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A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE EXERCISE EXPERIENCES, MOTIVATIONS, AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF WOMEN PRACTICING PILATES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore in depth the exercise experiences, motivations, and perceived physical and psychological benefits of women who practice Pilates. The study was conducted using a phenomenological design within the framework of a qualitative research approach. The study group consisted of a total of 17 female participants, selected through criterion sampling, who had been practicing Pilates regularly for at least three months. Data were collected face-to-face a semi-structured interview form and analyzed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis approach. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that the Pilates experience was organized under five main themes: initiation and preference dynamics, contextual mechanisms supporting continuity, perceived physical benefits, perceived psychological and subjective benefits, and transfer to and meaning-making in daily life. The findings indicate that participants initiated Pilates through social networks and external triggers; however, over time, the experience became internalized and transformed into a process of personal meaning-making. While instructor quality, group dynamics, and social support played a decisive role in sustaining continuity, physical benefits emerged as increased strength, flexibility, posture, and energy; and psychological benefits as reduced stress, emotional balance, and improved self-perception. Furthermore, it was observed that the Pilates experience gradually became integrated into participants' lifestyles and was associated with existential meaning-making. In conclusion, this study reveals that Pilates is not merely a form of physical exercise, but a multidimensional and process-oriented experience. The findings contribute qualitatively to theoretical models explaining the sustainability of exercise behaviors and highlight the importance of instructor quality and the social environment for practitioners.

Keywords: Pilates, phenomenology, thematic analysis, exercise experience, motivation, lifestyle.

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INTRODUCTION

Physical activity is a fundamental component in maintaining and improving individuals' health and has significant effects on both physical and psychological well-being. In addition to the positive effects of regular exercise on the musculoskeletal system, cardiovascular structure, and metabolic processes, it is known to provide psychosocial benefits such as reducing stress levels, improving mood, and enhancing quality of life (Şavkın, 2014). Acquiring exercise habits that individuals can sustain throughout their lives is of great importance for the protection and promotion of health. In this context, developing lifelong sustainable exercise habits is considered one of the fundamental components of preventive health services. It has been observed that sports activities positively affect individuals' body perception (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997). This improvement in body perception is directly related to self-esteem and psychological well-being. Pilates, one of the most preferred exercise programs today and developed by Joseph H. Pilates, has been shown to have positive effects not only on muscle and bone health but also on individuals' mental health (Tavşancıl, 2014).

In recent years, Pilates, which has become particularly widespread among women, offers a holistic approach based on the integration of mind and body. Pilates exercises are built on core principles such as control, concentration, centering, precision, and breathing, aiming to enhance individuals' physical and mental awareness. Studies have shown that Pilates has positive effects on flexibility, muscle strength, balance, and posture (Rogers & Gibson, 2009). Additionally, it has been reported that Pilates contributes to reducing stress levels, improving mood, and enhancing psychological well-being (Fleming et al., 2018). Pilates is an exercise system developed by Joseph Hubertus Pilates that aims at the holistic harmony of body and mind. This approach was defined by its founder as "contrology" and is based on performing movements consciously and in a controlled manner (Kloubec, 2010). In this respect, Pilates is not only an exercise that improves physical performance but also an intervention approach that supports holistic health.

The main purpose of the Pilates method is to support the circulatory system, increase physical fitness, improve flexibility, and enhance postural alignment. In addition, it contributes to the development of motor coordination by increasing body awareness in individuals. It has also been reported that Pilates exercises play a supportive role in injury prevention and rehabilitation processes and help reduce chronic pain (Mourrahy & Nielsen, 2016). Pilates is a systematic exercise program consisting of repetitive movements structured based on specific principles. Its adaptability to different age groups allows it to be practiced by a wide population (Srivastava, 2016). When examining participation and adherence to exercise, it is seen that individuals are influenced by physical, motivational, and psychosocial factors. Especially among women, participation in exercise is affected by components of intrinsic motivation (enjoyment, relaxation, feeling good) and extrinsic motivation (social support, environmental factors), and these factors are considered decisive in the sustainability of exercise behavior (Uslu, 2019). Furthermore, the social nature of the exercise environment strengthens individuals' sense of belonging and supports continuity in exercise. Specifically in Pilates, individuals experience this exercise not only as a physical activity but also as a process of mental relaxation and self-discovery. Qualitative studies have

shown that individuals practicing Pilates experience increased body awareness, feel more energetic, and cope more effectively with daily life stress (Caldwell et al., 2010). Additionally, in individuals with long-term exercise experience, Pilates becomes part of their lifestyle and integrates with their self-perception.

Graduate thesis studies conducted in Türkiye also support the multidimensional effects of Pilates on women. It has been reported that Pilates exercises increase physical fitness and quality of life in women (Yıldız, 2021), positively affect body perception and psychological well-being (Kara, 2020), and contribute to both physical and psychological changes in individuals who exercise regularly (Demir, 2019). Moreover, studies examining women's motivation for participating in exercise indicate that factors such as the desire for a healthy life, weight control, improvement in physical appearance, and coping with stress come to the forefront (Çelik, 2022). It is known that women's exercise experiences are not limited to individual factors but are also influenced by social and cultural contexts. Social roles, family responsibilities, time management, and economic conditions are among the important factors determining women's participation in and continuity of exercise. In this regard, examining women's exercise experiences in depth is considered important for understanding the multidimensional dynamics shaping this process (Uzun & Demir, 2020).

When the literature is reviewed, it is seen that although there are numerous quantitative studies on the physical and psychological effects of Pilates, qualitative studies addressing women's exercise experiences, motivations, and perceived benefits together are limited. However, understanding the meanings individuals attribute to exercise, along with their experiences and perceptions, is of critical importance for the sustainability of exercise behavior and the development of effective intervention programs. In this context, examining the exercise experiences, motivations, and perceived benefits of women who practice Pilates through a qualitative approach will contribute to filling this gap in the literature. This study is expected to make an original contribution to the literature by addressing women's exercise experiences from a holistic perspective. Accordingly, this study aims to examine in depth the exercise experiences, motivations, and perceived benefits of women who practice Pilates.

METHOD

Participants

The study group consisted of women who regularly participate in Pilates exercise. Participants were selected using the criterion sampling technique, one of the purposive sampling methods.

The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows:

- (i) engaging in regular Pilates practice for at least three months,
- (ii) participating in Pilates exercise at least two days per week,
- (iii) being 18 years of age or older, and
- (iv) volunteering to participate in the study.

In line with these criteria, a total of 17 female participants were included in the study. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation in qualitative research. As the interviews progressed, the data collection process was terminated when the generation of new data became limited and themes began to repeat.

Although the study group exhibited a homogeneous structure in terms of Pilates experience, it included diversity in terms of age and individual experiences.

Data Collection Process

The research data were collected through one-on-one face-to-face interviews conducted with the participants. The interviews were carried out at times convenient for the participants, and each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. With the informed consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and later transcribed into written text. The identities of the participants were kept confidential, and each participant was coded as P1, P2, P3, and so on. Throughout the research process, ethical principles were followed, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and voluntary participation was ensured.

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted to explore in depth the exercise experiences, motivations, and perceived physical and psychological benefits of women who practice Pilates. The study was conducted within the framework of a phenomenological design, which aims to reveal individuals' lived experiences related to a particular phenomenon and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. The research was structured from a perspective grounded in the interpretive dimension of the phenomenological approach and focuses on how participants make sense of their Pilates experience. In this context, the study is based on the phenomenological tradition that seeks to uncover the essence of lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). The research questions were designed to reveal common patterns of participants' experiences and the meanings they attribute to these experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained were analyzed in accordance with the reflexive thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). This approach provides a flexible and theoretically adaptable analytic process that allows for the systematic identification of patterns within qualitative data.

The analysis process was carried out in the following six phases:

1. Familiarization with the data (repeated reading of transcripts)

2. Generating initial codes
3. Constructing themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The coding process was conducted by the researcher, and the resulting codes were grouped according to their similarities to form sub-themes and main themes. Consistency across the data was ensured through the use of the constant comparison method during the analysis process. In this study, thematic analysis was used in conjunction with the phenomenological approach, allowing participants' experiences to be examined in terms of both content and meaning.

Validity and Reliability

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the qualitative research criteria proposed by Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba (1985) were taken into consideration:

Credibility

Participant statements were supported with direct quotations, and the findings were presented based on the data.

Transferability

The research process and participant characteristics were described in detail.

Dependability

The data analysis process was systematically reported, and the analysis steps were clearly specified.

Confirmability

Continuous comparison was conducted during coding and theme development to minimize researcher bias. Additionally, to enhance the auditability of the analysis process, an audit trail was maintained, and the resulting themes were reviewed by a field expert (Nowell et al., 2017).

Researcher Role and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is an active part of both the data collection and analysis processes. In this study, the researcher interacted with participants during data collection and adopted a reflexive approach in interpreting the data. While the researcher's field knowledge and experience contributed to making sense of the data, the analysis process was conducted carefully with an awareness of potential biases.

FINDINGS

The findings obtained in this study indicate that the Pilates experience is structured within a multidimensional framework. As a result of the thematic analysis applied to the data corpus, participants' experiences were organized under five main themes: (1) initiation and preference dynamics, (2) contextual mechanisms sustaining continuity, (3) perceived physical gains, (4) perceived psychological and subjective gains, and (5) transfer to daily life and meaning making.

Table 1. Theme Hierarchy

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Included Codes	Participants (n)
Initiation and Preference Dynamics	Social initiation triggers	Social/media-related triggers	8
	Personal readiness and alignment	Intrinsic motivation/autonomous initiation; search for suitable activity/fit; professional/instrumental motivation	8
	Expected benefits and problem-solving orientation	Health orientation; psychological coping motivation; body image concerns; weight management	16
Contextual Mechanisms Sustaining Continuity	Instructor and environmental facilitators	Instructor quality and support; studio/environment/group climate	17
	Relational facilitators	Social support and socialization	9
	Self-regulation and reward loop	Tangible benefits and observable progress; discipline/responsibility/habit formation; enjoyment/passion	14
Perceived Physical Gains	Bodily form and alignment	Strength-toning-shaping; posture/flexibility/body alignment	14
	Vitality and physiological relief	Energy-vitality; relief from pain/symptoms; breathing comfort	15
Perceived Psychological and Subjective Gains	Emotional regulation	Emotional well-being; stress reduction and emotional release	17
	Self-related gains	Self-confidence/self-esteem; self-care/personal time/self-discovery	10
Transfer to Daily Life and Meaning-Making	Transfer to daily life	Lifestyle transformation; dietary self-regulation	12
	Existential meaning-making	Personal meaning and value attribution	17

The theme hierarchy presented in Table 1 illustrates how this structure is distributed across sub-themes and codes. In particular, the sub-themes “instructor and environmental facilitators” (n = 17) and “emotional regulation” (n = 17) appear to be prevalent across the entire sample.

Process Model

The analytical model presented below illustrates the core process structure derived from the data corpus. The primary backbone of the model is a four-stage trajectory developed from your earlier question set; to this structure, two outcome domains and an additional lifestyle output layer have been incorporated in the present report.

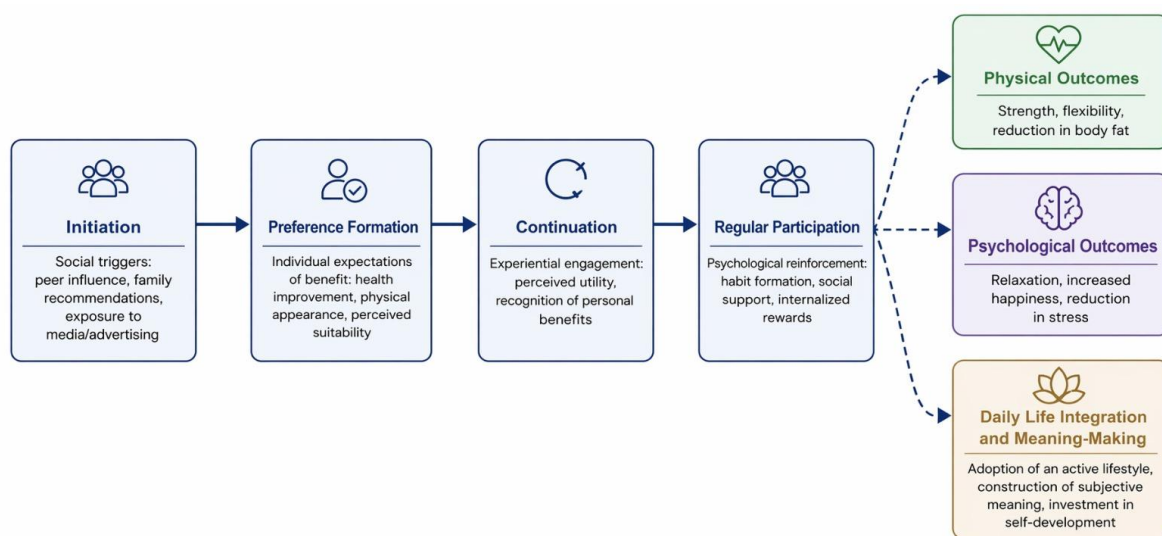


Figure 1. Process Model

As illustrated in Figure 1, this model enables Pilates participation to be interpreted as a behavioral process that is “socially initiated but individually internalized.” While initiation is driven by external triggers, continuation increasingly relies on experienced benefits; at the stage of regular participation, the instructor, group, and studio context evolve into a supportive structure that stabilizes this internalization.

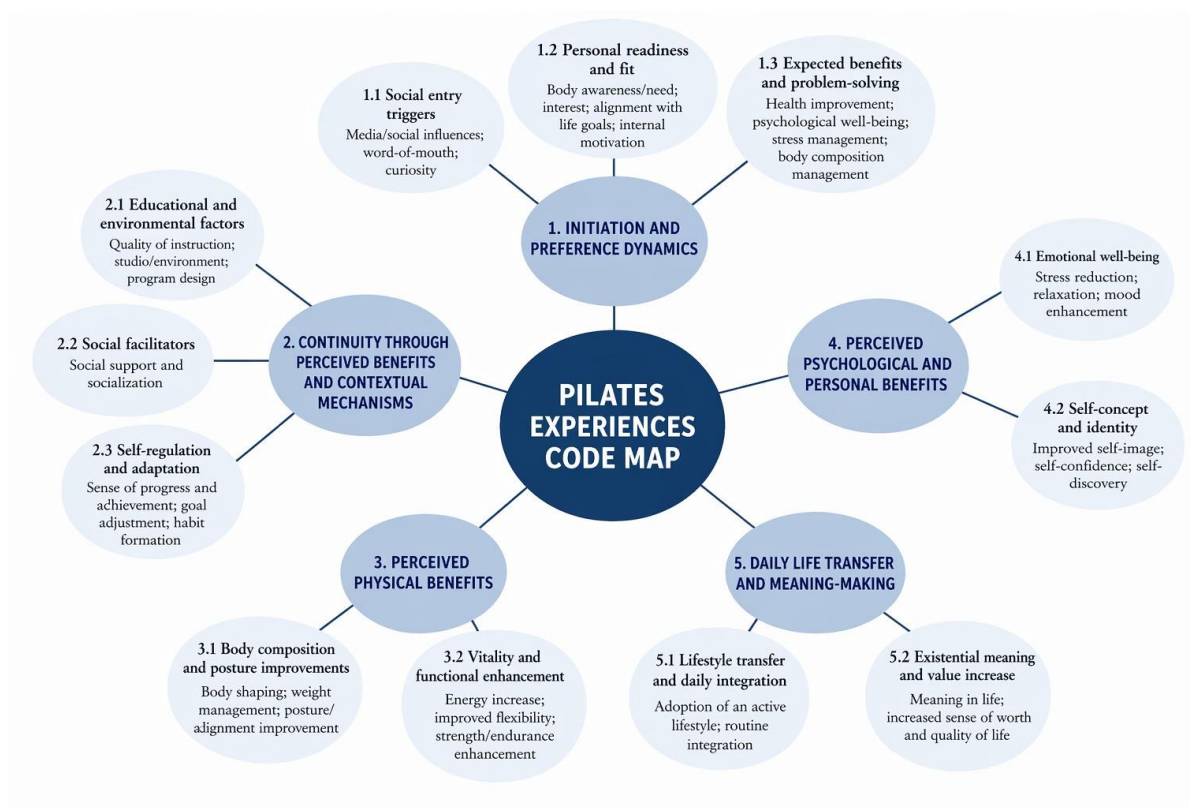


Figure 2. Code Map of the Pilates Experience

As presented in Figure 2, the thematic structure derived from the data corpus is illustrated as a holistic model. The model demonstrates that the Pilates experience is organized around five main themes: “initiation and preference dynamics,” “contextual mechanisms sustaining continuity,” “perceived physical gains,” “perceived psychological and subjective gains,” and “transfer to daily life and meaning-making.” These main themes are further elaborated through sub-themes and associated codes.

The first stage of the model, initiation and preference dynamics, explains participants’ processes of encountering and engaging with Pilates through social initiation triggers, personal readiness, and expected benefits. The second stage, contextual mechanisms sustaining continuity, reveals that regular participation is maintained through instructor-related factors, environmental conditions, social support, and self-regulation processes. In the third and fourth stages, the physical and psychological gains derived from the Pilates experience are positioned as distinct yet interrelated dimensions. In the final stage, these gains are transferred into daily life and are reconstructed through the attribution of personal meanings by individuals.

Overall, the model indicates that the Pilates experience progresses within a non-linear yet processual structure; participation that is initially driven by external triggers gradually evolves into an internalized, multidimensional, and meaning-laden life practice.

Initiation and Preference Dynamics

The theme of initiation and preference dynamics indicates that participants' processes of encountering and orienting toward Pilates are organized under three sub-themes: social initiation triggers (n = 8), personal readiness and alignment (n = 8), and expected benefits and problem-solving (n = 16). Social initiation triggers include guidance originating from friends, family, and media sources. Participant statements clearly reflect this pattern:

"We decided to come together with my friends." (P2), Upon my daughter's suggestion." (P1), I saw an advertisement and came." (P3). The sub-theme of personal readiness and alignment consists of the codes intrinsic motivation (n = 4), search for a suitable activity (n = 3), and professional/instrumental motivation (n = 1). Within this scope, some participants grounded their engagement with Pilates in individual preferences: "To engage in exercise based on my own volition." (P4) "I had wanted to do it for a long time." (P16).

The sub-theme of expected benefits and problem-solving (n = 16) emerges as the most prominent in terms of frequency. Within this sub-theme, the codes health orientation (n = 11), body image concerns (n = 9), and weight management (n = 8) were identified. Participant statements support this orientation: To lose weight in a healthy way." (P8) Being dissatisfied with my physical appearance" (P15) Toning up and improving mental health." (P1).

Overall, the findings suggest that participants' initiation into Pilates is largely shaped by social environmental influences, whereas their preferences are more strongly articulated in terms of health, body image, and individual needs.

Contextual Mechanisms Sustaining Continuity

The theme of contextual mechanisms sustaining continuity indicates that the factors underpinning participants' regular engagement in Pilates are organized under three sub-themes: instructor and environmental facilitators (n = 17), relational facilitators (n = 9), and self-regulation and reward loop (n = 14).

The sub-theme of instructor and environmental facilitators comprises the codes instructor quality and support (n = 16) and studio/environment/group climate (n = 8). Participant accounts clearly demonstrate the central role of the instructor and the exercise setting in sustaining regular participation:

"The instructor and seeing that it actually works." (P3) Experiencing its benefits and encountering a good instructor." (P10) Instructor and group motivation, stress relief, and feeling mentally well." (P17). The sub-theme of relational facilitators encompasses experiences of social support and socialization (n = 9). Within this dimension, group interaction and the formation of social bonds appear to reinforce continued participation Group motivation..." (P17). The sub-theme of self-regulation and reward loop (n = 14) consists of the codes observable progress/benefits (n = 10), discipline and responsibility (n = 7), and enjoyment and passion (n=6). Participant statements indicate that sustained engagement is closely associated with these components:

Discipline and visible improvement.” (P4) Seeing it as a responsibility and finding it enjoyable.” (P10) “The fact that it is a discipline that requires consistency” (P1). Overall, the findings suggest that regular participation in Pilates is shaped by a combination of instructor support, environmental and group-related factors, social interaction, and individually experienced progress and reinforcement mechanisms.

Perceived Physical Gains

The theme of perceived physical gains indicates that the physical outcomes associated with participants’ Pilates experiences are organized under two sub-themes: bodily form and alignment (n = 14) and vitality and physiological relief (n = 15).

The sub-theme of bodily form and alignment comprises the codes strength/toning/shaping (n=10) and posture, flexibility, and bodily alignment (n = 8). Participant accounts suggest that these gains are associated with both physical appearance and postural improvement:

“It improved the toning in my body and corrected my posture.” (P5) My muscle mass increased; I feel stronger and experienced fat loss.” (P15) Having a more flexible body; a reduction in lower back pain.” (P4). The sub-theme of vitality and physiological relief consists of the codes energy and vitality (n = 13) and relief related to pain, symptoms, and breathing (n = 7). Participant statements further support this dimension: It helped me breathe more comfortably.” (P1) I have a herniated disc and fibromyalgia; my pain has decreased.” (P16) “Thanks to stretching exercises, my body pain has decreased.” (P17).

Overall, the findings indicate that participants associate their Pilates experience with increased strength, enhanced flexibility, improved posture, elevated energy levels, and reductions in various physical complaints.

Perceived Psychological and Subjective Gains

The theme of perceived psychological and subjective gains indicates that the psychological outcomes associated with participants’ Pilates experiences are organized under two sub-themes: emotional regulation (n = 17) and self-related gains (n = 10).

The sub-theme of emotional regulation comprises the codes emotional well-being (n = 17) and stress reduction and emotional release (n = 13). Participant accounts indicate that Pilates is closely associated with psychological relaxation and emotional balance:

“It provided psychological happiness, relaxation, and a sense of well-being.” (P1) It reduces stress; after exercise, it brings relaxation and energy.” (P3) It helps regulate my inner peace, increases happiness, and reduces stress.” (P13). The sub-theme of self-related gains consists of the codes self-confidence and self-esteem (n = 6) and self-care, allocating personal time, and self-discovery (n = 6). Participant statements further support these gains: I feel more self-confident.” (P2) To regain my self-confidence.” (P13) I feel that I am doing something for myself.” (P16).

Overall, the findings suggest that participants associate their Pilates experience with psychological relaxation, reduced stress, enhanced emotional balance, and positive transformations in self-perception.

Transfer to Daily Life and Meaning-Making

The theme of transfer to daily life and meaning-making indicates that participants' reflections of their Pilates experiences in everyday life, as well as the meanings they attribute to this experience, are organized under two sub-themes: transfer to daily life (n = 12) and existential meaning-making (n = 17).

The sub-theme of transfer to daily life comprises the codes lifestyle transformation (n = 12) and dietary self-regulation (low frequency). Participant accounts suggest that Pilates is closely associated with daily routines and lifestyle habits: "I now have a more structured life and a higher quality of living." (P13) "I have definitely adopted an active lifestyle and a healthy eating routine." (P15) "My life has become more organized; my sense of responsibility toward exercise has increased." (P17).

The sub-theme of existential meaning-making encompasses the personal meanings and values attributed to Pilates by participants (n = 17). Participant statements further support this dimension: "It elevates my standards of living. (P1) It is an indispensable part of life." (P7) "It represents a second chance through which I rediscovered myself." (P13). Overall, the findings indicate that participants associate their Pilates experience with transformations in daily routines, lifestyle habits, and the construction of personal meaning.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the Pilates experience emerges not only as a form of physical exercise but also as a multi-layered structure encompassing psychosocial and existential dimensions. The findings reveal that participants' initiation into Pilates was mostly driven by external triggers (such as social environment and media), but over time, the experience became internalized and transformed into a process of personal meaning-making. When evaluated within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this finding supports the theoretical perspective that behaviors initially driven by external motivation may evolve into intrinsic motivation over time (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Findings related to initiation and preference dynamics indicate that participation in exercise is largely shaped by social interactions and health-oriented expectations. This is consistent with studies showing that exercise behavior has multidimensional determinants. The Theory of Planned Behavior, developed by Icek Ajzen in 1985, explains and predicts individuals' behaviors through their intentions, suggesting that actions are based on rational processes and perceived control. Within this framework, behavioral intentions are known to be associated with social norms, attitudes, and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991). In this study, the initial influence of the social environment is consistent with the social norm component of the theory.

When examining the contextual mechanisms that support continuity, it is evident that the role of the instructor and the exercise environment are central. The majority of participants identified instructor quality and group atmosphere as the main drivers of adherence. This finding aligns with the literature indicating that group-based exercise environments enhance participation. For instance, Carron et al. (2007) demonstrated that group

cohesion has a significant effect on exercise adherence. Similarly, Estabrooks and Carron (1999) emphasized that social support and group cohesion increase commitment to physical activity.

One of the notable findings of the study is that self-regulation and reward cycle mechanisms play a critical role in sustaining continuity. Participants' expressions such as "visible improvement" and "discipline" indicate that the behavior is maintained through reinforcement. This is consistent with Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, particularly the mechanisms of self-efficacy and behavioral reinforcement. The tangible benefits individuals gain from exercise create internal feedback mechanisms that support the of behavior.

Findings regarding physical benefits show that Pilates is particularly effective in improving posture, flexibility, and muscle strength. These results are consistent with systematic reviews demonstrating the positive effects of Pilates on muscle endurance, flexibility, and balance. For example, Wells et al. (2012) reported significant improvements in muscle strength and flexibility, while Kloubec (2010) highlighted positive effects on body composition and posture.

In terms of psychological benefits, the findings indicate that Pilates has strong effects on reducing stress, promoting emotional balance, and enhancing well-being. This aligns with the extensive literature demonstrating the positive impact of physical activity on psychological well-being. Studies in the field of exercise and mental health show that regular exercise reduces levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Rebar et al., 2015). The findings of this study suggest that Pilates is not only a physical activity but also a powerful tool for psychological regulation.

One of the most original contributions of this study is the dimension of transfer to daily life and existential meaning-making. Participants' association of Pilates with concepts such as "lifestyle," "self-discovery," and "a second chance" indicates that exercise is linked to identity and the construction of life meaning. This finding supports studies addressing the effects of exercise on quality of life and subjective well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Furthermore, when evaluated from the perspective of embodied cognition, it suggests that bodily experience is integrated with cognitive and emotional processes. Embodied cognition posits that mental processes are closely connected with bodily experiences and environmental interactions, emphasizing that thinking is not solely confined to the brain but also involves the body, senses, and movement (Farina, 2021).

Overall, this study shows that the Pilates experience does not follow a linear pattern but progresses within a cyclical and process-oriented structure. A process that begins with external motivations gradually becomes internalized and integrated into individuals' life practices. In this respect, the study provides a strong qualitative contribution to theoretical models explaining the sustainability of exercise behaviors.

The study revealed that the Pilates experience exhibits a multidimensional structure and that individuals make sense of this experience at physical, psychological, and existential levels. Based on the findings, the following conclusions were reached.

1. The initiation of Pilates is mostly shaped by social environmental influences, whereas continuity is maintained through individual experience and intrinsic motivation.
2. Instructor quality and the exercise environment are the most critical determinants of sustained participation.
3. Pilates provides not only physical benefits but also strong psychological and emotional gains.
4. Over time, the exercise experience becomes integrated into individuals' lifestyles and transforms into a process of meaning-making.

SUGGESTIONS

In line with these results, the following recommendations can be proposed for practice and future research

Recommendations for practitioners:

- Instructor quality and communication skills should be prioritized and improved in Pilates programs.
- Social interaction environments that strengthen group dynamics should be established.
- Feedback mechanisms that make participants' progress visible should be systematized.

Recommendations for researchers:

- This study is limited to a qualitative design; future studies should test the model using quantitative methods.
- Comparative studies should be conducted with different age groups and male participants.
- The long-term effects of Pilates on behavioral change should be examined through longitudinal designs.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Pilates is not merely a type of exercise but a holistic experience that reconstructs individuals' lives. In this respect, the study makes an original contribution to the sports science literature, particularly in the context of exercise experience, motivation, and lifestyle transformation.

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