

## Motivations to be active in club-based sport compared to fitness centres

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Understanding motivations for participation in different types of physical activity and settings has important implications for growing, servicing and retaining participants. The aim of this study was to identify the motivations to engage in organised club-based sport and activity through fitness centres.

**Methodology:** Two surveys were conducted, of Australian adults, those playing sport or who were active through fitness centres.

**Findings:** 4,509 adult survey respondents reported their motivations for participating in sport clubs ( $n = 3824$ ) or fitness centres ( $n = 685$ ). There were many significant differences in the motivations between the two groups. Overall, sport club participants were significantly more likely to report fun and enjoyment, and social reasons for a motivation to play compared to fitness centre users ( $p < 0.001$ ). The fitness centre users were significantly more likely than the sport club participants to report physical health or fitness, to lose weight/keep weight off/tone and for psychological/mental health/therapy ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Practical implications:** These findings have implications for sport and fitness centre managers in terms of program design decisions. For example, motivations may inform the creation of options that lean more to social or health outcomes for new users.

**Research contribution:** This study uniquely investigates motivations for participation across organised sport clubs and fitness centres.

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## Introduction

The aim of this study was to identify the differences in general motivations to engage in two types of physical activity conducted in different settings: activities in organised club-based sport setting and in fitness centres.

Understanding how motivations influence user decisions to engage in sport or leisure activity has important implications for growing, servicing and retaining user bases. While there is a depth of research and behaviour-informed insights available to

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organisations about who participates and what the consumption patterns of users are, less research has considered the motivations for different types of physical activity/active recreation, and how motivations might inform user decisions.

Ecological approaches and models suggest behaviours are influenced at multiple levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Such models have provided a useful framework for understanding sport and leisure activity and constraints, with applications to skill development (Davids et al., 2021), physical activity (King & Gonzalez, 2018) community sport development (Rowe et al., 2013) and continuing participation in organised sports (Vella et al., 2014). Understanding motivations and how they differ for different activity markets and segments can allow deeper understanding of the factors that inform these models, including by not limited to intra- and inter-personal, organisational, community, physical environmental and policy factors.

More, nuanced understandings of the motivations of users and how they differ across services and settings also has important implications for managers, including how they position and promote their services. Aligned with the known outcomes of sport, a range of psychological, social and health-based motivations influence the reasons why people undertake physical activity (Box et al., 2019; Spiteri et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). These may differ across types of activity, as well as demographic factors (and wider psychological/personality factors). Further participation is also influenced by the provision of facilities, location of residence and socio-economic factors (Eime et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Turnock, 2021). Such differences are important for the marketing and positioning of services for managers. Whether in setting campaigns for attracting new participants or those returning to sport, an acute understanding of the motivations of participants to be active, can assist in the development of positioning and communications, as well as in

guiding whether generic or more segmented marketing activities are appropriate. Further, the design of products and services which serve current and potential participants can be informed by an understanding of motivations. For example, those seeking social motivations or health outcomes may find a modified sport or fitness activity more appropriate (e.g. where a sport creates a more social, or cardio focused version within its club). The value of understanding motivations also extends to campaigns and the design of service experiences for users. Within both sport clubs and fitness centre settings, retaining users is a critical issue. Developing services that reinforce and communicate, for example, specific social, health or other related benefits to users may be effective as users calibrate their experiences with the benefits from the activities they undertake.

## Participation in sport and physical activity

There is an abundance of literature describing population participation rates in sport and physical activity (Eime et al., 2021; Eime et al., 2020; Hulteen et al., 2017; Shull et al., 2020). There is also an increasing body of research describing how participation in sport and physical activity changes throughout one's life (Eime et al., 2022; Eime & Harvey 2018; Jenkin et al., 2017; Kemp et al., 2018). For example, participation in sport is very popular among children and youth, however many drop-out and participation rates decline as people get older (Eime et al., 2021; Eime et al., 2022; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Whilst many dropout of competitive club-based sport, particularly during adolescence, many individuals still participate in physical activity in both organised activities and formal settings such as fitness centres and non-organised activities such as walking, cycling and swimming (Eime et al., 2020; Kemp et al., 2018; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Active adults are more likely to participate in activities such as walking, running, cycling,

yoga and swimming than competitive sport (Hulteen et al., 2017; Strain et al., 2016). However, in many countries including Australia many individuals are sedentary and do not meet the physical activity levels recommended for maintaining health (Allender et al., 2020).

The changes in active behaviour throughout one's life are impacted by a range of factors. These relate to individual, social, organisational, environmental and policy aspects (Biernat et al., 2020; Eime & Harvey 2018; Fowlie et al., 2021; Jenkin et al., 2017; Jenkin et al., 2021; Somerset & Hoare, 2018). In summary these include factors at the individual level, skill and competency level, time commitment and also the amount of fun and enjoyment derived. Various demographic factors also influence participation (Biernat et al., 2020; Eime & Harvey 2018; Fowlie et al., 2021; Somerset & Hoare, 2018). At the social level peers, parents, coaches as well as socio-economic factors play a major role in facilitating and supporting participation (Biernat et al., 2020; Somerset & Hoare, 2018). The organisational setting also influences to participation patterns through the type programs and competitions that are offered as well as provision of facilities (Biernat et al., 2020; Fowlie et al., 2021). The organisational environment such as club culture as well as aspects related to for example the climate can influence participation in sport and physical activity (Biernat et al., 2020). Lastly policies driving strategic direction and investments influence participation across the lifespan (Eime & Harvey 2018; Jenkin et al., 2021). Such studies have explored the range of determinants of leisure-time physical activity and sport, but there is limited research on the motivations to be active across different activity modes.

Such insights are particularly important for policy makers. Although organised sport has long been heralded as an important platform to achieve health and community connection objectives, the sector itself has been myopic in its approach to recruit and retain

participants. Many sport governing bodies (and their clubs) have knowledge about the number of participants/different consumer segments within their sports. However, there is a limited understanding why and how people are motivated across a range of sports or activities, let alone what motivates them outside the context of organised sport (or other physical activity forms, e.g. fitness centres). In order to not only better serve and retain those who are physically active now, but also to stimulate those who are not, sport administrators and policy makers need deeper insights into what motivates people, in general, to participate in physical activity, and in which context they prefer to do so. In this study, we therefore focus on the contexts of club-based organised sport, and fitness centre-based physical activities.

### **Motivations to be active**

Much of the literature on motivations of physical activity concerns psychological-based research and often discuss the differences between external versus internal motivations within the sporting context. There are in that regard, discussions that contemporary sport has become corrupted by an increasing emphasis on external goals, at the expense of its internal values (Dixon, 2018). Dixon analysed the concept of professional sport's internal values and the relationship with its external values (Dixon, 2018), and discusses the need to understand the role that motivations, like the pursuit of money, fame and entertainment, can play in sport without diminishing sport's internal values (Dixon, 2018). For youth and those playing community-level adult sport, participants are mostly intrinsically motivated, driven by internal goals. As they are not paid to play, they play for the sake of the game itself, for reasons that they find intrinsically rewarding (Dixon, 2018). This can be combined with other motivations such as enjoying playing with teammates (Dixon, 2018). Many

studies investigate motivations to be active in general but not specific to settings or modes of participation (Miller & Brown, 2017; Steltenpohl et al., 2019).

Related to intrinsic rewards is the concept of fun and enjoyment. When it comes to participation in sport or physical activity more broadly, it is important that people participate in an activity of their choice, as this is connected to enjoyment and fun (Collins & Barcelona, 2018; Eime et al., 2013a; Visek et al., 2015). Fun seems obvious, but it is a key component, and these studies talk about having positive experiences so that people keep playing. However, the studies do not delve into what drives fun and engagement. When people play a sport of their choice, fun and enjoyment is often enhanced because of the social context (Eime et al., 2013a; 2013b). If people enjoy being physically active no matter what the activity nor the context of participation, then they are more likely to remain active (Eime & Harvey 2018). The Fun Integration Theory posits a model of what makes playing sport fun for children (Visek et al., 2015). The model articulates that the fun determinants are grouped into four main categories: the contextual (practices and games), internal (learning and improving, trying hard, and mental bonuses), social (team friendships, team rituals and being a good sport) and external (positive coaching, game time and support) (Visek et al., 2015).

There is also literature on reasons why older adults play sport and this is often for health reasons, and being in a social, supportive environment or community and being part of a team (Stenner et al., 2020). Other reasons for participation included a sense of achievement, competition and a chance to travel (Stenner et al., 2020). Stenner et al. (2016) reported that older adults playing golf sought opportunities for social and community engagement, time for themselves and time spent with others, and also for physical, cognitive and mental health benefits (Stenner et al., 2016).

It seems in that regard that there will be differences in the motivations to be active across different settings or types of activity (Deelen et al., 2018). Whilst many of the motivations to play sport relate to enjoyment and social aspects, many adults who go to the gym are motivated for weight loss, followed by physical fitness and health (Sperandei et al., 2016). Deelen et al. (2018) investigated motivations across sport clubs, gyms and public spaces for Dutch adults and reported differences across settings (Deelen et al., 2018). They investigated motivations using the Behavioural Regulation in Exercise Questionnaire which distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. They reported that sport club participants were more motivated by extrinsic goals (social recognition and image) and intrinsic goals (skill development and social affiliation) compared to those engaging in non-sport physical activities (Deelen et al., 2018). A recent study of the motivations for adults to visit fitness studios found that people participated for health reasons, to increase fitness, to have a better appearance and to develop a more aesthetically pleasing body (Bartha & Bácsné Bába, 2021).

There has been limited research into the motivations to be active in different settings for sport and physical activity, such as fitness centres. The context of participation in club-based sport versus going to a fitness centre to participate in individual-based activities such as gym or swimming differs greatly, given that sports club participation is competitive whereas fitness centre participation is not (Deelen et al., 2018). What motivates people to choose one setting over the other may be different. This is also influenced by the conditions upon which participants have to sign up. For example, club-based sport requires an annual or seasonal membership expense and equipment and apparel expenses (Eime et al., 2009), whereas engaging through a fitness centre can be more flexible with pay-as-you-go options and without payment for

equipment or special clothing (Howat et al., 2012). However, many fitness centres have a subscription model which has implications for value perceptions of users and for renewal decisions. For example, they often have monthly subscriptions instead of users making decisions each season or year like in sport and this may be associated with different motivations for participation.

### **Context of participation in different physical activity settings**

Participation in sport and physical activity can be conducted through a range of different settings. Broadly these settings can include a sports club or association, gyms and fitness centres, community and recreation clubs, work and education, and non-organised settings such as a local walking track (Eime et al., 2020). For this study, we refer to participation in two distinct settings, sports clubs and fitness centres. Within the Australian context, participation in competitive sport is largely played through volunteer run local community sports clubs (Eime et al., 2020). Many Australians, particularly adults also participate in non-competitive individual activities, and this is often done through public fitness centres (Australian Sports Commission, 2023).

Club-based sport in Australia is predominantly driven by volunteers (Eime et al., 2021) compared to fitness centres which are professionally run and this could contribute to differences in the (perceived) quality of experiences and commitment of participants (Kumar et al., 2018). For example, club-based participants often have to take on volunteer responsibilities to help run the sport. Club-based sport can therefore also enhance social interactions and connectedness and provide a sense of belonging due to the social and structured nature (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b; Jenkin et al., 2018), whereas participation through fitness centres such as going to the gym or going for a swim are more individual

activities. There are also further commitments with club-based participation with structured competition and training days and times and travel for home-and-away competitions. Participation in fitness centre activities offers participation on any day and at any time that suits participants.

Club-based sport is often underpinned by masculine, competitive cultural environments that emphasise winning (English, 2017; Spaaij et al., 2015). In organised sport, there are sport-specific skills required, and many people do not have adequate physical literacy to play sport (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). With sport participation there are also many sport-specific rules to understand and adhere to, whereas many fitness centre activities are simple for people to participate in at their own leisure and without complex participation rules.

A major influencing factor on differences in motivations to participate in club-based sport compared to engaging through fitness centres is age. Sport is highly dominated by children and youth with half (49%) of all club-based community-level participants aged between 4–14 years of age (Eime, Harvey, Charity, Casey, et al., 2016). Participation through fitness centres is dominated by adults and gym-based activities are limited to those of a certain (adolescent and adult) age. Residential location also plays an important role in activity choices. For example, participation in sport is more popular in regional and rural areas than in metropolitan areas (Eime, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2016; Eime et al., 2009). This is related to population densities and also because there are fewer options for leisure activities in regional and rural areas compared to metropolitan cities within Australia (Eime et al., 2015). For example, in regional areas there are generally less indoor sports and recreational facilities such as aerobics, fitness, weight training and yoga (Eime et al., 2015).

In recent years there has been a transition from participation in organised club-based

sport to more individual and non-competitive forms of physical activity (Borgers et al., 2018; Eime et al., 2016). As the Physical Activity and Sport Participation framework proposes, sport and physical activity need to be considered in a holistic framework rather than as separate independent activities (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Motivations to be active are key to developing physical literacy, and one needs to understand different motivations to participation in a range of modes or settings, and across different demographics to assist with the development of key strategies to increase participation at a population level (Deelen et al., 2018; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Historically the motivations for participation in sport or fitness centres has been researched separately without comparative studies to aid our understanding of service positioning and marketing.

Beyond identifying the general motivations to engage in physical activity and sport, the aim of this study was to compare the motivations for participation in sport and physical activity (broken down by age, gender and region), between adults who play organised club-based sport and those who are active through engagement with fitness centres.

## Method

This study is based on data from two programs of research in Australia. The programs are focused on two different settings for sport and physical activity: community sport clubs and public aquatic and recreation centres, designated in this study as “sport clubs” and “fitness centres” respectively.

The first program involved the longitudinal measurement of sport and physical activity profiles and physical, mental and social health and wellbeing outcomes that are the result of this participation. The data used in the present study were collected in the first wave of data collection which included retrospective (baseline) data pertaining to pre-COVID-19 (2019) as well as during COVID-19 restrictions

(2020) when there were lockdowns in Australia and cancellation of participation in sport and closing of fitness centres. An online survey of sport club participants was conducted during May and June 2020 using the Qualtrics survey tool. Recruitment to the survey was primarily facilitated by national and state sporting organisations (NSOs and SSOs). The sample included adults aged 18 years or older who were registered in the 2019 and/or 2020 playing seasons to participate in one or more sports. The sport organisations that sent out the survey invitation to their registered participants represent major sports in Victoria and Australia (R. Eime et al., 2019; R. Eime et al., 2020). This research sample was used to understand the sport motivations of  $n = 3824$  sport club participants. The survey was approved by the Victoria University Ethics Committee for research involving human participants, ID: HRE20-049, and the UniSA Human Ethics Committee, ID 203095.

Sports club participants were defined as being a registered player who was a member of a sports club. The survey participants could indicate from a list of 14 popular sports which they played or identify a sport that was not listed. These included Australian football, basketball, football/soccer, golf, hockey, netball, rugby union, cricket, and bowls. The fitness centres generally offered lap swimming, gymnasium, personal training and fitness classes.

The second program of research includes data from a survey of adult users of 15 fitness centres conducted in February and March 2021. The survey was conducted using Qualtrics and distributed via email to members and users of 15 fitness centres. Respondents were asked a series of questions on their levels of wellbeing, social connection and community communication, as well as questions on the type of sport, physical activities, fitness centre activities and community activities that they undertook. Using this process, the research sample was used to understand the motivations of  $n = 685$  respondents who took part in fitness centre activities.

Common to the two research programs, respondents were asked identical questions about basic demographic characteristics – gender, age and residential postcode – as well as their motivations for participation in the activities undertaken.

Date of birth was used to determine age in years at the time the survey was completed. Age was then recoded into four adult age cohorts: young (18–29 years), family-raising (30–49 years) empty-nesters (50–64 years) and older adults (65 years and above). Residential postcode correspondence tables (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) were used to assign each postcode to one of two broad geographical zones or regions: Metropolitan, comprising the capital cities of the Australian states; and non-metropolitan, comprising regional cities, towns and rural areas.

Respondents to both surveys were also asked to indicate their motivations for the sport or fitness centre activity. For the sport club survey, motivations were separately recorded for each sport played, with respondents being asked to select whichever motivations applied to them for that particular sport. For the purpose of producing a broad overview of motivations for playing sport, for each respondent the motivations reported for each sport they participated in were coalesced into a single list of all motivations reported by the respondent. For each of the lists of motivations, an indicator variable was then derived, with each respondent assigned a value of 1 (motivation reported) or 0 (motivation not reported). Respondents to the fitness centre survey were presented with the same list of motivations and asked to select whichever motivations applied to them regarding their fitness centre activities.

For each setting (sport club, fitness centre) the number and percentage of respondents reporting each motivation were tabulated, and chi-square tests of proportions were used to compare the responses for the two settings. Similar analyses were conducted for groups

defined by demographic characteristics. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ . Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 24.

## Results

A total of 4509 adult survey respondents reported their motivations for participating in sport clubs ( $n = 3824$ ) or fitness centres ( $n = 685$ ).

The great majority of sport club survey respondents were from the state of Victoria; however, metropolitan and regional areas of all six Australian states and two federal territories were represented in the sample. Respondents were asked to select all sports in which they participated from a list of 16 sports, with the option to add up to three further sports. Respondents selected or nominated a total of 69 sports, of which nine sports (Australian football, basketball, bowls, cricket, football/soccer, golf, netball, swimming and tennis) represented more than 1% of all responses. The fitness centres sample was drawn from 15 centres across the metropolitan and regional areas of five of the six Australian states.

Table 1 shows profiles of gender, age group and region of residence, for the two survey samples and for the corresponding age cohort

**Table 1.** Demographic profiles of the survey samples, compared to the Australian population aged 18 years and above.

	Sports club sample %	Fitness centre sample %	Australian population <sup>1</sup> %
Gender			
Male	65.2	29.6	49.6
Female	34.8	70.4	50.4
Age (years)			
18–29	14.9	10.0	21.1
30–49	22.1	43.0	35.2
50–64	15.1	25.0	22.8
65 and above	47.9	22.0	20.9
Region			
Metropolitan	63.4	68.1	67.7
Non-metropolitan	36.6	31.9	32.3

<sup>1</sup>Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Regional population by age and sex, 2020*.

of the Australian population. Comparisons of the three profiles are complicated by the fact that there are two other hidden intermediate profiles – the populations of participants in club sport and participants in fitness centres – which do not have the same demographic profiles as the overall population, and so there are two levels of representativeness in play here. Further, the sport club survey covered a diverse range of activities, and recruitment was facilitated by a number of different organisations, whereas both the activities and the survey of fitness centres were more homogeneous in nature. The consequences of these differences are apparent in Table 1.

Men were over-represented and women under-represented in the sport club survey, which is consistent with the known higher rate of sports participation by men, and the fact that the distribution of survey invitations was facilitated predominantly by the organisations of male-dominated sports. Conversely, women were over-represented in the fitness centre survey which is consistent with latest Australian figures (Australian Sports Commission, 2023). The age profiles of the two samples were also very different. In the club sport sample, those aged 65 and above were over-represented, with the other three groups being under-represented by similar proportions. In the fitness centre sample, those aged 30–49 years were over-represented. The mechanisms are thought to be subtly different. In the case of the fitness centres, it is likely that the age profile of the sample reflects the age profile of the population of fitness centre participants. In the case of the sport club sample, it seems to be the case that the age profile of the sample is aligned with the age profile of a partial segment of the more heterogeneous sport club population, due to the peak organisations of sports more popular with older adults being more effective in recruiting survey participants. The two types of region were represented proportionately in the fitness centre survey sample, with

a slight over-representation of non-metropolitan areas in the sport club sample which may reflect the more central role of traditional forms of sport in these areas.

The responses from both surveys are summarised in Table 2. For each category of respondents, the table shows the number (frequency) and percentage of respondents to the survey in each setting who reported a particular motivation. Because each respondent could report multiple motivations, the percentages add up to more than 100%. The total of the percentages indicates the average number of responses per respondent. For example, the first section of the table (All respondents) shows that for sport club respondents the total response percentage is 578.3%, which indicates that on average respondents reported just under 6 types of motivation out of the 11 types of motivation listed (mean = 5.783).

Underpinning each row of Table 2 is a  $2 \times 2$  contingency table of motivation (yes/no) by setting. The tabulated counts and percentages correspond to the “yes” answers in this contingency table. The  $p$ -value is from a chi-square test of association, which tests for a difference between the percentages of “yes” responses in the two settings. Where differences between percentages are statistically significant, the higher percentage is shown in boldface.

There were many statistically significant differences in the motivations to be active through sport clubs compared to fitness centres. Overall, the sport club participants were significantly more likely to report fun and enjoyment as their main motivation to play (92%) compared to fitness centre users (71%) ( $p < 0.001$ ). Sport club participants were also significantly more likely than the fitness centre users to be motivated by social reasons (77% v 29%,  $p < 0.001$ ), performance or competition (75% v 9%  $p < 0.001$ ), to be with friends (65% v 23%,  $p < 0.001$ ), sense of achievement (56% v 31%,  $p < 0.001$ ), to be a good role model/to encourage others to participate and to learn a new skill (26% v 17%,  $p < 0.001$ ).



**Table 2.** Motivations: comparison between two activity settings, for all respondents and for each gender, age group and region.

Motivation	Activity setting				p-value <sup>4</sup>
	Sport clubs <sup>1</sup>		Fitness centres <sup>2</sup>		
	Count <sup>3,5</sup>	% <sup>3,4</sup>	Count <sup>3,5</sup>	% <sup>3,4</sup>	
<i>All respondents</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	3510	<b>91.8</b>	484	70.7	<0.001
Performance or competition	2920	<b>76.4</b>	62	9.1	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	2954	77.2	611	<b>89.2</b>	<0.001
Professional/part of my job	200	5.2	28	4.1	0.209
Psychological/mental health/therapy	1875	49.0	377	<b>55.0</b>	0.004
Sense of achievement	2122	<b>55.5</b>	215	31.4	<0.001
Social reasons	2940	<b>76.9</b>	201	29.3	<0.001
To be with friends	2489	<b>65.1</b>	155	22.6	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	995	<b>26.0</b>	117	17.1	<0.001
To learn a new skill	688	<b>18.0</b>	61	8.9	<0.001
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	1420	37.1	458	<b>66.9</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	3824	578.3	685	404.2	
<i>Women</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	1226	<b>92.6</b>	348	72.7	<0.001
Performance or competition	971	<b>73.3</b>	31	6.5	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	1098	82.9	430	<b>89.8</b>	<0.001
Professional/part of my job	56	4.2	16	3.3	0.394
Psychological/mental health/therapy	683	51.6	281	<b>58.7</b>	0.008
Sense of achievement	791	<b>59.7</b>	142	29.6	<0.001
Social reasons	1,016	<b>76.7</b>	139	29.0	<0.001
To be with friends	848	<b>64.0</b>	114	23.8	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	379	<b>28.6</b>	89	18.6	<0.001
To learn a new skill	336	<b>25.4</b>	44	9.2	<0.001
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	517	39.0	334	<b>69.7</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	1324	598.3	479	410.9	
<i>Men</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	2270	<b>91.4</b>	132	72.7	<0.001
Performance or competition	1938	<b>78.0</b>	31	15.4	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	1847	74.4	177	<b>88.1</b>	<0.001
Professional/part of my job	144	5.8	12	6.0	0.920
Psychological/mental health/therapy	1186	47.7	93	46.3	0.687
Sense of achievement	1326	<b>53.4</b>	71	35.3	<0.001
Social reasons	1914	<b>77.1</b>	59	29.4	<0.001
To be with friends	1634	<b>65.8</b>	39	19.4	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	613	<b>24.7</b>	26	12.9	<0.001
To learn a new skill	351	<b>14.1</b>	17	8.5	0.024
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	899	36.2	120	<b>59.7</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	2484	568.5	201	386.6	
<i>Aged 18–29 years</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	525	<b>92.3</b>	49	71.0	<0.001
Performance or competition	464	<b>81.5</b>	14	20.3	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	491	86.3	63	91.3	0.245
Professional/part of my job	69	12.1	4	5.8	0.119
Psychological/mental health/therapy	301	52.9	38	55.1	0.733
Sense of achievement	304	<b>53.4</b>	22	31.9	0.001
Social reasons	405	<b>71.2</b>	19	27.5	<0.001
To be with friends	313	<b>55.0</b>	17	24.6	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	162	<b>28.5</b>	10	14.5	0.013
To learn a new skill	128	22.5	12	17.4	0.333
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	248	43.6	43	<b>62.3</b>	0.003
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	569	599.3	69	421.7	
<i>Aged 30–49 years</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	773	<b>91.7</b>	217	73.8	<0.001
Performance or competition	609	<b>72.2</b>	26	8.8	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	639	75.8	262	<b>89.1</b>	<0.001
Professional/part of my job	67	7.9	16	5.4	0.155

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

Motivation	Activity setting				p-value <sup>4</sup>
	Sport clubs <sup>1</sup>		Fitness centres <sup>2</sup>		
	Count <sup>3,5</sup>	% <sup>3,4</sup>	Count <sup>3,5</sup>	% <sup>3,4</sup>	
Psychological/mental health/therapy	483	57.3	172	58.5	0.718
Sense of achievement	411	<b>48.8</b>	77	26.2	<0.001
Social reasons	636	<b>75.4</b>	73	24.8	<0.001
To be with friends	498	<b>59.1</b>	55	18.7	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	283	<b>33.6</b>	72	24.5	0.004
To learn a new skill	155	<b>18.4</b>	25	8.5	<0.001
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	368	43.7	207	<b>70.4</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	843	583.9	294	408.8	
<i>Aged 50–64 years</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	933	<b>92.9</b>	116	67.8	<0.001
Performance or competition	749	<b>74.6</b>	11	6.4	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	788	78.5	150	<b>87.7</b>	0.005
Professional/part of my job	44	4.4	6	3.5	0.601
Psychological/mental health/therapy	533	53.1	90	52.6	0.912
Sense of achievement	572	<b>57.0</b>	61	35.7	<0.001
Social reasons	797	<b>79.4</b>	49	28.7	<0.001
To be with friends	664	<b>66.1</b>	36	21.1	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	248	<b>24.7</b>	21	12.3	<0.001
To learn a new skill	173	<b>17.2</b>	15	8.8	0.005
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	399	39.7	123	<b>71.9</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	1004	587.6	171	396.5	
<i>Aged 65 years and above</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	1279	<b>90.8</b>	101	67.3	<0.001
Performance or competition	1098	<b>78.0</b>	11	7.3	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	1036	73.6	136	<b>90.7</b>	<0.001
Professional/part of my job	20	1.4	2	1.3	0.931
Psychological/mental health/therapy	558	39.6	77	<b>51.3</b>	0.006
Sense of achievement	835	<b>59.3</b>	55	36.7	<0.001
Social reasons	1102	<b>78.3</b>	60	40.0	<0.001
To be with friends	1014	<b>72.0</b>	47	31.3	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	302	<b>21.4</b>	14	9.3	<0.001
To learn a new skill	232	<b>16.5</b>	9	6.0	0.001
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	405	28.8	85	<b>56.7</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	1408	559.7	150	398.0	
<i>Metropolitan residents</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	2219	<b>91.8</b>	332	72.5	<0.001
Performance or competition	1868	<b>77.3</b>	41	9.0	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	1874	77.5	418	<b>91.3</b>	<0.001
Professional/part of my job	135	<b>5.6</b>	13	2.8	<0.001
Psychological/mental health/therapy	1182	48.9	262	<b>57.2</b>	<0.001
Sense of achievement	1313	<b>54.3</b>	155	33.8	<0.001
Social reasons	1842	<b>76.2</b>	141	30.8	<0.001
To be with friends	1554	<b>64.3</b>	113	24.7	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	591	<b>24.4</b>	84	18.3	<0.001
To learn a new skill	431	<b>17.8</b>	47	10.3	<0.001
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	871	36.0	300	<b>65.5</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	2418	574.0	458	416.2	
<i>Non-metropolitan residents</i>					
Fun/enjoyment	1282	<b>91.8</b>	147	67.7	<0.001
Performance or competition	1042	<b>74.6</b>	19	8.8	<0.001
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	1072	76.8	185	<b>85.3</b>	0.005
Professional/part of my job	65	4.7	14	6.5	0.254
Psychological/mental health/therapy	688	49.3	112	51.6	0.523
Sense of achievement	803	<b>57.5</b>	55	25.3	<0.001
Social reasons	1091	<b>78.2</b>	59	27.2	<0.001
To be with friends	925	<b>66.3</b>	40	18.4	<0.001
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	401	<b>28.7</b>	31	14.3	<0.001
To learn a new skill	254	<b>18.2</b>	12	5.5	<0.001

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

Motivation	Activity setting				<i>p</i> -value <sup>4</sup>
	Sport clubs <sup>1</sup>		Fitness centres <sup>2</sup>		
	Count <sup>3,5</sup>	% <sup>3,4</sup>	Count <sup>3,5</sup>	% <sup>3,4</sup>	
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	545	39.0	154	<b>71.0</b>	<0.001
Number of respondents/Total of percentages	1396	585.1	217	381.6	

<sup>1</sup>Data from adult respondents to a survey of sport club participants.

<sup>2</sup>Data from a survey of adult users of public aquatic and recreation centres.

<sup>3</sup>For each category of respondents, the table shows the number (frequency) and percentage of respondents to the survey in each setting who reported the particular motivation. Because each respondent could report multiple motivations, the percentages add up to more than 100%. The total of the percentages indicates the average number of responses per respondent. For example, the first section of the table (All respondents) shows that for sport club respondents the total of the response percentages is 578.3%, which indicates that on average respondents reported just under 6 types of motivation out of the 11 types of motivation listed (mean = 5.783).

<sup>4</sup>Underpinning each row of the table is a 2 × 2 contingency table of motivation (yes/no) by setting. The tabulated counts and percentages correspond to the “yes” answers in this contingency table. The *p*-value is from a chi-square test of association, which tests for a difference between the percentages of “yes” responses in the two settings. Grey = not statistically significant (*p* > .05). Where differences between percentages are statistically significant, the higher percentage is shown in boldface.

<sup>5</sup>Small discrepancies between the total counts for demographic breakdowns and the “All respondents” count are due to missing data (age and region) or excluded categories (gender). Age groups were based on date of birth. Region was determined on the basis of residential postcode. The gender question had four responses: male, female, other, choose not to respond. Respondents in the 3rd and 4th categories were not included in the male/female breakdown.

The fitness centre users were significantly more likely than the sport club participants to report physical health or fitness (89% v 77%, *p* < 0.001), to lose weight/keep weight off/tone (67% v 37%, *p* < 0.001) and psychological/mental health/therapy (55% v 49%, *p* < 0.001) as motives to be active.

These trends were similar across genders, except for the psychological motivations. Female fitness centre users were significantly more likely than female sport club participants to be motivated for psychological/mental health/therapy (59% v 52%, *p* = 0.008), however there was no significant difference amongst the men between the two activity groups and was lower than for the females (46%–48%).

The motivations for both groups were also quite similar across the different age cohorts. Consistent across the adult lifespan the sport club group were significantly more likely than the fitness centre users to be motivated for fun and enjoyment, performance and competition, sense of achievement, social reasons, to be with friends and to be a good role model. Conversely, overall, the fitness centre users were consistently more motivated than the

sport club participants by psychological/mental health/therapy and to lose weight/keep weight off/tone. The main motivations to play sport were consistent across the lifespan however, all those except the younger cohort (18–29 years) who play club-based sport were significantly more likely than the fitness centre users to be motivated to play to learn a new skill. Further, the fitness centre users in all except the youngest group were significantly more motivated for physical health or fitness reasons.

There were also similar motivations for both groups across regions, with two exceptions. In the metropolitan region, sport club participants were more likely than fitness centre users to report that they were a professional athlete, or that participation was their job (6% v 3%, *p* < 0.001), and fitness centre users were more likely than sport club participants to report psychological/mental health/therapy as motivations to be active (57% v 49%, *p* < 0.001).

## Discussion

This study demonstrates that the motivations to be active are quite different according to

activity type or setting. Further, the motivations to be active through sport clubs or fitness centres were quite consistent across participant demographics of age, gender and residential location.

Sport club participants were generally more motivated than fitness centre users for fun and enjoyment, social reasons, to be with friends, to be a good role model and performance or competition and a sense of achievement. These can be broadly categorised as: fun, social and performance. Fitness centre users were significantly more motivated than the sport club participants for health (physical and mental) and weight. Sport club participants also indicated many more motivations to play than the fitness centre users. Participation in club-based sport was more closely linked to intrinsic motivations compared to fitness centre participants extrinsic motivations. These findings are similar to a study of College students in the USA reported that those who played sport were more likely to report enjoyment and challenge as their motivations to play whereas those doing general exercise were more focused on appearance, weight and stress management (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). It can be argued that in the more socially connected and dependent (i.e. volunteering) environment of the sport club, the higher purpose of participation is transformational and almost existential. The main motivators to participate lie within the individual, and being part of the club, the team and the activity, transform the participant in the moment (fun, enjoy) and in the process (social engagement and connection). This in turn leads to outcomes that benefit the wider community (social capital). In contrast, the environment of the fitness centre is more of a transactional nature, where the principal purpose is to achieve more functional outcomes. Through the fitness centre, a basic service is provided that allows the participant to achieve outcomes that centre around bodily health and body image. In this

environment, by its very transactional nature, it is harder to achieve outcomes that deliver on social connection and team-based fun and enjoyment.

Clearly, people of all ages and genders and across different regions play sport for fun and enjoyment, and this is enhanced through social connections with others. Further, sport club participants were motivated to be a good role model for other participants, and to encourage others to play too. Sport too is about striving to achieve and competition and performance, but this was secondary compared to motivations for fun, enjoyment and social reasons. However, men and the younger cohort were motivated more by performance and competition than fun and enjoyment. Sport needs to ensure that fun and enjoyment in inclusive programs and competitions is prioritised alongside the purpose to improve and play. Whilst fun and enjoyment and the social nature of playing sport are commonly reported (Collins & Barcelona, 2018; Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b; Visek et al., 2015), this study highlights three main aspects: individual fun and enjoyment, social interaction with others, and then the game itself are the main motivations to play. The importance of having fun through sport and a positive experience for youth in sport has been previously reported, and the coach can play a main role in participant experience and enjoyment (Vierimaa et al., 2017). Further they suggest that community sport should aim to nurture competition by downplaying the outcome of winning and losing, and instead emphasise the process of competing as a means of fostering participant enjoyment and personal development (Vierimaa et al., 2017). Participation in sport can also contribute to building social networks and social connectedness and social capital for adults (Biernat et al., 2020; Skrok et al., 2019).

It needs to be noted here that the “play” factor is central to distinguishing further between being physically active in the sport club compared to being physically active in

the fitness centre. Playing competitive sport inherently involves a dominant play element (the game itself) which in turn offers many moments of potential fun, connection and engagement. In other words, sport is naturally suited to deliver on playful enjoyment. On the other hand, more routine, regimented and scripted physical activities in gym and fitness centre settings are less conducive to providing highlight moments of fun, and active social engagement. This is why improving one's health is a major (functional) motivation particularly for those individuals participating through fitness centres. For those fitness centre users, physical health and fitness was significantly higher motivation than sport club participants, and psychological/mental health/therapy was significantly higher than sport club participants for older adults and metropolitan residents. Whilst the motivations for health reasons were not as high for sports club participants, participation in club-based sport can provide increased psychological and social health benefits that individual-based activities including for adults (Eime et al., 2013a; Jenkin et al., 2018). These benefits are generally attributed to the social nature of team and club-based engagement (Eime et al., 2013a; Jenkin et al., 2018).

With nearly half of sport club participants aged 4–29 dropping out of sport participation within 2 years (Eime et al., 2009), it may be prudent to ensure that the focus of community sport matches individuals/participants motivations. It often is not primarily about winning, however hegemonic masculinity, a framework where stereotypically masculine traits are over-emphasised, plays a central role in sport, and this may lead to an excessive focus on winning (English, 2017). This also includes traditions of being tough, being competitive, winning against all odds (English, 2017). Many community sport organisations are in danger of mirroring elite sport's focus on winning as the main objective. This research shows that community sport organisations need to better align with individuals' motivations to play.

Fitness centre users are motivated more than the club participants for health (physical and mental) and weight-related reasons. This is confirmed by other research (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). However, in general individuals that go to the gym or fitness centres have a much higher attrition rate (Kopp et al., 2020; Sperandei et al., 2016), and this may be related to the motivations that are weight related. A Brazilian study reported that 63% of new members stopped participating before their third month of engagement, and only 4% remained active for 12 months for unsupervised programs. They reported that individuals motivated by weight loss were most "at risk" of dropping out (Sperandei et al., 2016). Further, whilst fitness centre users are not motivated to be active in these settings for fun and enjoyment, individuals focusing on activity for weight loss still require a genuine interest in that activity if they are to continue (Kopp et al., 2020; Teixeira et al., 2012). As a matter of fact, in the absence of genuine moments of play that make the activity more fun, weight loss as the primary motivator to stay involved may quickly become a barrier rather than facilitator. This is supported by evidence that for fitness centre settings people have difficulty in maintaining their participation, where starting a program does not seem to be the issue (Kopp et al., 2020).

Building on the established ability of ecological models to frame the various influences that impact decisions and behaviours of individuals, the study of comparative motivations has potential to positively influence various aspects of the settings where sport and leisure activities take place. In particular, understanding differences in motivations across activity types can shape or inform policy, program development and delivery, and design of physical settings. This may in turn guide manager interventions and influence user behaviours. Shaping and designing settings and delivery of sport to reinforce outcomes related to motivations for each activity could have an impact on attracting and

retaining users and participants. As an example, building on the motivation of “fun” for sport clubs, consideration of the fun integration theory, and embedding fun aspects into various ecological layers, could provide new opportunities for managers.

This study has some limitations. The sport club data were collected from a convenience sample, predominantly recruited with the assistance of NSOs and SSOs of four sports, in May and June 2020. The geographical coverage was uneven, depending on the strength of the relationships between the research team and the SSOs in the various Australian states, and the capacities and priorities of different SSOs in the context of the unfolding COVID-19 situation. Consequently, the sample is subject to both known potential sources of bias and unknown self-selection bias. Nevertheless, on the other side of the ledger, the sample obtained was extremely large, and because respondents provided information about the multiple sports that they engaged in, there was comprehensive representation of the sporting codes that are available in Australia. The fitness centre sample was much smaller, with data being collected from a convenience sample of users of a small selection of fitness centres. However, it still provided representation of metropolitan and regional areas of five Australian states, and was subject to similar sources of bias as the sport club data. Given these limitations to both surveys, caution must be exercised in generalising the results of the study. Finally, regarding analysis, this study focused on the difference between the motivation profiles of participants in two settings, with regard to three demographic factors – gender, age and region of residence – considered separately in turn. Another approach would be to conduct a 4-factor multivariate analysis – of setting, gender, age and region of residence – for each motivation in turn, which would enable an assessment of the interplay of the effects of the four factors on each motivation.

## Conclusion

There are clearly different motivations according to activity type or setting. From a health perspective, it does not matter what activity people participate in, but it helps if they enjoy the activity. It can be concluded that the main motivational difference between those who play sport in clubs and those who engage in fitness activities in purpose-built and outfitted facilities centres on fun is indeed driven by setting and activity. The setting of the sporting club offers participants manifold opportunities to engage in free-flowing fun infused gameplay, more often than not with multiple other participants involved in the same sporting contest. The setting of the fitness club on the other hand, is often structured and fitted to deliver on largely individual objectives that largely are confined to improvement or enhancement of fitness and body shape. Participation in sport is driven by fun and enjoyment, in the process reaping the health benefits (mental, physical and social) of being active, and active *with* others. In regard to the health benefits generated by playing sport, this has been a long-held assumption by those who run sport and seek (health) funding to go into sport. The reality is however, that the move of focus away from club-based sport being about competition and winning has been a difficult one to achieve. Fitness centre users are more motivated for health reasons and weight loss, and perhaps need further reasons than weight loss alone to remain active. These findings have implications for sport and fitness centre managers in terms of program design decisions. For example, moving beyond transactional offerings, and building “play” and “game” related elements into fitness exercise may well lead to higher retention rates in fitness centres. As such, understanding users’ motivations can assist with marketing and positioning of the services not only by reinforcing the benefits of

participation but adding fun infused moments that also inspire new users to join. Whilst the motivations to be active are different according to activity type, if the activity is fun and if you are active with others, you are more likely to remain active, which is important for long-term health.

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