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**Exploring customer experience  
journey of participants in the Fit4Life  
project at Monaliiku**

## ABSTRACT

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Research on customer journeys has been utilized to explore the experiences customers encounter before, during, and after acquiring goods or services. This thesis investigated such an experience journey of participants in the project Fit4Life at Monaliiku, an organization striving to promote the health and well-being of immigrant women through sports and physical activities. The study was designed to understand the participants' motivations and thoughts behind the decision to participate in the exercise program, their experiences during participation, and the reasons for retention.

Qualitative analysis through semi-structured interviews was applied to gain insights into the experiences of four participants who had been participating in the program for one to eight years. Interview data were analyzed using thematic coding to reveal themes relating to the experiences in three journey stages: pre-participation, participation, and future participation.

The analysis of themes in the pre-participation stage revealed a decision process led by the primary motivation of relieving current perceived physical, mental, and social health issues and influenced by various individual, social, and structural factors. In the next stages, the data showed a smooth transition between initial and ongoing participation and overall satisfaction with different activities and benefits from the program. The satisfactory aspects included the program structure and delivery, participant-staff relationship, social interactions, positive dietary and lifestyle changes, and improved holistic well-being, contributing to high engagement, loyalty, and long-term retention in the program. The challenges encountered along the experience journey were explored and revealed as points for the project development and supporting the target group in participating in sports and physical activities.

This thesis recommends research on the customer experience journey that can provide a valuable approach to better understanding clients' needs, interests, and challenges for service improvement and development.

**Keywords:** Customer experience, customer journey, immigrant women, physical activity

## CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION .....	3
2 IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY .....	6
2.1 Physical activity and health of immigrant women in Finland.....	6
2.2 Immigrant women’s opportunities and barriers to physical activity.....	7
3 MONALIIKU, FIT4LIFE PROJECT, AND RESEARCH TARGET GROUP.....	10
4 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE JOURNEY .....	12
4.1 Customer experience .....	12
4.2 Customer journey .....	14
5 PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE THESIS .....	16
6 METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS .....	17
6.1 Qualitative research.....	17
6.2 Semi-structured interviewing.....	18
6.3 Data quality and extent.....	20
6.4 Thematic analysis.....	20
7 RESULTS.....	22
7.1 Pre-participation .....	22
7.2 Initial participation.....	25
7.3 Ongoing participation .....	28
7.3.1 Attendance .....	30
7.3.2 Program structure and delivery.....	32
7.3.3 Communication and information sharing.....	33
7.3.4 Social interaction and community building .....	34
7.3.5 Health and well-being.....	36
7.3.6 Dietary habits and lifestyle changes .....	38
7.4 Future participation.....	40
8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	44
9 DISCUSSION.....	47

9.1 Decision process .....	47
9.2 Participation and retention in the program.....	49
10 CONCLUSIONS .....	54
11 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT .....	57
11.1 Yen Nguyen .....	58
11.2 Anh Tran .....	58
12 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	59
SOURCES .....	60
APPENDIX 1. Interview questions for respondents.....	66

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Regular exercise and physical activity are important for health and well-being, help prevent diseases, e.g., cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes, and improve physical fitness and functional capacity (Suomalaisen Lääkäriseuran Duodecimin ja Käypä hoito -johtoryhmän asettama työryhmä, 2016). However, one in five immigrant women do not engage in regular exercise at all, and less than half achieve the recommended amount of endurance exercise (Lahti, 2024). Immigrant women also tend to find more difficulty in performing daily functional activities like walking and climbing stairs than immigrant men and the general population (Sainio & Koskinen, 2024). This demographic group has been reported to be slightly less satisfied with their health than the general population (Castaneda, 2024). Moreover, they are likely to perceive their health as poorer and report chronic diseases and health problems in association with functional limitations more often than immigrant men (Skogberg, 2024). Those reported results have placed immigrant women on the target for physical activity promotion to improve their health and well-being (Lahti, 2024).

The latest research on immigrant women living in Finland has shown the low accessibility to and the inadequacy of municipal indoor and outdoor sports services, which is speculated to be partly due to discrimination perceived by this target group (Nykänen, 2024a & 2024b). Furthermore, research and reports on the opportunities and barriers of immigrant women to participation in sports and physical activity can be found around the world (Gagliardi et al., 2022; O'Driscoll et al., 2014; Schwenzer, 2020; Zou et al., 2021). Although immigrant women were shown to be less physically active than their male counterparts and the native Finns, sports and physical activity are perceived to be meaningful to them regarding health, relaxation, and sociability. Therefore, there has been a call for strategies focusing on these aspects to promote this target group's participation in sports and physical activities. (Zacheus et al., 2010.) Moreover, organizations and services targeting immigrant women are recommended to take into account

the barriers this group faces in sports and physical activity participation (Zou et al., 2021).

Monaliiku (Kansallisten naisten hyvinvointi ja liikunta ry) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to supporting and empowering women with immigrant backgrounds by promoting their physical health and well-being. Through a variety of activities and projects centered around sports and fitness, Monaliiku aims to improve health outcomes and enhance the overall quality of life for its target population (Monaliiku, n.d.-a). One of its key initiatives, Fit4Life, is an example of the organization's mission by offering structured physical activity programs designed to meet the needs of multicultural women (Monaliiku, n.d.-b).

Launched in 2015, Fit4Life has been the subject of several research and development efforts to understand and improve the participants' experiences. These studies have focused on the impacts of the program and exploring ways to enhance its effectiveness in promoting physical health (Korpijärvi, 2020; Mulepati & Vertiö, 2018; Sherpa, 2020; Vartio & Banahene, 2018). For instance, a study showed that participation in physical exercises and receiving health-related information, such as guidance on healthy nutrition, in the Fit4Life project had a positive impact on multicultural women (Ohanga-Too, 2016). This body of research highlights the benefits of the project's activities from the participants' perspectives.

While much of the existing research has focused on the immediate outcomes of the project's activities, Monaliiku has recognized the importance of adopting a more comprehensive approach to understanding participant experiences. Rather than limiting the focus to the period of active participation, the organization has embraced the idea of creating a systematic view that covers the participants' entire journey with the service – from the initial awareness of the program to post-participation reflections. This perspective is important for capturing the full range of experiences and interactions that shape how participants perceive and engage with Fit4Life.

This need for a more holistic understanding led to the development of the current research-based thesis to explore the customer experience journey of the immigrant women who participate in Fit4Life and its physical health-promoting activities. The journey will include a client's successive stages, beginning with the awareness of the organization and its offerings. It will follow the participants' decision-making process, including how they evaluate their own needs, consider joining, and contact the program. Once they join, the research will examine their interactions with the program and how they evaluate their experience, concluding in the decision of whether to continue participation or not.

By taking this customer journey approach, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the participants' holistic experiences when interacting with Monaliiku and Fit4Life. Importantly, the research seeks to uncover the main motivators behind the participants' engagement as well as their program loyalty. This information is important for informing future service improvements and ensuring that Monaliiku remains responsive to the needs of its clients. The findings will offer insight for enhancing service, increasing engagement, and supporting the sustainability of the program.

## 2 IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The “participants” mentioned in the title of this thesis refer to women with an immigrant background participating in physical activities organized at Monaliiku. According to the International Organization of Migration (IOM), an immigrant is defined below.

From the perspective of the country of arrival, a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence (Sironi et al., 2019, p. 103).

Although the definition of immigrant is still under controversy, for research purposes, a person born outside of Finland is generally considered an immigrant in Finland, who is called the first immigrant generation. Depending on the research scope, immigrants can also include those with at least one parent born in another country than Finland. (Zacheus et al., 2010.) Therefore, this thesis’s target group of immigrant women is, by nature, multicultural and multilingual.

### 2.1 Physical activity and health of immigrant women in Finland

Immigrant women have been shown to be less physically active than their male counterparts and native Finns (Zacheus et al., 2010). In the latest report by MoniSuomi-työryhmä (2023), immigrants from outside Europe and Russia are less likely to engage in physical activity (Lahti, 2024). Accordingly, less than half (45%) of immigrant women achieved the recommended amount of endurance exercise, such as walking, jogging, and climbing stairs, with the least achievement belonging to women from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. About one in five immigrant women (21%) reported not engaging in any regular exercise. Women were shown to achieve the recommended level of exercise less often than men, regardless of their country of origin. In agreement with those results, it was slightly more common among immigrant women than men and the

general population to have difficulty walking half a kilometer, climbing stairs from one floor to another, and running 100 meters (Sainio & Koskinen, 2024).

Regular exercise and physical activity are important for health and well-being, help prevent diseases, e.g., cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes, and improve physical fitness and functional capacity (Suomalaisen Lääkäriseuran Duodecimin ja Käypä hoito -johtoryhmän asettama työryhmä, 2016). Sports and physical activity are also perceived to be meaningful to immigrant women in terms of health and well-being, sociability, and empowerment (Ohanga-Too, 2016; Zacheus et al., 2010). However, this demographic group was reported to be slightly less satisfied with their health than the general population (Castaneda, 2024). They also perceived their health as poorer and reported chronic diseases and health problems in association with functional limitations more often than immigrant men, which affects their ability to cope in daily life and is linked to, among other things, the need for health care services (Skogberg, 2024). Therefore, Lahti (2024) recommended that physical activity promotion measures target the least physically active immigrant women.

## 2.2 Immigrant women's opportunities and barriers to physical activity

Sainio & Koskinen (2024), in their report about the physical ability of immigrants in Finland, concluded that immigrants, especially women, should be offered sufficient support to maintain their mobility through municipal sports and physical activity provision and guidance. That highlights the essential role of regular exercise and physical activity in the health and well-being of this target group, whose subjective health is compromised due to, among other things, low levels of physical activity, as mentioned earlier. There has also been a call for strategies to promote this target group's participation in sports and physical activities, focusing on the fact that these women value physical activities for health benefits and chances for relaxation and socialization (Zacheus et al., 2010).

In the research on the use of municipal services, Nykänen (2024a) reported that about half of immigrant women (48%) had used indoor sports services, and more

than half (54%) had used outdoor sports services. Those from the Middle East and Africa were reported to use the sports services the least, from 34% to 43%. About a quarter of immigrant women (24%) using indoor sports services felt that the service was inadequate in relation to their needs (Nykänen, 2024b). That number was 17% for those using outdoor sports services. In the same report, Nykänen speculated a connection between the low accessibility and inadequacy and the more pronounced discrimination, especially based on religion, people from the Middle East and Africa have experienced in another research on experiences of discrimination (Castaneda & Kuusio, 2024). This demographic group seems to face unique challenges that limit their participation in physical activities and sports.

Studies have pointed out various factors affecting immigrant women's regular participation in sports or fitness activities in the host country, thus influencing their health and well-being (Gagliardi et al., 2022; O'Driscoll et al., 2014; Schwenzer, 2020; Zou et al., 2021). These women often experience social isolation due to migration-related factors, such as being away from their home countries and communities, which further limits their opportunities for engagement in public spaces like gyms or sports centres (Schwenzer, 2020). Muslim women, due to their cultural and religious backgrounds, may need more privacy when participating in sports and physical activities, making open public facilities not appropriate (O'Driscoll et al., 2014). Gagliardi et al. have suggested culturally safe and community-based provisions for physical activity promotion in immigrant women. In that sense, initiatives such as women-only swimming pools and other physical activities are found necessary to promote the participation of immigrant women in sports and physical activity (Yle News, 2019).

Other barriers include, for example, lack of time and motivation, insufficient language skills, financial constraints, and familial and social support, which may prevent many immigrant women from accessing the benefits of physical exercise and thus adversely affect their health and well-being (Zou et al., 2021). Therefore, while still focusing on motivation and meaningful experiences towards physical activity, service providers also need to tackle barriers encountered by immigrant women to increase their participation. This call especially touches on services

and organizations aiming to promote the health and well-being of immigrant women through sports and physical activities like Monaliiku.

### 3 MONALIIKU, FIT4LIFE PROJECT, AND RESEARCH TARGET GROUP

This thesis is conducted in partnership with and under the supervision of Monaliiku, a Helsinki-based non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to enhancing the well-being of immigrant women through sports and physical activities. Monaliiku's mission is to create a safe and supportive environment where immigrant women can engage in physical activities, improve their health, and build social connections (Monaliiku, n.d.-a). The organization recognizes that sports and physical activities play a crucial role not only in promoting physical health but also in enhancing mental well-being and facilitating equality, inclusion, and integration into Finnish society

Through programs like Fit4Life, Monaliiku aims to remove the barriers preventing immigrant women from participating in physical activities, fostering both individual empowerment and community integration (Monaliiku, n.d.-b). From the beginning, the project targeted immigrant women in the Metropolitan area (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa) and recruited participants based on voluntary registration through tools such as pamphlets, posters, and social media of multicultural organizations and groups (Ohanga-Too, 2016, pp. 20-21). The project has created culturally sensitive and women-only exercise spaces, offered programs that cater specifically to the physical and social needs of immigrant women, and provided accessible discussions and information on health and well-being, thereby offering not only physical benefits but also opportunities to build confidence, make friends, and engage with their new communities. That is expected to result in long-term positive changes in favour of immigrant women's intersectional position in Finland.

Monaliiku encounters about 250 women and their families from different language groups and nationalities weekly (Monaliiku, n.d.-a). Most participants in the Fit4Life project, i.e., this thesis's research target group, seem to come from Africa and the Middle East, with Somali people being the largest population (Korpijärvi, 2020; Ohanga-Too, 2016; Vartio & Banahene, 2018). As shown earlier, immigrant women coming from these regions are less likely to engage in regular

physical activities and use municipal sports services due to perceived discrimination. The fact that the project Fit4Life has been in operation since 2015 implies the increasing need to enhance the participation of this least physically active group, as well as other immigrant women, in health and well-being promoting activities.

One of the first research on the experiences of participants in the Fit4Life program was carried out by Ohanga-Too (2016). The program was shown to influence the participants in many ways positively. For example, it improved the participants' physical, mental, and social health. The participants also reported becoming more physically active and adopting healthier behaviours in cooking and choosing food. Those results were then confirmed by other research, such as that of Korpijärvi (2020), in which the participants of the Fit4Life program reported being satisfied with the effects the program had on their health and well-being. The research also addressed other points that made the program successful, as well as points for improvement, such as women-only, free-of-charge, information about different sports programs, and the variety of exercise equipment. These can motivate immigrant women to increasingly engage with the program and, in general, with physical activities.

There has been, however, no research on what motivated a person and how they came to the Fit4Life program in the first place, at least to the knowledge of this thesis' authors. Moreover, what other factors besides health and well-being achievements can sustain the participants in the program even in the future? Korpijärvi (2020) addressed several challenges the participants have been facing when joining the program, such as their own and family members' health problems and bad weather conditions. This thesis' students are also curious to find out other challenges and interests along their journey from the time a potential participant learns about the program and considers joining.

## 4 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE JOURNEY

This chapter provides the framework for understanding the analysis done in this thesis. It examines two interrelated concepts: customer experience and customer journey. These concepts are essential for analysing how individuals engage with and perceive programs and the progression of their interactions across multiple touchpoints. In turn, they help understand the decision-making process behind the respondents' program participation and retention. By outlining these elements, the chapter lays the groundwork for interpreting the findings and their implications.

### 4.1 Customer experience

There is no single definition for customer experience; instead, it varies from situation to situation. Gentile et al. (2007) implied customer experience as the comparison between the customer's expectations and the stimuli originating from the points of interactions, or touchpoints, with the service provider and the offered services. The stimuli can be rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual. Kalbach (2016, p. 20) characterized this experience as holistic, personal, and situational (Nolvi, 2018, p. 11). The customer experience extends beyond the point of service delivery; it begins before the customer actively uses the service and continues after the interaction has ended. Customers may form opinions or perceptions about the service provider based on prior knowledge before they even consider the service. Once the service is acquired, the customer may not only return but also refer their friends and relatives to the service if they feel satisfied. Therefore, the customer experience is a dynamic and ongoing process.

This process consists of multiple touchpoints, which can be direct, such as face-to-face conversations or phone calls, or indirect, such as social media engagement or website interactions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These touchpoints shape the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that the customers associate with the service providers. These responses, whether positive or negative, may remain

unspoken even though they are valuable resources for learning about customers' concerns, interests, and needs. For instance, a customer may have dissatisfaction but not express it, which can lead to unmet needs and missed opportunities for service improvement. Conversely, positive experience can promote loyalty and long-term engagement (Eskiler & Safak, 2022).

Within customer experience, the concepts of static and dynamic customer experience provide a framework to understand how customer perceptions develop and change over time. Unlike static customer experience, which examines touchpoints at single time points, dynamic customer experience investigates the accumulation and development of customer experience over time (Kranzbühler et al., 2018).

Customer experience also influences customer behaviour (Kim & Choi, 2013). Customer behaviour refers to the actions, decisions, and emotional responses of individuals when they interact with services, products, or organizations (Nassè, 2021). Positive experiences help build satisfaction, trust, and loyalty, while negative experiences can lead to disengagement or unmet needs (Eskiler & Safak, 2022; Kim & Choi, 2013). Understanding behavioural patterns helps identify pain points in the customer journey, such as barriers to access, and informs the strategies to create more inclusive, empathetic, and effective service touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Nassè, 2021).

Understanding the entirety of this process is crucial for healthcare and service providers looking to improve customer satisfaction and service quality. Many organizations have invested in customer experience research to uncover hidden concerns or preferences. Investigating customer experience allows service providers to identify key factors behind satisfaction and dissatisfaction and to understand how they impact customer loyalty, retention, and advocacy (Eskiler & Safak, 2022). The insights gained from these investigations provide valuable data for adjusting services to meet customer needs and preferences better. In doing so, the providers not only improve the overall quality of services but also strengthen the relationship with their clients.

## 4.2 Customer journey

The concept of customer journey is more commonly applied in the commercial sector than in the social services field. However, it also gains relevance in social services, where the customer's experience is similarly important but often less thoroughly examined. The customer journey refers to the service process as seen from the customer's perspective, comprising all between a service provider and its users (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). These interactions may occur at various points and form the basis of the relationship between the customer and the service provider. Despite its importance, the service process is not consistently defined across different bodies of literature (Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

One common definition of the customer journey, particularly in the commercial setting, is the breakdown of the experience into three main stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This approach is useful for understanding a customer's actions, thoughts, and feelings progress throughout their engagement with a service. Each stage involves different types of interactions, or touchpoints, with the service provider. The pre-purchase stage includes the customer's initial awareness and consideration of the service, often influenced by prior knowledge, marketing, or recommendations. The purchase stage refers to the actual decision-making and acquisition of the service, where direct interactions play an important role. The post-purchase stage involves follow-up experiences, such as service outcomes, opportunities for feedback, or customer support, all of which influence customer loyalty. Drawing from Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1942), individuals prioritize physiological and safety needs before progressing to higher-order needs such as social connection, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Healy, 2016). For social services, understanding these needs helps providers align their offerings with client's priorities at different stages of their journey.

The research adopts the framework of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages to explore the customer journey in the context of the Fit4Life program. These stages are referred to as pre-participation, participation, and

future participation, respectively, in this research to better reflect the nature of the service. This perspective allows for a comprehensive understanding of the customer's actions, thoughts, and feelings throughout the interaction with the service provider at various touchpoints. With this approach, service providers can develop strategies to enhance satisfaction and loyalty.

## 5 PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE THESIS

This thesis aims to explore the customer experience journey of immigrant women participating in the Fit4Life project's activities at Monaliiku, with a particular focus on understanding their experiences before and during engaging with the project and their expectations for future engagement. The journey will include the respondents' experiences, from awareness to participation in the activities and afterward, which can be a one-time off or returning to the next activity season. The experiences consist of not only the respondent's actions but also their thinking, feelings, interests, concerns, and needs. The interactions between the respondents and the project's staff will also be investigated.

The research aims to answer the following questions.

- (1) What makes the target group decide to participate in the Fit4Life project's activities?
- (2) What makes the target group decide to remain in the Fit4Life project's activities?

The research data is expected to give the organization a systemic view of their clients' experiences upon participation in the Fit4Life project's activities. It helps inform the service provider of clients' interests, concerns, and needs and is a point for service improvement. Moreover, by studying customer experiences, the research highlights the specific challenges and opportunities these women face when accessing sports and physical activity programs. The insights gained from this research will not only contribute to the ongoing improvement of Monaliiku's programs but also may inform broader efforts to create inclusive, supportive environments for immigrant women across various sectors. It also aims to meet the needs for sustainable marketing and development of the project as it can be shown to third parties such as stakeholders and funders.

## 6 METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This section provides a methodological framework for collecting and analyzing interview data from the respondents. Details of the collection and analysis process will also be described. A timeline (Table 1) is displayed to clarify the timeframe of each activity in the whole process.

### 6.1 Qualitative research

The research methodology for this study adopts elements of a qualitative approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of respondent experiences within the Fit4Life project at Monaliiku. Qualitative research is valuable because it helps us understand people's experiences in a deep, detailed way (Sandelowski, 2004). The research primarily took the form of an evaluation study, aiming to assess the effectiveness of the project and explore respondents' perspectives. The size of the interviews consisted of 4 women, all of whom were immigrants from various backgrounds. A more detailed background of the respondents is not mentioned in this paper to protect their anonymity. That sample size was selected considering the students' limitations in analysis expertise and data collection timeframe. Also, a qualitative study often involves fewer samples than a quantitative study (Dworkin, 2012). Although the sample size chosen might not be optimized according to Dworkin, it provided the students with the opportunity for a more focused and in-depth analysis of the respondents' narratives.

To ensure a depth of experience in their answers, this thesis focused on the respondents who had been in the program for at least one year. This was done to ensure that the respondents had participated in all offered activities, including several exercise sessions in the spring and fall seasons with two to three thematic discussions per season, according to the project's plan provided by Monaliiku. Besides that, the participants are also offered two health check-ups and discussions per year, from which they are informed about their health status and

changes through comparisons between the two check-ups. That activity could affect the respondents' perception of the program's effects and experiences as well as their consequent behaviours. To participate in these activities, a participant must have been in the program for at least one year.

Respondents were recruited through Monaliiku's existing networks based on voluntary participation. The group incidentally represented a diverse set of experiences with varying duration of participation. This diversity allowed for the research to capture a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the Fit4Life program on the respondents from different perspectives.

## 6.2 Semi-structured interviewing

The method used in the data collection process was primarily qualitative, focusing on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool. In customer journey research, understanding the entire journey requires insight into each stage of the respondent's interaction with the program. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in questioning, enabling holistic exploration of the customer journey (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). By engaging in conversations with respondents, nuanced details, emotional responses, and contextual factors can be uncovered that may not be captured through other methods. Semi-structured interviews are employed to collect qualitative and open-ended data that are useful in this research as they allow for in-depth exploration while enabling researchers to identify recurring themes across interviews (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This method is particularly effective for exploring subjective experiences and uncovering the complexities of respondent journeys within the Fit4Life project.

Each interview followed a semi-structured format, allowing for open-ended questions to gather detailed insights into the respondents' experiences before, during, and after engagement with Fit4Life activities (for interview questions, see Appendix 1). The interview structure covered key aspects such as awareness of

the project, motivations for participation, perceived benefits, challenges faced, and feedback for improvement. These interviews captured the diverse range of experiences among respondents to provide a complete picture of the customer journey.

For respondents who did not speak English fluently, an interpreter was present to assist with communication. The employment of interpreters in cross-language interview studies is popular but usually remains invisible in the papers and receives little research attention regarding the trustworthiness of the data (Squires, 2009; Wallin & Ahlström, 2006). In this study, the interpreter was a professional working at Monaliiku and thus familiar with both the cultural context of the respondents and the program. The interpreter was briefed on maintaining neutrality and confidentiality throughout the process. The presence of an interpreter helped the respondents express themselves freely in their native language.

Table 1: Process Timetable

Activity	Month/2024									Month/2025				
	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5
Collect data and documents from Monaliiku														
Interview the participants														
Produce transcripts														
Analyze data														
Writing report														

Data and documents from Monaliiku, such as the Fit4Life program structure and theses done about the project, were collected from April to July 2024 (Table 1). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded with the respondents' consent throughout May 2024. The interviews took place at Monaliiku after the respondents' weekly exercise session. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. Both students were present for the first three interviews, with Anh Tran

being absent from the fourth one due to scheduling conflicts. The following stages, including production of the transcripts, data analysis, and reporting, were performed from June 2024 to February 2025.

At the start of the interview, respondents were presented with consent forms, which both parties signed in duplicate, one copy for each. The interview proceeded only after this step. Respondents were informed about the research, how the data would be used, and their right to withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence. This action ensured transparency and allowed respondents to give informed consent.

### 6.3 Data quality and extent

The collected data comprised recorded interviews, which were later transcribed for analysis. The transcription was done with the help of Microsoft Word's Transcribe feature. The transcripts and the audio recordings were reviewed and edited by the students to ensure accuracy. A total of 4 interviews were conducted, amounting to approximately 2 hours and 10 minutes of recorded audio. The transcription generated 44 pages of text. The length of each interview varied based on the flow of conversation and the respondents' willingness to share their stories. The interviews yielded valuable data, as the semi-structured format facilitated an environment where respondents could express their thoughts openly, leading to detailed responses.

### 6.4 Thematic analysis

The method used to analyze the data was thematic analysis, a widely recognized qualitative analysis method. This approach was selected due to its flexibility and ability to identify patterns or themes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, both students conducted independent analyses to ensure originality. The analyses were then cross-examined to produce the final report. The analysis followed a set of structured steps to ensure thoroughness and accuracy.

The first step involved familiarizing with the interview data. All interview recordings were listened to multiple times, and transcripts were read thoroughly. During this stage, initial observations about the respondents' experiences through their journey at Fit4Life were documented.

In the second stage, coding was undertaken. The transcripts were coded. Each segment of text that related to a specific experience or perspective was assigned to a code. Codes were used to categorize different aspects of the respondents' experiences, such as motivation, challenges, benefits, and suggestions. Codes were aligned with the stages of the customer journey, including preparticipation, participation, and future participation. Following coding, the third stage involved searching for themes. After coding, the codes were grouped into themes that corresponded to the stages of the customer journey. This step involved identifying how these themes were related to the customer journey.

Once themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined during the fourth and fifth stages. These steps aimed to ensure that the themes accurately captured the respondents' experiences without overlap or redundancy. Themes were adjusted and polished to reflect the nuances of the data better. The final step involved interpreting and reporting the themes in different stages of the customer journey. Each stage provided a narrative on the respondents' motivations, experiences, and reflections. By aligning the analysis with these stages, a structured framework for understanding how respondents engaged with the program over time was provided.

## 7 RESULTS

The customer journey of the respondents started when they were aware of the program and considered joining and included three main stages: preparticipation (consisting of awareness, consideration, and decision), participation (consisting of initial and ongoing participation), and future participation, which correspond to the stages prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase proposed by Lemon & Verhoef (2016). Regarding this thesis' target group, their total length of participation varied between one to eight years. Adopting Lemon and Verhoef's framework, a set of questions was developed to examine the respondents' journey across different stages (Appendix 1). These guiding questions aligned with the three stages and were designed to meet the need for a comprehensive overview from Monaliiku. Consequently, the respondents' answers revealed overlapping themes, with the depth of responses varying among individuals depending on, e.g., the respondents' interests and/or timeframes of the interviews. The appropriate codes from the thematic analysis were assigned to each stage along their journey, which were then grouped into themes/subthemes for the following report.



### 7.1 Pre-participation

Through thematic analysis, five themes affecting the decision process from being aware to participating in the program were drawn from the interviews: influences of third parties, employment status and daily activities, health and well-being concerns, emotions and thoughts, and conveniences and challenges (Table 2). The first contact or touchpoint with Monaliiku was revealed through awareness that often came through word of mouth (three out of four cases) or community centres like Monika-Naiset. Besides information sources, third parties might provide mental support (e.g., encouragement) and interactive support (e.g., referral) for the potential participants. The reliance on trusted community

networks indicated that immigrant women might prefer receiving information through familiar, culturally relevant sources rather than formal channels like advertisements or online platforms.

I was at home on Friday, so I didn't have anything to do... My neighbour [also a participant] told me that there is a place special for exercise...So, then my friend encouraged me to come. (Respondent 4)

Table 2. Themes and codes throughout different phases of decision process

Phases	Themes (codes)
Awareness 	Influences of third parties (friends, neighbours, and other organizations as source of information, referral, and encouragement)
	Employment status (housewife, student, part-time or full-time employee), daily activities (childcare, studying, working)
Consideration 	Health and well-being concerns (sickness, pains, stress, low mobility, limited socialization, immigrant background)
	Emotions and thoughts (determined to participate, expecting improvement, valuing health and physical activities, appreciating support and encouragement from third parties, and weighing between motivations, facilitators and obstacles)
	Conveniences and challenges (time availability, duties, distance, transportation)
Decision	

The respondents narrated their daily and working lives before entering the program. It was evident that employment status varied among respondents. They could be a housewife doing primarily housework and childcare, and they could also be studying or working part-time or full-time. The initial awareness phase coincided with the respondents' recognition of their health issues, low mobility, and limited socialization opportunities, often associated with their living and working conditions. These worries about health conditions and the consequent

expectations of improvement were revealed to be the primary motives for most of them to search for a suitable place and way to alleviate physical pain and improve mental health and socialization. In other words, health and well-being concerns were the most critical determinant in the decision process.

I was a housewife. I had small children at home... I didn't use to go anywhere... I was sick. I had pain in many places, and I wasn't feeling well... And because of my health, I decided to join this exercise... There are other reasons such as to socialize and to meet friends and talk with other people. (Respondent 1)

As shown in the above excerpt, determination towards movement commitment and expectation of improvement were among emotions and thoughts in this early stage of the customer journey. Living healthy and active was valued in association with previous positive experiences with physical activities. For example, one respondent participated in a physical activity group and was determined in continuity when the group was dismissed, leading them to Monaliiku.

When I come in Finland, I was all the time sick. High pressure. All the time sick. Every places...This work I did at Monika for three years, cleaning. You see my cleaning, doing very hard work. When I go home so tired. Everywhere, pain. And so, I said I must do sport. When I started to sport. Different. It is my first medicine, my first medicine, I tell you. No more. (Respondent 3)

Potential conveniences and challenges on the respondents' way to the program were recognized. Time availability, affected by daily personal duties and activities, was the most prominent factor. For example, the fact that children were in schools or daycare centres during the daytime was revealed as a convenience, which implied a challenge for those with small children at home. Other possible facilitators or obstacles included the distance and transportation to the activity place. However, all respondents considered those possible challenges minor compared to the anticipated effects of joining the program on their health and well-being.

There was no challenge because the children were going to school and daycare. The exercise happens during the day, so I didn't have any challenges with that [making time to come]. (Respondent 1)

Taken altogether, the analysis of the pre-participation stage revealed the interaction of various personal, social, and structural factors in considering and making the decision to participate in the program. The most prominent motivation was health concerns, which signified a determination to overcome barriers and make time for physical activities. In other words, the expected benefits outweighed the inconveniences, leading to the decision to join.

It's all about health. It helps me, my body and also to relieve the stress. That is the only thing I come here... I don't have any big challenges, but the place and my house are not very close to each other, so maybe that can be a little bit challenging, but it's not that big challenge, yeah. (Respondent 2)

## 7.2 Initial participation

The analysis showed that the respondents' first experiences when joining the program were shaped and influenced by third parties, initial interactions and actions, impressions about communication with staff, and emotions about the first attendance (Table 3). The respondents, having been informed by their friends about the program, came on the first day with those friends who were also the program's participants. The friends seemed to have different roles at this stage than in the previous stage. They provided the new participants with mental support, reassurance, and a sense of familiarity.

I didn't know the place, so I came with my friends who already knew the place... I wasn't alone on the first day. (Respondent 1)

I came with my friend on the first day... [The first person contacted] was very good, and he was a very open person... They welcomed us...I just came and everything went smooth, and it was good. (Respondent 2)

Moreover, their experiences differed somewhat from those of the respondent coming with another organization's referral. The former usually received

information about the activity and the current situation, such as the queuing system and the working procedure, including checking and informing about the vacancy and confirming the placement acceptance (e.g., respondent 1 below). Meanwhile, the respondent with a referral recalled the first interview when they were asked several questions about, e.g., how they had known the program and the reasons for coming to the activity, and their placement was confirmed right after that interview (e.g., respondent 3 below). In both cases, the new participants experienced initial interactions and actions, including making acquaintances and exchanging information. Moreover, regardless of whether the placement was immediately confirmed, they did their first guided exercise.

At that time there were many people so they couldn't put everyone in the list, but they allowed us to make the exercise, and they say [until] we get the place for you, we will write your name in the queue...I think two days after, we got the place. (Respondent 1)

When I come to the activity, there was one lady who ask you many questions. Why do you want to do sport? Too many questions... Why do you want to be here or something like that? What are you doing?... [After a while of questioning and answering] So, they say "OK. You can join this group". Then I started with them. (Respondent 3)

The participants might also have observations of the environment and relevant reflections. For example, they could realize the group's diversity in terms of language and reflect their language skills.

There were Somali speakers, but most were Finnish speakers at that time. I spoke a little bit Finnish at that time...Some Somali speakers used to translate for us. (Respondent 1)

Table 3. Themes and codes in the stage of initial participation

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Influences of third parties	Acquaintances as company and mental support resource, different first reception between coming with acquaintances and referral
Initial interactions and actions	Making acquaintances, exchanging information, doing the first exercise, initial observations and reflections

Impressions about interactions and communication with staff	Smooth communication with interpretation provided if needed; staff are welcoming, flexible, and supportive; sports instructors are perceived professional
Emotions	Unfamiliar and overwhelmed with new environment, people, and information; doubtful about chance of getting a place; welcomed and supported by staff; reassured by acquaintances; satisfied with the first exercise; feel lucky and relieved when receiving the placement

The respondents revealed positive impressions about the staff and their communication. They were supported with translation if needed, making the communication go smoothly. The staff was commented to be open and flexible, providing the new participants with clear information and inviting them to do the exercise for the first time, meeting their biggest expectation when deciding to join the program, as shown in the analysis of the pre-participation stage. Also, the receptionists and sports instructors were considered professional, which seemed to meet the respondents' expectations of a fluent and effective process.

The staff here welcomed us very openly. Our sports instructor first time was [instructor's name]. She was also a good sports instructor and there were also other Monaliiku's staff that were welcoming us, and they supported us in many ways. So we didn't have any challenges when we came to Monaliiku. (Respondent 1)

The communication was OK then. They were English people, but then we could communicate in Finnish language... They were open and they welcomed me and nothing bad happened. (Respondent 4)

The respondents were shown to probably have mixed emotions on the first few days of contacting the organization. They could feel unfamiliar and overwhelmed by the new environment and people, as well as a lot of information and new things. They could also be doubtful about the chance of getting the placement and their language skills for communication. On the other hand, they could feel supported and reassured by their friends' presence, welcomed by the staff,

satisfied with the first exercise, and lucky and relieved when receiving the placement.

I was told that there is only one place available...I was lucky to get it and there was no challenge. (Respondent 4)

Overall, the respondents expressed satisfaction with a smooth transition without remarkable adversities. However, the analysis implied that new participants might face emotional challenges and possible communication difficulties for the first time due to language barriers, in which case they might need support from acquaintances or staff. The implication suggested that staff also needed to familiarize themselves with the new participants and, at the same time, help and support them in navigating and getting familiarized with the environment. The organization was, therefore, required to have enough resources to effectively support new participants, such as interpreters and experienced and supportive staff with sufficient information about the program and familiarity with the organizational practices.

### 7.3 Ongoing participation

After the placement was confirmed, the four respondents entered the experience journey of one to eight years. Using thematic analysis, we explored six themes contributing to the respondents' experience throughout this journey: attendance, program structure and delivery, communication and information sharing, social interaction and community building, health and well-being, and dietary habits and lifestyle changes (Table 4). These themes will be presented in the following subsections.

Table 4. Themes, subthemes, and codes in the stage of ongoing participation

Themes	Subthemes (codes)
Attendance	Attendance patterns (irregular and regular attendance), factors and challenges affecting the attendance (employment status such as retirement

	and student, time availability, scheduling conflicts, family issues, health status, and weather and transportation conditions), attendance challenge-related feelings and thinking and coping skills (determined to attendance, high commitment, negotiation and arrangement around time availability, preparation for bad weather)
Program structure and delivery	Program's activities (e.g., guided exercise and water exercise, thematic discussions), experiences about activity delivery (clear guidance in exercises, perceived support in interpretation, staff are welcoming, supportive, and encouraging), challenges in participation (fear or resistance to a new activity, lack of support for minor languages)
Communication and information sharing	Channels of communication (e.g., face-to-face, WhatsApp), information for exchange (updates of attendance or new events, questions and answers, progress update), experiences about communication (no issues with privacy and confidentiality, easy and satisfactory communication, staff are available for support such as in interpretation), challenges in communication (insufficient Finnish language skills and lack support for minor languages)
Social interaction and community building	Social interactions and community activities (talking discussing, and dining together; building relationships, finding community, and getting socialized with staff and other participants; learning and exchanging between different cultures), experiences about the social aspects in the program (social activities bring joy and happiness, feeling of fulfilment with voluntary activities, perceived improved social interaction and cultural integration), challenges in socialization and integration (tension between personal enjoyment and

	group norms, possible perceived cultural conflicts, lack of a common language)
Health and well-being	Attitudes and perceptions regarding physical movement and its effects on health and well-being (perceived risk of inactivity; physical activity as a preventive measure and having a therapeutic role like medicine; being physically active is considered one's philosophy, secret for healthy body and mind, and identity; perceived relationship between diet, exercise, and overall well-being), benefits of participation in sports and physical activities for holistic well-being (pain alleviation, emotional relief, happiness, improved sleep, maintaining health and energy and youthfulness, having a positive outlook, gaining coping skills, improved social and cultural integration, motivation for further participation)
Dietary habits and lifestyle changes	Effects of the program on dietary habits and lifestyle changes (preferring an active lifestyle and avoiding passivity, changing towards healthy diet choices), challenges in change process (initial resistance of the recommended dietary practices due to cultural and habitual conflicts, third parties such as health care professionals influence on change process, necessity of repetition and continuity of exposure to healthy suggestions and choices)

### 7.3.1 Attendance

Attendance patterns could be regular or irregular. Irregularity was with the shortest participation time, i.e., one year of being in the program, indicating the possible fluctuation in commitment at the early stages of the journey. Influential factors and challenges to participation include life transitions (e.g., from work to

retirement, from study to work) that can affect time availability (e.g., retirees might have more time for participation) and conflict in scheduling (e.g., work, study, doctor appointment), own health conditions (e.g., sickness), family-related issues (e.g., child sickness, schooling schedule), public transportation issues, and weather conditions (e.g., coldness in the winter and slippery roads causing fear). Interestingly, one respondent mentioned the increase in regularity due to injury and the consequent leaving from working life (Respondent 2 below).

Sometimes they [children] got sick, or I got sick then that can be a challenge. (Respondent 1)

I wasn't coming regularly because at that time I used to do gig work. Some days I had to take work, but now I have issues with my legs so I'm not working anymore. That's why I come regularly. (Respondent 2)

I can't be absent. I don't know. I've never been absent, never been. If I have some appointment first, I say "That day is my sports day.". So, they have to change. Even if I go to my doctor and say "Hey, not that time. I have sport". My doctor, he knows, he knows. (Respondent 3)

Despite the challenges, the respondents expressed determination to commit participation by perceiving no problems with and endeavoring to overcome transportation and weather difficulties. In addition, their coping skills included preparing for weather conditions (e.g., with suitable clothes) and negotiating around their schedule to make time for activities.

Very easy for me to come. I just take my train, then at Pasila I wait for this tram till here, very near. Very simple for me... Not very, very close, but if you want something, you must do. (Respondent 3)

No problem, no problem [with wintertime]... We know, we know that the streets are slippery, we put everything under our shoes, so I can't fall down. I said no, wintertime, rainy time, sunny time, no problem. I am there. (Respondent 3)

For me, that [weather in the winter] is not big challenge. I was able to participate when there is winter, or the weather was dark. (Respondent 4)

### 7.3.2 Program structure and delivery

Activities in the program were diverse: guided exercises, which have kept the consistency of routine for a long time; theme days, such as nutritional education and mental health awareness, which helped respondents learn new knowledge; and water exercise as a new skill for many respondents.

When we started the sports [the instructor] was showing what to do...We started the exercise like the way we did today. (Respondent 1)

The respondents showed appreciation for the support and welcoming attitude of the staff. For example, the staff encouraged the participants to try a new activity, such as water exercise. Sports instructors played an essential role in the guided exercises. Their instruction was reported to be clear and easy to understand.

Before I was afraid of water, but the first time I was like this, I can't move my... I don't know. I say I've never been in water. They say try mother. Then I try. Now it's OK. Good. And I like it. (Respondent 3)

The teacher of the sports is in front of us, and we can see the instructions clearly, so there are no difficulties at all. (Respondent 4)

Easy comprehension was also applied to other activities like thematic discussion and information delivery. Support in communication, such as interpretation, was provided when needed, e.g., during thematic discussions. Staff also provided information about other activities outside the program, e.g., those offered by the city of Helsinki during summertime. The respondents seemed to trust the staff for reliable information about those activities, which implied the role of networking in providing services.

There are times that we have this theme days. We talk about the food for example and at that day we have Somali speaking person who can translate for us... That [communication] goes smoothly and we understand the messages. (Respondent 4)

Everything which is happening in this activity makes me happy. (Respondent 4)

As shown, the respondents expressed their enjoyment of all activities provided by the program and overall satisfaction with the program structure and delivery. Possible challenges the respondents faced included overcoming hesitation to try a new activity due to, e.g., fear of water, seeking translation for minor language groups such as French and Swahili, timely receiving expected information, such as about summer activities by Helsinki city when there were no activities offered at Monaliiku.

The city organizes some sports outside. I don't know. This year I didn't see the paper, but all the time from here they give us. "If you want, you can continue there."...Nobody tell us about it [this year]. Today I just asked to [the instructor]. She says "No, I don't know..." They said they are going to close, but now what are we going to do? (Respondent 3)

### 7.3.3 Communication and information sharing

Channels for communication included face-to-face or WhatsApp and individual or group format. Exchanged contents could be updated information (e.g., new events, attendance), inquiry, help-seeking, and feedback-seeking and progress-checking by staff.

We have a WhatsApp group and at that time they used to update us. If there's information that's new that they used to put in the WhatsApp so that that's the way we [get updated]. (Respondent 1)

No, no [misunderstandings, any challenges, difficulties in communication with staff]. Because they [the staff] want to know our opinions too. How is it going? (Respondent 3)

Regarding privacy and confidentiality in the WhatsApp group, the respondents revealed no issues experienced so far. Moreover, they expressed ease of and satisfaction with communication with the staff, trust in staff accessibility and support in information clarification and comprehension, and dependence on staff for information regarding activities inside and outside the program.

There was no secret in the group, and also, we don't have any secrets to hide. So it was just open. The only thing that we were

writing is like, "I'm not coming today" or "I'm coming ". It's open for everyone and it's a WhatsApp group where everyone can see other messages...There's no problem with that (Respondent 1)

They [the staff] are very, very good people here. They are very good people and they understand us. If you have problems, maybe you can speak with them. When you have question you just phone or speak with them. (Respondent 3)

As mentioned earlier, translation support remained a concern, especially for minor language groups like French and Swahili.

My Finnish language is not that good, so there are some times that I don't get everything, but I understand somehow some things. Not everything. (Respondent 2)

#### 7.3.4 Social interaction and community building

The respondents considered joining the program a valuable opportunity to meet others, build relationships, and find community. Not only did they interact and communicate with the organization's staff, but they also met friends and new participants in their group. Many also built connections in activities outside the program, either referred by the organization or self-sought.

There are also other organizations which I go for exercise or for sort to socialize. So, I do have something to do with other organizations also, not only in Monaliiku. (Respondent 2)

The respondents considered socialization a source of happiness and that active engagement with social activities brought joy. For example, besides valuing exercising, the respondents also enjoyed other aspects of the activity, e.g., dining and talking after exercising. They appreciated thematic discussions where they could share their own and listen to others' opinions. Some felt fulfilled by providing voluntary work to the community, e.g., providing childcare for other immigrant women, and advocating and promoting the group by, e.g., participating in interviews.

Other than the health issue, it also helped me to socialize and meet new people and that's one thing I can mention. It helped me to join this so it's not only the physical health, but social health. It's helping me a lot. (Respondent 1)

To socialize always help make you happy when you meet new people...you feel good and happy. So that's one thing to come here and do something makes you happy. So overall it helped me. A lot are changing my life. (Respondent 2)

They valued chances to discover different cultures and build friendships across cultures. Due to cultural differences, they might experience tension between personal enjoyment and group norms. They might resolve that conflict by respecting others' cultural and religious practices, self-compromising, and adapting to collective norms. Also, they might encourage others to learn Finnish as a common language for communication. However, it was possible that not all participants could solve these language and cultural conflict challenges and interact with each other effectively.

Here also I like because I found many people. I speak with the others. I discovered the other cultures. Very important. (Respondent 3)

I like music, listening music during the exercise. When I started for the first time, the teacher, they used music. But now...they [music] all went away. They [other group members] say no, we don't like music, no music. So, they stop, they don't put music. No problem. I understand. It is their religion. I can't be against. I accept. I say OK, I can listen my music at home maybe. (Respondent 3)

Overall, the respondents positively evaluated the social aspects of the program and perceived improved social interaction and cultural integration upon participating in the program. However, it should be noticed that this perspective of social interaction and well-being was only a part of social life, which also included family and work life.

Very nice. When I go home, I find my daughter. I find my grandchildren. When I come here, I find other people or the ladies we talk we speak. Sometimes they want to speak only in their own language. I say "No, I don't understand what you say. Speak Finnish". I just said that. You must learn Finnish. (Respondent 3)

### 7.3.5 Health and well-being

The respondents perceived the importance of movement to the body and realized the improvement in different aspects of health and well-being during participation in the program. Physical activity was also considered a preventive measure and had a therapeutic role, as respondent 3 stated: "Sports is the first medicine." Pain alleviation, emotional relief, happiness, improved sleep, maintaining health and energy and youthfulness, and having a positive outlook were among the benefits perceived by the respondents. To protect and enhance the benefits, they emphasized the risks of inactivity and the relationship between diet, exercise, and overall well-being.

I'm really happy that I joined on time here. If I didn't join here, I wouldn't be this healthy. My health will be worse than this. It helped me in many ways. For example, this water exercise is helpful for us and all other exercises that they're doing here help with my health. (Respondent 1)

The best thing is that I move my body and then I leave from the pains, which I have...Yeah, that's the reason I came. I like it. (Respondent 2)

Of course I gained a lot of benefits. I had lower back pain and also muscle pain and that are all gone after I started these exercises. (Respondent 4)

The benefits of exercise were revealed as motivation for participation. The more health-related issues, the more movement was required. Sports could even become one's philosophy and secret to share with others for a healthy body and mind, which the person considered an identity to be proud of.

As shown earlier, the respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with and enjoyment of all activities in the program. It was despite the challenges the respondents might face, e.g., fear of water, societal expectations of aging, and cultural and language differences. Overcoming challenges and gaining benefits, e.g., becoming healthier and learning new practical and coping skills, seemed to boost confidence and belief in their decision to join and motivate them to continue with the program.

When somebody meet me “I meet you, five years before, but you the same. You don't change”. I say “You want to know the secret. Do sport”. They said “Oh sport? You are old enough. Why do you do sports? Stay home and rest”. I say “OK if I stay home, I will become sick and sick and sick.” Do sport. This is my secret. I say to everybody. Maybe they laugh. They say, “That lady, she's old now, but she needs sport”. I say, “Sports give me more energy, more energy”. (Respondent 3)

While enjoying the social aspects of the activities in the program and perceived benefits in social well-being, as mentioned earlier, the respondents also encountered challenges in cultural and social integration, which adversely affected their health and well-being. The challenges did not necessarily come from the program and the organization but rather from, e.g., perceived loss of status, identity, and respect due to the immigrant background and cultural clashes at the workplace and in the family, which might subject the person to mental health issues. During the program participation, the respondents might gradually change their attitude and thoughts about the challenge and learn to cope with it. They enjoyed their multicultural living and working environment more, accepted and respected other cultures, and enjoyed more social interactions across cultures, which they referred to as a positive outlook, a benefit gained from doing physical activities in particular and joining the program in general.

Before it was terrible, terrible... When I go home, sometimes I don't want to eat. Ah, I don't sleep well. Only thinking, thinking, thinking... Now I accept, after many years. I accept because I must respect their culture. We have two cultures. What can I do now? I must respect each other... It was a problem but now, when you are living with people, you must try now to integrate. (Respondent 3)

You know, when we come here, we immigrants, we have many problems. Background, many problems. When you come, you bring your problems in you, you see... But when you started doing sport. It goes. It goes and you forget all of them. No more stress. When you sleep, you sleep well. You feel better. I have now good heart... If I tell my age, you can't believe. You said “No, you feel young. Why? What's the secret?” It's sports. Only the sports make me young. Yes. So, it is a very good thing, to do sport. Everything changed my life. Now I can laugh. I am very happy. I have positive idea. Everything I like...And I find also a very nice country. So, everything's OK when I do my sport. (Respondent 3)

### 7.3.6 Dietary habits and lifestyle changes

The respondents revealed the positive effects of participation in the program on their dietary habits and lifestyle. They tended to prefer an active lifestyle and avoid passivity. They utilized available time to engage in various physical and social activities inside and outside the program and the organization. Also, their dietary habits had changed in a positive way.

I'm not working anymore. Now I'm retired, so I have too many times to do my sport. I don't want to sit just watch TV or use computer. No, I prefer to be, to do something else, I have too many times. This is why I come here. We do sports here 2 days here and one day at home. We use zoom...Three times I can say and the other one it is new, we go swimming on Sundays. (Respondent 3)

Yes, it [theme day] affected my life a lot, especially my shopping when I go shopping. I learn what to buy and what not to buy. For example, which oil is good, and which is not good. Same as salt and sugar, so it affected our shopping a lot. Positively. (Respondent 4)

Although the respondents recognized the relationship between diet and exercise and overall well-being, their journey toward healthy choices has not been straightforward. They might be aware of the healthiness of a new culture's diet. However, they might initially resist the recommended dietary practices, e.g., more brown bread and salad, and still strongly attach to familiar food culture, e.g., white bread and meat. Full adoption seemed to take time. Some were still in the incomplete adoption of new dietary habits as they realized positive changes in food shopping but admitted to obtaining only partial dietary changes. Some progressed to the point that they preferred new diets over traditional ones. The change process was also influenced by other parties, such as their healthcare professionals.

It's our culture that we ate a lot of protein and then carbohydrate bread or rice and meat. But that helped a little bit, so I think about to buy little bit, salads or more vegetables to add to my food. It helped me to think like that, but I cannot tell that it helped me that much that

I totally changed your food style. I'm still eating the meat and rice, and bread, also. So, it's kind of cultural thing, yes. (Respondent 1)

In Africa we just eat everything. We just eat, we don't care about what we are eating. But when I come to Finland just eating salad, I say this is for our animals, not me. Why do I have to eat salad? I said no salad...But now I see. When they come, they explain us why you can eat this salad. Oh, they are right. So now I change...For bread also. It was the same. When I come here in Finland, we used to eat only white bread. I like white bread...The doctor says "You must stop. Because your sugar will be high, stop eating" OK. They stop them. Now they will change. I prefer now black than white. I like it. Really it helps if you respect your food, you respect to do sport, you are in heaven. (Respondent 3)

The challenges encountered by the respondents on the way to healthy dietary habits and lifestyle were obvious and long-lasting, which implied the involvement of repetition and continuity of exposure to healthy suggestions and choices in the complete change. Those positive changes in dietary habits and lifestyle also contributed to the holistic health and well-being that the respondents expected when coming to the activity and seemed to motivate them to stay long in the program.

In conclusion, although there were challenges in the journey, the respondents expressed their gratitude for joining the program and satisfaction with all its aspects. These included the trust relationship with the staff, enjoyable activities such as exercising, water exercising, and thematic discussion, enjoyment of social interactions and community connection, and the benefits and positive changes the program has brought them. As revealed and further discussed in the later analysis, the respondents expressed their commitment to participation in the program even in the future, which was probably due to the combination of satisfaction with different aspects of the program, perceiving short-term and long-term benefits on holistic well-being, meeting the needs, and even exceeding initial expectations of improving health, which was set during the consideration and decision phases.

## 7.4 Future participation

As our interviews proceeded to this stage with themes and codes shown in Table 5, we aimed to investigate the tendency and possibility of further participation in the program. For example, we examined challenges that might prevent participation and the factors that facilitate it. The respondents' desires and recommendations for the program were also revealed.

Table 5. Themes and codes of the stage of future participation

Themes	Codes
Desires and recommendations	Emphasized importance of continuity of the current activities and ways of working, expectation of retention in the program, desire of program expansion with more frequencies and activities, expectation of a common language for communication
Prospect and challenges of future participation	Uncertain view of future participation; challenges of participation include time availability, shifts between studying and working, and weather and health conditions

When we started to ask for recommendations from the respondents, they usually expressed satisfaction with the current structure and offerings of the program. The importance and benefits of all activities in the program were highlighted. No remarkable challenges were reported regarding program structure and communication, which was consistent with the previous stages' analysis. Being generally satisfied with the program, the respondents emphasized the importance of continuity of current activities and encouraged the organization to continue what and the way they are doing.

The most important thing is the continuity, to be continued...The sports is happening in the office and the one in the water...So, we wish to continue both of them the way it is. (Respondent 1)

I didn't see anything missing. But I would like to encourage to continue the same work...From my point of view, I wouldn't remove anything. I would like to add more. (Respondent 4)

Due to the appreciation of activities beneficial for health and well-being and the perceived benefits from the Fit4Life program, all respondents expressed their commitment to mobility in general and expectation to maintain participation in the program in particular. They might even fear inactivity and see exercise as inevitable, suggesting that the respondents anticipated maintaining health and well-being through constant mobility and participating in the program as long as possible.

In the future, I'm expecting to continue and if I continue, I hope that it will improve my health. (Respondent 2)

No, no. If I stop [doing exercises], I feel, I don't know. I become so...all the time tired. So, I can't...No, no, no. I will stop when I die. Then I stop. (Respondent 3)

In further discussion about satisfaction enhancement, the respondents expressed a desire to expand the program. For example, they valued any activities beneficial for health and well-being. Because of that, they desired increased frequency and types of activities, e.g., more exercise days and massage activities.

It would be good to have more...Would be good if they add more of the one that we are doing here. The zumba. And also the one in the water, they can also add more days. That will be good. Both of them will be good if we can get more days... If they add here one more. I only have one here, zumba. If I have two zumba days here in the office and then two in the water will be good. So total four days of exercise would be good. (Respondent 1)

Anything which is improving our health would be always good. For example, if there are some massages every other week, that would be good...If we get the exercise, we get the massage, I could not ask more....And increase exercise days, that will be also good... Two more days will be good. (Respondent 2)

Social aspects of the program were also noticed regarding the perceived challenges in multilingual settings. A lack of a common language (Finnish in this case) was seen as an issue in social interaction in the group, e.g., interpreter dependence, as well as in daily personal and work life. Therefore, the need for Finnish language learning activities was raised in one of the interviews.

Because when we come here, not only to do exercise, but we must listen also Finnish words. Because many ladies were in the same group, they can't speak Finnish. They are still, at home, they have children, they have no time to go to school to learn Finnish. So, it is not good for them. They are mothers and they have children. Maybe they can also help their children by speaking the same language you see, but many of them, they don't. They only think that this place is only for the mother tongue place. No, because we are mixed so you don't understand what they say. That's not good. When we come here, we must know that we must now learn also Finnish. Because when the teacher is giving instructions, he doesn't speak in the language, not in our, my language, but in Finnish only. Only in Finnish. So, all the time. What they do here, they take somebody else, interpreter, to come and translate for them. But we, for instance, we are speaking French and nobody now can translate, you see. So, it is good maybe to have only one language. (Respondent 3)

Despite expectations and wishes to continue in the program, the respondents showed limited future visualization of participation opportunities and a few concerns about the continuity of participation. The most evident challenge was time availability due to, e.g., working or studying because the schedule was somewhat out of control. This consideration might indicate a shift in the respondent's journey back to the pre-participation stage (Figure 1, the red arrow at the bottom), from which temporary or permanent leave from the program would be determined based on realistic considerations of the participant.

I'm now studying at the moment...I have Fridays off. But then when it finishes, I don't know how the future will look like. Will I start working where I need to go every day for work, or will I go to another school where I go for Fridays? I'm not sure how the future will look like...But I would like to continue...It depends on my free time. So as I mentioned, I'm not sure like how my free time will be. (Respondent 4)

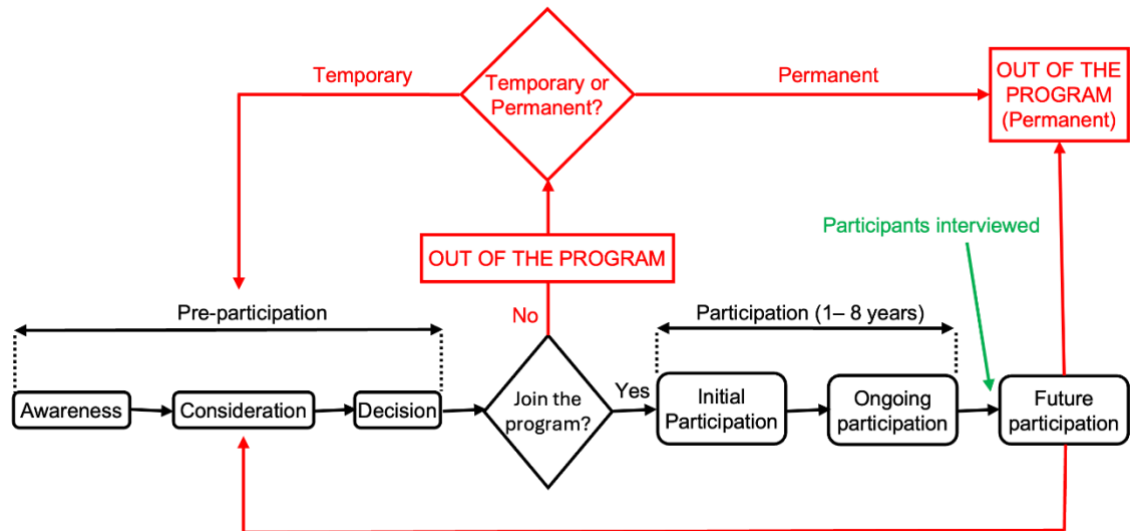


Figure 1. Customer experience journey map of the interviewed participants.

As in previous descriptions, other possible challenges included weather conditions, e.g., fear of slipping in the winter and public transportation. However, these challenges seemed to be temporary and insignificant to all respondents. Despite the bad weather and transportation disturbances, they showed willingness and resilience to attend the activity. On the other hand, a request was implied to improve conditions in the living environment, e.g., more sand for slippery roads, which affected transportation to the place and might cause harm to health.

It's very challenging. We come from a sunny place where the sun is always shining. We have some cold regions but even those ones have something slippery, or you are not worried about your legs or to fall down. You will put only something on your body to warm, but it will not... It's scary for us here. Yeah. So it's very hard for me to during the winter...because we keep falling down, falling down, falling down. (Respondent 1)

In my own apartment, we have this backyard... I used to put them [small stones] everywhere that I'm walking. But now the financial situation in the country is not that good. So, they don't even bring those small stones near to the apartment. So the situation is not that good now. (Respondent 1)

## 8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several measures were implemented to ensure the ethical conduct of the research, as guided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK] (2023) and The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences [ARENE] (n.d.). Moreover, this study involved people as research objects, so relevant ethical principles were followed (TENK, 2019). Informed consent with clear information about the purpose and nature of the study and voluntary participation was obtained from all respondents. Ensuring informed consent was of significant importance as it provided clear information about the interview's purpose and respondents' rights and allowed them to make voluntary decisions about their involvement.

Besides that, measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents' data. Background information, such as age, ethnicity, or other personal details, was not disclosed to ensure that the respondents' identities remained secure, and their privacy was maintained throughout the research. Recordings and transcripts were only used for data references and deleted after the thesis's publication.

Additionally, researchers prioritized the well-being and autonomy of respondents, ensuring that their voices were accurately represented and respected throughout the research process. If the respondents wished to stop the interview process for any reason, their wishes were respected. Efforts were made to create a safe, supportive, and interactive setting, ensuring a respectful dialogue. For example, arrangements with Monaliiku were made to provide the respondents with a safe space so that they could feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

Cultural sensitivity was ensured by taking proactive measures to respect the diverse backgrounds and identities of the participants. Because only the English language was used in the interviews, interpretation was provided when needed so that the respondents could express their opinions in their mother tongues or preferred languages. The researchers acknowledged the limitations of their

cultural knowledge and sought input from Monaliiku to ensure the appropriateness of the interview questions. Before conducting the interviews, the draft questions (Appendix 1) were sent to Monaliiku for review and approval. Monaliiku, being familiar with the cultural contexts of the participants, assessed the questions to ensure they were respectful, clear, simple, and did not contain potentially offensive language or content. Otherwise, the questions were not provided to anyone in the target group prior to the interviews. It is a limitation of this study regarding the importance of pilot studies in qualitative research to test for clarity and relevance of the interview questions (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

As mentioned earlier, interpretation support was provided by Monaliiku when needed. According to Squires (2009), the use of interpreters in qualitative research is crucial when participants are not proficient in the language of the researcher, as it bridges language barriers and allows respondents to express themselves in their own language. However, they also note that translations may fail to capture the original conceptual essence, resulting in inaccuracies or misunderstanding. Interpreters also have an impact on the trustworthiness of the data (Wallin & Ahlström, 2006). The interpreter employed in this study was a staff at Monaliiku who was familiar with the project. They were briefed to maintain neutrality during the interview process. Otherwise, other attributes of the interpreter were unknown, such as their competence in translating and their relationships with the respondents. Those considerations render the interpretation affect the trustworthiness of the interview data in an uncontrollable manner, which is acknowledged as a limitation of this study.

Finally, the research adhered to ethical guidelines and standards of academic integrity, with findings presented honestly and accurately and any conflicts of interest disclosed (ARENE, n.d.). Methodological consistency across different phases of the study was ensured to maintain reliability in data collection and analysis. Also, to maintain transparency throughout the process, communication between the students and Monaliiku as well as supervising teachers of Diaconia University of Applied Sciences was timely secured so that all stakeholders were informed about the research process. The thesis has been sent for Monaliiku to review as they wish before its final publication. Adhering to those ethical

considerations ensured the ongoing reliability and sustainability of the research efforts, ultimately leading to meaningful insights and positive impacts for Monaliiku.

## 9 DISCUSSION

The customer experience journey of four respondents with one to eight years of participation in the Fit4Life project's physical activity program has been explored using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The aim was to define the respondents' motivations and influences leading to the decision to participate as well as the reasons for their retention in the project's activities. The respondents' actions, thoughts, feelings, and challenges throughout the journey were investigated to inform the service provider of their clients' interests, needs, and concerns for service improvement and development.

As a result, a journey of three main stages was built (Figure 1), starting with the pre-participation stage, in which awareness of the program, consideration, and decision to participate occur. The data indicated a decision process led by the motivation of improving physical, mental, and social health conditions and influenced by several individual, social, and environmental factors. The data also showed that the achievements of expected health and well-being and the overall satisfaction of different aspects of the program contributed to the participants' engagement, loyalty, and long-term retention. Those results will be further discussed in the following subchapters.

### 9.1 Decision process

An experience journey starts already before service or product acquisition (Nolvi, 2018, pp. 11-15). As evidenced in the analysis, the first touchpoint recognized was when the respondents learned about the program's existence through their acquaintances' word of mouth. Research has shown that word of mouth, i.e., user comments and reviews about the product or service, significantly affects buying intention and decision (Mahmud et al., 2024). Therefore, it is strategic to improve word of mouth by, e.g., enhancing customer satisfaction (Ahmadi, 2019). Although online feedback is the primary source of word of mouth in those research studies, the effects of word of mouth are also applied to this study, in

which the respondents learned about the program from their acquaintances and started to be engaged with the organization. Trusting their community, they also believed participating in the program would benefit their health and well-being.

The motivation to improve physical, mental, and social health conditions was explicitly stated by the respondents, providing the most critical step in the decision process. Indeed, health and social relationships are among the motivational needs at the bottom levels in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1942), which can motivate people's behaviours, such as making decisions (Healy, 2016). However, as shown in various studies as well as ours, immigrant women in general and those in Finland are subjected to many health issues due to, among other things, low mobility but may have difficulties in accessing sports and physical activities, which needs to be addressed (Gagliardi et al., 2022; Korpijärvi, 2020; MoniSuomi-työryhmä, 2023; O'Driscoll et al., 2014; Zou et al., 2021). The combination of perceived health conditions and expectation of improvement made the respondents believe in the program's potential benefits. As mentioned above, this belief could be strengthened by word of mouth from acquaintances. Moreover, at least one respondent had experienced the positive impacts of doing sports, which further motivated them to the program.

In agreement with Zou et al. (2021), our study found similar individual challenges in considering joining the program. The most explicitly stated difficulty was time availability, which is closely related to studying, working, and familial factors. In addition, although not mentioned in the interviews, finding a placement meeting their culture, language, and values is equally important when considering joining a fitness program (Gagliardi et al., 2022). This idea is based on the reported challenges immigrant women likely face in participating in physical activities (Zou et al., 2021) and the limited number of organizations that offer sports and physical activities for this target group (Schwenzer, 2020). In this study, three out of four respondents learned about the program from their community. They went to the activity for the first time with their acquaintances to secure a sense of familiarity and belonging.

The discussion about the significance of word of mouth should not be taken as a rejection of other channels for the program promotion, such as a website or service network. Many multicultural women may still not be aware of the program, and that is also a challenge for Monaliiku in reaching that target group. For example, one respondent came to the program with a referral from another organization working with multicultural women, suggesting the usefulness of utilizing a service network to reach and engage the target group. Indeed, there has been a promotion for the important role of partner networks in reaching and better serving clients (Tax et al., 2013).

Although the respondents in this study were determined to enter the program and thus endeavor to overcome obstacles, this may not apply to all. Also, our research focused only on the participants already in the program and did not include those who might not know or have heard of the program but could not participate. It was previously mentioned about the call for efforts to promote this target group's participation in sports and physical activities based on the fact that these women value physical activities for health benefits and chances for relaxation and socialization (Zacheus et al., 2010). Besides that, it is still recommended that Monaliiku and other service providers targeting this client group be aware of the challenges and develop support resolutions to include more immigrant women in sports and physical activities.

## 9.2 Participation and retention in the program

Except for the first touchpoint coinciding with the act of awareness, our analysis failed to define other touchpoints during one- to eight-year participation in the program. Given that perception, the customer experience (CE) discussion will focus on dynamic CE instead of static CE, thereby understanding the accumulation and development of CE over time (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is impossible to conclude that an approach alone provides a sufficient explanation for retaining the respondents in the program. Single touchpoints, such as participant-staff and participant-participant interactions, can affect engagement and loyalty (Eskiler & Safak, 2022). Although such

touchpoints were not precisely located and profoundly analyzed in our analysis, their roles in shaping a dynamic CE cannot be denied, which is in agreement with Kranzbühler et al. proposing a multilevel perspective to CE exploration. It implies that every activity day contributes to the whole picture of CE for the respondents.

Initial participation, or one to a few first days of contacting and joining the physical activity, can be regarded as the first acquisition of service. The first purchase is one of the critical experiences that retailers usually aim to improve to increase repurchase intention (Chatzoglou et al., 2022). On the other hand, according to the dynamic CE model, the effect of this first service encounter on CE and the possibility of retention may need to be examined in connection with other encounters along the journey of many positive and negative events (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). In our study, all respondents experienced guided physical activity for the first time, which met their purpose when coming to the program. Although there was some uncertainty and unfamiliarity in a new environment, the respondents' first impressions and experiences were positive, which may contribute to the overall satisfaction with the program, as revealed by the respondents in the interviews.

However, the initial experience is not necessarily the same for everyone; therefore, it affects the possibilities of reacquirement and loyalty differently (Hyken, 2009, pp. 53-62). That applies similarly to all the activities and interactions in the program, including guided exercises, water exercises, thematic discussions, refreshment times, interpretation support, staff communication, social connections, and community building. In searching for strategies to maximize CE and loyalty, many researchers support consistency and predictability in service provision, while others promote surprising factors to sustain the customers' excitement and engagement (Siebert et al., 2020).

Our data reveal that the program, on the one hand, has managed to preserve the core physical activity and its routine (e.g., welcoming, doing exercises, and refreshment after exercising). All respondents also recommended the continuity of the current program in terms of both activities and delivery structure. On the other hand, new activities such as water exercises and new topics for thematic

discussions have been introduced gradually and deliberately. With support available for initial and ongoing participation, although there might be some hesitation, resistance, and fear at the beginning (e.g., in water exercise), the respondents finally enjoyed the new activity. They even promoted it due to the perceived benefits it would have on their health.

As shown in the program structure section, participation is not limited to the Fit4Life project's activities, including guided exercise days and water exercises. Monaliiku's activities are numerous and diverse (Monaliiku, n.d.-a). The respondents also revealed that they joined in other activities outside the project, both inside and outside the organization. For example, they participate in online exercises by Monaliiku, as well as dancing and social activities offered by the city of Helsinki or other organizations. Those referred or self-sought and internal or external activities along the journey, including those in the summer when the project is in the summer break, contribute to the continuous engagement with health and well-being promoting activities that respond to the respondents' expectations. The importance of service networks in spreading information about the program has been discussed previously, and it is also applied to this stage of the customer journey. Therefore, it has been recommended that service providers create a service delivery network to fulfil the different needs of the customers and thus optimize the customer experience (Tax et al., 2013).

All respondents realized and appreciated the positive effects of sports and physical movements, e.g., relieving pain and improving sleep quality, both in the short and long run, consistent with previous studies in the same context (Korpijärvi, 2020; Ohanga-Too, 2016). They recalled their right decision to join the program and expected to stay as long as possible to maintain good health. The respondents also enjoy the social aspects of the program, such as participant-participant interactions. They build and strengthen relationships and a sense of belonging to the group and community and voluntarily support each other. Because the respondents' primary motivation is improved health and socialization, those achievements mean the service quality has met and even exceeded the respondents' initial expectations. Satisfaction with service

outcomes and quality has been shown to result in loyalty and long-term retention (Eskiler & Safak, 2022).

As revealed in the decision process, the respondents came with the motivation to become healthier and more social. However, there has been an argument for a more effective intervention in behavioural change, taking into account social, cultural, and economic factors that influence behaviours besides personal capabilities and motivation (Davis et al., 2015). In that sense, the program has been successful in providing the respondents with free-of-charge physical and social activities (Ohanga-Too, 2016, pp. 20-21). It has also considered cultural and religious characteristics by providing a culturally safe and community-based environment for this target group, as proposed by Gagliardi et al. (2022).

As a result, besides improved physical health and a more active lifestyle, the respondents shared their stories about changes in different aspects of their lives, such as dietary changes and social and cultural integration, along their journey in the program. The respondents revealed that they were becoming more receptive and adaptive to the new diet and culture. However, driving the change to the end and maintaining it requires time and resources. The program is recommended to sustain good practices and support, e.g., recurring thematic discussions about healthy diets and mental health issues and facilitating intercultural exchange and discussion. Maintaining human and financial resources for the program is one challenge for the project managers. However, it is worth it as the program has helped create positive changes in the holistic well-being of this target group.

One factor contributing to positive CE and, thus, long-term retention is the trust relationship between the service provider and the service user (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), which was evidenced in this study. All respondents expressed satisfaction with the staff communication and support without recognizing remarkable challenges. The sports instructors were highly evaluated for their skills and guidance. The other staff supported the respondents in many ways, such as interpretation, socialization support, and encouragement, which positively affected the staff-participant relationship, which has been shown to be an indicator of customer loyalty (Eskiler & Safak, 2022). Information exchange has

been smooth and reliable; for example, the respondents trust the staff's references to other activities, even outside the organization. When challenges such as language barriers, misinformation, and delayed information provision are resolved to the respondents' satisfaction, it is a sign of obtaining trust and loyalty (Bitner, 1990).

Taken altogether, the respondents' experience has positively developed during one to eight years of participation. Milestones and positive impacts include the smooth initial transition, challenge-free and satisfactory exercise sessions, trust in relationships with the staff, enjoyable social interactions and community connections, and positive changes in health and lifestyles. As customer experience influences customer behaviour (Kim & Choi, 2013), the accumulated satisfaction probably resulted in the respondents' long-term engagement and retention in the program.

As shown in Figure 1, the respondents can have different journeys. Some will continue to participate and leave the program permanently at some point. However, some may need to reconsider continuing the program due to, e.g., time availability, and it is hoped that they do not have to leave the program early while their needs still exist. This notion implies a call for increasing retention by tackling challenges and facilitating participation opportunities. Moreover, listening, responding, and adapting to the respondents' needs, interests, and wishes are needed to optimize satisfaction and enhance loyalty, which can be achieved through cooperation with other services inside and outside the program.

## 10 CONCLUSIONS

Upon exploring the pre-participation stage of the three-stage customer journey in the Fit4Life project (Figure 1), our study aims to gain insights into the needs, expectations, and influential factors leading to the decision to participate. One finding is that the decision process is led by the primary motivation of relieving current perceived health issues, which have been reported in this target group through many research literature (Gagliardi et al., 2022; Schwenzer, 2020). Another motive related to well-being is limited mobility and socialization, which may affect the tendency and extent for the information about the program to be spread and received. Word of mouth is the prominent means of awareness, usually through acquaintances who also provide initial encouragement as well as companionship and emotional support in the initial participation. The consideration was shown to be influenced by several individual, social, and environmental factors, with time availability being the most obvious challenge whose effect is not limited to this stage of the journey. Despite potential obstacles, determination to participate has been expressed with expectations for positive impacts of sports and physical activity on many aspects of well-being.

Further investigation of the experience journey revealed the influential factors behind the program's loyalty and retention possibilities. In agreement with previous research in the same context (Korpijärvi, 2020; Ohanga-Too, 2016), all respondents are satisfied with the program and appreciate its short- and long-term impacts on their physical, mental, and social well-being, which responds to their primary needs and expectations from the program. Other satisfactory aspects, such as program structure and delivery, communication, and participant-staff and participant-participant relationships, contribute to the overall satisfaction with the program. Therefore, long-term engagement and commitment to the program's activities are likely expected despite many difficulties, e.g., weather challenges and making time for the activity. As discussed previously, it is recommended that the project managers acquire, develop, and sustain resources for long-term service provision, including personnel, finance, and service network.

Regarding sustainability, assessing the long-term impact of the research findings on Monaliiku's programs and services is vital. This study aims to help the organization gain more insights into its clients' needs, interests, and expectations, thereby developing strategies to serve them better. Service providers should notice that immigrant women appreciate the values of sports and physical activity but, at the same time, face challenges accessing sports services as well as during service participation. These insights can help service providers find effective ways to promote the participation of immigrant women in physical activities.

However, as mentioned earlier, the sample size for this study might be too small to capture more detailed and profound experiences. Besides that, the journey length is long and variable (1-8 years), which challenges the ability to define and analyze individual touchpoints at single time points, e.g., on an activity day. Furthermore, regarding customer experience research, it is recommended for a combination of perspectives from both the service provider and participants to compare and match CE creation and management by the service provider to the participants' CE perceptions (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Those points can be considered in future research on the customer journey.

The variability of participation period length may affect the perception of experiences. Shorter participation is expected to provide fresher and more detailed descriptions of the beginning, while long-term participation can provide a more dynamic view of the journey. Our analysis has implied a stronger commitment and higher retention possibility for the participants with longer participation in the program. Therefore, future research may compare the experiences among the groups of different participation lengths or apply a real-time approach to capture the journey from the beginning.

This thesis provides the first study on the experiences of the Fit4Life project's participants, starting before they enter the program and extending to their future participation. Applying such a customer journey approach can help extend the view of the service provider beyond the current experiences of their clients. The findings are beneficial not only to the Fit4Life project development but also to

Monaliiku's future initiatives to design other projects and services aimed at immigrant women. At the beginning of this study, it was challenging to find literature about customer journey research in social services. This study hopes to contribute to that shortage and recommends the approach to the research of clients and services in the social field.

Social sector organizations can benefit from applying the customer experience journey framework to their service design, as it helps them understand how clients interact with services from initial contact to long-term engagement. This holistic approach reveals key motivations, needs, and challenges, allowing for better-targeted support and improved client satisfaction. By focusing on the entire journey, organizations can build more inclusive and responsive programs. This is particularly beneficial for long-established organizations seeking a comprehensive view of their impact over time. Gaining these insights can also strengthen funding proposals by demonstrating a deep understanding of client experiences and service effectiveness.

## 11 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The thesis research provides an opportunity not only to gain valuable insights into the experience of immigrant women participating at Fit4Life but also to strengthen the professional growth of the writers as students of social services. By exploring the lived experiences of this specific demographic and their interactions with the program, the research deepens the students' understanding of cultural sensitivity, empowerment, and service accessibility. This knowledge can be directly applicable to their future as social workers, where understanding the diverse needs of the clients is a key responsibility.

In the process of conducting this research, the students developed several core professional skills essential to social work practice (Diaconia University of Applied Sciences [Diak], n.d.). One such growth is research competence. Social work relies heavily on evidence-based practice, meaning that social workers must be competent in gathering and researching to inform service delivery. Throughout this research, the students gained firsthand experience in designing a study, collecting qualitative data from respondents, and interpreting their findings. These research skills can prove to be an asset in their future roles as social workers.

Another key competency developed through this research is social and cultural competence (Diak, n.d.). Social work is rooted in the principle of cultural sensitivity. The practitioners are, therefore, required to recognize and respect the cultural identities of their clients. Engaging directly with respondents from diverse backgrounds in this research provided students with valuable practice in building rapport and understanding the unique and cultural factors that shape their client's experiences. These practices will enhance the student's ability to work effectively with diverse populations, a critical skill for social workers in the increasingly multicultural society.

In addition to these competencies, the thesis involves collaboration with Monaliiku, offering students the chance to further develop their cooperative and coordination skills. Working together with a community-based organization

provided the students with the experience of practical situations of social work partnership, such as maintaining effective communication and navigating challenges. Through this cooperation, the students gained a deeper understanding of the importance of networking and partnerships in achieving positive outcomes for clients.

### 11.1 Yen Nguyen

Besides those developments, I have learned to manage teamwork in the two-year thesis process. A weekly meeting schedule has been shown to facilitate our thesis's progress, along with a thesis diary and meeting minutes. Another skill is working with different stakeholders, in this case, our thesis team, Diak supervisors, and Monaliiku as the work-life partner, especially in terms of communication and ensuring the whole process's transparency. Those skills are expected to be beneficial for my working life. Furthermore, doing research in the social field is another development I achieved when I had a chance to conduct interviews with immigrant women like me. It was valuable to listen to their stories, which I could relate to. In my opinion, for an organization or a social enterprise to sustainably grow and develop, understanding its clients is the key. After this bachelor's program and doing this thesis specifically, I feel more motivated and confident working with people with an immigrant background as a future social services worker.

### 11.2 Anh Tran

Engaging in qualitative research provided me with an invaluable opportunity to see the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. I developed a deeper appreciation for the research process, from designing questions to analyzing responses. I also developed my ability to conduct interviews by learning to create a comfortable environment for respondents and asking follow-up questions that allow for more detailed responses. Throughout the research process, I have improved my ability to work within a team and enhanced my

communication skills. Through collaboration with Yen, I have learned how to communicate clearly and share relevant information in a timely manner to achieve our shared goals efficiently. Overall, I believe this experience strengthened my confidence as a researcher and provided me with practical skills that will benefit me in my future career as a social worker.

## 12 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to take this chance to express our appreciation and gratitude to Monaliiku and its representatives, who have strongly supported us with valuable ideas and practices from the beginning and throughout the research process. Another gratefulness is for the respondents who voluntarily participated in our study and shared their stories and experiences, providing precious data for this study. We also thank all the staff and teachers from Diaconia University of Applied Sciences for supervising our thesis, supporting our course of study, and equipping us with valuable knowledge and skills from different subjects, which have been utilized throughout this thesis process. Last but not least, thank you to our fellow students, who have shared private talks and teamwork with us and supported us in many ways, which are helpful not only in school but also in our long-term professional development.

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## APPENDIX 1. Interview questions for respondents

### **1. Awareness and Initial Engagement:**

1.1. How did you first know about Monaliiku and the activity you are joining? (probe used if needed: did you know, e.g., through friends, Facebook...)

1.2. What made you decide to participate? (probe: do you want to, e.g., to improve health condition, to be with friends, to meet new people...?)

1.3. What challenges/difficulties, if any, you had to consider coming to the activity? (probe: did you think about, e.g., transportation to the place, health condition that may prevent, childcare...?)

### **2. Information and Communication:**

2.1. Please tell us your impression/experience when you first contacted Monaliiku's staff? (probe: what did you think/feel about the contact person, communication, information you received...)

2.2. How have you experienced the communication with Monaliiku staff?  
(Probe: Do the staff respond well to your questions, is it easy to understand, e.g., in terms of language?)

### **3. Program Participation:**

3.1. Please tell us one activity day of yours, e.g., today or a day before Ramadan. Let's start when you wake up in the morning.

3.2. What do you usually like on those activity days? (probe: do you like food, exercises, meeting friends ...?)

3.3. What challenges/difficulties do you usually have on those activity days? (probe: do you have difficulties in making time to come, transporting to the place, understanding exercise instructions, exercising due to health problems, communicating with instructors...?)

### **4. Progress and Achievements:**

4.1. When you compare before participation in the program and now, what differences/changes have you recognized? In other words, how and in which

ways has the program affected you? (Probe: in terms of health, habits, social networking...)

4.2. What theme days (e.g. nutrition) have you attended? How do you feel about those days? (probe: are they informative/useful, do they change your habit/thought...?)

### **5. Feedback and Improvement:**

5.1. Have you ever filled in any feedback form since joining the activity?

- If yes, how do you think about feedback forms and providing feedback? What issues are there in giving feedback, e.g., language, questions hard to understand, not enough time to answer...?

- If no, go to next question.

5.2. In your opinion, what improvements or changes could be made to enhance your satisfaction with Monaliiku and the program you are participating in? (probe: in terms of communication, instruction, support (childcare, transportation...))

5.3. What activities/theme days do you wish to be introduced in the future?

### **6. Future Participation and Community Advocacy:**

6.1. What may influence your decision to continue participating in Monaliiku's activities in the future? (probe: e.g., back to working/studying after maternity leave, health condition...)

6.2. Will you recommend Monaliiku's activities to others in your community? Why or why not?

6.3. How do you think Monaliiku can encourage more members to participate?