

Dropout & Prevention in Fitness Sports

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Abstract

High drop-out rates in sports programmes, both health and therapeutic sports, are not exceptional. Long-term retention of active athletes is a problem. This is equally true for fitness training in fitness clubs, where about half of the active individuals drop out prematurely. The aim of this study is to create a comprehensive inventory of the dropout problem and the prevention of it in fitness sports. From the results obtained, recommendations for action can be derived to increase customer satisfaction in fitness facilities and thus reduce the dropout rate in the long term. Methodologically, a review of the relevant literature was conducted in this study. When analysing various research results, it was found that dropping out of a sports programme always depends on several factors. Characteristics of dropping out of sports activity can be personal as well as situational and structural. While it is often possible to identify individual reasons that ultimately tip the balance in favour of quitting, this is usually influenced by a complex set of factors. The reason that fitness club membership fees are too expensive is found at the top of the list in all known studies, followed by the statement that the time spent on sport is too much. Relocation, job and family reasons, other hobbies and, last but not least, health reasons are then usually found in the further course of the lists of dropout reasons. All these reasons seem plausible, but they may also be feigned. They are often difficult to verify by those responsible in the fitness clubs and usually have to be accepted as such. They are rather unsuitable for use in successful dropout prevention. At most, stated health reasons can play a role for preventive measures, but not if serious diseases are involved. Essential demands on the management of a fitness club are therefore the creation of a good social atmosphere during training, time-efficient training programs, fun during the training, fulfilment of training goals and intensive support mechanisms. Only sensible innovations, market-oriented behaviour and flexibility can lead to future success in the fast-moving fitness market.

Keywords: Dropout, prevention, fitness sport.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the reasons for drop-out has hardly been investigated so far, so knowledge about it is patchy. Information on average drop-out rates in fitness studios is already problematic because these are usually not recorded or published. Evaluations and statistical analyses on the question of how pronounced the various reasons are for quitting activity in a gym are only available in small numbers. Recent studies on this are almost non-existent. Whether there are typical reasons for quitting and which of these reasons are used in a statistically significant way to a greater or lesser extent for the realization of a dropout by which groups of people is not only interesting, but also existential for fitness studio operators. From such analyses, conclusions can be drawn in particular about member satisfaction scores and various performance parameters (such as

quality of the offering, training staff or membership fees). The results obtained can be used to derive recommendations for action to increase customer satisfaction in fitness centres and thus reduce the dropout rate in the long term. Most available studies show that dropout from an athletic programme always depends on several factors.

Characteristics of dropping out of sports activity can be personal as well as situational and structural (Rampf, 1999). While it is often possible to identify individual reasons that ultimately tip the balance in favour of dropping out, dropout is usually influenced by a complex set of factors. In this context, Dishman (1988) critically notes the often-unsystematic approach of many studies and calls them atheoretical. He criticizes the limited database and attributes this to the lack of standardized models that could simplify research. Due to

the lack of standardization of the theoretical approaches as well as the research methods, the comparability of the studies available to date is still very limited. Overall, it can be stated that there are still too few studies available worldwide in the fitness field on the dropout problem. It seems reasonable to assume that companies are reluctant to release sensitive data for research purposes or do not collect it at all. However, accurate data would be an important tool to reduce the dropout rate and improve the long-term success of a fitness company.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is a bibliographic review study in which the critical points of existing knowledge on a theoretical approach to the topic of "Dropout & Prevention in Fitness Sports" are presented. There is no specialized and comprehensive research work in this field. This study attempts to fill this gap and may be a useful aid for those who will undertake similar efforts in the future. The main objective of the bibliographic review is to place the study within the "body" of the topic in question. The review of the current study addresses clearly stated questions and uses systematic and explicit criteria for critical analysis of a published paper through summarizing, sorting, grouping, and comparing.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REVIEW STUDY

Dropout term

The fact that the fitness industry is characterized by a high number of fitness facilities and an annually increasing number of their members should not hide the fact that many of these fitness facilities repeatedly have to deal with high customer turnover. High dropout rates mean that long-term financial and personnel planning becomes more difficult for operators. Against this backdrop, the question arises: How does dropout occur at the fitness club, despite the many benefits and positive effects that fitness sports have? How does it happen, when the goal of operators is to perceive the needs of customers and meet them by offering adequate services (Zarotis, 1999; Zarotis *et al.*, 2017).

Dropout is a commonly used term that originated in American dropout research. It refers to premature dropout from a system (degree programme, educational event, and the like) without achieving a degree. In the field of competitive and elite sports, the term dropout is used to describe a departure without having reached the maximum or targeted performance level. The transfer of such definitional considerations to everyday life as well as to popular, recreational and health sports has led to the fact that today dropout is spoken of as a discontinuation of a career stage in sports or a discontinuation of a health measure, a course or a programme in general. One thing must be kept in mind: In all attempts at definition, it is always pointed out that the decision to dropout is made willingly and voluntarily.

STATE OF RESEARCH

High dropout rates in sports programmes are not necessarily exceptional, nor are they limited to fitness sports. So, what do we know about dropout in general and in particular? Here are some research findings:

In very general terms, it is well known in sports science that, primarily among adolescents, the reasons for dropping out of competitive and elite sports are determined by four factors related to (1) the coach or trainer, (2) the social environment, (3) personal burnout, and (4) dual careers. In this context, an analysis of approximately 500 available studies, all of which deal with the dropout problem in general, clearly shows how complex the network of factors is behind the decision to drop out. Thus, according to a comprehensive literature analysis, both intrapersonal and interpersonal as well as structural factors, which manifest themselves in various patterns, come into play in a dropout. These include lack of enjoyment of the sport, realization of lack of physical ability, stress that occurs, saturation that has occurred, the emergence of negative feelings about training, pressure from coaches, family, and/or friends, other social priorities, alternative sports, lack of time experienced, health conditions and injuries, costs, and training and living conditions (Crane & Temple, 2015, 114). Ultimately, two factors emerged as the most important in this analysis: lack of physical ability and lack of enjoyment of the sport or training (Crane & Temple, 2015, 128).

Regarding dropout rates and the uncertainty of the data situation, Oldridge found dropout rates ranging from 13% to 75% in ten prevention sports programmes as early as 1981. The analysis of another 18 prevention sports programmes then revealed dropout rates ranging from 3% to 87%. The more sports programmes analysed, the wider the range of dropout rates. Such results explain everything and nothing more, and are accordingly not suitable to answer the above questions about basic patterns for dropout. Moreover, the analysis of organized sports programmes cannot be transferred so easily to individual fitness training, as has already been stated above. A study by Franklin (1988) found a 46% dropout rate in sports programmes. The study also came to the remarkable conclusion that dropouts are the rule rather than the exception. According to Franklin the first six months and the end of the programme are of great importance for a dropout. Furthermore, according to the results of the study, dropouts are more likely to suffer from health problems than remainers. In addition to medical or health-related and psychological reasons for quitting, the factors "lifestyle and living situation of the person" are also often cited.

Gettmann *et al.*, (1983) identified similar factors for the discontinuation of sports programs, but in comparable studies the factor "lack of time" was almost always in first place. In particular, the factors "illness

within the family, lack of interest in the sports programme, and inconvenience of getting to the training" (time-consuming, expensive, etc.) have been cited by the dropouts from a company sports programme studied. In another study by Oldridge (1979a), "psychosocial reasons" (e.g., lack of interest or even problems in the family) were cited by 42% of dropouts from a rehabilitation programme for patients with coronary disease. 25% of the dropouts gave "unavoidable reasons" (e.g., professional conflicts, change of job, change of residence), 22% gave medical reasons, and 11% gave other reasons for dropping out. In Pahmeier *et al.*, (2012), there are explicit figures with regard to the decisive reasons for quitting among young people in the field of football: 22% quit because of the coach, 29% because of the team, 9% for health reasons, 18% for external organisational reasons (travel, time, etc.), and 22% quitted football because of a lack of motivation or the emergence of other interests. For gymnastics, Kleinert *et al.*, (2010) report that 5 to 20% of young people drop out of this sport every year.

According to this study, the reasons for quitting are conflicts in everyday life and at school, problems with friends, and the reduction of free time. Nagel (2015, 23) provides a whole series of further results of research with regard to the dropout problem, the conclusion of which is as follows: at least 50% of overweight Americans drop out of their training programme within the first six months, in several other studies it is up to 65%. A large proportion of exercisers do not find their way into regular training at all, and dropping out afterwards is a conscious result of a balancing decision-making process. Brehm and Eberhardt (1995) asked fitness athletes about their reasons for dropping out because they had not renewed their membership at the end of their contract. The primary factor cited for dropping out of the activity was "lack of enjoyment of exercise." In addition, "motivation problems" (e.g., convenience), "lack of time" (often due to work commitments), and "financial reasons" (membership fees perceived to be too expensive) were cited as reasons for dropping out.

In an open question, the respondents were also asked for a very specific reason for quitting. Criticism of the "studio atmosphere" (too impersonal), "lack of social support" (e.g., no contact with other members, partner quit training, etc.) and too "high membership costs" (also for additional services such as childcare) played an important role. In this context, Pahmeier (1994) notes that of the 65 respondents, each gave an average of 3.6 reasons, and the strongest problems influencing quitting had been time management and factors related to life and work situations. Nagel (2015) identified an interesting aspect for the discussion of dropout in his study on the maintenance of health-oriented fitness training, which is important for the interaction of trainers with fitness exercisers. He finds that fitness training is evaluated less

positively over time with regard to all recorded training goals (176).

Furthermore, he shows that even if the training frequency remains the same, the amount of training (in minutes/hours) decreases (179). It follows that the original motivations for fitness sport or the intended goals possibly change during the duration of the training. This change in motivation is an aspect that has not yet been properly investigated, but it has important implications for practice. The literature available to date regarding dropout relates primarily to children and adolescents and specific sports, of which fitness sport is hardly one, and also to competitive or elite sport, as well as organized sport. In this context, Nagel (2015, 23) explicitly points out in his analysis of dropout and retention, it is important to note that most of the results refer to organized sports groups and can only be compared to a limited extent with individual fitness training in a fitness club. However, this assumption has not yet been substantiated.

Dropout Reasons in Fitness Sports

Dropout favourites

Detailed analyses of dropouts - i.e., those who have effectively terminated their contract with a gym - are only available in small numbers. In general, the analyses focus on the importance of the various possible reasons for the decision to leave a gym. The reasons for quitting elicited from the interviewees are mostly given on an interval scale, i.e., the scales used on a given scale measure which reasons are comparatively particularly important or particularly unimportant for quitting a fitness club or terminating a contract. The patterns that become apparent in the process are repeatedly similar in the available studies.

Nagel (2015, 23) provides a literature analysis that deals with the causes of a dropout and summarizes the available study results in an overview. The reason that "fitness club membership is too expensive" is found in all known studies in the top position, followed by the statement that "training is too time-consuming". Relocation, job and family reasons, other hobbies and health reasons are then usually found in the lists of reasons. All these reasons seem plausible, but they may also be feigned. They are often difficult to verify by those responsible in the fitness clubs and usually have to be accepted as such. They are rather unsuitable for use in successful dropout prevention. At most, stated health reasons can play a role for preventive measures, but not if serious illnesses are involved.

High ratings are often found for the dropout reason "problems with scheduling in daily routines," but here the dispersion is clearly the highest, i.e., this question therefore has the greatest heterogeneity among respondents in the various studies. Brehm and Eberhardt

(1995), for example, have such results. In their study, persons between 30 and 50 years of age have major time problems and see this as an impediment to further participation in sports. This group has obviously been heavily occupied due to their age, both professionally and for family reasons.

In the studies by Zarotis *et al.* (1999, 2017, 2018), the reasons "work commitments", "regular sports appointments not compatible with schedule", "home/family commitments", "membership costs too high", alongside "health does not permit further training", also play a relatively large role. It is striking that - except for membership costs (see also Rampf, 1999; IHRS, 2012; Breuer, 2013; Zarotis *et al.*, 2018) - studio constraints play no to no significant role in the decision to quit fitness training according to the studies of Zarotis *et al.*, (2018). It is also noticeable, that on the one hand the reason "health does not permit further training" is given relatively strongly, at the same time the reason that the training "brought too little in terms of health" is practically not given. This suggests, that the health reason for dropping out is only pretended.

From the results obtained, it can be derived that alone the allegedly too high membership costs play an important role with the termination of a membership. As a recommendation for action, this suggests a more differentiated and flexible pricing policy on the part of fitness companies. This is the only way to address the individual needs of members and thus achieve a better cost-benefit calculation for them. Consideration should be given here, for example, to a pricing concept such as an exclusive equipment membership or course membership, power plate membership or only EMS membership (electro-muscle stimulation) or only sauna use. For people who want to train irregularly or are often away on business and also train elsewhere, a 10-visit pass or a day pass would also be appropriate. The aim of these measures should be to retain members in the long term and to adjust memberships as life situations change.

Psychological reasons for quitting

Almost none of the available studies address possible deeper psychological reasons for quitting fitness sports. Also, in Nagel (2015, 24) there are indications that there might be such deeper reasons for quitting that are much more serious than costs, time, etc. For example, personal experiences and experiences with the social environment are probably of much greater importance for quitting than sometimes assumed. Above all, members of fitness clubs seem to be left alone, which certainly does not increase motivation to train and sooner or later leads to quitting: "I felt out of place," "It was too intimidating," "I didn't know what to do there," "I did not . . . go there" - statements that virtually demand a more in-depth analysis. Unfortunately, this demand is not followed up by the fitness clubs or by the research.

The role of the general conditions of the studios

One of the few recent studies by Zarotis *et al.*, (2017) examines the evaluations of a fitness club by individuals who have just given up activity at that gym. In particular, the question is examined whether there are typical focal points in terms of positive or negative ratings among dropouts from fitness sports. The best ratings are clearly found for the items in which the studio's trainers are rated. Also opening times, trial training and the first impression lie on average closer to the evaluation level "very good" than to the evaluation level "good". The relatively worst evaluations show up with the characteristics "membership costs", (tight) "space conditions", "music" and "ventilation".

It is important that the customer feels comfortable in the training area and in all other areas of the fitness club. Comfortable feelings are guaranteed, for example, by not overcrowding the workout area with equipment. Sufficient space for movement during the workout allows for a positive workout experience. Background music also creates a positive atmosphere. Adequate ventilation is of particular importance (Rampf, 1999). Overall, the various aspects of the studio offering and its environment are essentially rated as "good." The respondents were particularly appreciative of the trainers (friendliness, helpfulness, competence), followed by opening hours, trial training and first impression. Membership costs and individual aspects such as space conditions, music and ventilation were rated more critically, although not really badly.

Dropout Types

Gender-specific differences

In terms of gender, the clearest differences are found in the assessment of "work commitments" as a reason for dropping out among men, as well as "domestic or family commitments" and the lack of compatibility of regular sports appointments with personal schedules among women (Zarotis *et al.*, 2017, 2018). Notable differences remain for the mentions of "no longer having fun," "too boring," "other interests," and "too comfortable to continue exercising". Women have the higher mean scores for all of the above characteristics. Otherwise, the differences are small from a descriptive point of view and thus of little significance in terms of content (Zarotis *et al.*, 2017, 2018).

Age-specific differences

Differentiation by age group for six majors dropping out reasons shows:

- Problems with scheduling in daily routines are clearly least pronounced among respondents beyond an age of 55 and clearly most pronounced in the age group between 26 to 40 years:
- The item "regular sports appointments not compatible with schedule" as a reason for dropping out is clearly rated the least important by the oldest respondent group. The other three age groups show

an ascending level of importance with increasing age.

- The item "domestic and family obligations," on the other hand, shows that this reason plays practically no role at all in the youngest and oldest age groups, but is cited most strongly in the 26-40 age group.
- The dropout reason "membership costs too high" shows little age differentiation; this reason is also cited most frequently by the respondent group between 26-40 years of age.
- In contrast, the reason "health does not permit further training" is - as expected - dominated by respondents in the highest age category. The reason is significantly less pronounced in all other age groups and decreases steadily the younger the respondents are.
- In contrast, the reason for dropping out because of, "professional commitments," is surprisingly most accentuated among the youngest respondents and then declines with increasing age.

Overall, it can be seen that only a few of the dropping out reasons given in the survey are also given with any significant frequency as important for the decision-making process. Trends in the age dependency of the relevant reasons for quitting - i.e., reasons that were mentioned with a notable frequency - can be shown to be statistically significant in two main reasons:

- "Health problems" as a dropping out reason are significantly stronger the older the respondents are
- "Professional obligations" and "problems with planning daily routines" correlate significantly negatively with age, i.e., they become less important with increasing age.

Dropout Prevention

In the previous explanations, it has become clear that the members of a fitness club today have very different demands, which pose a great challenge to the operators. Attracting and retaining members is no longer only a question of the sports offered. The professional dealing with members and the quality of the equipment (Palm, 1988), not to mention the training schedules, the social atmosphere and the rewards play also an important role (Annesi, 2000, 12). This results in completely diverse and challenging tasks for the club operators. Member loyalty to the club is highly dependent on how strongly the needs are addressed. The more these needs are addressed simultaneously in a fitness facility, the greater the retention of members because they are given the opportunity to spend their free time in several performance dimensions and to switch to another service area if they lose motivation (Annesi, 2000, 16). In this regard, personal relationships with the member individually and within the fitness club in general are key: "You have to give people ... the feeling like they are the only person that matters. Customers have to go in and feel-good right there and, most importantly, come

out with the feeling: that's where I'm going again, that was great" (Stemper, 1993, 1).

Thus, essential demands on the management of a fitness club are the creation of a social atmosphere during training, time-efficient training programmes, fun during training, fulfilment of training goals, and intensive support mechanisms. The fitness club should distinguish itself as a unique place for exercise and experience from a social and societal point of view, e.g., by offering sports-free activities such as work-shops, parties or outdoor activities. The increase of the membership potential and the development of new target groups is ensured in particular by motivational-psychological aspects of the sports activities, such as having fun, or by intrinsic motivational structures that can be learned situationally, but also by the professional consideration of the health motive, the body experience and the social component. Only sensible innovations, market-oriented behaviour and flexibility can lead to future success in the fast-moving fitness market. Commercial interests must not take precedence over the individual well-being of fitness club members, members will notice this immediately. After all, if profit maximisation is the sole maxim for action, ethical, moral or educational goals will be displaced. In the long run, this will jeopardize success.

Studies show that pursuing short-term goals in training behaviour reduce the dropout effect. Logging the training goal, feedback programs, and positive communication of training progress are absolutely part of the process. General speeches on health as well as physical effects are not enough to motivate people. Ultimately, it is important to strengthen self-management in order to maintain the training or to stimulate it in the first place. It is therefore very important to develop appropriate concepts, i.e., to convince people that they will organize and perform a certain training behaviour on their own (Nagel, 2015, 25).

CONCLUSION

The fitness industry is characterized by a near stagnation in the number of fitness facilities and annual fluctuations in the total number of fitness club members. Many fitness facilities are facing problems such as high customer turnover. When analysing various research findings, it was found that dropping out of an athletic programme always depends on several factors. Characteristics of dropping out of the sports activity can be of personal, situational and structural nature. While it is often possible to identify individual reasons that ultimately tip the balance in favour of dropping out, this is usually influenced by a complex set of factors. High dropout rates also mean that long-term financial and staff planning is hardly possible. This results in completely diverse and challenging tasks for club operators. Member loyalty to the fitness club is highly dependent

on how strongly customer needs are addressed. The more these needs are addressed simultaneously in a fitness facility, the greater the retention of members, because they are given the opportunity to spend their free time in several performance dimensions and, in case they lose motivation, to switch to another area of offering.

In conclusion, it can be deduced from the results obtained that the supposedly high membership costs alone play a role in membership cancellation. As a recommendation for action, this suggests a more differentiated and flexible pricing policy on the part of the fitness company. This is the only way to address the individual needs of members and thus achieve a better cost-benefit calculation for them. For example, a pricing concept such as an exclusive equipment membership or a sole course membership, a power plate membership or only EMS membership (electro-muscle stimulation) or only sauna use could be considered here. For people who want to work out irregularly or are often away on business and also work out elsewhere, a 10-visit pass or a day pass would also be appropriate. The aim of these measures is to retain members in the long term and to adapt the membership as life situations change.

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