

Real World Repercussions of Motivation and Interactions in a Virtual Space. *Explored in Relation to the Body and Self*

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"I forgot to log my work out....did it still happen?" (Holly, DM)

After spending almost 2 months as part of an active online fitness community called "Daily Mile" the themes and topics that have arisen are too broad and too many to discuss in this short essay. With this in mind I have given an overview of the community values and of the main themes that relate to the central question of whether there are any and if so what kinds of real life repercussions are a result of online interaction with a virtual community focused on fitness.

Although the 'Anthropology of the Body' in relation to 'Sport' is not new, the phenomenon of sports or fitness specific virtual communities are a recent development and I have yet to find a paper discussing the effects and impacts such communities have. Within these virtual fitness communities is the ubiquitous use of wearable technology, these devices have a symbiotic relationship to the communities and websites. Wearable devices are a topic in their own right and therefore there needs to be more research to gain an in depth understanding. Consequently, this paper only touches upon some of the impacts and implications of wearable technology.

This study is in the field of 'Cyber Anthropology' and the field site is entirely virtual, but the repercussions are physical and psychological, hence this essay draws on the theoretical frame work of Michel Foucault's essays, as well as various works on the anthropology of the body, symbolism, social agency and the psychology of optimal experience.

METHOD

In full disclosure of any bias I admit I am not a fan of social media, I do not have a Facebook page I don't even have a Gmail account. I have a skepticism and a wonder towards the web and so embarking on a journey where I would join up to a social network site, a "Facebook for athletes" has been fascinating.

As a participant observer I spent the first month slowly acclimatizing, I made my profile page and started trying to connect with people. I identified myself as a cyclist and an anthropology student and posted a picture of myself. The friend making process was quick, within days I had gone from 1 friend to 20, within weeks to 88. Mostly I requested to be connected but after establishing myself as a member of the community with my posts and comments, I started to get request from people wanting to connect to me.

After my first post I remember how good it felt to be "accepted" and so I can only image how must feel to be "rejected" as was the case of one member a few weeks into me joining. As my relationships developed and I learnt more about the community through my participation and observation, later I had the opportunity to conduct semi structured single interviews as well as fully structured interviews via email. Out of the 14 people who agreed to speak to me, only one would speak on Skype. This reticence to interact in person was new to me, but it is clear that relationships built online take longer to establish and that like my own initial feeling

there is a skepticism that exists in online communication, an underlying fear that you might not be what you present yourself to be.

At the same time as joining the community I also began wearing a 'Jawbone - Up24" wristband which tracks movement and sleep. I had a Nike Fitbit that many people on DailyMile use, as well as the Nike watch and the Garmin device. But the devices felt alien and as the 'Jawbone' felt like a normal piece of jewelry I decided to use it instead. Soon it became second nature to sync up my 'Jawbone' and log my posts on the site, seeing the responses became something I looked forward to. But when I synced up my 'Jawbone' to my phone for the first time I felt unnerved it knew how tall I was, how much I weighed, that I was female. At the time I had forgotten I had actually input this data, but from that reaction it revealed how much credence I gave the device, my perception was that it was all knowing. It is this authority we give to devices for their infallibility and the pressure their precision exerts that appears to be at the root of our complicated relationship with them.



Figure 1 Jawbone UP24 wristband (Flickr/Boram_K) 2015.

COMMUNITY

As I discuss my findings in the following chapters I have only used screen names or first names of my informants to preserve their anonymity. I will also refer to Daily Mile by the abbreviation 'DM' from now on.

The community I have encountered has a definite set of core values and when someone challenges those values like in any community there are consequences. The value of exercise is obviously central, but with regard to general social values the community exudes warmth, compassion and support. Equality is a key value and the community is made up of both men and women of all ages, all acknowledge the fact that "*a man possess nothing certainly save a brief loan of his own body.*" (J.B Campbell as cited in, Csikszntmihalyi 1990:94) and with this loan of mortal flesh they should do everything possible to push it further. There appears to be a fundamental belief that "*every person, no matter how unfit he or she is can rise a little higher, go a littler faster, and grow a little stronger.*" (Csikszntmihalyi 1990:97)

The way the community projects these values comes in a myriad of ways, but Jim an active member of the community put it perfectly "*DM is first and foremost a community of athletes, this mutual support is the mortar that holds the bricks of*

connectedness together." When someone's actions are in contrast to these values then it is as a community that the consequence is decided and meted out. One such example was when a popular and active member of the community posted a comment about "gays having babies." What immediately followed were comments trying to accentuate the positive of this suggestion, but the member who made the original post turned the topic to a personal nature and revealed a homophobic stance and verbally abused other members of the community. Less than 24 hours later 13 members of the group had rallied to support the member who was verbally abused and within minutes a decision to ban the offending member was made and executed. This was a clear indication of the moral framework of the community and an example of what would not be tolerated. It also illustrates what the consequence can be when a member is at odds with the core values of the community.

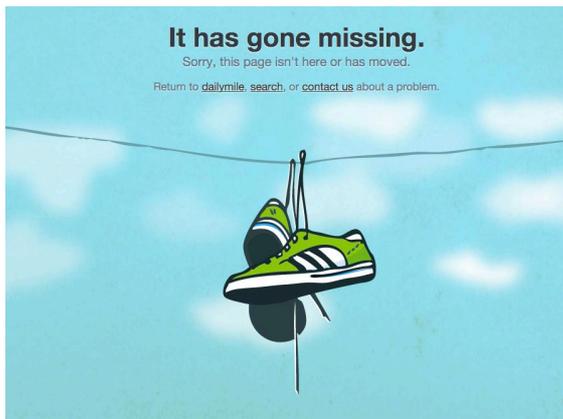


Figure 2 "Screen shot after the account had been removed" (DailyMile) 2015.

Another way in which the community projects their core values is via images, over the course of a day at least one image will be posted which reflects a value, be it weight, persistence, responsibility or self belief. These images act as a visual reminder of what you should be trying to attain or to motivate you in some way or to challenge your own perception of ability. Below is an example of one such image posted on the site.



Figure 3 "This life is your 100% your responsibility" (DailyMile) 2015.

The text within the image "*This life of yours is 100% your responsibility.*" Makes clear that the onus is on you, this accountability, this idea that we are responsible for our own well-being is something intrinsic to the community. Shaindel a DM member list this as one of the things she likes about the DM community "*I love the community and goal-setting and accountability.*" The different ways in which the community projects its values appears to perpetuate a chain reaction of activity and provides positive reinforcement of these ideals for those active members.

THE DIGITAL, VIRTUAL AND THE PHYSICAL

There is an inherent link between the virtual and physical, where there is action comes a reaction and both exercise and the act of participating online at times seem inseparable. For many exercise is incredibly important to them, for Saliha "*exercise is my perfect getaway from all the chaos in my life.*" and for Fabenne "*it's honestly like my drug. I'm totally addicted to it and I feel for it.... exercise keeps me sane.*"

"When a normal physical function, like running, is performed in a socially designed, goal-directed setting with rules that offer challenges and require skills, it turns into a flow activity. Whether jogging alone, racing the clock, running against competition, or - like the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, who race hundreds of miles in the mountains during certain festivals - adding an elaborate ritual dimension to the activity, the simple act of moving the body across space becomes a source of complex feedback that provides optimal experience and adds strength to the self." (Csikszentmihalyi 1990:95)

I wondered if the act of posting itself could be the ritual dimension to the often solitary activity of exercise? For most a lone activity such as cycling or running provides an opportunity for contemplation, a chance to meditate on ones thoughts and to escape the day, to connect our disembodied heads with the rest of our bodies. I often found these quiet moments became filled with the construction of the post I would later write about the activity I was currently doing.

For Jim posting is "*my link to this community so to not post is to not be a part of the community. Second though DM nicely runs a total of your mileage for the year so to miss a post effects the accuracy of your mileage total.*" The ritual act of logging your work outs of posting your thoughts, feelings and stats in this community has a two-fold purpose, it signifies your participation and on personal level is an act of ritual assessment, of quantifying and measuring yourself against your own goals. In the words of Foucault "*the only truly important ceremony is that of exercise.*" (1979:137)

The other ritual act is the prevalent use of wearable devices. Everyone I have spoken to uses one or multiple devices on an almost daily basis. "*For the disciplined man, as for the true believer, no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power it wishes to seize it.*" (Foucault 1979:140) Statistics or "*the numbers*" as they are often referred to are a significant part of the relationship we have to the virtual and have genuine real world repercussions.

For some these by-products are positive, the device provides a way to measure themselves, to pit themselves against the clock, but often "*crazes of gadgets or toys are not primarily about social display and belonging, but more about private fascination and obsession.*" (Van Ginneken 2003:133) Therefore there are those who find "*the numbers*" become like a prison and sap the energy and joy from the previous safe haven of exercise, "*the numbers*" in essence intrude and steal something from them.



Seriously, I'm in tears here. I broke a 9 minute mile.
about 3 hours ago



Figure 4 "Seriously. I'm in tears here. I broke a 9 minute mile" (DailyMile) 2015.

When our relationship to "the numbers" becomes complicated it removes the "fun" from exercise. Wilt who wears a Garmin and a self confessed "numbers geek" told me that "running was becoming like a part time job" and now he consciously doesn't take his devices out every time he goes for a run, so that he can "smell the flowers again" instead of "gritting his teeth through every mile." Christopher another member of the community has had a similar experience and decided to take a break from the DM site so that he could find his running "mojo" again. He felt that by posting regularly that "It makes it harder to skip a session because you feel almost obligated to train. When preparing for a race, this is a good thing!" But at some point he no longer felt like running and now he runs "naked" without a device as he tries to rekindle his passion for something he previously loved.

MOTIVATION

Christophers experience shows that sometimes motivation can turn to pressure and obligation. For others these devices enable them to enjoy little victories and personal bests, from these milestones comes a sense of achievement, a reward, a catalyst in the form of digits to physically push yourself further in the name of self improvement. All these personal achievements are reinforced by the community through their posts and comments and through their collective and symbolic acts and expressions of "approval of the actions taken." (McPhail 2006:442)

Some of these symbolic actions are built into the architecture of the site others are spontaneous reactions to an event or post.

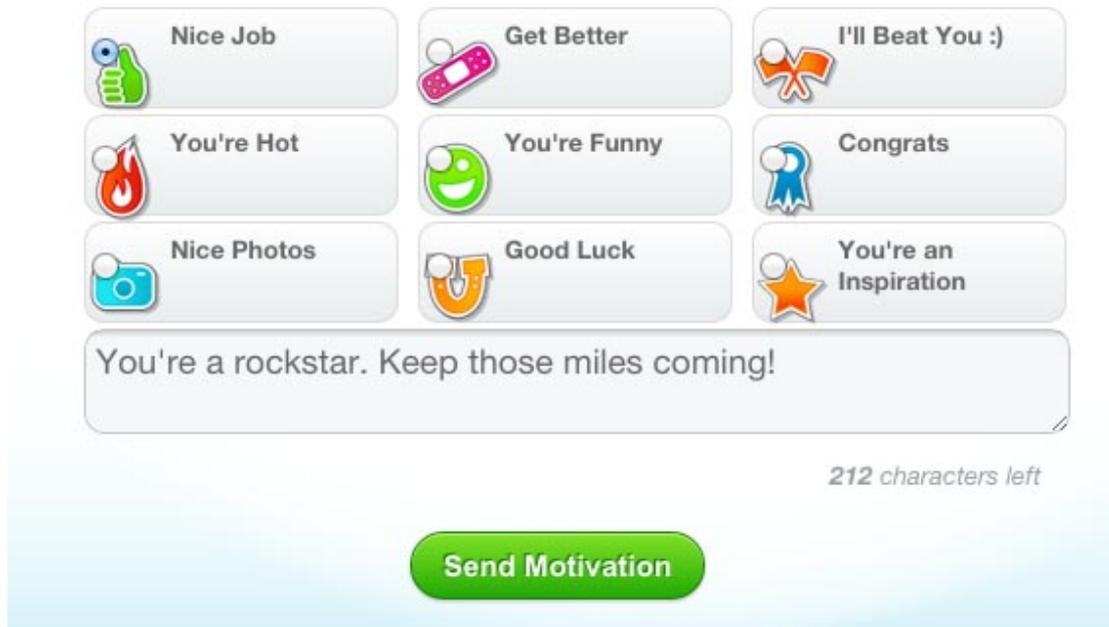


Figure 5 "Motivation buttons that you can add as comments or icons to posts" (DailyMile) 2015.

The motivation buttons are a short hand for expressing support and of course motivation in various ways. Although the site has these core values built into its architecture the community have developed their own methods of motivation.

Examples of this are the "*Weekend Shout Outs*," Sue an active member of the community, unprompted, began collating everyone's achievements over the weekend and posting them collectively as a way to encourage and congratulate. I was included in one of the "*Weekend Shout Outs*" and it had a definite uplifting effect even more so than someone commenting on your post. To have your effort and achievement witnessed and validated has a profound effect on the psyche and in my case only motivated me further. Fabienne put it succinctly "*It's a nice virtual pat on the back.*" Another way the community works to inspire and motivate each other is through community challenges, once again these are not created by the site but devised by individuals who then invite members to take part. These community challenges draw members of a similar sport preference or level of dedication together. It proceeds to strengthen ties within the community and in addition creates a virtual event that requires a real world physical demonstration of your commitment through the act of training.

Inbox / You're invited to the challenge Ride 400 miles by end of March



Figure 6 "Invitation to ride 400 Miles by end of March 2015" (DailyMile) 2015.

In more general terms the upbeat and perpetually active nature of the community also serves as a source of motivation. Jim finds that DM *"helps to keep my enthusiasm up on those in-between periods. I find there is something inspirational about seeing others do well and meet goals, that encourages me to want to do the same. Call it a positive peer pressure if you like."* Most people like Saliha agree with Jim *"DM definitely helps especially when you get up in the morning and you log on to see all these amazing workouts, you can't help but get inspired and willing to test your limitations."*

Beneath the validation and the positive peer pressure is the emotional and psychological support needed when doing something challenging or that is seen as being outside of the norm as regular training is sometimes perceived. For Christopher, *"Daily Mile can help immensely by helping to motivate, congratulate and commiserate depending on how things are going. Most people in 'real life' don't really understand the variety of emotions runners go through."* This emotional aspect is important, Fabienne feels *"It's nice to fit in somewhere"* and *"to have a community who embraces your active lifestyle as oppose to shooting it down because they're not doing anything."* There is an implicit understanding within the community, the familiarity of shared experiences and of the trials and tribulations of those who train.

EFFECTS

"The firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude," suggesting "willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life' " (1993:195). Because in most Western cultures we generally take that which is communicated by the body to be a message about the self, Bordo (1993) notes that the size and shape of one's body has come to signify the moral state of the individual. For instance, one's body is a physical reflection of one's internal capacity for commitment and self-control." (Reischer, Koo 2004:300)

These physical manifestations of our interaction with a community which espouses the virtues of the modern age of *"willpower"* and *"self control"* are imprinted on the flesh, as you participate in challenges and train harder your physical body undoubtedly changes, you may of course become stronger, faster, leaner and some would say *"better."* But being in the orbit of those who have attained this physical and mental goal appears to alter the way we perceive ourselves. Jennifer is obese but she religiously trains everyday and her participation in the community has affected the way she sees herself. *"I no longer think of myself as being a fat person, I "think" I'm going to be a lean person and do the best I can !"* For Shandel the way she sees

her body has changed *"I now think of my body as something that can DO certain things and not something that should look a certain way (most of the time)."*

The societal ideal of the lean and therefore healthy body even with all the support, motivation and acceptance of the community is something that is still difficult not to measure yourself against. One member of the community is not your archetypal slim frame, but she is by no means unhealthy or unfit, she is a marathon runner and incredibly motivated. When measuring herself against others she does not see these things, and focuses instead on her size. *"I haven't been able to get a handle on getting my weight back down to my pre running weight. I'm not sure I would even fit the description of 'fit'."* This seems to be a negative consequence of the ideals the community projects, mirroring our real world tendency to measure ourselves against another in pursuit of a particular goal.

It is clear that many who are active in the community have experienced a physical effect as a consequence of their participation, whether that is evident externally or on an interior level. In addition to the psychological effects of how we perceive our bodies there is evidence to suggest that engagement can influence how we treat our bodies. For Jim *"I have become better at knowing myself and thus can set better goals that will challenge me but not be so outlandish that I'll simply quit and then be frustrated with the whole experience."* Saliha has also benefited, *"Coming out of an injury can leave some pretty serious physical and emotional scars so DM has not only helped me overcome my fears but it has given me that extra push to excel physically. I'm much more stronger than I was 15 years ago."*



Figure 7 "The Gift of Running" (walkjogrun.net) 2015.

CONCLUSION

This desire to push ourselves further is something that comes up repeatedly, the image above illustrates this clearly; "*that make us stronger, challenge us, push us to want to do more.*" I find in conclusion that active engagement in a highly motivated focused virtual community can have a profound effect on both the body and the self, when the desire to exceed and excel is present it provides a structure and a limit to push against and grow within. "*A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.*" (Foucault 1979:136) And these types of virtual communities can be a transformative space.

Self-improvement is at the core of the community and therefore comes to be at the centre of the self "*The body is, after all not only symbolic of the self, and the society, it is the self. We are embodied. Furthermore bodies collectively are not only constitutive of the society, they are (or we are) the modes through which society reproduces itself - physically figuratively.*" (Synott,Howes 1992:163)

The virtual proceeds to impact on the physical and having your workout be "*witnessed*" is at the heart of this relationship. To have your effort celebrated, to be validated for your achievements through the many symbolic virtual interactions that take place within the virtual community, bolsters you mentally and encourages you physically. I feel this is a positive by-product of this virtual engagement, but the impact of wearable devices raises more questions than it answers.

I see their benefit when wanting to surpass yourself but I wonder if they in some way are reductive and signal a disassociation from the harmonious mental and physical pursuit of exercise? I question if there are more market gains than personal gains as we commodify ourselves breaking down our bodies to a sum of parts and we distance ourselves from the connection between mind and body as we start to obsess about "*the numbers.*" Or whether there is also a harmony to be found where we are not trying to beat the clock, where our focus isn't just our heart rate but the whole body and where the information and digits serve to support us in a more holistic instead of potentially intrusive way. Their prevalent use feels like the ripples of the waves of change, do they signify an emergent social movement and a change in how we perceive ourselves? These are all questions that need to be explored.

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