

Possible reasons for exercise dropout in fitness centres: Insights from active users

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Abstract:

Exercise dropout rates pose a considerable challenge for fitness centers worldwide, affecting both public health outcomes and the long-term sustainability of the fitness industry. Despite the well-established benefits of regular physical activity, maintaining consistent exercise routines remains difficult for many individuals. This study aimed to identify and characterize the main reasons for exercise dropout based on the perceptions of current gym users. By focusing on active members rather than former ones, the study provides insights into potential risk factors before dropout occurs, enabling proactive intervention strategies. A cross-sectional design was employed, involving 540 active users from a fitness chain in central Portugal. Participants responded to an online questionnaire that included an open-ended question about possible reasons for discontinuing exercise. The collected qualitative data were subjected to content analysis, following Bardin's methodological framework, and the resulting categories were quantified in terms of frequency. A total of 777 valid text units were coded and distributed across seven main dimensions: service-related issues (32.43%), health problems (20.08%), aspects related to the technical framework, such as instructor quality and turnover (15.06%), financial constraints (12.48%), distance to the facility (9.27%), lack of time (6.69%), and other factors (3.99%), including motivational and personal reasons. Among these, price concerns, perceived service quality, instructor engagement, and class overcrowding were the most frequently cited categories. Findings indicate that perceived service quality and the role of instructors are the most critical factors in determining the dropout intention. These results suggest that fitness centres should invest in enhancing service personalization, promoting continuous staff training and development, offering adaptable pricing models, and fostering inclusive environments. The future research should investigate longitudinal patterns and explore how motivational and psychological factors interact with structural barriers to influence exercise adherence and dropout behaviour.

Key Words: fitness centres, exercise dropout, customer retention, motivation, service quality.

Introduction

Exercise is a fundamental pillar for promoting health and well-being (American College of Sports Medicine, 2020). However, recent data (European Commission, 2022) revealed that, in Portugal, 72% of the population never engage in any physical activity and 11% rarely do it (1 to 3 times a month). Of the few who do, 30% do it in fitness centres, and this rate has risen progressively over the last few years: 12% in 2010; 17% in 2014; 27% in 2018; 30% in 2022 (European Commission, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022), which shows that fitness services continue to increase and become a consumer trend in Portugal, due to the several offers provided (Franco et al., 2021, 2022, 2022, 2024). These physical inactivity levels display a very worrying trend, with Portugal always ranking as one of the countries in the European Union with the lowest rates (European Commission, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022), which justifies and highlights the relevance of studying the reasons for adherence to exercise (loyalty), as well as the reasons for exercise dropout. In Portugal, as well as in the European Union, improving health, relaxing, enhancing physical fitness, controlling body weight, bettering physical performance, spending time with friends, refining physical appearance, having fun, boosting self-esteem and combating the effects of aging are indicated as the main reasons for exercise. Lack of time, motivation and/or interest, disability or illness, shortage of financial capacity, not liking competitive activities, fear of contracting injuries, scarcity of sports facilities near the area of residence (both adequate and accessible) and not having friends to exercise with are the main reasons given for not practicing (European Commission, 2022).

In the fitness market, literature points to a strong association between perceived quality, satisfaction and loyalty intention which, as a consequence, reduces the dropout rate (Barbosa et al., 2023; Gonçalves et al., 2015; Teixeira et al., 2024). García-Fernández et al. (2022) identify some variables, such as the quality of facilities,

condition of equipment, customer service, variability of services, variety of activities and value for money, as strong predictors of satisfaction and retention/loyalty. The study by Gonçalves and Diniz (2015) suggest that gyms should focus on facilities and equipment, as well as fostering strong relationships with customers to provide a pleasant experience. Similar results were presented by Rahmati and Honari (2013), who emphasized the importance of service quality as a competitive differentiator for those who operate and want to succeed, something corroborated by Amaral (2025). For this author, if fitness clubs have access to infinite solutions to help them make profit, optimize and add value to their business, through specialized companies in the market that solve all their needs, what differentiates them? To Amaral (2025), it is in the difference that the profit lies, and it is essential to find it in extremely competitive markets. Tokarski et al. (2023) emphasizes the importance of welcoming social environments for retaining members, and suggests that a lack of social support and impersonality of the environment can be determining factors for dropout, variables that are greatly affected by the work of the sector professionals. Braga-Pereira et al. (2024) highlights the importance of the fitness instructor's behaviour in promoting intrinsic motivation, commitment and enjoyment for the user, positively influencing maintenance in practicing. These authors emphasize the positive interaction and support offered as being fundamental to maintaining long-term exercise habits, which is crucial given the low retention rates in the sector, both in Portugal and internationally.

In Portugal, retention rates are a pressing concern (37.50% in 2021, 25.40% in 2022). In 2023, for the first time, the figure exceeded 50% (54.70%) (Pedragosa & Ferreira, 2024). Gjestvang et al. (2023) point out that the adherence in fitness centres is generally low, indicating that 40% to 65% drop out within the first six months. To Teixeira et al. (2020) there is a heightened loss of clients after three months of practice, with approximately 50% of participants leaving the gym after the first six months. Another study, by Antunes et al. (2025), reveals that 42% of clients also cancel their subscriptions after the first six months. For Tokarski et al. (2023), around half of all people who use fitness centres give up early on. This data emphasizes the importance of defining effective customer retention strategies. For Antunes et al. (2025), motivational strategies are crucial to this end and to the financial sustainability of fitness centres. Offering an inclusive environment and personalized services can improve member retention, highlighting the importance of adopting marketing and service strategies that meet members' needs (Gjestvang et al., 2023). Positive social environment, efficient training programs and intensive support can help retention, through the support of instructors, who should seek to build a welcoming environment, which is essential for promoting the maintenance of sports practice (Sobreiro et al., 2021).

For exercise dropout in fitness centers, Franco et al. (2008) identify lack of time, dissatisfaction with the instructors, incompatible schedules, economic difficulties and lack of complementary activities as the most prevalent ones. Campos et al. (2016) indicates lack of time, health issues, facility inadequacy (e.g., studios size, changing rooms) and incompatible schedules as the most frequent reasons for exercise dropout. For Rodrigues et al. (2024), lack of time, associated with professional and personal demands, also appears as one of the biggest obstacles to regular practice. Tokarski et al. (2023) point to structural and financial factors, noting that high payment fees and lack of time are notable obstacles to carrying through with practicing, as relocating, professional and family commitments and other personal priorities. The distance to the gym is also one of the main reasons given by Sobreiro et al. (2021). Lack of time is cited as a very critical reason by Martins (2017), and is generally associated with excessive working hours, family obligations and time management difficulties. Teixeira et al. (2020) state that the main reasons for leaving are the quality of the service provided and poor quality of exercise supervision, the latter being directly associated with technical support.

In light of all referred above, this research aims to identify and characterize the possible reasons for exercise dropout in fitness centres, based on the perceptions of active users. Analyzing the reasons for the dropout could help identify areas for improvement in the service provided by fitness centres and formulate strategies to increase customer satisfaction and consequent loyalty. According to Rodrigues et al. (2024), it is important to implement changes aimed at improving customer experience, such as personalizing programs, continuous training for instructors and creating motivating and supportive environments. In order for gyms to improve retention rates and reduce dropout, it is crucial to understand the variables that influence user behaviour, such as motivation, the quality of interpersonal interactions, structural issues or the cost involved (Gjestvang et al., 2021). An in-depth understanding of the reasons for dropout and the implementation of client-centered practices, such as creating pleasant training environments, efficient programs and ongoing support (Zarotis & Tokarski, 2025), are essential for developing the sector in a more solid and sustainable way (Rodrigues et al., 2024).

Material & methods

Participants

The study featured 540 users of a fitness chain with five gyms located in the center of Portugal. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 80 years old [Mean $\pm$ Standard Deviation ($M \pm SD$) = 43.17 $\pm$ 11.96]; 417 (77.22%) were female (42.68 $\pm$ 13.01) and 123 (22.78%) male (44.77 $\pm$ 12.97). The inclusion criteria were: being 18 years old or over; having been enrolled in one of the five clubs for at least a month; and attending at least once a week. All participants were informed about the subject of study and filled out/signed the informed

consent form. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Polytechnic University of Coimbra (Portugal) (number D40/2024).

Instruments

An online questionnaire was used for gathering data, drawn up by a research team in direct collaboration with the chain of gyms, ensuring that the information collected was relevant to the parties involved. After its construction, the questionnaires were submitted to a panel of two experts with a doctorate in sports science and experience in the field. Based on the recommendations given, minor adjustments were made. The redraft was then sent to a second panel of experts with similar training and experience, who deemed them valid for the proposed objectives. The questionnaires had a set of cross-cutting questions, including one about the possible reasoning for exercise dropout: Indicate the main reasons why you might cease practicing. The question was open-ended, so as not to condition the responders' motives/reasons and to allow them to freely explore their opinions on the subject. The answers were then coded and grouped using the statistical technique of content analysis (Bardin, 2008).

Procedures

In order to achieve the goals established, data collection was planned in partnership with the gym chain coordinator, who coordinated the process and encouraged the collaboration of all the instructors at the five gyms. They, in turn, sensitized the fitness participants to the importance of their contribution in improving the quality of the service provided. Questionnaires were distributed using Salesforce Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software. Collection took place between the 25th of November and the 20th of December 2024.

Statistical analysis

Content analysis followed the methodology proposed by Bardin (2008), widely referenced in the literature, which proposes three main phases: pre-analysis; exploration of the material and treatment of the results; inference and interpretation. The results, obtained through categorical analysis, considered the number of words, excerpts and/or ideas [number of text units (NTU)] contained in the answers of the 540 respondents. Possible reasons for dropout were identified and some of those were incorporated into broader dimensions to allow for a better understanding. Frequency tables are therefore presented to characterize NTU, associated with each of the categories and dimensions (possible reasons for dropout), and their respective percentage, considering all the NTU coded ($n = 777$). NVIVO software (version 14) was used for statistical analysis. Intra-coder and inter-coder reliability were calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, with values above .90 being obtained for both, which indicates substantial levels of agreement (McHugh, 2012).

Results

In identifying the possible reasons for exercise dropout, six dimensions were identified, plus seventh, denominated Others, which incorporated reasons that were indicated in a vestigial way (e.g., lack of motivation). The question asked allowed stating multiple possible reasons for exercise dropout, which is why, although the number of participants was 540, the number of valid answers was 777 (100%). To better understand the content of each dimension and category, are presented some excerpts from the answers collected.

Possible reasons for dropout related to the service provided were the most frequently mentioned (NTU = 252; 32.43%; e.g., "reduced quality of service", "they don't care what customers say", "customer satisfaction is not prioritized in this gym", "poor service", "the gym should offer more than one towel", "it could open at least at 6:30am", "I only go in the morning so it could be a different price", "not having class packs", "not being able to attend only one specific class and the price being adjusted", "not having an alternative or discounted payment plan when the whole family goes to the gym", "poor gym management", "lack of interest in improving the gym and in the clients' interests"). Within this overall dimension, the following possible reasons were identified:

a) price (NTU = 80; 10.30%; e.g., "high monthly fee", "increase in monthly fee", "an extreme increase", "being too expensive", "the price", "price/quality ratio", "service fee too high", "personal trainer fee").

b) space/facilities (NTU = 36; 4.63%; e.g., "lack of hygiene", "sloppy classroom cleaning", "unpleasant smell in the rooms", "weight training equipment should be disinfected by the users themselves after use", "air conditioning", "car park", "lack of facilities", "cold water in the changing rooms", "lack of ventilation and air conditioning", "the changing rooms are not at all suitable", "the layout of the benches and lockers is impractical", "poor parking and lack of lighting in the changing rooms", "lack of hangers in the lockers", "the water temperature is not always ideal", "needs improvement work").

c) offer (NTU = 35; 4.50%; e.g., "no group classes after 8pm", "no group classes", "termination of classes like Pilates and Body Pump", "lack of timetables", "lack of class times with vacancies", "few classes and little variety on Saturday mornings", "constant change of class times and activities").

d) materials/equipment (NTU = 34; 4.38%; e.g., "lack of machines", "lack of bodybuilding machines", "lack of equipment", "lack of machines", "insufficient equipment", "condition of equipment", "lack of maintenance of machines", "little variety of machines", "deterioration of equipment in use and lack of maintenance", "few materials for group classes", "worn-out equipment is not replaced").

e) overcrowding (NTU = 30; 3.86%; e.g., “the gym is crowded”, “the space is overcrowded”, “too many members”, “too many users for the space”, “the gym has too many clients”, “it’s difficult to get a place”, “too many people at the same time”, “there’s a big influx at peak times”, “the equipment/machines room is always full”, “the number of people in relation to the space”, “it’s impossible to train often, even at off-peak times”).

f) competition (NTU = 22; 2.83%; e.g., “opening of new gyms”, “new club”, “competition from other gyms”, “a gym with better conditions”, “a better gym”, “having another gym nearby”, “finding a cheaper gym”, “finding another space with better service”, “a gym with better conditions”, “offering better conditions in terms of price/service ratio”, “there are other options with more machines”).

Next up are possible health-related reasons, in general terms (NTU = 156; 20.08%; e.g., “health reasons”, “serious health reasons”, “health problem”, “dying”, “passing away”, “medical indication”, “medical assessment”). Within this dimension, we have specific reasons related to:

a) illness (NTU = 43; 5.53%; e.g., “illness”, “serious illness”, “sudden illness”, “illness that doesn’t allow me to do physical activity”, “some illness that prevents me from continuing”).

b) injury/disability (NTU = 27; 3.47%; e.g., “serious injury”, “injury”, “disability”, “I don’t feel physically able to practice”).

Are also presented reasons associated with the technical framework as a whole (NTU = 117; 15.06%; e.g., “lack of quality and experience of class instructors”, “lack of communication between instructors and clients”, “less and less experienced instructors”, “lack of knowledge of new instructors”, “lack of knowledge on the part of classroom instructors”, “poor performance of instructors”, “uninteresting classes”, “lack of instructor professionalism”, “instructor competence”, “lack of knowledge and discouragement”, “not being sure how to do things or exercises”, “some instructors are just there to be there”, “classes are repetitive”, “poor quality classes”, “with the absence of some instructors I would cancel my registration”, “lack of teachers with the skills to teach group classes”, “at the moment what keeps me is the instructor with whom I do personal training and the group class”, “professionals with very little demeanor to teach group classes”, “the lack of cadence counts, rigor in complying with choreographed classes”, “they don’t take care to correct postures”, “side conversations between some personal trainers”, “what has encouraged me to come home from work and go to the gym are teacher A’s group classes”, “apart from teacher B and C there are no other instructors with the skills to teach”, “at the moment only D and E keep me in group classes”, “some instructors show very little knowledge of and desire to teach” “apart from teacher B and C there are no other instructors with the skills to teach”, “at the moment only D and E keep me in group classes”), specifically, in terms of:

a) rotativity (NTU = 39; 5.02%; e.g., “constant change”, “instructors always changing”, “change of personal trainer”, “departure of some current instructors”, “departure of my instructor”, “departure of my personal trainer”, “departure of instructors A and B, if the Cycling class given by C ceases to exist”, “taking Pilates classes with E and F”, “some instructors leave”, “huge turnover of instructors”, “G or H must return”, “the best professionals leave”, “a high turnover is bad for the relationship with instructors”, “the recent departure of good instructors is discouraging me”).

b) monitoring (NTU = 37; 4.76%; e.g., “lack of monitoring”, “discrimination”, “lack of attention”, “lack of care on the part of the instructors”, “not providing adequate monitoring”, “lack of attention and sensitivity towards the members”, “not being proactive and always sitting waiting for the client”, “lack of monitoring on the part of the instructors in the weight room”, “instructors don’t care much about users”, “instructors (especially those in the room) are inattentive and distracted”, “lack of sympathy”, “lack of education”, “poor quality of service in the room”, “lack of attention/education towards gym users”, “few people approach clients to ask if they need help or correct postures”, “not very active in supporting training in the weight room”, “disrespect”, “no more committed PT”, “too much chat between instructors and certain members or between themselves”, “those in charge of the training room should be more attentive to people”, “they can’t always be chatting, paying attention to girls or boys and friends”, “not treating all clients equally”, “not bothering to contact clients to find out how difficult it is to use the machines”, “when they are in the machine room, they very rarely correct the students on the various exercises”).

Financial situation is another of the possible reasons for dropout most often indicated by those surveyed (NTU = 97; 12.48%; e.g., “economic reasons”, “economic difficulties”, “financial situation”, “tight finances”, “unemployment”, “lack of work”, “change in financial situation”, “monetary difficulties”, “lack of money”, “not being able to pay tuition”, “going through financial hardship”, “change in my income”).

Then there’s distance (NTU = 72; 9.27%; e.g., “distance”, “transport”, “emigrating”, “changing country”) and, within this dimension, possible reasons related to changing:

a) residence/housing (NTU = 41; 5.28%; e.g., “change of residence”, “change of dwelling”, “change of house”, “change of where I live”, “university”, “change of place of residence”, “pursuing studies in higher education”, “change of place of study and, with that, change of address”).

b) work (NTU = 18; 2.32%; “work”, “profession”, “professional change”, “change of job”).

Lack of time is another of the main possible reasons for dropout exercise (NTU = 52; 6.69%; e.g., “lack of time”, “lack of time for exercise”, “lack of time for professional reasons”, “lack of time for family reasons”,

“limited availability”, “lack of time for work”, “lack of time due to my profession”, “difficulty conciliating after-work hours with the gym”, “working hours”).

Finally, we have the other dimension (NTU = 31; 3.99%; e.g., “discouragement due to not achieving results”, “lack of desire to train”, “loss of interest on a personal level”, “the cold makes me too lazy to leave the house”, “personal reasons”, “personal problems”, “wanting to try other training methods”, “managing professional and personal life”).

For a better understanding of the possible reasons for dropout sports practice at fitness centres, Figure 1 shows the different dimensions and their respective categories, as well as the percentage obtained for each one.

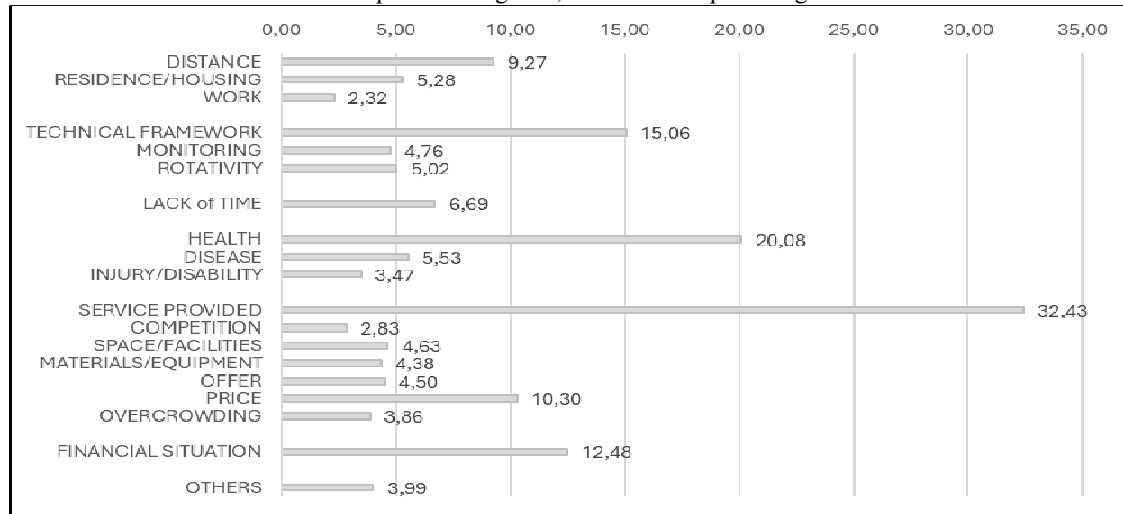


Figure 1: Characterization (%) of the main reasons for exercise dropout.

Discussion

The results show that the main reasons given for possible exercise dropout in fitness centres are mainly factors relating to the quality of the service provided, health issues, the technical framework and financial issues, all with values above 10%. This hierarchization of factors is aligned with previous studies, which demonstrate the complexity and multi-diversity associated with adhering to and maintaining the practice of physical exercise in gyms (Campos et al., 2026; Gjestvang et al., 2023; Tokarski et al., 2023).

The emphasis given by respondents on the quality of the service provided, especially the price, facilities, offer, materials/equipment and overcrowding, reinforces the importance of the perception of the value received by the customer. As pointed by García-Fernández et al. (2012) and Rahmati and Honari (2013), perceived service quality is a strong predictor of satisfaction and retention/loyalty. If customers do not perceive a favorable cost-benefit ratio, the tendency to the dropout increases. In addition, issues such as overcrowding and limitations in the range of classes/activities on offer suggest a mismatch between expectations and reality, which, according to Yi et al. (2021), jeopardizes retention, especially during the first few months of use.

The health dimension emerges as the second biggest possible reason for dropout; it includes illnesses, injuries and temporary or permanent disabilities. The results coincide with those previously described by Franco et al. (2008) and Rodrigues et al. (2024), who emphasize the impact of medical conditions on continuity of practice of physical exercise. However, unlike other modifiable factors, such as technical support and organizational environment, these conditions are sometimes unavoidable, which implies thinking about inclusive solutions, such as adapted programs to mitigate the negative effects of these often-irreversible setbacks.

The importance of the technical framework, namely the quality of the instructors, turnover and lack of follow-up, is emphasized in a worrying way by many participants. This perception is in line with that expressed by Braga-Pereira et al. (2024, 2025), who indicate that the performance of fitness professionals has a direct impact on the intrinsic motivation, commitment and enjoyment of the user. The high turnover of coaches, in turn, jeopardizes the creation of bonds of trust, which are critical for retention, as also suggested by Tokarski et al. (2023). The results suggest that investing in the continuous training of professionals and the stability of the technical team can be an effective strategy for satisfaction and loyalty.

The financial situation was another frequently mentioned reason, especially through expressions related to unemployment or a change in economic status. This result, already documented by Teixeira et al. (2020) and Sobreiro et al. (2021) reinforces the need for more flexible payments, if and when possible, differentiated, especially in unstable socio-economic contexts. The perception that the service is not adapted to the client's financial capacity, or the value of the service provided and used, can act as a critical barrier to continuity of practice.

Reasons such as commuting to the gym, the change of residence or place of work, reflect logistical constraints in the lives of users. The literature has already identified the difficulty in reconciling training schedules with work and family routines as one of the main obstacles to regular practice (Martins, 2027; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Although difficult to overcome, these barriers can be mitigated with more flexible schedules, hybrid options (face-to-face and online) and/or local partnerships with other organizations.

Finally, although less frequently, there were answers related to motivation, lack of interest and personal problems. Despite the low percentage, these aspects should not be undervalued, as they reflect the role of psychological and contextual variables in the continuity of practice. As indicated by Zarotis and Tokarski (2025), discouragement, especially if intrinsic, can be a strong predictor of dropout. Hence the importance of motivating environments and adequate interpersonal support on the part of the professionals who deal with clients on a daily basis (Jaques, 2025). In summary, the results corroborate the literature and underline the importance of adopting a multi-component approach to managing fitness centres, which goes beyond the technical offer, also integrating relational, logistical, economic and motivational aspects. A holistic understanding of the possible reasons for exercise dropout will allow for more sustained interventions, with a direct impact on user retention.

Conclusions

The practical implications of this study are clear and pressing for the fitness sector in Portugal, particularly for managers, technical coordinators and exercise technicians. The high number of mentions of service-related reasons (e.g., price, overcrowding, supply) reinforces the need to adopt customer-centered management models, with greater attention to personalizing the experience, price differentiation and the quality of infrastructure/materials. At the same time, the negative perception of instructors points to the importance of continuous training programs, reducing turnover and monitoring the quality of technical support in its different dimensions (e.g., pedagogical, relational). The instructors' work must be strategic, centered on social support, motivation and building trust.

From a strategic point of view, fitness centres should consider more flexible fealty models, adjusted to the social and economic reality of their users. This implies, for example, offering plans adapted to different schedules and financial rewards, as well as alternatives for times of personal and/or professional crisis. The incorporation of digital technologies for remote or hybrid training can mitigate the effects of distance, promoting greater flexibility and commitment.

In terms of future research, we would emphasize the need for longitudinal studies that explore the reasons for abandonment over time, considering seasonal, professional and personal variations in users. It would also be pertinent to delve deeper into the relationship between types of motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) and loyalty behaviour, with special attention to the mediating role of interactions with the instructor. Research with mixed designs (quantitative and qualitative) can make relevant contributions to capturing the subjective nuances of the user experience.

In conclusion, we reinforce the idea that it is important to continue promoting a client-centered approach that values the human side of practicing physical exercise, both in terms of empathy and the ability to respond to the needs and expectations of the client. Only in this way will it be possible to meet the current challenges the sector is facing, increase retention rates and contribute to a more sustained and continuous practice of physical exercise geared towards the well-being of the population.

Conflict of interest

The authors state there is no conflict of interest.

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