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Facebook and YouTube as virtual third places: How the fitness industry continues to engage with customers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledgement of country

Abstract

Maintaining levels of fitness during the COVID-19 pandemic became a worldwide problem as many gyms were forced to close. Failing to maintain fitness was a cause of many health-related problems, including mental health issues. One way to overcome the problem was fitness centres moving their classes and other programs online, but there were no guidelines or rules for doing so. This paper investigates the way in which some fitness centres used social media platforms to alleviate the problem of falling participation levels in the fitness industry. This paper examines numerous scholarly texts that looked at the third place and how that is increasingly including online spaces; texts that investigated the social aspects of both YouTube and Facebook as virtual third places; and texts that evaluated the motivations for engaging in fitness activities through online communities. These studies suggest that fitness programs can be moved online, providing all the right criteria are met, such as: social interaction and a sense of belonging, access to infrastructure, digital knowledge, and a sense of community. Without all of these factors, using social media platforms as online third places for people to engage in fitness programs, is likely to fail.

Paper

The global fitness industry has grown in stature over time, but the COVID-19 pandemic saw many gyms and fitness centres around the world close their doors. Sometimes these closures were temporary – in response to government mandated restrictions on activities in order to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus – and others were permanent because of an inability to operate sustainably after their temporary closures. The industry struggled globally and had to re-evaluate its operations and adapt to a new way of doing things. If they did not adapt, they would simply fade away. This paper fits within the Communities and Social Media stream and will look at how some in the fitness industry changed in order to survive. It will examine the notion of third places, away from home and work and how people used online social networks as a location they could fulfil their own fitness needs. In particular, the paper argues the fitness industry has used Facebook and YouTube as third places to create online communities, providing a sense of belonging and encouraging active participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The definition of community is debatable – from thick physical communities to thin online communities (Turner, 2001, as cited in Delanty, 2018, p. 205). Some communities are a mix of physical and online, such as family members that interact in the physical world and online platforms like Facebook; and some are distinctly one or the other (Delanty, 2018, p. 204). Irrespective of whether a community is physical or virtual, it would not exist unless its members believed they were, in fact, a community (Delanty, 2018, p. 205). Craig Calhoun argued that online internet communities were secondary to face-to-face communities rather than communities themselves (Calhoun, 1996, as cited in Delanty, 2018, p. 213), but as the internet has matured, we can see virtual online communities as third places in their own right.

Third places are becoming more entrenched in the online world. Once, they were considered to be convivial physical meeting places such as the coffee shop, alehouse, or bar (Oldenburg, 2009, p. 40), but more and more they are considered as any place where people meet to interact around similar interests, beliefs, or desires. Social platforms such as Facebook are

sufficiently loose and fluid with their rules that communities can form and dictate their own norms within their online space (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 215). Charles Soukup (2006, p. 424) suggests that "In many respects, computer-mediated contexts and traditional third places share similar functions and characteristics". Online spaces can take on many, if not all, of the characteristics traditionally prescribed to the physical third place by Oldenburg. Perhaps, where they differ most, is in the notions that third places emphasise local communities, are social levellers and easily accessible. Online communities are distributed, rather than local; not everyone can connect, because of socio-economic restrictions or a lack of digital skills; and the infrastructure is not available that would allow access in every location. Notwithstanding these limitations, there is enough similarity to consider some social network spaces as a "virtual third place" (Soukup, 2006, p. 432) where people meet and socialise.

While online communities have become more important over time, they are not perfect. There has always been a tendency within established society to look at emerging communities in an overly critical manner by highlighting their inadequacies or dangers, yet clearly ignoring their benefits (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, pp. 643-644). Change is inevitable and communities are fluid. Prior to the industrial revolution most connections were between people acquainted with each other, who lived in geographically connected spaces – they interacted almost daily and were likely to know many things about one another through those interactions – they formed strong physical bonds (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 644). These were the thick communities described by Turner (2001, as cited in Delanty, 2018, p. 205). Throughout history, it can be seen that various technologies that "facilitate contact at a distance" (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 647) have allowed people to move away from their established social and physical neighbourhoods. The sometimes transient nature and strong emphasis on self-presentation within online communities can, however, lead to thinning of that community by weakening links and commitments to others (Delanty, 2018, p. 220). This is not always the case, though, and the opposite can be seen in the emergence of online fitness communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes, including a decrease in physical activity and an inability to attend gyms and other recreation facilities because of government mandated restrictions such as physical distancing, travel restrictions and closure of those facilities (Stanton et al., 2020, p. 9). Many fitness centre operators either chose to close, or had to close because of the pandemic (Andersson & Andreasson, 2021, p. 2). Gyms can be a

physical third place where people meet to get away from their life's daily duties and form communities around similar interests (Oldenburg, 2009, p. 41), but the pandemic restrictions took away the opportunity to attend. Lysniak (2021, p. 217) learned through her research that a sense of community is extremely important and can help people through many bad times. While teaching her fitness students through online classes, Lysniak found that community of family became an essential part of surviving the pandemic, including bringing whole families together to exercise while in lockdown. Family togetherness is not always physically possible and so must sometimes move into the realms of the online third places created on social media platforms.

boyd and Ellison stated that "social networking sites … have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices" (2007, p. 210). In 2022, there are about 4.48 billion users who spend an average of 2 hours 24 minutes per day on social media sites (Dean, 2021 para. 7). Global social media usage has grown by 44 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Watson, 2020, as cited in Vuorenlinna, 2021, p. 12) with the two most popular social media platforms being Facebook and YouTube (Dean, 2021 para. 7). Social isolation became a cause of some psychological issues and a threat to people's general health, so they sought social interaction online (Cronshaw, 2022, p. 451). Tia Vuorenlinna (2021) undertook a study in Finland as part of her master's thesis research where she interviewed a selection of CrossFit gym members. She analysed the benefits and value that participants believed they received from the CrossFit brand's Facebook and Instagram social media communities, which showed that all participants felt there was an increase in informational, educational, social, entertainment, economic, and motivational benefits associated with using the brand's social media platforms during the pandemic (Vuorenlinna, 2021, p. 43). This was partly because of the fast changing rules around training policies, which they could get in a timely manner, but they could also take part in online training sessions that were hosted on the social media platforms, such as Facebook Groups (Vuorenlinna, 2021, p. 44). CrossFit members could take part in various competitions, challenges, and workouts of the day while they were isolated or restricted in other ways from attending the gym (Vuorenlinna, 2021, p. 45). Having the workouts readily available at home through a Facebook Group made it easier to continue their fitness routines while interacting and competing against other gym members in their online community.

COVID-19 saw a significant increase in people converting parts of their homes into workout spaces, or even fully equipped home gyms, with a 307 percent increase in sales of home fitness products in the United States alone (Stackline 2020, as cited in Kim, 2022, p. 1). YouTube fitness channels enabled people to exercise at times that suited them, without a need to travel to the gym. People could watch videos posted by the online trainers, film themselves and upload their own videos or watch videos created by other users (Kim, 2022, p. 2). It did not take long for people to become overwhelmed with choice on YouTube with the large volumes of content uploaded every day, so it became more important to follow online trainers that already had a good reputation. Communities formed around those reputable presenters and Kim noted that "first, fitness YouTube channels should emphasize the development of a socially friendly environment" (Kim, 2022, p. 2). For a channel to become successful, it had to be reputable, but it also had to have social interaction through the use of the channel's comments section. The successful YouTube channels became a third place that enabled people to meet virtually and interact and even compete against each other just as they would if they were meeting in a real-world gym.

The uptake of online social media platforms as a third place for people to meet and take part in fitness regimes became somewhat of a paradox. While they could freely participate and achieve their fitness goals, there was also the issue of identity. What persona did they want to portray of themselves in that space and who were the other people within the online community? Was the community real, or was it simply a simulation of community? (Soukup, 2006, p. 426). Social media allows users to be almost completely anonymous; and that is where the problem lies. Those same spaces that afforded the social interaction and community could also be the breeding ground of trolls and miscreants with very little accountability. The online spaces became a two-edged sword. The lack of accountability also allowed people to leave and not complete their exercises with no one else knowing (Cronshaw, 2022, p. 452). There was no-one watching to ensure you stuck to your program, enabling people to cheat, although it was really only themselves they would be cheating. Overall, Cronshaw found that people taking part in what she described as "digital-physical activity" (2022, p. 460) created a positive result of their overall well-being. People could take a break from their regular activities and feel the pleasure of a workout while gaining some social interaction along the way.

Rovniak et al. (2016, p. 895) found that people were more likely to be motivated to take part in exercise by their existing group of family and friends than with people they didn't know. This correlates with the importance of family for wellbeing, that was highlighted by Lysniak (2021, p. 217). It also supports the arguments made by (Kim, 2022, p. 2) that before a YouTube fitness channel is likely to become successful, it needs to promote a sense of being social and friendly besides the fitness information provided.

Many people have been able to transition from the physical third space of the gym to the online virtual third place, but not everyone has had that opportunity. Some people simply don't have the technology skills to make the change, some people can't afford the required internet connection, and some people don't have the infrastructure in place to enable connection, even if they could afford it and have the requisite skills. Overall however, research has shown that a good deal of fitness centres have taken their programs online, with instructors building a community that welcomes their patrons, and provides essential health advice and workouts to maintain their wellbeing. Facebook and YouTube have been the most popular social platforms used by the fitness industry to provide a place of belonging while encouraging active participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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