An exploratory study on decision-making processes of fitness training professionals in curating exercise programs

Jesslyn Choon Peng Oi*

Graduate School of Business, SEGi University, Petaling Jaya, 47810, Malaysia, sukd1901103@Segi2u.my

*Corresponding Author email: jess@robozeman.com

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ABSTRACT

Fitness training professionals (FTPs) are widely in demand by both commercial fitness centers and individual people. In commercial fitness centers, they serve their clientele in one-to-one personal training sessions and group settings. Despite the widespread reach and demand of these professionals, there is no standardized path to enter Malaysia's fitness industry. The resulting inconsistency of services rendered creates among the biggest concerns for their customers. It is not clear to the public what knowledge and skills are applied when FTPs conduct safe and correct exercises. Furthermore, there is a lack of an integrative framework for studying strategic decisions made in the professional fitness industry. Therefore, this study's main objective is to examine the decision-making processes of FTPs used in curating exercise programs with the use of the Cognitive Continuum Theory (CCT) and the Strategic Decision-Making Model (SDMM). This study attempts to contribute a new framework to study FTPs' decision-making processes. Additionally, this framework may help FTPs promote and justify injury-free physical activity for fitness enthusiasts and the general public.

Keywords: Fitness Professionals; Decision-Making; Exercise Program Curation; Cognitive Continuum Theory; Strategic Decision-Making Model

1. INTRODUCTION

Fast-growing fitness trends worldwide have enormously benefitted fitness centers and fitness professionals. As one of the stakeholder groups, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified Fitness Training Professionals (FTPs) to play an essential role in promoting physical activity services to the public (World Health Organization, 2018). The increasing awareness of health benefit through regular exercise coupled with economic growth, has promoted FTPs' excellent job opportunity across first-world and second-world countries. In Malaysia, the fitness market is relatively young, though it has multiplied in the past 5 to 10 years (The Edge, 2012). Many large and small commercial fitness centers have sprouted and created many job opportunities for new talents of all ages. The International Health, Racquet & Sports club Association (IHRSA) (2018) affirms that there are about 400 commercial fitness centers in Malaysia as of the year 2017. Most commercial fitness centers, and the highest demand for fitness services, are concentrated in the Greater Kuala Lumpur region; therefore, the fitness industry is becoming more competitive.
The competitive fitness environment forces fitness organizations to look for ways to better their services and motivate and satisfy members through their workforce (Foroughi et al., 2019; Molanorouzi et al., 2015; Teik, 2015). Malaysian regulations prevent fitness centers from selling memberships longer than 12 months in duration. This policy protects members from any potential loss caused by club bankruptcy or default. However, Malaysian consumers remain less aware of such regulation but were attracted to a forbidden multi-year or lifetime memberships (Singh, 2017b). A large portion of their workforce, and therefore success in the competitive atmosphere, lies in the quality of their hired FTPs. In general, it is easy to have a career as an FTP because there is no one governing body that provides regulation for the fitness sector (Waryasz et al., 2016).

Moreover, there is an absence of a standardized professional path for FTPs to practice. This issue holds for many aspects of this country's industry (Singh, 2017a). Currently, the qualification requirements for staff recruitment in fitness centers vary widely across chains and branches. However, the public's professional image of FTPs varies based on individual fitness qualification, execution of the exercise, and professional profile and competencies (Rosado et al., 2014).

Studies examining FTPs' qualifications, skills, and knowledge have discussed these to be essential credentials for ensuring service quality and exercise effectiveness (Burkow-Heikkinen, 2009; Malek et al., 2002; Markula & Chikinda, 2016; Melton & Dail, 2010). Nevertheless, there has been a dearth of focus on how FTPs use their knowledge and skills to help their members deliver safe, balance, and adequate exercise guidance (Ladwig et al., 2017). According to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) guidelines, certified fitness professionals should prescribe a customized exercise program for every individual based on demographic and personal needs. Therefore, FTPs' expertise is closely related to their abilities to curate and conduct exercise programs effectively. Studies have acknowledged that current literature has not adequately investigated the level of competencies displayed in prescribing exercise programs among FTPs (De Lyon et al., 2017; Ekkekakis et al., 2015). A study is needed to study FTPs' decision-making processes in curating exercise programs for commercial fitness center members in Malaysia to address this gap.

It is against this backdrop that this study explores FTPs' judgments and decisions when curating exercise programs for members. This study uses the Cognitive Continuum Theory (CCT) by Hammond1996 and the Strategic Decision Making Model (SDMM) (Papadakis et al., 1998) as theoretical frameworks. This paper poses two questions: (1) what are the decision-making processes of FTPs in curating exercise program for members? and (2) to what extent FTPs are likely to change the way exercise program is curated? Identifying the processes and constructs will allow FTPs to ensure their continued sustainability and professionalism. Also, it provides valuable insights for the sector to continue supporting the public health challenges. This study is the first attempt to investigate decision-making processes in exercise program prescription in the fitness industry with the lens of CCT.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. FITNESS INDUSTRY BACKGROUND

According to IHRSA, the Asia Pacific region's fitness market has displayed constant growth for many years (IHRSA, 2018). IHSRA is a not-for-profit health and fitness trade association based in the United States of America and founded in 1981. IHRSA plays the role of increasing access to physical activity and sets the global health and fitness industry's pace and standard. In Malaysia, the commercial fitness industry is growing with a market penetration rate of around only 1% to 2% (The Malaysian Reserve, 2017). Data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia shows that ischemic heart diseases, pneumonia, and cerebrovascular diseases were the top three causes of death in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). The risk for all three of the listed health conditions can be reduced with healthy eating and regular physical activity. This situation indicates there is a sizeable untapped market for the fitness sector to enrich public health and lifestyle.

Like many other countries, commercial fitness centers in Malaysia have conquered urban and suburban spaces (Florida & Boone, 2018; Rosman, 2019). People of all ages head to commercial fitness centers to exercise for various reasons, to receive supervision and support during workouts, to nurse specific injuries or health conditions, to learn correct techniques to improve fitness and stamina or to supplement and enhance their recreational activities (Berkow-Heikkinen, 2009; Doğan, 2015; Paoli & Bianco, 2015). There is a plethora of evidence for improved physical and psychological wellbeing through exercise. Schwink (2014) found that physical fitness is directly linked to better mental health, better academic performance, improved memory, greater independence in old age, higher life expectancy, and higher quality of life. Paoli & Bianco (2015) reviewed a systematic article that practicing fitness positively affects children, adults, and the elderly in improving cardiovascular fitness, improving physiological condition, reducing fat mass, and increasing insulin sensitivity. They also found that older women who do regular strength training can prevent osteoporosis (Paoli & Bianco, 2015). Other researchers such as Molanorouzi et al. (2015), Saayman & van der Merwe (2018), Zervou et al. (2017) have studied exercise motives for adult participation in physical activities for various reasons.

2.2. ROLES OF FITNESS TRAINING PROFESSIONALS (FTPs)

Current rapid fitness industry growth has created a new employment landscape for emerging FTPs in the fitness industry. Moustakas et al. recognize a broad range of occupational job titles as FTPs, including but not limited to fitness class programmer, group fitness (GX) specialist, personal fitness trainer, fitness specialist, fitness consultant, and any coach that delivers diverse exercise programs (Moustakas et al., 2020). A more specific classification or definition for FTPs would include paid personal fitness skilled workers who curate and teach either individual or group exercise programs for their members (Gavin, 1996; Malek et al., 2002)

FTPs are an accessible source of exercise instruction, content, and supervision to fitness center members (De Lyon et al., 2017; Maguire, 2001; Melton et al., 2011). They support
members in developing realistic exercise goals, designing, modeling correct exercise protocols, and monitoring progress against goals (Wayment & McDonald, 2017). Noticeably, FTPs play an essential role as a group of workforce and stakeholders to serve members in physical activities and designing exercise protocols and instructions (Guthold et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2018).

2.3. Problem Statements

Upon recognizing FTPs' vital societal role and the opportunity to profit from the current fitness trend, many people have taken different qualification paths to be "certified" as fitness professionals. The lack of standardization has set the entrance barrier for new incoming FTPs low. Each fitness organization sets its own culture and guides (García-Fernández et al., 2014), and there is no consensus about the qualification and training requirements of FTPs. The growing widespread numbers of self-proclaimed "fitness professionals" have created the need to assure the public that they are adequately qualified. Like in many countries, no one elected governing regulatory body provides regulation for the Malaysian fitness industry. Therefore, it seems advantageous to individuals to fast-track fitness qualifications where an individual can be certified overnight or with a short course (Hoffman, 2014; Melton et al., 2008; Waryasz et al., 2016). It would appear then that growth in opportunities for fitness professionals has caused difficulties in the fitness sector. In particular, they are critiquing fitness professionals' specialized competency and source of their knowledge. Fig. 1 shows a visualization of the research problem in a flow chart diagram.

![Flow Chart Diagram](image-url)

**Fig. 1.** Research Problem
Generally, commercial fitness centers provide personal training and group exercise training alongside the self-training in the gym. Personal training (PT) is often the second-largest source of revenue for centers. And in many smaller centers, personal training is their primary source of income. According to the National Strength and Conditioning Association (ASCA)’s Scope of Practice for an NSCA certified personal trainer, each personal training professional should be equipped to use an individualized approach, evaluate, motivate, teach and train members regarding their health and fitness desires (National Strength and Conditioning Association, 2017). On the other hand, group training (GX) is a structured program to cater to a group of members. The group programs are different and designed for different fitness levels of members. Nevertheless, fitness professionals teaching PT and GX apply different professional knowledge and skills (Jankauskiene & Pajaujiene, 2018; Kouvelios, 2003; Ku & Hsieh, 2020).

It is generally agreed that a certified fitness professional should possess the knowledge to individualize an exercise program to cater to a variety of members (Florida & Boone, 2018; Thompson, 2018). Proper certification is encouraged for the FTP because it assures the member that their fitness expert has completed a professional training curriculum (Fischer & Bryant, 2008; Markula & Chikinda, 2016; Rupp et al., 1999). However, studies showed that certifying organizations lack quality and rigor. The uncertainly results in the production of falsely credentialed FTPs released for practice. The weak credentials can significantly impact designing and teaching exercise programs (Melton & Dail, 2010).

Due to the time length and high cost of a degree-based professional program, many trainers opt for shorter credentialing courses (Hoffman, 2014; Rupp et al., 1999). As with most commercial industries, a certificate course's quality is often positively related to the cost. Specific certification courses are incredibly stringent and provide high quality, while others require only paying a fee and taking an exam (Cardinal & Cardinal, 2015). Therefore, there are mixed results in the professional preparation of exercise science students to ensure a competent professional to accommodate diversity among members (Melton & Dail, 2010). Research findings from De Lyon & Cushion (2013) indicated that formal training and accreditation pathways do not equip fitness professionals with appropriate competency for their daily work. Instead of attaining one-time formal career qualifications, FTPs' knowledge and skill acquisition journal should be dynamic, social, and continuing.

Little exploration has been conducted to find how FTPs obtain and incorporate their skills and knowledge into their practice (Akerson, 2014; Stacey et al., 2010). However, a study found out that less than half of FTPs access and incorporate high-quality knowledge and information (Bennie, Wiesner, van Uffelen, Harvey, & Biddle, 2017). Studies have proved that low-quality knowledge sources can feed unscientific exercise information and introduce unreliable and risky exercise protocols to FTPs. Furthermore, unknown exercise and guidance sources cause knowledge misconceptions of fitness professionals (Jolley et al., 2018, 2020).

As the fitness industry is not well-regulated, the state makes weak enforcement efforts to ensure specific standards are met (Goh, 2019; Singh, 2017a). The fragile enforcement situation allows members who consume exercise-related services to safeguard their
welfare and decide their choice of FTPs. Evaluating the certificate program, however, may be as important as assessing the FTPs. Many FTPS was not certified by a reputable educational organization that provides learners' experiences and effectively sets their knowledge. The ultimate consequence is the potential for incompetent FTPs practicing in fitness facilities and potentially harming members through ineffective exercise guidance, negative exercise experiences, and injury (Miller, 2015; Rawson et al., 2017). The unprofessional workforce would cause the public to view all fitness professions as subspecialists (Anderson et al., 2010; Melton et al., 2010). As a result, it is difficult for fitness members to predict FTPs' competency in prescribing safe and accurate exercise programs.

Most of the commercial fitness centers' primary revenue source is from membership and membership dues (IHRSA, 2018). Fitness centers have to recruit enough new members and keep existing members satisfied to secure their profitability and existence. Researchers discovered that age, gender, and psychological needs affect members' choices for exercise participation. Teik (2014) studied members' needs based on individual satisfaction with program quality, interaction quality, outcome quality, and physical environment quality. To create high service quality, FTPs should have the industry knowledge and professional judgment to serve members (Parviainen, 2018; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). Following this line of research and particularly the importance of providing high-quality fitness offers a wide range of members, FTPs are called to be better aligned with the health sector to work with special populations such as older people and people with non-communicable diseases (Moustakas et al., 2020).

Seemingly, decision-making in curating exercise programs is a progressive valued component in helping fitness center members to achieve goals (Bennie et al., 2017). There is a wide variety of FTP competencies, but there is a void to explore decision-making processes when curating exercise programs for their members (De Lyon & Cushion, 2013; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). Besides technical competency, provided by their certifiable education, there are four other core competencies associated with sports management. These four are FTP’s self-competence, social competency, methodological competency, and sport management competency (Fahrner & Schütto, 2019). Apart from having the responsibility to advocate and raise awareness to barriers to physical activity, FTPs have the duty of care not to increase the risks that are inherent to exercise and participating in fitness programs (Melton et al., 2010; Melton & Dail, 2010; Melton et al., 2008). Therefore, FTPs should play a pivotal role in assessing and monitor members' health and fitness (Bennie et al., 2018).

Decision-making is an indispensable component of FTPs' duty when training members (Foroughi et al., 2019; Markula & Chikinda, 2016; Moustakas et al., 2020; Rupp et al., 1999). But research showed that most FTPs were unprepared to functions effectively as fitness professionals (De Lyon & Cushion, 2013; Melton et al., 2008). Despite many notable research efforts, few have made headway in resolving FTPs’ competencies in practice. Although the literature on the decision-making processes of health and clinical professionals is extensive, data on how FTPs make decisions about implementing these practices is limited (Bennie et al., 2017; Jolley et al., 2020; Nutt, 2011). Given the exhibited complexity in the fitness industry, locus of responsibility of physical activity for the members, and formal education
background of FTPs, understanding how FTPs make decisions with respective experience may elucidate specific constructs relevant to commercial fitness centers.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper poses two research questions: (1) what is the decision-making processes of FTPs in curating exercise program for members? and (2) to what extend FTPs are likely to change the way exercise program is curated? To answer these two research questions, the researcher plans to conduct a qualitative research methodology with a deductive approach.

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

A guiding framework is a research blueprint likened to a foundation for building a house. It provides essential support for the research and clarifies the research context. The guiding framework is encompassed of components and sources of elements identified from the Cognitive Continuum Theory (CCT) (Hammond, 1981, 1996) and the Strategic Decision-Making Model (SDMM) (Papadakis et al., 1998). To ensure a vibrant flow of study to obtain meaningful data to answer research questions, this research integrates and adopts CCT and SDMM to form a theoretical framework. Refer to Fig. 2 for the theoretical framework used to explore FTPs decision-making processes when curating exercise programs for members.

![Strategic Decision Making Processes](image)

**Strategic Decision Making Processes**

### TASK and COGNITION

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<tr>
<th>Formulation</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
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<td>Analytical and Intuition</td>
<td>Monitoring</td>
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<td>Politic and Power</td>
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**Qualification, Experience, Skills, and Knowledge**

**Lens of CCT**

- Quality results
- Injury free
- Popular
- Acclaimed
- Trust

**Outcome**

*Fig. 2. A theoretical framework to study decision-making processes*
The theoretical framework shows the formulation and implementation components that FTPs employ when deciding on various tasks and modes. In the research framework, the CCT is applied as a lens to understand and assess several constructs in management judgment and decision making when formulating and implement exercise programs for members.

3.2. Research Scope

Taking the constructivist worldview, the researcher's approach to the study the topic in a qualitative method and design (Creswell, 2018). FTPs from commercial fitness centers in the Greater Kuala Lumpur region are used as the unit of analysis. To explore the processes of FTPs' decision-making on curating effective exercise programs, one to one interviews will allow the researcher to capture data in the form of expression by the interviewees relating to their experiences, opinions, and phenomena (Merriam, 2009).

The researcher plans to use purposive sampling for six commercial fitness centers in Greater Kuala Lumpur. The sample will consist of six managers or supervisors, six senior FTPs, and six junior FTPs. A semi-structured and in-depth interview uses open-ended questions that seem the most suitable dialog structure to explore and understand participants' experiences, opinions, feelings, perceptions, and knowledge (Rosenthal, 2016). Another reason for applying the semi-structured interview is the flexibility of items, guided by some questions to break the ice at the beginning of each meeting. The researcher will be the primary interviewer, and interview sessions will be 30 minutes to one-hour long. Interviews are the primary method to collect data, and the observation will be supplementary to the interview. All the interview sessions will be voice recorded for verbatim transcription. Qualitative data will be analyzed with theory-driven data analysis to look for themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020).

4. Conclusion

The study has several goals and direct fitness industry implications. First, it aims to reveal fitness professionals' decision-making processes in curating exercise programs for commercial fitness members. The research will have theoretical and practical contributions to decision-making research and its interconnections with fitness and exercising. To date, no study has explored the cognition of fitness professionals when undertaking exercise teaching and supervisory roles with CCT. The adaption of CCT by including information systems’ impact on task and cognition fill the academic gap (Dhami & Thomson, 2012). Next, the study hopes to provide fitness management insights. It would reveal how FTPS choose exercise programs between the technical or analytic and intuition cognition continuum based on their experience and knowledge. Integrating explicit decision-making processes into managing members' exercise program development can likely increase the use of goal setting and critical thinking and, in practice, may lead to further tool development.

Lastly, the study aims to extend the knowledge of FTPs through a new framework. The new framework would highlight FTPs' competencies in the decision-making processes when they curate exercise programs. The new framework would give a hands-on guide instead
of a cookie-cutter template for exercise programming. Furthermore, this new framework will explain decision-makers’ logic, cognition, and judgment in implementing safe and effective exercise. Through this study, complex relationships between professionals, members, professional knowledge, competencies, and tools in which exercise programs are developed and implemented will be clarified, thus distinguished insights for this occupation.

Reference:


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everyone/2017/06/29/the-truth-about-fitness-centres-while-some-gyms-offer-a-wide-range-of-facilities-and-services-for-or


