

Worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends for 2021

by Walter R. Thompson, Ph.D., FACSM

Apply It!

From this article, the reader should understand the following concepts:

- Explain the differences between a fad and a trend
- Use the worldwide fitness trends in the commercial, corporate, clinical (including medical fitness), and community health fitness industry to further promote physical activity
- Study expert opinions about identified fitness trends for 2021

Key words: Commercial, Clinical, Corporate, Community, Expert Opinions, Future Programs

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 is the most memorable in many of our lives, especially those of us in the fitness industry. The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic changed everything. Even as you read this, health clubs are closing, or at the very best restructuring their services. For that reason, this 15th annual survey of fitness trends will have the most impact it has ever had on the industry.

For example, new to this year's survey was the inclusion of potential new trends such as online training and virtual training. From the 2020 survey, virtual/online training was redefined as the more specific online training (and was the no. 1 trend for 2021). Virtual training became a defined trend on its own (and was the no. 6 trend for 2021). The results of this annual survey will help the health and fitness industry make some critical business decisions for future growth and development. These investments can be based on emerging trends that have been identified by health fitness professionals all over the world and not on the latest exercise innovation marketed during late night infomercials on television or the next hottest celebrity endorsing a product.

For the last 15 years, the editors of *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal*[®] (FIT) have circulated an electronic survey to thousands of professionals around the world to determine health and fitness trends for the following year. This survey guides health and fitness programming efforts for 2021 and beyond. The first survey (1), conducted in 2006 (for predictions in 2007), introduced a systematic way to forecast health and fitness trends, and these surveys have been conducted annually since that time (2–14) using the same methodology. As this is a survey of trends (and not fads), respondents were asked to first make the very important distinction between a “fad” and a “trend.”

These annual ACSM surveys of fitness trends can be used in the commercial (usually for-profit companies), clinical (including medical fitness programs), community (not-for-profit), and corporate divisions of the industry. They not only continue to confirm previously identified trends but also recognize some new emerging trends and trends that appear for the first time due to the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19. The fitness trends survey does not attempt to evaluate products, services, equipment, gym apparatus, hardware, software, tools, or other exercise machines that may appear in clubs or recreation centers or show up in television infomercials. The survey was designed to confirm or to introduce new trends (not fads) that will have a perceived positive impact on the industry according to the international respondents. Some of the trends identified in earlier surveys could predictably appear for several years, whereas fads may appear but will expectedly



drop off the list in subsequent years (some as short as 1 year). The potential market impact of new equipment, an exercise device, or program is not evaluated by this annual survey. The information provided in this survey is left entirely up to the readers to determine if it fits their own business model and how to best use the information for potential market expansion.

Commercial health clubs (those that are for-profit and the largest sector of the industry) can use these results for the establishment (or maybe the justification) of potential new markets, which may result in increased and more sustainable revenue drivers. Corporate wellness programs and medical fitness centers will find these results useful through potential increases in service to their members and to their patients. Community-based programs (typically not-for-profit organizations) can use these results to justify investments in their markets by providing expanded programs typically serving families and children. The health and fitness industry should carefully consider and thoughtfully apply this information to its own unique setting.

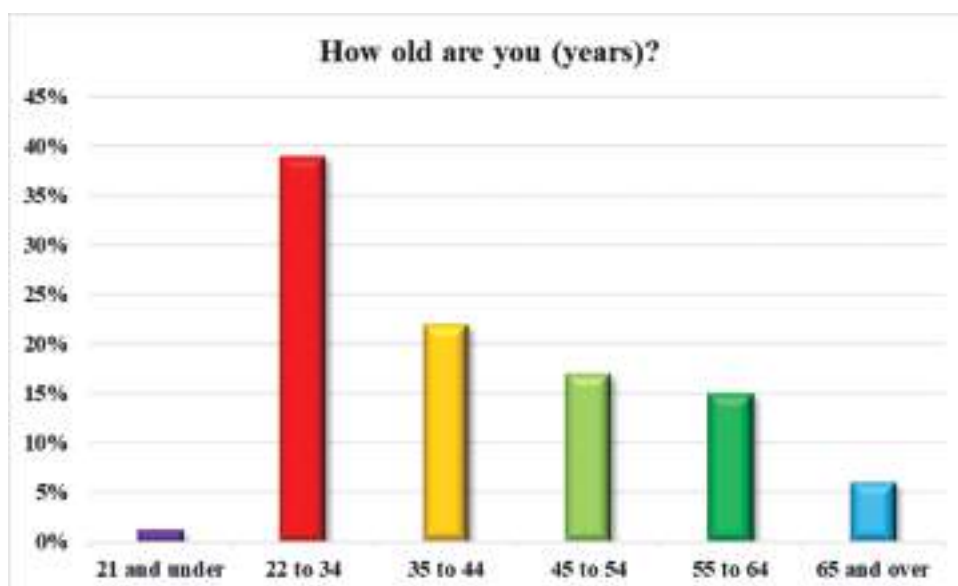
THE SURVEY

Every attempt was made to replicate the survey delivery as in the past 15 years. For the 2021 survey, there were 41 possible trends. The top 25 trends from previous years were included in the survey, as were some potentially emerging trends identified by the editors of *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal*[®]. The editors represent all four sectors of the health fitness industry (corporate, clinical, community, and commercial) as well as from academia. In the survey, potential trends were identified followed by a short explanation to offer the respondent a few details without inconveniencing them with too much reading, analysis, or interpretation. The survey was designed to be completed in 15 minutes or less. As an incentive to complete the survey, the

editors made available to 10 random winners fitness-related books published by Wolters Kluwer/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins and Human Kinetics and a \$100 MasterCard gift card. These incentives were designed to help increase participation in the survey.

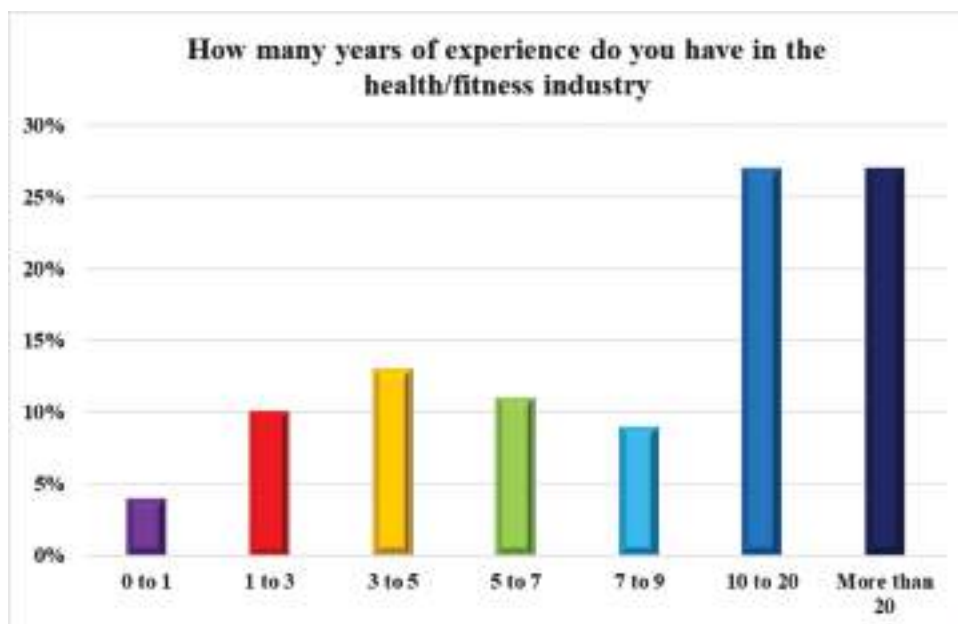
As in all previous years, the survey was constructed using a Likert-type scale ranging from a low score of 1 (least likely to be a trend) to a high score of 10 (most likely to be a trend). After each scoring opportunity, space was allowed for additional comments. At the survey conclusion, more space was left for the respondent to include comments or potential fitness trends left off the list to be considered for future surveys as well as some demographic information. The next step was to send the survey electronically to a defined list of health and fitness professionals. Using SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), the online survey was initially sent to 75,383 people (a 40% increase from last year's record of 56,746), including ACSM certified professionals, those who registered to attend the 2020 ACSM's International Health & Fitness Summit, the ACSM Certification e-mail opt-in list, ACSM Alliance members, ACSM professional members who have added a FIT subscription, nonmember FIT subscribers, FIT Associate Editors, and FIT Editorial Board members. A link also was shared on the FIT web site and on various social media sites, including the FIT Twitter page, the ACSM Journal's Facebook page, and ACSM's Instagram page. This year, the online/social link solicited 648 responses more than doubling the 300 responses from last year. Out of the 75,383 invitations, 791 bounced back as undeliverable and 781 opted out. The survey response total was 4,377, which is an increase of more than 44% from last year's 3,037 responses. The response rate was 6%, which is comparable with previous years.

Figure 1. Age (in years) of survey respondents.



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Figure 2. Years of experience reported by the survey respondents.



Responses were received from just about every continent, including the countries of Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Japan, India, Italy, Russia, Singapore, Serbia, United Kingdom, and the United States, among many

others. Demographics of the survey respondents included 63% females (37% males) across a wide variability in ages (Figure 1), 53% having more than 10 years of experience in the industry (Figure 2), and 27% with more than 20 years of experience. More

Figure 3. Annual salary of survey respondents.

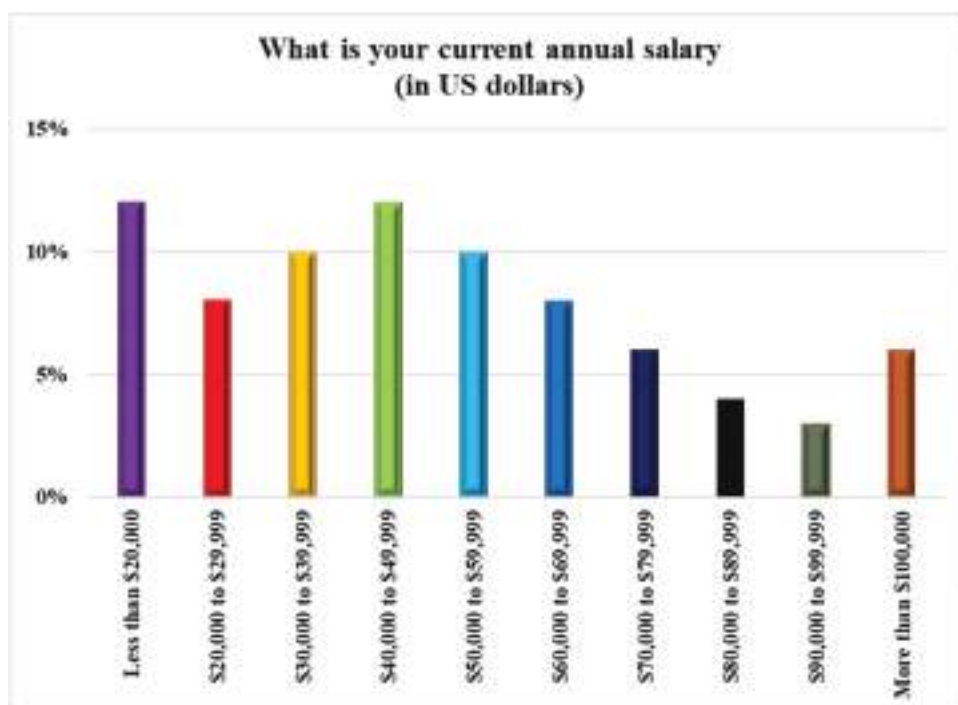


TABLE 1: Survey Respondents' Occupation (What Is Your Primary Profession?)

Respondent Occupation	Total Respondents (%)
Personal trainer (part time)	10
Personal trainer (full time)	10
Group exercise leader	4
Exercise physiologist	7
Clinical exercise physiologist	6
Program manager	4
Health/fitness director	6
Owner/operator	4
Health/wellness coach	5
Undergraduate student	2
Graduate student	5
Teacher	3
Professor	9
Medical professional (MD/DO, RN, physical therapist, occupational therapist)	8
Registered dietitian	2
Other	17

than 37% of the survey respondents earned an annual salary of more than \$50,000, which included more than 6% who earned more than \$100,000 a year (Figure 3). Respondents were asked to identify their occupations (Table 1), with 20% indicating that they were full-time or part-time personal trainers. When asked if they worked full-time or part-time, 63% indicated full-time and 27% part-time (less than 20 hours per week). Figure 4 indicates where respondents work. Survey respondents were asked about their career choices, with 35% indicating they were in their first job and 32% indicating they were in their second career. Figure 5 indicates the broad range of certifications held by the survey respondents. New to this year's survey (Figure 6) is a question regarding whether the reported occupation was a first job, a second job, or a career change.

SURVEY RESULTS

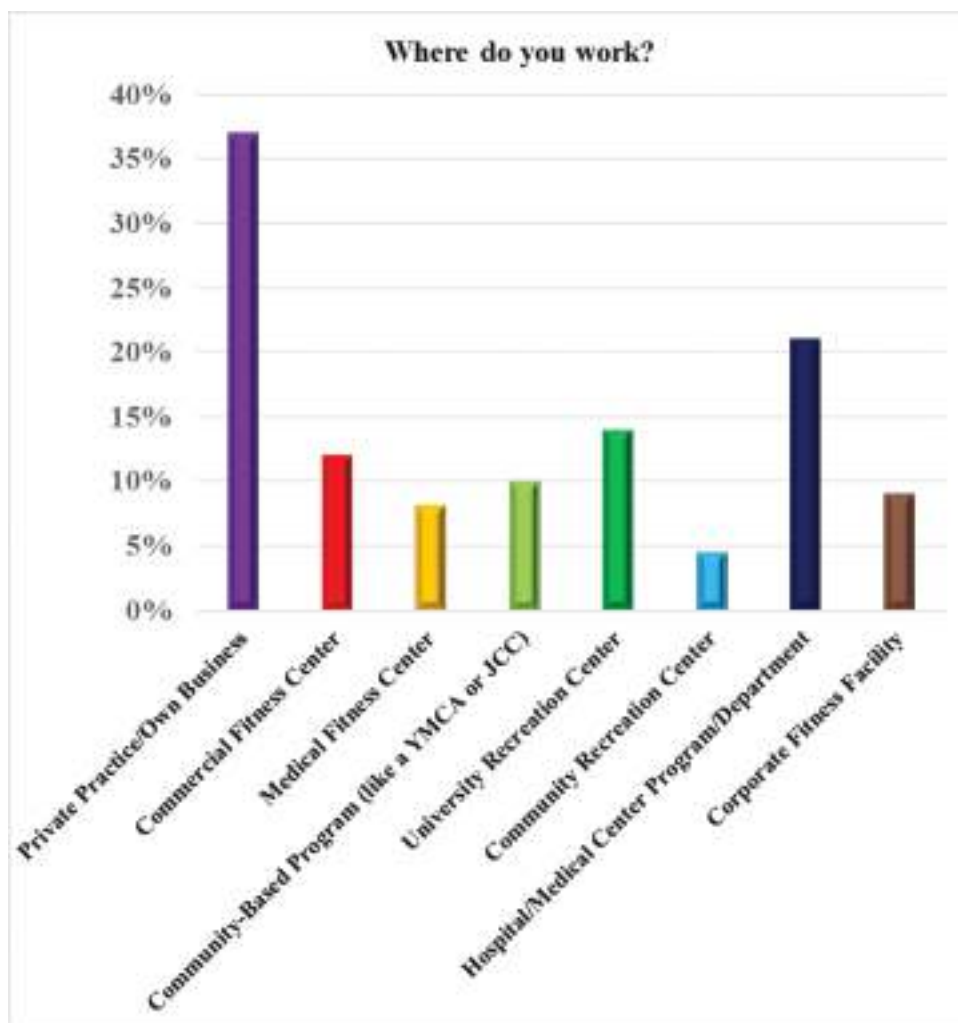
The top 20 fitness trends for 2021 are described in this report. For a comparison of the top 10 trends from the past 15 years' surveys (1–14), please see the comprehensive comparison table available online (available at <http://links.lww.com/FIT/A156>). The 2021 survey results (Table 2) reveal potential trends as defined in the survey. It is not unusual for potential trends to drop out of the top 20 and later to be labeled as a fad. New to

the top 20 trends identified for 2021 include a new no. 1, online training (which was no. 26 in 2020), virtual training (no. 6), and mobile exercise apps (no. 12). Falling to no. 5 is high-intensity interval training (HIIT) and falling to no. 17 is group training. The top 20 for the year 2021 include circuit training (no. 17 for 2020; no. 26 for 2021), worksite health promotion and workplace well-being (no. 18 for 2020; no. 27 for 2021), and children and exercise (no. 20 for 2020; no. 28 for 2021).

1. **Online training.** Virtual online training was first introduced on the annual survey in 2019 and debuted at no. 3 before dropping to no. 26 in 2020 when the “virtual” was dropped from the title in favor of the more specific online training. The big changes within the health fitness industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the temporary closure of clubs around the world forcing innovative delivery of classes. The challenges of engaging clients at a distance resulted in the use of some very strategic delivery systems. Online training was developed for the at-home exercise experience. This trend uses digital streaming technology to deliver group, individual, or instructional exercise programs online. Online training is available 24/7 and can be a live class (live streaming workouts) or prerecorded.
2. **Wearable technology.** Wearable technology was the no. 1 trend since it was first introduced on the survey in 2016 (the only exception was a drop to no. 3 in 2018) and includes fitness trackers, smart watches, heart rate monitors, and GPS tracking devices. Examples include fitness and activity trackers like those manufactured by Fitbit®, Samsung Gear Fit2®, Misfit®, Garmin®, and Apple®. These devices can be used as a step counter and can track heart rate, body temperature, calories, sitting time, sleep time, and much more. Initially, there was some question of accuracy, but these issues have seemed to be resolved well enough that it has been estimated to be about a U.S. \$100 billion industry. New innovations include blood pressure, oxygen saturation, and electrocardiogram.
3. **Body weight training.** Body weight training appeared for the first time on the trends survey in 2013 (at no. 3) and was in the no. 2 position in 2017, no. 4 in 2018, and no. 5 in 2019 before dropping to no. 7 in 2020. Body weight training did not appear as a survey trend option before 2013 because it only became popular (as a defined trend) in gyms around the world within the last decade. Using a combination of variable resistance body weight training and neuromotor movements using multiple planes of movement, this program is all about using body weight as the training modality. Body weight training uses minimal equipment, which makes it an inexpensive way to exercise effectively.
4. **Outdoor activities.** Perhaps because of the COVID-19 pandemic, more outdoor activities such as small group

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Figure 4. Where do you work?



walks, group rides, or organized hiking groups have become popular. They can be short events, daylong events, or planned weeklong hiking excursions. Participants can meet in a local park, hiking area, or on a bike trail typically with a designated leader. This trend for health and fitness professionals to offer outdoor activities for their clients began in 2010. In that year, outdoor activities ranked no. 25 in the annual survey, and it ranked no. 27 in 2011. Outdoor activities were the no. 14 trend in 2012, no. 13 in 2013, no. 14 in 2014, no. 12 in 2015, no. 14 in 2016, and no. 13 in 2017. In 2018, outdoor activities were ranked no. 14, no. 17 in 2019, and no. 13 in 2020.

5. **HIIT.** Although a part of the survey as a possible trend before 2013 but not making the top 20, HIIT was no. 1 in the survey in 2014 and 2018 (dropped to no. 3 in 2016 and 2017) and has been in the top five between 2014 and 2020. For 2021, HIIT drops to no. 5. These

exercise programs typically involve short bursts of high-intensity bouts of exercise followed by a short period of rest. Although there are several commercial



Figure 5. Which certifications do survey respondents hold?



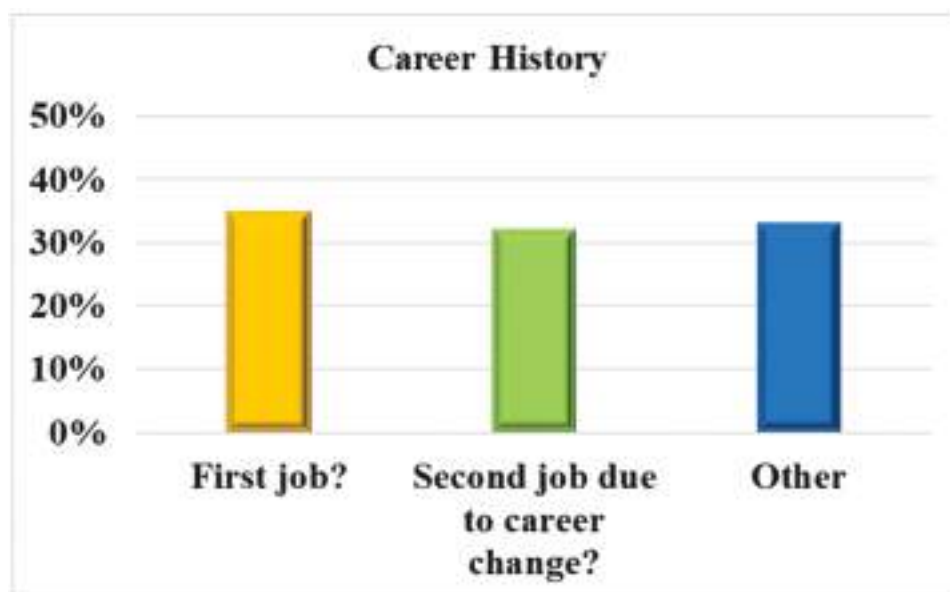
club examples of HIIT, all emphasize higher intensities (above 90%) of maximum during the increased intensity segments followed by periods of rest and recovery. Despite warnings by some fitness professionals of potentially increased injury rates using HIIT, this form of exercise has been popular in gyms all over the world.

6. **Virtual training.** This is the first time that virtual training has appeared separately from virtual online training. For the purpose of the survey, virtual training was defined as the fusion of group exercise with technology offering workouts designed for ease and convenience to suit schedules and needs. Typically, virtual

workouts are played in gyms on the big screen attracting smaller number of clients compared with live classes while providing clients of all levels and ages with a different group fitness experience. Virtual classes are often a gateway for live group fitness classes. Virtual workouts typically attract smaller numbers, and clients can go at their own pace, which makes it ideal if training a novice looking to learn the moves. As with online training, virtual training in the top 10 may be an industry reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. **Exercise is medicine.** Exercise is medicine (EIM) is a global health initiative that focuses on encouraging

Figure 6. Is this your first job?



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primary care physicians and other health care providers to include physical activity assessment and associated treatment recommendations as part of every patient visit and referring their patients to exercise professionals. In addition, EIM recognizes fitness professionals as part of the health care team in their local communities. EIM was the no. 7 trend in 2017, no. 12 in 2018, no. 10 in 2019, and jumping to no. 6 in 2020.

8. **Strength training with free weights.** Previous surveys included a category described as “strength training.” Determined to be too broad a category, strength training was dropped in 2020 in favor of the more specific free weight training. Free weights, barbells, kettlebells, dumbbells, and medicine ball classes do not just incorporate barbells into another functional class or activity. Instructors start by teaching proper form for each exercise and then progressively increase the resistance once the correct form is accomplished. A new exercise is added periodically, and those begin at the form or movement level. Training with free weights debuted at no. 4 in 2020.
9. **Fitness programs for older adults.** This trend is making a return after being in the top 10 since 2007 (when it was the no. 2 trend) and dropping to no. 11 in 2017. Fitness programs for older adults were the no. 9 trend in 2018, no. 4 in 2019, and no. 8 in 2020. This trend continues to stress the fitness needs of the Baby Boom and older generations. These individuals in general have more discretionary money than their younger counterparts, and fitness clubs may be able to capitalize on this growing market. People are living

longer, working longer, and remaining healthy and active well into their retirement from work.

10. **Personal training.** One-on-one training continues to be a strong trend as the profession of personal training becomes more accessible online, in health clubs, in the home, and in worksites that have fitness facilities. Personal training includes fitness testing and goal setting with the trainer working one-on-one with a client to prescribe workouts specific to their individual needs and goals. Since this survey was first published in 2006 (1), personal training has been a top 10 trend. Personal training was no. 9 in 2017 and no. 8 in 2018 and 2019. In 2020, personal training was the no. 5 trend.
11. **Health/wellness coaching.** Previous surveys included wellness coaching but for the 2019 survey, the term “health” was added, which better describes this trend. Wellness coaching has been in the top 20 trends since 2010 and was listed as no. 17 in 2014, no. 13 in 2015 and 2016, no. 15 in 2017, no. 18 in 2018, no. 11 in 2019, and no. 9 in 2020. This is a trend that integrates behavioral science into health promotion and lifestyle medicine programs. Health/wellness coaching uses a one-on-one (and at times small group) approach with the coach providing support, goal setting, guidance, and encouragement. The health/wellness coach focuses on the client’s values, needs, vision, and short- and long-term goals using behavior change intervention strategies.
12. **Mobile exercise apps.** Now available for mobile devices, apps like MapMyRun[®], Fitness Buddy[®], JEFIT Workout Planner[®], Runkeeper[®], MyFitnessPal[®],

TABLE 2: Top 20 Worldwide Fitness Trends for 2021

Rank	Top 20 Worldwide Fitness Trends for 2021
1	Online training
2	Wearable technology
3	Body weight training
4	Outdoor activities
5	HIIT
6	Virtual training
7	Exercise is Medicine
8	Strength training with free weights
9	Fitness programs for older adults
10	Personal training
11	Health/wellness coaching
12	Mobile exercise apps
13	Employing certified fitness professionals
14	Functional fitness training
15	Yoga
16	Exercise for weight loss
17	Group training
18	Lifestyle medicine
19	Licensure for fitness professionals
20	Outcome measurements

EIM, Exercise is medicine; HIIT, High intensity interval training.

Runtastic[®], and Nike Training Club[®] include both audio and visual prompts to begin and end exercise and cues to move on. Some of these apps can track progress over time as well as hundreds of other functionalities. These apps are available for mobile devices such as the iWatch[®] iPhone[®], iPad[®], and Android devices. Mobile exercise apps ranked no. 20 in the 2019 survey, no. 25 in 2020, and now no. 12 in 2021.

- Employing certified fitness professionals.** Debuted as the no. 6 trend in 2019 and dropping to no. 10 in 2020 and now at no. 13, the importance of hiring certified health fitness professionals through educational programs and certification programs that are fully accredited for health fitness professionals is fast becoming a trend. More certification programs have become accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, allowing employers easy access to certification validation through the United States Registry of Exercise Professionals. Employing certified fitness professionals was

a new survey item in 2019, replacing “Educated, certified, and experienced fitness professionals,” which was determined to be too broadly defined as a survey item.

- Functional fitness training.** Replicating actual physical activities someone might do as a function of their daily routine, functional fitness first appeared on the survey in the no. 4 position in 2007 but fell to no. 8 in 2008, and no. 11 in 2009. It reappeared in the top 10 in 2010 at no. 7 and in 2011 as no. 9. Functional fitness was the no. 10 trend in 2012, and it was no. 8 in 2013 and 2014. It was no. 9 in 2015, no. 7 in 2016, no. 12 in 2017, no. 10 in 2018, no. 9 in 2019, and no. 12 in 2020. This is a trend toward using strength training to improve balance, coordination, muscular strength, and endurance to improve activities of daily living typically for older adults and also in clinical populations.
- Yoga.** Yoga has taken on a variety of forms in the past (including Power Yoga, Flow Yoga, Yogilates, Hot Yoga, Rocket Yoga, and many others) as well as on-demand videos and books. Yoga first appeared in the top 10 on this survey in 2008, fell out of the top 20 in 2009, but made a great comeback in the 2010 (no. 14) and 2011 surveys (no. 11). In 2012, yoga was no. 11 on the list falling to no. 14 in 2013, and up to no. 7 in 2015. In 2017, it ranked no. 8 after occupying the no. 7 spot in 2015 and no. 10 in 2016. Yoga was ranked no. 7 in 2018 and 2019 and no. 14 in 2020.
- Exercise for weight loss.** Most diet programs recommend including some type of exercise program into the daily routine of caloric restriction, adding the caloric expenditure of physical activity into the equation. Exercise in weight loss programs has been a top 20 trend since the survey began. In 2009, exercise for weight loss ranked no. 18, moving to no. 12 in 2010, no. 7 in 2011, no. 4 in 2012, and no. 5 in 2013. In 2014, this trend was ranked no. 6 and remained at no. 6 in 2015. Exercise for weight loss was no. 9 in the 2016 survey and no. 10 in the 2017 survey. It was the no. 11 trend in 2018, no. 12 in 2019, and no. 11 in 2020.
- Group training.** Group exercise training programs have been around for a long time and have appeared as a potential worldwide trend since this survey was originally constructed. However, it was only in 2017 that group exercise training made the top 20, appearing at no. 6 followed by no. 2 in the 2018 and 2019 surveys. In 2020, group training fell slightly to no. 3. However, for the 2021 survey, group training fell dramatically to the no. 17 spot. Defined as more than five participants, group exercise instructors teach, lead, and motivate individuals through intentionally designed bigger in-person group movement classes. Group classes are designed to be effective, motivational sessions for different fitness levels with instructors teaching many types of classes and

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equipment, from cardio-based classes and indoor cycling to dance-based classes to step classes. The dramatic drop in the 2021 trends survey may be the result of gyms closing or the recommendation to limit social gatherings.

18. **Lifestyle medicine.** Lifestyle medicine is the evidence-based practice of helping individuals and families adopt and sustain healthy behaviors that affect health and quality of life. Examples of target patient behaviors include, but are not limited to, eliminating tobacco use, improving diet, increasing physical activity, and moderating alcohol consumption. Lifestyle medicine promotes healthy behaviors as the foundation to medical care, disease prevention, and health promotion. Lifestyle medicine appeared for the first time in the fitness trends survey at no. 16 in 2020.
19. **Licensure for fitness professionals.** There are some professions in the United States and around the world that are regulated by either local, state, or national licensure. For example, people cannot call themselves a medical doctor or nurse, and in many places a physical therapist or dietitian without holding a license issued by the state or federal government. This is a trend in the fitness industry to pursue regulation of fitness professionals such as personal trainers and exercise physiologists. Licensure for fitness professionals first appeared as a fitness trend in 2018 when it was ranked no. 16, then no. 18 in 2019, and no. 15 in 2020 before settling in at no. 19 for 2021.
20. **Outcome measurements.** Outcome measures are efforts to define, track, and report data leading to accountability of both the health club member and the trainer.

Measurements are necessary to determine the benefits of health and fitness programs in disease management and to document success in changing negative lifestyle habits. The proliferation of technology aids in data collection to support these efforts. Outcome measurements were the no. 21 trend in 2018, no. 16 in 2019, and no. 19 in 2020.

WHAT'S OUT FOR 2021?

Dropping out of the top 20 from 2020 were circuit training, worksite health promotion and workplace well-being, and children and exercise. Circuit training ranked no. 17 in 2018, dropped to no. 21 in 2019, no. 17 in 2020, and no. 26 for 2021. Worksite health promotion and workplace well-being has been ranked as high as no. 15 in 2019, dropped to no. 18 in 2020, and now is ranked at no. 27 for 2021. Children and exercise has been ranked as high as no. 1 in 2007 but has slowly lost ground in recent years. In 2020, children and exercise ranked in the top 20 (no. 20) but has fallen to no. 28 for 2021. Postpublication commentary on these results is always interesting, with one group or another arguing that their interest is a popular trend. Readers of this survey must understand that regional popularity does not always translate as an international trend.

SUMMARY

Online training went from the no. 26 trend in 2020 to the no. 1 trend for 2021 probably because of the shift in the market from clubs to homes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Wearable technology took over the no. 1 spot in 2019 and 2020 after dropping to no. 3 in 2018 and is now no. 2 for 2021. HIIT, the

no. 1 trend in 2014 and 2018, fell to no. 3 in 2019 and no. 2 in 2020 and is now the no. 5 trend. Group training made a significant return in 2017 as the no. 6 trend and had been the no. 2 trend in 2018 and 2019, no. 3 in 2020, and fell to the no. 17 trend for 2021. Training with free weights (which replaced barbell training in 2020) was the no. 4 trend in 2020 falling to no. 8 for 2021. Personal training is still in the top 10 but falling to no. 10 for 2021. Fitness programming aimed at older adults had regained some popularity after falling out of the top 10 trends in 2017, appeared as no. 9 in 2018, no. 4 in 2019, no. 8 in 2020, and is no. 9 for 2021. Body weight training first appeared as a fitness trend at no. 3 in 2013 and has been a top five fitness trend since that time realizing a peak as the no. 1 fitness trend in 2015. It was the no. 5 trend in 2019, the no. 7 trend in 2020, and now the no. 3 trend for 2021. Other trends to watch are outdoor activities (no. 4), virtual training (no. 6), and EIM (no. 7). Dropping out of the top 20 were circuit training, worksite health promotion and workplace well-being, and exercise programs specifically designed for children.

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BRIDGING THE GAP

The 2021 worldwide survey of fitness trends is now in its 15th consecutive year with this being perhaps the most critical year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting health club business models. It was designed to help and support the health fitness industry when making critical programming and business decisions to capture additional business into the future and maybe even to stay in business. These results are relevant to all four sectors of the health and fitness industry (commercial for-profit clubs, clinical or medical fitness programs, corporate wellness programs, and community-based not-for-profit fitness programs). Although no one can accurately predict the future of any industry, this survey helps to track trends that can assist owners, operators, program directors, and health fitness professionals with making their important business and program decisions.