

The Revolution of Fitness: A Contemporary Analysis of How Technology and Personal Training Influences Consumer Behavior in Two Atlanta, Georgia Fitness Centers

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ABSTRACT

Today, fitness gyms and private health clubs are globally recognized as multi-billion-dollar establishments. This study explores the development of the modern gym and fitness culture, particularly the emergence of fitness trends such as personal training and technology. This study aims to understand how and why training in the gym has become so important for people. A comparative case study approach was used to consider personal training and technological influences, which are both contributing to the prevailing phenomena of the fitness industry. How are gym members' behaviors affected by the fitness centers' culture? Why do consumers seek to use technology while working out? Why do they rely more on personal training in studio-based gyms versus the "big box" gyms. In this study, "fitness culture" is the embodied culture found inside health studios and clubs amongst members. Methodology included continuous monitoring direct observation and semi-structured interviewing. The analysis suggests that the practices, apparatuses, and physical exercises used today in these two Atlanta area gyms are the result of a physical fitness culture established and currently refined throughout the twentieth century. The physique ideals, exercises, and incorporation of technology have turned fitness into a highly customizable popular movement based on fitness culture and modern trends.

THE "REVOLUTION" OF FITNESS

Technology is an obvious rapid advancement and highly involved in our society, would you say that incorporating this type of technology might distract the members from focusing more on the actual workout?

"Absolutely, it completely distracts some members from getting their sweat on. Sometimes members will refuse to continue working out if the Bluetooth doesn't connect properly. It is almost as if they just don't know what to do or they are lost without it" (Jordan, personal communication, March 26, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The initial step to conduct my research was to take the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules through Kennesaw State University's IRB. Since my project is relative to the contemporary fitness industry, I chose two fitness locations who entered the market one year ago. At each location, I performed semi-structured interviews with the management and personal trainers to gain enriched data to better understand the companies' structures, fitness cultures, and their personal opinions on the evolution of the fitness industry. I had a total of three interviews at each location for my comparison. In addition to my interviews, I wanted to gain a better understanding from a personal viewpoint so I incorporated participant observation. I have always been a consecutive gym goer but by buying the latest fitness wearable (Figure 4), I was able compare my previous workouts and the effects that technology has from a consumer's perspective. The control variable was technology and since each facility's workout regimen was led by a personal trainer, I gained critical data to compare with my continuous monitoring direct observations. While both facilities under investigation entered the market in 2013 and both utilized group-based personal training instructed classes, they each incorporated different workout routines which justified the comparative analysis.



Figure 1. An Orangetheory Fitness workout performance report sent to my email following participation.



Figure 3. A marketing image used by Orangetheory Fitness Franchises, which emphasizes the scientific approach to training, a caloric expenditure, and weight-loss.



Figure 2. A marketing image used by UFC Gym Franchises, which emphasizes personal training and it's one-on-one objectives toward achieving optimal physical fitness.

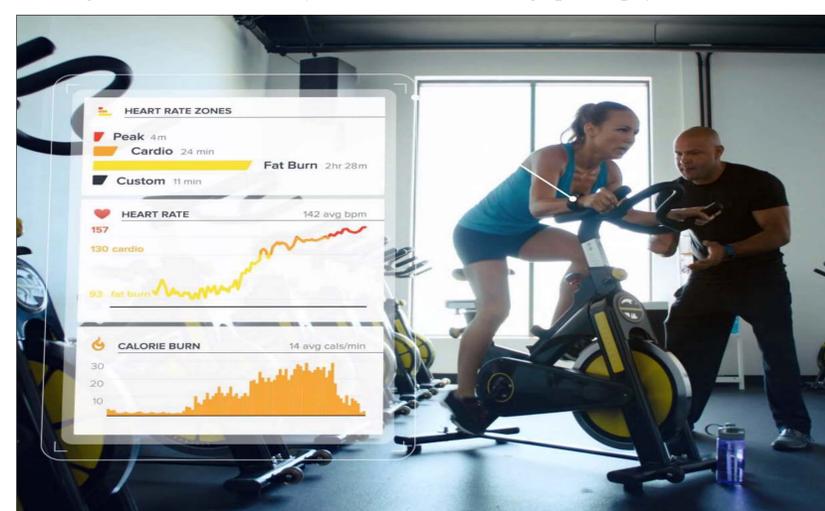


Figure 4. A marketing image used for the FitBit surge, the most recent fitness wearable produced during the project.

RESULTS

1. Why do consumers seek to use technology while working out?

"It's innovative & holds them accountable. The effort they put in is an immediate feedback for them [Figure 1]. As society advances our sense for patience and self-administered actions disintegrates. An immediate performance summary acts as a motivating agent and reinforces progress. After all, most interviewed members, said they join a gym to get results. I found that technology and personal training both have tremendous benefits and purposes for the members taking the classes. Technology also attracts a lot of people and gyms advertise as 'Results Guaranteed!' It keeps members from guessing. (Personal Trainer, personal communication, March 03, 2015)

2. How are gym members' behaviors affected by the fitness centers' culture?

At UFC Gym, there was no technology involved (Figure 2). Interviewed participants said that they are motivated enough by a trainer and don't need computerized equipment to feel good about working out. The members seemed to understand that the trainer could help them achieve their goals. At Orangetheory Fitness, members relied on technology feedback and personal training. If their name wasn't displaying their performance during class, they would complain and stop to fix it. The workout comes second to technology (Figure 3).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My data and analysis served as confirmation with participants' subjective reporting of truly understanding the goals of working out. My interview memo's and coding showed patterns which illuminated the meaning and importance people place on personal training/technology in modern fitness centers. Previous research (Andreason et al. 2014) supports the idea that current fitness trends are due to a globalization of the gym and fitness culture over time. The pre-established physical culture in the twentieth century is ever developing. Other research by Barry Glassner (1989) revealed that parallel to the historic shift of consumerism, the buyers are seeking products that fit symbolic interactions and deliverance. In the case of fitness, we are seeking any type of aid to provide immediate results. The positives of technology are the visual and scientific aids they provide to those working out. I expected to find more awareness of health related information by those using fitness wearables, but the majority of people wearing them only knew the basic calorie count meaning, and nothing about the targeted scientific values it provided. It is clear that America is focused on a weight-loss phenomena and "Results Guaranteed" facilities. Further research could support how the contemporary media and business structure play an important role in consumer mindsets as we become more and more technology dependent.