



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Fitness Clubs Revolution and Social Interaction

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### Abstract

Most, if not all, of us have experienced fitness personally, as athletes, spectators or both. Most likely, we are familiar with the physical and emotional experiences of going at the gym and may know the rules and strategies used in gym sport. You may even follow the lives of high-profile athletes in your school or on the national sport scene. In this article, the aim is to focus on the meaning associated with fitness clubs – the process through which it becomes part of the social and cultural life. The importance of doing sport as a way of preventing illness and maintaining health has often been invoked by medical specialists. In addition to the health benefits of regular exercise, the aesthetic advantages must also be mentioned. Such spaces where individuals can cultivate their appearances and maintain health are fitness clubs. In the century where speed is at its highest, individuals do not have to worry about accessing the use of fitness services. What has the ability to maintain and increase the number of members of a club is the way they communicate through social media and social interaction in the fitness club. As it is this environment precisely that which provides information about the behavior one needs to adopt in order to build and maintain a healthy body. I believe fitness clubs promote the idea of a healthy lifestyle in accordance with internal strategy and concept, health being a means of achieving a desirable physical form. The content of the information provided reflects the insistence on the concern for health control.

**Keywords:** *fitness clubs; body; communication; social interaction; healthy.*

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### **The importance of studying fitness clubs and social interaction**

Studying fitness as a new social phenomenon leads to research questions such as: Why is fitness popular in one society but not another? Why are fitness events and fitness gyms organised in different ways from one society to the next? How is fitness connected with other parts of society, such as the family, religion, education, government, the economy and the media? Who sponsors fitness industry, and for which reasons? In summary, fitness is an important part of culture, which differs from place to place and generation to generation. How fitness is defined, organised and integrated into social life varies from one society to another. This means that to understand fitness in its entirety we must view it as an aspect of the social world that is created in a particular social context. Sociology provides us with tools that help us to view and understand fitness as an aspect of the social world that is created in a particular social context as we discuss major issues related to sport in society.

### **Why study fitness in society?**

There are several reasons why it is necessary to study the important part that fitness clubs play in a society. The three most important reasons are the following:

- Fitness clubs are connected to major spheres of social life.
- Fitness clubs are a part of people's lives.
- Fitness clubs are connected with important ideas and meanings in life.

### **Introduction**

This article is not only about understanding physical activity through gyms and health; it is also about promoting physical activity and health. Physical activity has been endorsed and promoted in recent years through a number of marketing strategies. Being in an early stage of development, the Romanian fitness market began to emerge in 2000, with the entry of international operators on the market. In Bucharest, most sports, recreational and wellness centers are concentrated, this being explained by being the most populous city in Romania, and because it has a higher income level.

At the same time, the corporate segment is overdeveloped, which means that the potential of the fitness market is very high. Renowned companies enter into partnerships with sports service providers in order to facilitate their employees access to sporting activities, at a cost, but at negotiated rates at the group level.

In a fragmented market where there are competitors at different levels, the sports and wellness centers are expanding with new locations. By promoting training and emphasizing the importance of sport as a lifestyle, fitness is an integral part of sport. This present study tried to understand the way in which interaction is organized in 5 World Class fitness clubs.

### **Theoretical framework**

I will open the article with a general discussion of recent theoretical contributions. The fitness services industry reflects the evolution of marketing strategies in this area by focusing on maintaining customers, providing high quality services and promoting fitness as a product of expertise. More specifically, through the services offered, fitness clubs provide a social framework for consumption exposure, membership of a club marking the individual's position as a symbolic capital. Maguire (Maguire, 2008: 104) suggests that "the choices offered by fitness clubs can be treated

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and evaluated in the same way as other leisure options such as shopping, tourism, filmmaking, etc.”

There are several types of fitness clubs, their classification being determined by the types of services offered. So, in some fitness clubs only fitness can be done, other clubs are exclusively dedicated to women, and there are also clubs offering a full range of services, including ancillary facilities like a spa, a sauna. The basic feature of a fitness club is that in order to gain access to these services, the consumer has to consolidate his membership of that club by signing a membership contract.

Fitness clubs compete in creating a consumer experience through the variety of services offered. These include access to the gym, aerobics, swimming pool, sauna, jacuzzi. To meet the needs of consumers for complex, personalized services, fitness clubs also include personal training services. Most fitness clubs have classrooms dedicated to class or group training. Classes are supported by an instructor sitting in front of the participants. Music is used to accompany the different stages of the training and the instructor's voice is perceptible by using a headset microphone. Although most of the time the instructor participates fully in the classroom, coordinating the movement on the rhythm of the music, it can address the participants recommendations, suggestions on the execution of the movements.

Fitness as an integral part of the sports industry has not been among the core concerns of sports management researchers. Despite this, fitness is an important part of sport and adherence to an active and healthy lifestyle. The prevalence of obesity and other health problems has generated interest in the development of innovative technologies through which health services are communicated. Many local cities have greatly speculated the effectiveness of communicating the benefits of fitness through various environments, with the launch of several campaigns, including BeHealthy Bucharest / Timisoara / Brasov Festival, Move on Fitness, REVIVE Fitness Bootcamp, Free Unica Sports Training Day Child and Pentecost, Sports and Health Festival, The Biggest Hour of Sports.

Within these festivals there are sports activities, especially fitness classes supported by trainers from the country and from abroad. There are also football championships, table tennis and charity tournaments. In addition to these activities, participants are provided with an area dedicated exclusively to health testing using specialized devices. Fitness and wellness providers are constantly evolving in the way of communication to create and deliver branding about fitness services.

The company that requested this market study is 7card, one of the main players in the field (“The Romanian Fitness Market: How many people go to the gym, how much money does it take out of pockets and what activities they like”). According to a study on trends in the fitness industry, the results show the predilection for group training, which attests to the importance of communicating in a fitness setting (Thompson, 2018). Numerous studies have focused on the exploration of the interaction in the fitness room (Sassatelli, 1999), the motivations and meanings attributed by the walkers (Crossley, 2006) and the fitness industry as a space for exposure of the body in the culture of consumption (Featherstone, 2010).

In the study *The standardization process of movement in the fitness industry* (Parviainen, 2011) the author analyzes the standardization process of Les Mills choreographers and their effects on the interaction between instructors and clients. Starting from the recognition of Les Mills International - the largest provider of group training programs in more than 12,000 clubs in over 70 countries with 5 million

participants in a week - Jaana Parviainen is basing its research on observation participating in the fitness classes of eight fitness centers in a European city and on the texts and images presented on the official Les Mills International website.

The researcher speaks of a standardization of the motion process in the fitness industry through an experience-based model. This model refers to the design of products, processes, services, events and atmosphere based on the importance of the emotions, perceptions, sensations and imaginations of an individual or group (Parviainen, 2011). In order to test the experience-based model, Parviainen participated as a customer in Les Mills International classes in order to test these training concepts and compare the experience experienced with those described in the texts on the company's website (Parviainen, 2011). The researcher appreciates that in the global fitness market, Les Mills International has been forced by the ability to provide group training programs consisting of simple moves that people can easily learn after participating in a few classes (Parviainen, 2011: 530-531).

### **The personality and symbolic capital of fitness clubs**

The personality and symbolic capital of fitness clubs are characteristic of the horizontal stratification of the fitness services industry. Maguire (2008, 93) suggests that the personality of the club is cultivated through the décor, clientele and the way staff treat customers and, moreover, is enhanced by promotional materials and consumer reviews. In other words, as we live in a hyper-consumer society dominated by products and services designed to meet the most diverse requirements, "building the personality of the club helps create a structured choice of choices to meet the various budget constraints, training requirements and preferences lifestyle" ( Parviainen, 2011: 530-531).

The club's personality is defined by club promotional materials and consumer testimonials bringing together the personalities of the members in a single, predominant, ideal personality (Parviainen, 2011: 98). Thus, consumer testimonials are a tool for promoting self-consciousness over the criteria of personal choices (Parviainen, 2011: 99). Advertising and consumer reviews define the personality of the club by offering potential customers the opportunity to identify themselves with it. Regarding the club's symbolic capital, the author mentions that it includes the physical framework or decor. Basically, design and decoration created communicates the type of consumer sought. For Roberta Sassatelli (Sassatelli, 1999: 229), "with the use of space, light and decoration, each club organizes its own way of marking the transition from everyday reality to the world of exercises." Also, "the different ways of going out into the outside world, both spatial and symbolic, establish the official style or the tone of each club" (Sassatelli, 1999: 230).

A particular aspect is that in the fitness club market competition is not only manifested by the types of devices provided but also by the desired clientele reflected by the club's image (Sassatelli, 1999:230). Membership as a member - claims Maguire (Maguire, 2008:102) - not only involves paying the monthly fee but also joining the club's general profile. Membership of a fitness club becomes a symbol of the motivation to take care of oneself and the ability to do so. The personality and symbolic capital of the club are also strengthened by the hired staff. It is not only responsible for providing services but reflects the personality of the club in terms of and interaction with clients (Maguire, 2008:102).

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### **Fitness, Consumerism, Hyperconsumerism**

According to Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 2008: 165), for centuries, the body was denied being perceived as an entity outside the individual. In the consumer society, however, we are witnessing a special effort to “convince our body”. While initially the attention to the soul and the denial of pleasures and bodily desires were values associated with salvation, “today the body has become an object of salvation” (Baudrillard, 2008: 165). In other words, people become the consumers of their own bodies, the body being perceived as a possession, the object of investiture.

Another perspective on the attention given to the body is offered by Gilles Lipovetsky (Lipovetsky, 2007) in the paradoxical Happiness work. Essay on the hyperconsum. In the author's view, hyperconsum, this last phase of modernity, marks “the transition from the era of the election to the age of hyper-election, from monodotation to multidimension, from consumerism to dissent to continuous consumerism, from individualist consumption to hyperindividual consumption” (Lipovetsky, 2007 : 88).

At this stage when time is the enemy of all, “consumption as an art of living” (Lipovetsky, 2007: 88) becomes the main instrument that can satisfy the desire of individuals for a desirable body and can offer the so-called paradoxical happiness. From now on, the only effort we have to make is to identify what, from the huge market of consumption, corresponds to the idea of happiness, as well as the ways we get it. For this purpose, “rediscovery of self” and “improvement of form” are possible through appeal to relaxation techniques (yoga, sauna) that are meant to “amplify and come into contact with sensations” (Lipovetsky, 2007: 248 ) and “exercises to maintain and improve the physical form” (Lipovetsky, 2007: 252).

In support of this ideal there are the fitness clubs, those “shopping areas that offer consumers the opportunity to enroll in different body practices, being open to anyone who has the financial capacity to act as a consumer” (Sassatelli, 1999: 229 ). In *Fit for consumption*, Jennifer Smith Maguire (Maguire, 2008: 62) states that since the body is a central element of the consumption culture, functioning as an object of the statute, the spaces in which it can be cultivated, maintained and improved are also, spaces of the status. More specifically, through the services offered, fitness clubs can be regarded as an opportunity for exposing social status. They work in membership status, quality and diversity of programs, staff professionalism determining club status and membership costs.

Maguire (Maguire, 2008: 104) explains the development of the fitness services industry in America through two models that created, on the one hand, vertical stratification of price-based clubs and, on the other hand, a horizontal stratification transposed into symbolic capital and the club's personality. The range of services provided by fitness clubs involves adjusting the price that potential consumers pay to become members. At this level, Maguire (Maguire, 2008: 89) suggests that the fitness services industry is characterized by two business models.

The first one is sales-oriented and relies on the registration of new members, the latter assuming the maintenance of existing customers. Thus, the sales-oriented model aims to achieve profit, not limiting the number of members, maintaining membership levels low. This involves lower salaries for employees, so the quality of services is lower (Maguire, 2008: 90). On the other hand, the customer-oriented model of customer

retention increases profit through this approach by providing consumers with superior quality services by practicing higher membership fees, locating clubs, etc. (Maguire, 2008: 90).

Therefore, the cost of services depends mainly on the quality of the services offered, the training of the staff, the location of the club, etc. It is precisely through the higher prices that provide a higher-ranked clientele, the auxiliary facilities offered and the exposure in the media is supported by the credibility of clubs using the existing customer retention model (Maguire, 2008: 93).

### **Methodology**

The objective of my research is to explore how social interaction is organized in one of the World Class clubs in Bucharest and the role of the coach in the consumption of fitness services. So, in order to achieve this goal, I participated in the above-mentioned club and interviewed the club's coaches. The representative concept is social interaction. Thus, social interaction designates the "reciprocal or resulting action of the coupling (interference) of actions initiated by persons, groups or collectivities, influencing the conditions of manifestation and the obtained performances" (Vlăsceanu, 1993). In this regard, I will write below the indicators of the social interaction concept: the way the customer coaches encounter (eg greeting, facial expression, eyesight, gestures, mimics); what the customers discuss with each other / coach; rules that define the presence in the room; exercises proposed by the coach; instructions, recommendations provided by the coach; customer feedback from the coach; motivational tools used by the coach; client / coach-initiated questions; independent client / coach-trained topics; the way his coach stayed good (eg greeting, facial expression, eyesight, gestures, mimics); reactions generated by the coach at the end of the training (eg applauded).

### **Observant participation**

For the present research we have chosen as a method the participatory observation taking into account the research objectives and the fact that "the observation largely eliminates the artificialisation of the study of social life" (Chelcea, 2007: 401). Septimiu Chelcea (Chelcea, 2007: 401) mentions that "sociological observation is defined as concrete, field, empirical research and, in a narrow sense, as a scientific method of collecting data with the help of senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, etc.) sociological and psychological interferences to verify hypotheses or describe systematically and objectively the environment, people and interpersonal relationships, individual and collective behaviors, actions and activities, verbal behavior, physical objects, products of creative activities of people and human groups". There are several types of observation, the classification of which is not standard but rather determined according to the degree of structuring, the level of the researcher's involvement, the duration of the observation etc. and the terminology assigned by each researcher.

I will not insist on the presentation of the various types of observation, but I will recall from their variety the unstructured observation, the structured observation, the external observation, the participatory observation, the continuous observation, the sampled observation, etc. As far as the participatory observation is concerned, it is encountered in field sociological studies and especially in cultural anthropology research (Chelcea, 2007: 410).

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Edward C. Lindeman is the pioneer of the participatory observation, introducing this term into the sociology vocabulary in 1924, in the work *Social Discovery* (Chelcea, 2007: 412). Herbert J. Gans (1962/1982, 398-399 apud Chelcea, 2007: 413) distinguishes between three types of participatory observation according to the researcher's behavior: "the researcher behaves as an observer, the researcher participates, but as researcher, the researcher participates, becoming "researcher-participant" in this situation. Looking at the whole, this study provides support for my research on interactions taking place in five of the World Class clubs in Bucharest.

### **Analysis of the results**

At international level, the World Class fitness center chain has subsidiaries in over 14 countries across Europe and the Middle East. In Romania, the first fitness center was opened in 2000 in Bucharest. Since then, the Swedish company has inaugurated six clubs in Bucharest and one in Cluj and Timisoara, imposing itself as a market leader in the native fitness industry (source: <http://www.worldclass.ro/company-about-us.php>).

"Recognition and popularity enjoyed by World Class locally is largely due to the fact that there are no competitors of the same level, this being the only chain in the field. The company also has the advantage of being the first to enter the fitness market, clubs being located in hotels, shopping centers, office buildings, etc. " (source:[http://www.moneyexpress.ro/articol\\_22719](http://www.moneyexpress.ro/articol_22719)).

The intention to study this matter came along as i have participated in group fitness training, noting that what is happening in the World Class club where I train could become the subject of my dissertation paper.

Specifically, I started going to the hall from January 2017 to the present. The research itself took place between February and May 2018, during which I attended the club 4-5 times a week, taking my observations hour a day.

Being located in a shopping center in Bucharest, the World Class club where we researched occupies over 2,000 square meters, organizing it as "moving from the everyday world to the world of exercises" (Sassatelli, 1999: 229). More specifically, from the point of view of organization, this passage is symbolized by an illuminated tunnel that basically leads the individual to the space in which the body is subjected to physical exercise.

Personally, the aesthetics of the tunnel announcing training for training, reminded me of the tunnel through which the gunmen pass before entering the ring. Similarly, the World Class tunnel has a circular shape and is diffuse illuminated, suggesting that the individual is at the center of attention, being the "star" expected.

At the end of the tunnel there are two escalators that are not functional, which led me to believe that climbing and lowering the stairs could be regarded, on the one hand, as a potential heating for the exercises that individuals were supposed to do and, on the other hand, as a continuation of the exercises.

Once the escalator steps were taken, some of the way the club is organized can be deciphered. Thus, on the left is the gym area, more commonly known as the gym, on the right is the spa area and in the center the socialization area, relaxation and the club reception. Affiliation as a member of the club is made after paying the fee for the desired subscription type (3, 6 or 12 months), full time or day time and signing a membership contract. Depending on the subscription period purchased, the number of guests that the member can bring and the subscription period may be varied may vary. The customer receives a card that he has to leave at the reception and in return receives a key for the

locker room. This is an ordinary ritual, making “the transition from the everyday world to the world of exercises” (Sassatelli, 1999: 229).

With regard to the personality and symbolic capital of the club, they are cultivated through the decor or the physical environment, the clientele and the way staff treat clients and, moreover, are consolidated through promotional materials and consumer reviews (Maguire, 2008: 93) . Thus, the decor includes the wall pictures, lights, lighting, plants, etc.

An important area of “official style or club tone” (Sassatelli, 1999: 230) is the reception. Here, the individual who comes first in the club comes in contact with the offers, the events promoted and can create a first impression on how the club is positioned. For example, the four pictures in the reception area illustrate the slogan of We create shapes, a slim female body and a muscular male that reflects the female ideal, the male and the company logo.

Thus, the promoted images are in line with the company's slogan and strategy. In other words, through existing images, the club communicates how it wants to position itself in the mind of the consumer (Ries and Trout, 2004). Other images could be seen in the gym area and in the group training studio.

My attention was captured by the motivation you need. The results you want accompanied an image depicting a woman coaching with a man. I later found out that the man was the coach, given that his T-shirt was marked with PT initials, that is, trainer. Practically, the message and image suggests the idea that the personal coach is an important factor in motivating the client, helping him achieve his goals. Interestingly, the “club tone” (Ries and Trout, 2004) transmits energy, vitality through the presence of vibrant colors such as yellow, green, pink, blue that are found in the clothing of individuals in the club images and in the instruments used in the room (disks, dumbbells, balls, core bags, kettlebells).

Another form of expression of the club's personality is the promotional materials and consumer reviews. Specifically, the presence of promotional materials such as flyers, roll-ups, or supports that feature different materials that announce events, offers, etc. have the role of attracting the attention of potential customers and maintaining the interest of existing members.

At the same time, consumer reviews posted on the World Class Romania site contribute to the promotion of the club's services and facilities. The facebook page is another tool commonly used by the company to stay in the attention of existing customers and to attract new customers. The same purpose is fulfilled by monitors placed inside the hall and reception area. They broadcast broadcast shows where various World Class Romania coaches were invited, the club's offers, the events to be held, being an excellent motor for promoting fitness club providers - club coaches.

During my research, I have noticed that at one month's reception, there was a short presentation of one of the club's coaches. Under the slogan He excels in fitness with X (coach's name), the presentation was accompanied by a picture of the coach and was aimed at attracting new customers.

At one point, during a weekend, no group training was held in the World Class club I was attending, so I went to another fitness club club that is located in a hotel in Bucharest. We noticed that there was a panel in the lobby area where all club coaches were presented (studies, certifications, motto). Clubs therefore use different ways to promote coaches.



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The services provided by the World Class club where we conducted the research include access to gym, cycling, group training (classes), sauna, jacuzzi and spa. The club has a studio for group training and one for cycling (spinning). To meet the needs of consumers for complex, personalized services, the club also includes personal training services.

Most of my observations focused on the various group training programs that I attended during my personal training sessions when I had the opportunity to be close to personal coaches and clients. I also participated in some of the events organized by the club. Personally, for this research, the role I played was both observer and participant.

My comments on the behavior and interaction between the individuals in the fitness club were largely based on my enrollment in the various activities they were doing. By participating in group training and infiltration in areas such as the locker room, the club reception, the spa area, I was able to observe nonverbal behavior, interaction with club employees or other fitness customers.

Much of my remarks were made during the various group training sessions conducted by the seven coaches. The club is licensed for BodyCombat, BodyPump and CXWORK, these being three of the ten group training programs developed by Les Mills International, the world's largest provider of profiles.

The feature of Les Mills programs is that music and choreography change every three months, with four choreographies per year to be taught by the coach. Other group or class exercises are characterized by the coach's freedom to choose music and establish choreography.

As far as coaching is concerned, coaches need not make a mental effort to think about what they are doing, what they need to change, and can better focus on the participants' technique, correct them, and help them improve the movement.

### **Conclusions**

Interaction during group training that stems from the fact that the coach corrects the customer, gives him attention seems to be a good tool in attracting customers. Interestingly, the physical aspect is not regarded by coaches as a criterion on which they are chosen by the clients, indicating rather the experience in the field, the passion, the motivation.

The importance of practicing sport as a way of preventing illness and maintaining health has often been invoked by medical specialists. In addition to the advantages of the individual's health, the aesthetic advantages must also be mentioned. Probably any regularly practiced sport brings health benefits but also the way we look.

Such spaces where individuals can cultivate their appearances and maintain health are fitness clubs. In the century of speed, individuals do not have to worry about accessing the use of fitness services. Some fitness clubs are located right in the office buildings and with one click you can book your favorite training place.

In addition to the facilities offered, the human resources are equally important to confirm the quality and prestige of the club. Probably what has the ability to maintain and increase the number of club members is the way in which the social interaction in the sports club is communicated offline.

Sports centers are the ideal framework for analyzing how healthy lifestyles are built and presented, as they are where information is found about the behaviors people have to take to build and maintain a body healthy. This indicates that the individual must

be permanently connected to information to adopt the strategies necessary for a healthy lifestyle.

Through the strategy offered for the construction and maintenance of health, the idea of a corporeal project, which involves an active engagement of the individual “the appearance, the size, the form and even the content of the body depends on the individual's desire to mold it, his ability to care for the appearance”.

### **Future research**

The research opens new directions of study so that in the future, research can be made to look at the client's perspective: what attitude customers have to the coaches' work, which studies, qualities should have a coach. Additionally, a continuation of the present research could be to conduct participatory observation in various World Class clubs to see patterns of interaction between members and coaches. Also, in order to obtain as many opinions as possible on the use of fitness services, research could take place in several types of clubs (eg clubs exclusively dedicated to women, clubs offering access only to the gym force, etc.). Such an approach could help to identify new aspects of how the coach contributes to the consumption of fitness services. As most clubs have facebook and facebook pages, it would be interesting to look at how clubs promote their services, coaches. Specifically, by using content analysis, the content of the messages could be studied by the club's facebook sites and Facebook pages.

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