

# Reasons Why Gym Members Tend to Exercise in the Age of New Normals

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## Abstract

The adverse effects of the pandemic are apparent to the whole world. However, there are also positive effects experienced in the so-called pandemic period and the era of new normals. One of these effects is the tendency to exercise, in other words, the gain of sports awareness. In line with this view, the research aims to examine why fitness center members turn to exercise in the age of new normals. The research group consisted of a total of 127 people, 66 women, and 61 men, attending a hotel's fitness center in the Aegean Region. The phenomenology pattern, one of the qualitative research methods, was adopted in the study. "Semi-Structured Interview Form" was used to collect the research data. In the analysis of the data, the NVIVO 10 program was used. As a result of the research, the perspectives of the fitness center members on the phenomenon of sports were gathered under the theme of being healthy and sense of beauty. The reasons for the members' tendency to exercise were similarly grouped under the theme of healthy living, followed by physical development, recreational orientation, and social interaction. In addition, a connection was established between the pandemic and exercise, and it was seen that exercise awareness was formed. In this context, in the orientation of individuals to exercise in the age of new normals; It has been noted that physical, mental, and spiritual development, strengthening of the immune system and forming a mechanism against diseases, social media statements, and the environment are effective.

**Keywords:** Exercise, fitness, sedentary, the age of new normals

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Considering the history of the world is seen that the frequency of events that affect all the humanity is not very high. However, at the end of 2019, Covid-19, which emerged in Wuhan, China, spread all over the world in a short time, causing severe acute respiratory syndrome and pneumonia (Huang, 2020), is perhaps the most dangerous event (Mutz & Gerke, 2021). Covid-19 has spread very rapidly in a very short time, has been seen in thousands of people and has caused the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a pandemic since it has caused high numbers of deaths (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). In this context, WHO has suggested that governments should impose

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various restrictions, including social life, in order to reduce the spread of Covid-19 (WHO, 2020).

In the new normal period, initiated by the concept of "social distance" which entered into our lives within the scope of restrictions, many people have started to spend more time in front of the screen at home, have a sedentary lifestyle and irregular sleep patterns (United Nations [UN], 2020). This situation paved the way for less active lives and therefore the spread of sedentary behaviors. The lifestyles of individuals who maintain this behavior in a routinized way are stated as sedentary (Keskin & Çalışkan, 2017). However, it is accepted all over the world that a lifestyle supported by regular physical activity is one of the most important factors in solving the problems caused by sedentary life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). In many countries, the lack of regular and adequate physical activity/exercise is an important problem. Therefore, increasing an active lifestyle is an important component of national and international public health recommendations. According to a statement (no date) published by the Minnesota Ministry of Health (Department of Health [DH], 2022), exercise reduces the stress level; helps build strong immune systems which is one of the great needs of the pandemic period; and increases natural pain-relieving chemicals secreted in the brain.

Physical activity is all body movements which is caused by the contraction of skeletal muscles and causes energy consumption above the resting level; such as walking, cycling, doing housework, working (Murphy et al., 2019), exercise is a planned, repetitive form of physical activity which is performed to increase health or physical fitness (Piercy et al., 2018). It is known that both exercise and physical activity are healthy habits and protective factors against diseases and harmful behaviors. They are reported to improve one's self-esteem and body image, keep weight under control, reduce stress levels, some cancer types and chronic pain, improve sleep quality, increase muscle strength, endurance, flexibility, and bone mineral density (Lee et al., 2012; Román-Mata et al., 2020; Sallis et al., 2020). It is also stated that they improve the immune system, which is important for the transmission of Covid-19 (Martin et al., 2009; Da Silveira et al., 2021; Improtta-Caria et al., 2021). Within this framework, Sallis et al. (2021) concluded that when individuals who regularly do physical activity are compared with those who do not, these individuals are less likely to experience serious consequences when infected with the Covid-19 virus. Zadow et al. (2020) stated that low and moderate exercise can be adjunctive therapy for patients with mild to moderate Covid-19 infection and can reduce the risk of serious symptoms that can result in death. Simpson and Katsanis (2020) stated that exercise helps reduce the negative effects of Covid-19-induced isolation stress on immunity, and those who are physically active will recover shorter and have less severe symptoms if they are infected.

In this context, when the literature is examined, during the pandemic period, which is unknown for how many years it will continue to exist in human life, the reasons for individuals' tendency to exercise draws attention. Thus, in this study, it is aimed to examine the reasons to exercising of sedentary individuals and fitness center members in the age of new normals, by evaluating their views with open-ended questions.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Research Design

In the research, the phenomenology pattern, which is used in qualitative research methods, was preferred. Qualitative research, in its broadest sense, is an approach that determines the human being as the focal point and therefore aims to comprehensively examine people's experiences, perceptions, behaviors and beliefs (Creswell, 2014). One of these most important benefits is that it allows the data to be examined in depth with more holistic, descriptive and rich explanations (Merriam, 2015). Phenomenology pattern, which is among the qualitative research methods, takes into account the phenomena that people are aware of but do not have an in-depth and detailed understanding about. These phenomena can occur in various ways in daily life (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In line with this information, in the research, the effect of the pandemic and its effects on people's daily lives, the beginning of the adaptation process with the new normalization that emerged after the pandemic, was seen as a compatibilizer in the preference of the phenomenological design.

### 2.2 Participants

The research group consists of a total of 127 people, 66 women and 61 men, who live in Afyonkarahisar and became members of NG Afyon Hotel's Fitness Center during the pandemic period. While determining the research group, the criterion sampling model, one of the purposive sampling methods developed within the tradition of qualitative research, was used (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In the purposive sampling model, the researcher focuses on selecting subjects who have the characteristics suitable for the research problem in line with his own observations (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2018). Therefore, in this study, participants were selected according to predetermined criteria in line with the purpose of the research, using the criterion sampling model. The mentioned criteria were determined as the inclusion of people who do not have a sports background, who do an occasional exercise or who do not tend to exercise regularly, who continue to be a member of a sports center during the normalization process due to the pandemic.

### 2.3 Data Collection

In the research, the "Interview Form" developed by the researchers in order to predict whether the members of the fitness center comply with the criteria or not, and "Semi-structured Interview Questions" formed by taking expert opinion were used.

Yıldırım and Şimşek (2018) made some suggestions for the preparation of interview questions and explained these suggestions with the following items:

1. The questions to be formed should be easy to understand
2. Preparing focused questions about the research topic and problematic
3. Asking open-ended questions
4. Avoiding directing the participants while asking questions or getting answers
5. Avoiding asking multiple or independent multidimensional questions at the same time
6. Creating alternative questions, considering that the questions created may have different meanings for each participant

7. Creating different types of questions

8. Arranging the questions in a logical framework

9. Development of questions.

In this research, while the questions were being formed, the relevant suggestions were tried to be considered. Thus, the questions developed by the researchers and organized as a result of expert opinions in order to obtain data from the research group were applied as follows:

1. Why and how did you start exercising?

2. What does exercise mean to you? What are the advantages and disadvantages of exercise for you?

3. What changes has exercise made in you? Can you describe what has changed in your life with sports?

4. What do you think are the reasons for the increasing interest in exercise lately?

5. How do you think the connection between the pandemic and exercise can be explained?

6. How do you evaluate the importance of exercise in the normalization process?

In addition, after informing about the research, an average of 38 minutes of semi-structured and voice-recorded interviews were conducted with each person. The hall section of the fitness center was used for semi-structured interview questions and flexibility was tried to be provided for a fluent conversation. In order to respect copyrights, it was assured that the personal information of the participants would not be used in any way, and that pseudonyms or encodings would be used instead.

#### *2.4 Data Analysis*

Descriptive analysis and content analysis were used to analyze the research data. The purpose of descriptive analysis is expressed as presenting the findings to the reader by arranging and interpreting (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Based on this information, face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and tried to be transcribed one-to-one. After the data was transferred to the electronic environment, the content analysis process started. The purpose of content analysis is to reach the concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data.

In this context, the data summarized and interpreted with descriptive analysis are examined in depth with content analysis and the analysis results (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018) were tried to be strengthened with the concepts and themes created, and the NVIVO 10 program was used for content analysis. In the context of coding the data and reaching the theme structure (Kabakçı-Yurdakul, 2021), NVIVO 10 was preferred because it facilitates the analysis process.

#### *2.5 Validity and Reliability*

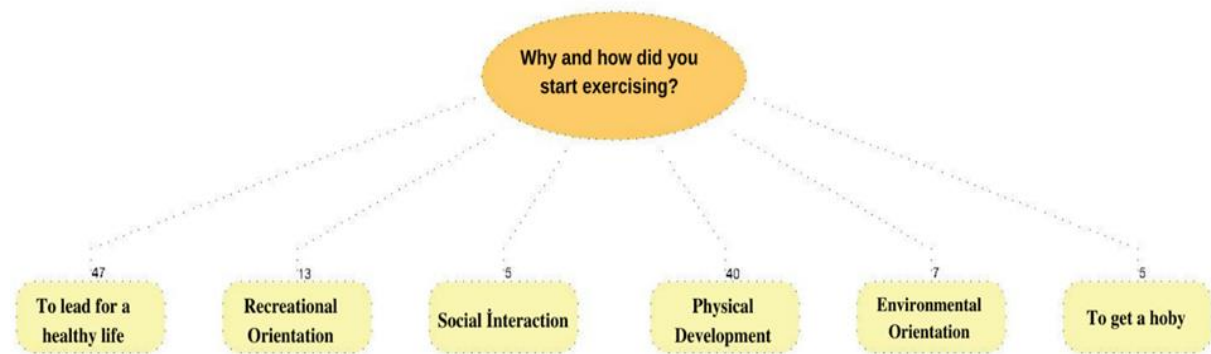
In order to ensure the validity of the research, the volunteering process of the participants were questioned, and permission was obtained from the participants to record their interviews. In this context, the data recorded by the voice recorder were transferred to an Excel file without any addition or deletion. In order to ensure the reliability of the measurement tool, expert opinions were consulted and the opinions of three field experts were compared in terms of consistency. In addition, the reliability formula of Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to calculate the reliability of the research. In this context, the formula of Calculated Reliability = Consensus / (Consensus + Disagreement) x 100

was applied and the principle that the consensus among the coders should be at least 80% and above was taken into account. For the total statements, consensus was determined as 37 codes and disagreement as 6 codes. Therefore, as a result of the formulation calculation, it was noted that the reliability of the research was provided at the rate of 86%. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, member checking was performed with 19 randomly selected participants from the study group. In line with the feedback of the participants, the categories were reviewed, and necessary corrections were made.

### 3. RESULTS

For the purposes of the research, the reasons for the fitness center members' orientation to exercise were examined and the findings are given below. In addition, to protect the participants' personal information, the participants' opinions were given with the P-code.

The question “*Why and how did you start exercising?*” were asked to the fitness center members. The answers to this question are given in the model below along with the number of people (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Model and number of people created for the first question

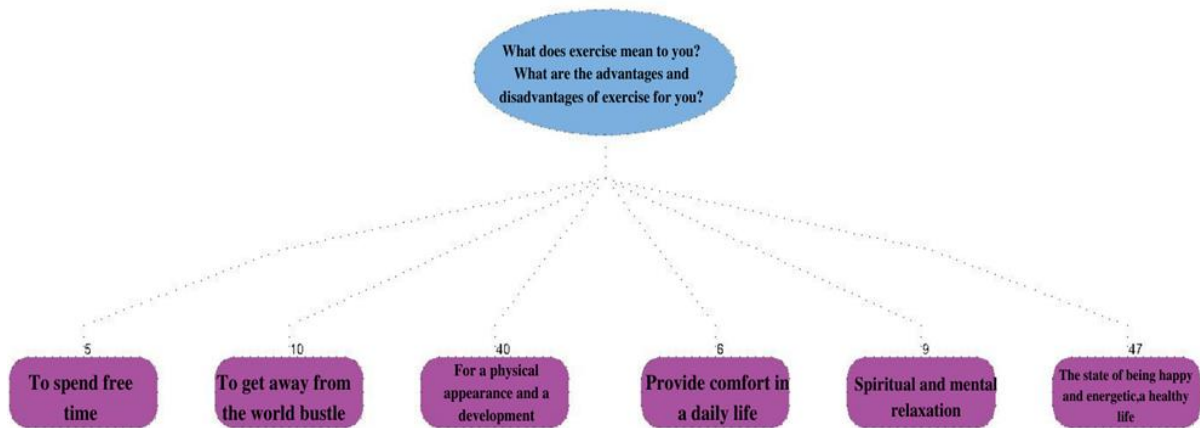
As can be seen in Figure 1, a difference was determined in the answers given by the fitness center members to this question. 47 of the fitness center members participating in the research answered as "To lead for a healthy life", 13 of them answered as "Recreational orientation", 5 of them answered as "Social interaction", 40 of them answered as "Physical development", 7 of them answered as "Environmental orientation" 5 answered as "To get a hobby". Some of the answers given by the fitness center members participating in the research regarding this question are as follows:

P19: I started to lead a healthier life in the future.

P31: I started attending karate and volleyball courses with the guidance of my mother and because I was interested.

P88: I started because of my weight and limitation of my mobility by it.

The question “*What does exercise mean to you? What are the advantages and disadvantages of exercise for you?*” were asked to the fitness center members. The answers to this question are given in the model below along with the number of people (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Model and number of people created for the second question

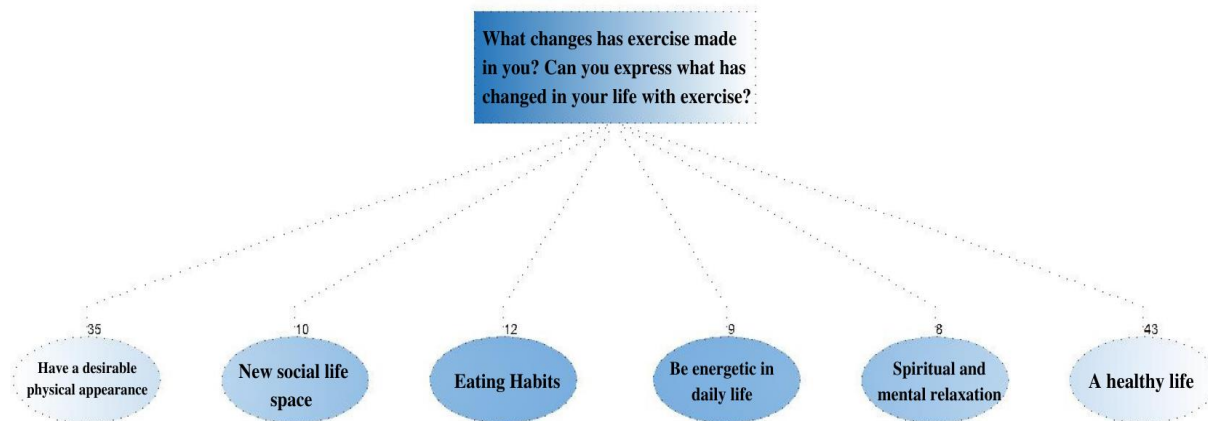
As can be seen in Figure 2, a difference was determined in the answers given by the fitness center members to this question. 5 of the fitness center members participating in the research answered as "To spend free time", 10 of them answered as "To get away from the world bustle", 40 of them answered as "For a physical appearance and development", 6 of them answered as "Provide comfort in daily life", 9 of them answered as "Spiritual and mental relaxation" 47 answered as "The state of being happy and energetic, a happy life". Some of the answers given by the fitness center members participating in the research regarding this question are as follows:

P3: Staying fit and energetic, keeping up with work and social life more easily

P39: Sport is to relieve the stress of the day for me.

P71: Exercising makes you feel more fit and alive. I become happier and more positive

The question "What changes has exercise made in you? Can you describe what has changed in your life with sports?" were asked to the fitness center members. The answers to this question are given in the model below along with the number of people (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Model and number of people created for the third question

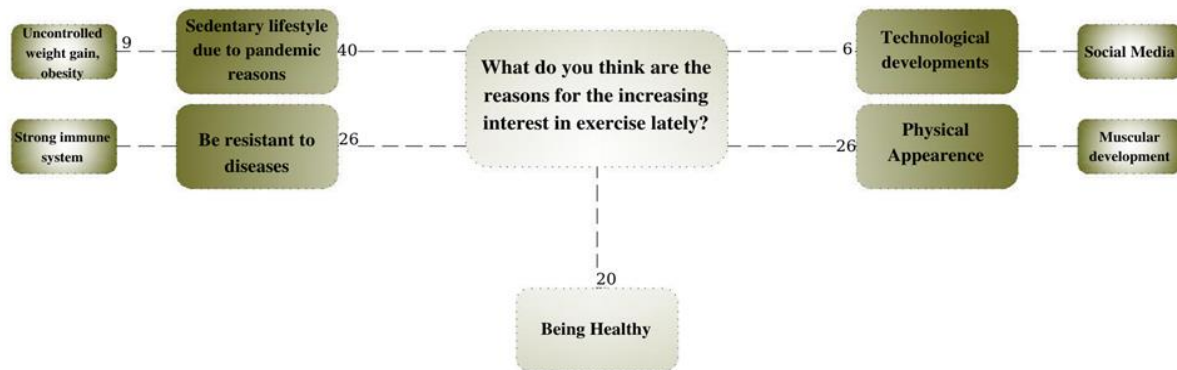
As can be seen in Figure 3, a difference was determined in the answers given by the fitness center members to this question. 35 of the fitness center members participating in the research answered as "To have a desirable physical appearance", 10 of them answered as "New social life", 12 of them answered as "Eating habits", 9 of them answered as "Be energetic in daily life", 8 of them answered as "Spiritual and mental relaxation" 43 answered as "A healthy life". Some of the answers given by the fitness center members participating in the research regarding this question are as follows:

P30: I lost weight, my diet is in order, when I do sports when I am in a bad mood or sleepy, I can feel better and continue my daily work.

P73: My appearance, my style of dressing and my ability to blend into society more easily have become better thanks to sports.

P103: When I do sports, I become more energetic, fit, confident, strong and positive. When I do not, I feel exhausted and weak.

The question "What do you think are the reasons for the increasing interest in exercise lately?" were asked to the fitness center members. The answers to this question are given in the model below along with the number of people (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Model and number of people created for the fourth question

As can be seen in Figure 4, a difference was determined in the answers given by the fitness center members to this question. 40 of the fitness center members participating in the research answered as "Sedentary life caused by pandemic reasons", 26 of them answered as "To be resistant to diseases", 26 of them answered as "Physical appearance", 20 of them answered as "Being healthy", 6 of them answered as "Technological developments". Some of the answers given by the fitness center members participating in the research regarding this question are as follows:

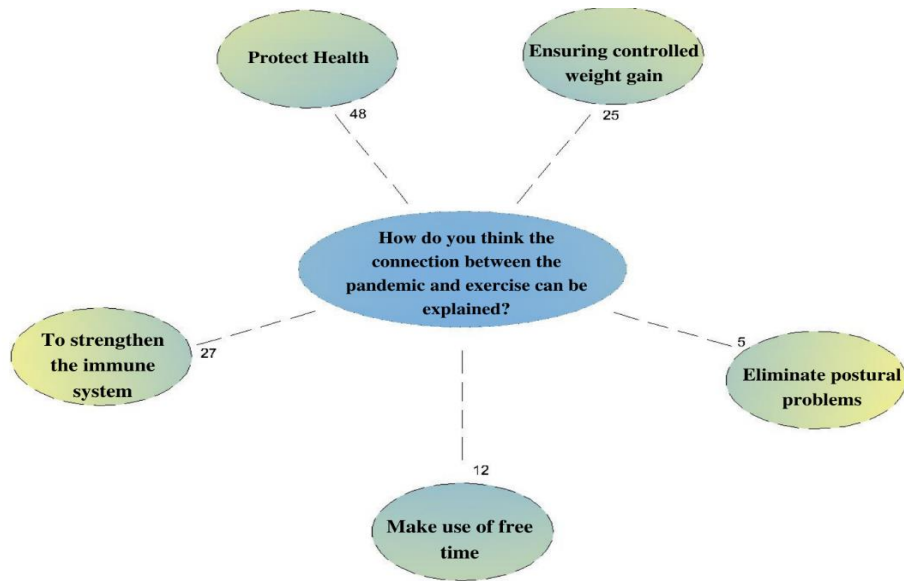
P6: Due to the pandemic, individuals had to spend a lot of time at home, which led to new searches. Since the importance of health has increased during the pandemic period and sport is an important factor in terms of health, interest in sports has increased.

P9: I think because of the pandemic, people took a little more time for themselves, they had a lot of free time. And obesity increased with a sedentary life, which increased the interest in sports.

P31: We were under quarantine for a while. And everyone was complaining about it. People's

movements were reduced. I think people feel powerless, especially when our muscles are not working. In addition, since sports affect our social environment, it is very natural for someone who has no friends to turn to sports.

The question “How do you think the connection between the pandemic and exercise can be explained?” were asked to the fitness center members. The answers to this question are given in the model below along with the number of people (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Model and number of people created for the fifth question

As can be seen in Figure 5, a difference was determined in the answers given by the fitness center members to this question. 27 of the fitness center members participating in the research answered as "To strengthen the Immune System", 48 of them answered as "Protecting health", 25 of them answered as "Providing Weight Gain in a Controlled Way", 12 of them answered as "Making use of free time", 5 of them answered as "Eliminate postural problems". Some of the answers given by the fitness center members participating in the research regarding this question are as follows:

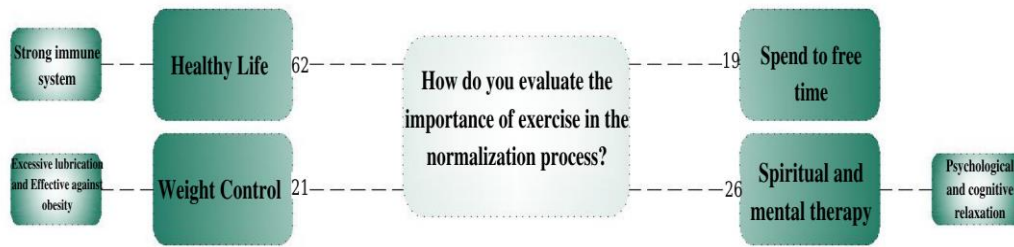
P9: Our immune system must be strong against the virus. Sports are also very effective in this regard.

P20: I was doing sports regularly before the pandemic. I think people give more importance to sports because of the pandemic. Because they have the problem of gaining weight from inactivity.

P53: Due to the pandemic, people were locked up at home and the muscles were melted due to inactivity, so sports became even more necessary.

The question “How do you evaluate the importance of exercise in the normalization process?” were asked to the fitness center members. The answers to this question are given in the model below along with the number of people (Figure 6).





**Figure 6.** Model and number of people created for the sixth question

As can be seen in Figure 6, a difference was determined in the answers given by the fitness center members to this question. 62 of the fitness center members participating in the research answered as "Healthy life", 21 of them answered as "Weight control", 26 of them answered as "Spiritual and mental therapy", 19 of them answered as "Spending free time". Some of the answers given by the fitness center members participating in the research regarding this question are as follows:

P1: It directs people to a healthier life. Staying sedentary at home and extra eating and drinking cause weight. This negatively affects our health.

P12: In the normalization process, there is a serious obesity and an irregular lifestyle in our country and of course in the world. This will cause many health problems.

P73: People gained weight by eating and drinking more than ever at home. If you want to continue in a healthy way, sports must be done during the normalization process. Metabolism must be regulated.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In this study, it is aimed to examine the reasons for the exercise tendency of the individuals participating in the research in terms of semantic, positive, and negative contributions within the framework of the pandemic and new normal age period. Accordingly, the findings obtained from the participants were discussed and interpreted in this section, and the research was tried to be supported by the research findings in the literature.

When the reasons for the participants in the research to turn to exercise are examined, it was determined that the members generally started to exercise in the context of a healthy life (N=47) and physical development expectation (N=40). Within the scope of other reasons, it was observed that the environment (N=7), social relations (N=5) and the ways to have a change (N=5) also affected exercise tendency. In addition, in line with the statements of some of the members, it has been determined that exercise is now seen as a recreational activity (N=13). In this sense, it can be said that the importance of healthy life has increased with the age of new normals, exercise has started to be used as a tool to get rid of the negative effects of life, and exercise has been preferred to make use of free time. In many studies in the literature, exercise has been associated with positive physical and mental health outcomes and a lower risk of death (Kahana et al., 2005; Leitzmann et al., 2007). Again, in parallel with the findings of the study, many studies have shown that exercise affects social relations positively (Delaney & Kearney, 2005). In addition, in the study conducted by Iliadis and Apteslis (2020), in

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addition to normal individuals, it was noted that special individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder socialized with physical education lessons and exercise, and their quality of life was improved.

It was determined that the majority of the members who attend the fitness center prefer sports for health (N=47) and visual beauty perception (N=40). On the other hand, it has been determined that other members of the minority tend to do sports as a way of getting away from problems (N=10), mental relaxation (N=9), increasing the quality of life (N=6) or leisure time activity (N=5). Accordingly, although the phenomenon of sports has different meanings for the members, it is noteworthy that there is a preference to get away from the negativities at the focal point. Johnson et al. (2020) emphasized that sport promotes and improves health and stated that sport is a popular leisure activity practiced with accepted tools. Walseth et al. (2017) stated that the identity structures of girls are affected by the dominant discourses of sports, health, and beauty in society, and in this sense, physical education is also effective on sports and health discourses. Based on this information, it can be said that sports are commonly associated with health and are also accepted as a leisure time activity in normal time now.

In another finding, the effects of exercise on the members were investigated, and it was determined that the majority of the participants started to reach a healthy life (N=43) and achieved the physical appearance they desired (N=35) after they turned to exercise. In addition, it was stated that some of the participants gained healthy eating habits (N=12), socialized (N=10), existed with positive energy in daily life (N=9) and reached both mental and spiritual calmness (N=8). Based on these views; It can be stated that exercise creates positive effects on individuals, their quality-of-life increases, and they gain awareness about sports. Similarly, in the study of Cerasola et al. (2022), it was noted that inactivity negatively affects anxiety, stress and chronic diseases, while physical exercise can improve health status and potentially optimize treatment strategies.

The answers of the majority of the participants to the question of the reasons for the increased interest in exercise were in the direction of sedentary life (N=40). Other reasons are listed as resistance to diseases (N=26), improvement in physical appearance (N=26), healthy life (N=20) and the effect of technology (N=6). For this finding, it can be said that the participants learned lessons from the effects of the pandemic and established a relationship between combating diseases and exercising. Supporting this finding; Malm et al. (2019) stated that physical activity and exercise have significant positive effects in preventing or alleviating mental illness, including depressive symptoms and anxiety or stress-related illnesses. Lakicevic et al. (2020) also reported that regular physical activity cannot be ignored in the therapeutic sense in the fight against non-communicable diseases.

When the relationship between pandemic and exercise was examined, most of the participants stated that exercise protects health during the pandemic period (N=48), similar to the answers they gave to other questions. Other participants stated that exercise increases the immune system during the

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pandemic period (N=27), is effective in maintaining weight control (N=25), provides an advantage at home in making use of free time (N=12) and eliminates postural problems (N=5). According to these findings, it can be said that individuals have established a positive relationship between the pandemic and exercise, and this awareness continues during the normalization period.

Studies in the literature support this finding by explaining that there is a positive relationship between the pandemic and exercise. Some study results are as follows; Zhang and Lee (2020) emphasized the relationship between physical activity and health, taking into account the increased sedentary lifestyle of children and obesity problems during the Covid 19 pandemic; Kartal (2021), stated that the students of the Faculty of Sports Sciences decreased their anxiety about catching the Covid 19 virus with their participation in physical activity; Kaur et al. (2020) stated that regular fitness training at home during quarantine helps individuals overcome psychological problems and fitness concerns. Ranasinghe et al. (2020) reported that the profound positive effects of exercise on immunity, and in particular innate immunity, justify current public health recommendations to promote physical activity during COVID-19; Sallis et al. (2021) also found that consistent meeting physical activity guidelines was strongly associated with a reduced risk of serious COVID-19 outcomes among infected adults.

When a question was asked to the fitness center members participating in the research about why exercise is important in the normalization process, the members' opinion was stated that exercise is an important factor in a healthy life. On the other hand, it has been stated that it prevents diseases such as obesity, provides weight stabilization, is a therapy and is an easily accessible leisure time activity. Accordingly, it has been determined that exercise is at the focal point of the participants' lives. It can also be said that the positive effects of exercise and the physical, mental and spiritual development of individuals in daily life have a serious effect on understanding the importance of exercise. Vancini et al. (2021), in their study examining the dynamics of scientific production on COVID-19 in a unique situation such as a pandemic, they reported that physical activity practice is necessary to improve or maintain physical and mental health.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As a result, it has been determined that the fitness center members participating in the research tend to exercise with various reasons. It is one of the undeniable facts that the pandemic has a great impact on the tendency to exercise. One of the most attractive reasons for this tendency, which started with the perception of quality life, was recorded as the protection from diseases. In addition; The effect of social media, social relations, spending time and mental relaxation factors has also attracted attention. In the end, it was concluded that individuals' tendency to exercise increased with various reasons and the common view focused on the "health theme".

## 6. SUGGESTIONS

It is important to carry out studies in which research groups are diversified and different factors are considered. For this reason, research can be carried out by taking into account the Faculty of Sports

## 7. ORIGINALITY

Based on the motto "Words fly, writing remains", it is important to record the reasons for the exercise tendency, which is on the agenda and frequently expressed, and to transfer it to future generations. In this context, although many studies have been conducted based on the pandemic period, it has been seen that there are not enough studies specifically on exercise tendency, which is constantly discussed both in social media and in field studies, and it has been decided to conduct this research. The research has preserved its originality, especially since it focuses on the era of new normals and face-to-face interviews are conducted with registered members of the fitness center.

## 8. LIMITATIONS

This research is limited to individuals who are members of NG Afyon Hotel's fitness center in Afyonkarahisar province during the pandemic period and normalization process.

## Author Contributions

The responsible author contributed to the method section of the work, the discussion and conclusion section, and the shape, layout, and design. The second author, the entry section, contributed to all regulations, including translation operations, and the third author contributed to data collection and the findings section.

## Ethics Declaration

This research was carried out with the approval of Afyon Kocatepe University "Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee" dated 17.09.2021 and decision numbered 2021/326.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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