Performative identities in online health & fitness communities are key to meeting fitness goals

This paper will argue that individuals who are active participants in online health and fitness communities experience greater success in meeting their health and fitness goals when they portray a performative identity of a fit and healthy individual on social networking sites. Firstly, this paper will discuss the role of community in influencing individual members to achieve their health and fitness goals. It will then explore online health and fitness communities on social networks with examples from posts tagged #bbgcommunity on Instagram, posts from the subreddit /r/intermittentfasting on Reddit, and comments from the YouTube community for the channel Yoga with Adrienne. Finally, it will discuss the role the individual plays in online health and fitness communities to achieve their goals while developing connections within the community through identity performance.

Health and Fitness Communities Online

Health and fitness communities are made up of individual members who each have a desire to improve their physical and mental wellbeing, with individual members joining these groups for inspiration in their own weight loss or fitness journey. For these members being an active participant in these types of online communities, the benefits to improving their own health and wellbeing can be enhanced by their online interaction with the community and its members.

Etzioni (2004) describes communities as being made up of two parts. The first is that the individual members are interconnected in "a web of affect-laden relationships", and secondly that community members have a "commitment to a set of shared values' (Etzioni, 2004). Individuals are encouraged to join communities and to unite in their fitness journey with others, because their relationship to others is based on working towards a shared common goal together. To expand on the notion of community, Etzioni (2004) adds that communities are strengthened by members having a "shared history and identity" (p. 225). Health and fitness communities are driven by the relationships of their individual members in being able to unite in their health and fitness journey. One example of how community members unite in their fitness journey can be found on Instagram, whereby a hashtag can be used by a community's member to connect with and join other individuals of the community (Instagram, 2020). The hashtag #bbgcommunity is added to a user's post on the social network, usually accompanied by an individual's weight loss or fitness progress photos (Instagram, 2020). The use of hashtags like #bbgcommunity provides the user with a sense of belonging to and being a part of a greater health movement (Pfortmüller, 2017).

Furthermore, members of health and fitness communities often share like history or identity in being overweight or in poor physical shape making them feel more connected to community members. As Pfortmüller discusses this proxy effect provides a 'sense of shared identity', that we are in this health and fitness journey together. This means that community members can begin to build trust whereby 'even though I don't know you, I trust you more than the average person because we are part of the same community, we share the same identity' (Pfortmüller, 2017). For those seeking to belong to a health and fitness community by having access to a group of peers of shared identity and values, members are more likely to be motivated to achieve their health and fitness goals (Leahey et al., 2012). As Larango and colleagues (2015) discuss, being part of a community

'can promote social support and social influence, facilitating health behavior change'. For community members to interact to facilitate this behavioural change, trust is important in building relationships with other community members. Hampton argues that traditional communities have found new ways to thrive online, and this is evident in the way that traditional gym or workout communities have turned to online spaces (Hampton, 2018). Web 2.0 technologies have provided opportunity for virtual social interaction and for accessing health and fitness support in ways that distance or time can no longer impede (Hampton, 2018). Porter (2015) discusses the concept of 'virtual communities' as 'communication communities' that serve more of a 'social function' rather than an exchange of information between members. These 'network-based virtual communities' can be described as communities that operate on social networking sites (Porter, 2015). Because some of these communities consist of 'large and disparate individual networks' what unites this virtual community is the support of the social network and the shared interest of its members (Porter, 2015). Health and fitness communities as virtual communities on social networking sites can be seen across a multitude of platforms. What social networking sites offer for health and fitness communities is an opportunity for members to interact with each other by exchanging photos, videos and messages that fuel motivation, peer comparison and competition in themselves and others towards achieving their health and fitness goals.

Communities on Social Networking Sites

Health and fitness groups have embraced new communication technologies, with Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking sites being embraced to connect individuals in their health and fitness journeys.

Platforms such as Instagram have acted in support of fitness movements such as the Kayla Itsines, Bikini Body Guide (Instagram, 2020). Users of the fitness program are encouraged to post photos of their journey with the progress picture playing a vital role in connecting individuals in the community in support and solidarity. By posting photos of ones fitness journey and applying the tag #bbgcommunity, members of this health and fitness community are united in completing the exercise program together. Furthermore, the use of the hashtag #bbgcommunity by Instagram users highlights how a tag can be used to foster and build community on a social networking site. From a hashtag fitness movement on Instagram, fitness instructor Kayla Itsines has further embraced how web 2.0 technologies can support an individuals health and fitness journey by introducing the platform Sweat to her #bbgcommunity (Sweat, 2020). Sweat is a mobile application that members sign up to to receive workout routines and to connect with other community members who are on the same path of achieving their health and fitness goals (Sweat, 2020). This embrace of new technology to support an online health and fitness community to connect, motivate and inspire each other to workout is an example of community in action and a community being strengthened by new technologies.

In their research into how social networks can increase physical activity, Zhang and colleagues (2016) argue that 'networks that emphasize social comparison among members can be surprisingly effective for motivating desirable behaviors.' For the community members of Sweat, being an active participant in the forum discussing their fitness journeys and exchanging photos of themselves and their fitness progression, members receive back support and motivation from their peers, encouraging them to keep on striving for their health and fitness goals. In addition to this their results also suggested that being part of a 'supportive environment significantly increased exercise levels', suggesting that while social comparison in individuals can be motivation, a 'support-based environment can change ineffective health networks into highly motivating social resources' (Zhang et al., 2016). This support focused community environment is also seen in the example of yoga YouTube

channel, Yoga with Adriene (YouTube, 2020). The viewership on this network are connected by their shared interest in yoga, and subscribe to content creator Adriene to view her pre-recorded and live yoga class streams (YouTube, 2020). This network of users who connect over the shared interest being broadcast by the producer, may not necessarily connect with other community members as much at an interpersonal level as with the Sweat forum. Due to the live nature of YouTube Streams, interpersonal interaction amongst this yoga community is limited. However, this collectie of like-minded individuals all share a common purpose of building on their own personal yoga practice. As seen in examples of YouTube user comments in the Yoga with Adriene community (Youtube, 2020), a sense of belonging to a cohort of individuals all following an online yoga course together, unites this community of followers on this platform. The support that the broadcaster and followers of the community provide to each other in the form of comments highlights this network's effectiveness as a motivating social resource for individuals (Zhang et al., 2016).

While social networking platforms have facilitated social fitness influencers like Kayla and Adriene to grow online health and fitness communities, individuals seeking to achieve their health and fitness goals, have also embraced web 2.0 technologies to connect with other like minded individuals on their health and fitness journeys and to find support within a community. Online forums such as Reddit support individuals in being able to connect with others with shared interests and goals, without necessarily having anything more in common than the subject of the subreddit they each are members of (Reddit, 2020). The difference between other social networking sites like Instagram, is that Reddit allows individuals to express more anonymity, whereas their identity can be more private or perhaps just part of one's identity that they choose to project online (Reddit, 2020). While there is conjecture into the authenticity and truthfulness of practices of anonymity and pseudonymity in individual profiles online, there is an important role that this level of privacy plays in allowing individuals 'to control what they reveal about themselves and who they reveal it to' (van de Nagal et al., 2015). As explored in the subreddit 'Intermittent Fasting', individuals who are in pursuit of their health and fitness goals may often identify as overweight or obese individuals (Reddit, 2020). The act of posting a progress photo onto a social network such as reddit, amongst a community of members who are also practicing intermittent fasting, allows an individual to project a partial identity of oneself to a group of people that may not necessarily be a part of their day to day lives. By having this anonymity, an individual who might usually be embarrassed about sharing a photo of their weightloss journey online in contrast feels supported and empowered to share their story on Reddit because they may not be viewed by other individuals in their day to day interactions (Donath, 1999). van de Nagal and colleagues (2015) state the practice of identity anonymity in a community such as a weight loss community, provides the possibility to connect with people who share the same weight loss goals but are separate from the 'social factors that routinely shape everyday life'. As such, the act of posting a weight loss progress picture to Reddit, allows an individual to share their story and gain support and motivation from others, who are separate from an individual's community in their real life and who may not be able to relate or share the same health and fitness goals as the individual (van de Nagal, 2015).

These examples from Instagram, Reddit and YouTube highlight the ways in which social networking sites support online health and fitness communities by connecting individuals with shared health and fitness goals. By being active participants in these online communities, individuals are more likely to achieve their health and fitness goals when they receive support from other community members. As Shakya and colleagues (2015) argue, when individuals seeking weight loss "cluster" together they are more likely to 'influence each other's weight outcomes'. Furthermore, individuals that received social influence from community members

achieved greater weight loss results than those who did not receive support (Shakya et al., 2015). While studies have highlighted that weight loss goals can be achieved by participants receiving support and motivation from their peers in health and fitness communities on social networking sites (Shakya et al., 2015), the social network community can only benefit the individual member when they actively partake in shaping their identity to one that reflects a profile of health and fitness.

Health and Fitness Identity Performance on Social Networking Sites

Performative identities on social networking sites, as is the case of individuals in online health and fitness communities, are constructed by each member so that they may be accepted and supported into the community they seek to belong to.

Kendall (2011) describes virtual communities as 'existing through people's imagined bonds', meaning that for online communities to perform, each 'participant's identity plays an important part in the formation and continuation of the community'. Pearson (2009) expands further on this theory suggesting that individuals are aware of their 'performance roles' and that by being 'actors' we construct these identities to connect with an 'audience of lurkers, virtual passers–by, and wider social networks'. Knowing that each individual is responsible for the identity they project can be a powerful tool for individuals seeking to meet their health and fitness goals as it allows them to project an identity that will attract support and motivation from community members. By posting regular progress pictures of one's weight loss or sharing a post that discusses one's improvement in fitness, community members receive back likes, follows and comments of support that further empower them to reach their goals. In a recent study of self-comparisons as motivators for healthy behavior, individuals that were part of health and fitness communities that shared social norms of healthy lifestyles and that had individual members who portrayed identities of healthy behavior imitation, were more likely to aspire to their 'healthy eating, physical activity, and weight loss intentions' (Leahey et al., as cited by Shakya et al. 2015, p. 2477). In the example of the #bbgcommunity on instagram, individual members who constructed their online health and fitness identity with posted progress photos were portrayed as fit and healthy, and of always being on track with their fitness regime or diet (Instagram, 2020). In reality, these individuals were likely to have struggled with temptation or lack of motivation like everyone else. However, the act of a networked performance of identity allows an individual to portray an identity of a healthy and fit person on a selected platform rather than across all their social networking sites.

Choosing to engage in a performative identity with a community such as the #bbgcommunity, not only strengthens one's own intention and motivation to workout but also demonstrates to other community members that if you too are an active participant in this community, you can look like this too (Leahey, 2012). As Centola and colleagues (2010) report individuals are more likely to adopt health and fitness behaviours when they have social reinforcement from other community members. Furthermore, their findings suggest that individuals 'were significantly more likely to adopt' a health or fitness behaviour after they receive more than one 'signal', such as a like or comment, from another community member (Centola, 2010). Further research also suggests that an individual who identifies as being less fit or overweight than others, 'may be more motivated by social media content' that reflects another individual for whom they can 'recognize as being similar to themselves' (Johnston, 2019). This notion suggests that while an individual's identity may be performative and showcase only the health and fitness identity that they choose to portray, members in online health and fitness communities value authenticity. Additionally, Johnston (2019) states that individuals who are aspiring to reach their health and

fitness goals are 'less motivated by content featuring professional athletes and extremely fit individuals'. While individuals may seek to connect with others that portray an identity of peak health and fitness in online communities, this research shows that 'relative similarity between users and people portrayed in the images' can be a powerful motivator of individuals who are seeking to achieve their health and fitness goals (Johnston, 2019). These examples of identity as performance display how health and fitness communities can support individuals in meeting their health and fitness goals, by allowing them to project an identity of health and fitness that not only supports them in staying on track to achieve their own goals but by also inspiring competition through peer comparison to motivate members to achieve the shared common goals of the community.

Conclusion

Active members of online health and fitness communities are more likely to be motivated and are more likely to achieve their health and fitness goals when they engage in a performative identity on social networking sites that support the communities social interaction. Social networking sites support health and fitness communities to connect members by allowing them to communicate by photos exchange, comments of support and messages of motivation. Peer comparison provides not only support but competition which plays a role in motivating individuals in achieving their health and fitness goals. By engaging with other community members, individuals can support one another in their health and fitness journey's. Health and fitness communities can further benefit an individual member to achieve their goals when they actively partake in shaping an identity of health and fitness on social networking sites. Having a performative identity in these communities supports individuals in meeting their health and fitness goals, by projecting an aspired or constructed identity of health and fitness, individual members are accountable for the identity that display which ultimately keeps them on track to achieve their own goals but inspires the community through peer comparison to motivate all members to achieve their shared purpose.

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