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What Motivates Highly Active Mothers? A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Background

Physical inactivity is a major global health concern linked to high mortality rates.² Extensive research demonstrates the role of physical activity (PA) in enhancing overall well-being, longevity, and disease prevention.²⁻⁴ Mothers living with children face significant challenges in pursuing PA.⁵

Purpose

This qualitative research uses Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which examines how individual motivation and satisfaction with physical activity are shaped by personal experiences and beliefs, in the context of highly active mothers.

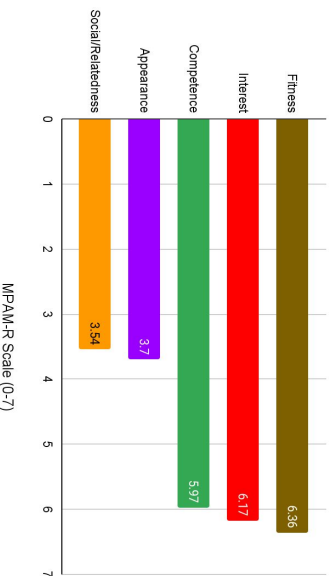
Methods

Participants (n=5) were screened for their physical activity levels using the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ) and were deemed eligible based on meeting the criteria for moderate to high activity levels. Participants engaged in at least 30 minutes of moderate-vigorous PA daily on at least five days of the week. Participants completed the Motives for Physical Activities Measure - Revised (MPAM-R) and the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNFS) and participated in semi-structured interviews which were subsequently coded for psychological satisfaction, psychological frustration, competence, fitness, autonomy, social/relatedness, interest and appearance. Any disparities in coding between researchers were subject to discussion and analysis, ultimately leading to a consensus on the final code.

Results

Based on coding frequency from the interviews, participants collectively expressed greater psychological satisfaction (32) than frustration (19). Coding further reveals the following motivational themes in order of magnitude: Competence (80), Fitness (49), Autonomy (46), Social/Relatedness (45), Interest (40), and Appearance (18). MPAM-R scores indicated high satisfaction across Fitness (6.36), Interest (6.17), Competence (5.97), Appearance (3.7), and Social (3.52). BPNFS outcomes consistently favored psychological satisfaction over frustration in Autonomy ($r=0.57$), Relatedness ($r=0.634$), and Competence ($r=0.63$).

Motivational Themes From MPAM-R Survey



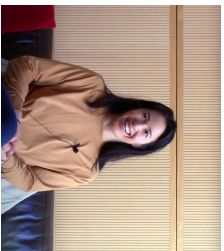
Interviews



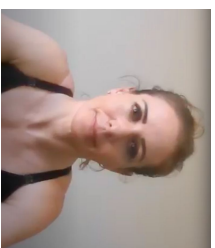
"I just want to be healthy for me. I want to be healthy for my kids. I want them to see that I make this a priority even if it is hard every single day to get up at 4:00 in the morning, and then I want people to look at like, okay, she makes herself a priority."



"It's really important for me to model like physical activity as just a normal part of life and not something that's a chore, something that is done for enjoyment and I think I've done a good job because my kids seem to really like to be active."



"I would definitely say prioritize yourself you are 100% worth it and if you can prioritize yourself and make yourself feel good I think you have far more to offer your family and your kids, whether that's mental or physical or whatever it is but figuring out a way to prioritize yourself."



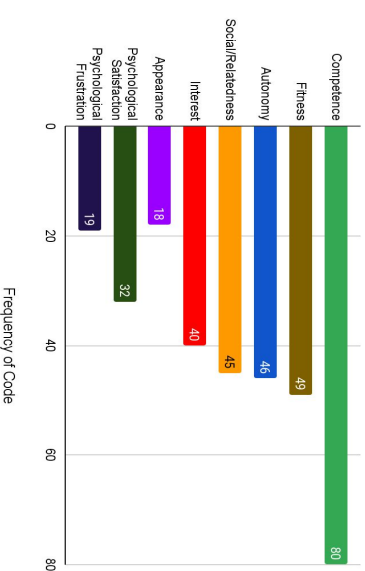
"With my first son, I put him absolutely first and didn't have enough energy for him because my cup was empty. With my second son, I am putting myself first and prioritizing self-care."



"I get a lot of stress reduction working out. A good morning workout allows me to hit the ground running when I get to work."

Results

Sum of Coding Frequency From Interviews



Discussion

Findings from survey data and interviews demonstrate the importance of competence as a key motivator for highly active mothers. In addition to the desire to be fit and lead a healthy life, mastery of specific activities and the habits needed for consistent participation emerged as a key finding. Additionally, participants frequently stated the importance of self-care as a prerequisite for care of their children. Surprisingly, participants self-reported and expressed higher levels of frustration compared to past cohorts. Despite such frustration, these highly active mothers expressed more satisfaction than frustration in both the questionnaire and in interviews, suggesting motivation and ability to overcome obstacles and maintain high levels of PA. While our study offers valuable insights, the small sample size limits the generalizability of our findings. Future research with larger and more diverse samples can improve understanding of motivational factors. Comparative research across different demographics might target care to specific needs.

Conclusion

Clinicians working with mothers should be aware of the challenges that prevent engagement in PA and provide resources to overcome them. Our findings suggest that clinicians should promote the value of self-care and provide opportunities for mastery of PA.

References

