cross-sectional study capturing participants' experiences at a single point in time, longitudinal research could offer a more nuanced understanding of how exercise motivations evolve and what factors sustain or hinder engagement over time. Finally, the requirement that participants engage in physical exercise at least five days per week means the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of highly active women. Expanding inclusion criteria to encompass women with different levels and patterns of exercise participation would enrich our understanding of the diverse ways women experience and sustain physical activity.

6. Conclusions

According to themes drawn from participants' narratives, empowerment emerged as a central outcome of physical exercise, with benefits such as self-assurance and self-love playing a meaningful role in sustaining motivation for continued engagement. Intrinsic motives enhanced enjoyment and supported long-term commitment, while immediate and delayed extrinsic motives often provided the initial drive to begin exercising. Participants also described navigating gendered expectations, suggesting that psychological traits like perseverance, along with physical strength, may help mitigate the internalization of sociocultural pressures and ideals (i.e., self-objectification). Their stories reflected a range of motivations from caring for their physical and mental well-being to the desire for a long, healthy life, all of which supported long-term commitment to physical activity.

Our findings underscore the empowering potential of fitness for women and highlight the deep connection between physical and psychological well-being. This study expands existing literature by offering a nuanced understanding of physically fit women's motivations, the psychological benefits of exercise, and the gender-based challenges they navigate. By integrating self-determination theory and objectification theory, the study provides a valuable framework for understanding how extrinsic motives rooted in sociocultural pressures can evolve into intrinsic motives aligned with autonomy, competence, and self-defined goals. Programs aiming to improve women's exercise adherence and overall health should acknowledge the psychological toll of cultural pressures (e.g., negative self-talk) and encourage women to pursue fitness based on personal needs and goals. Centering these

considerations may help prevent self-objectification and promote the positive psychological outcomes associated with physical activity.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SDT	Self-determination theory
HITT	High-intensity interval training

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