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“New Challenges, Reality, Perspective of Personal Trainers on Fitness in the Era of Covid-19”

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Abstract

Sport is, without a doubt, an inherent part of our culture and social life. Changes in social reality connected with the emergence of Covid-19 and resulting introduction of particular actions aimed at prevention of spreading the danger, have not bypassed the world of sport or, widely understood, fitness culture. Colossal changes, which stopped everything for a moment, have ensued. The effect of those changes was suspension of operation of fitness facilities involved in fitness culture, including fitness clubs or gyms. The fitness world, the community of creators as well as consumers of fitness culture, collided with a new reality and new challenges. The loss of workplaces, e.g. for trainers, and the lack of spaces to be physically active have influenced immensely how sport activities look like for the subjects actively taking care of their health, physical condition, their bodies and appearance. What is Polish fitness world currently struggling with? How personal trainers are faring in the era of Covid-19? How does the collaboration of personal trainers and their clients look like? How does the fitness community find themselves in the new “coronavirus”, pandemic reality? What strategies were adopted by the personal trainers to survive and be able to function actively in their professions? I will try to answer these specific questions in this article, based on my own research, which had an exploratory character and was aimed at recognizing the experiences of personal trainers as the main representatives of the new reality connected to the emergence of Covid-19. The research was conducted through interviews with 10 personal trainers. As a result of the qualitative data analysis, six main areas emerged, such as reactions for the introduction of changes; reflections on life; new possibilities; places/spaces for work and meetings; interpersonal relationships and reflections on the future. The fitness culture during the Covid-19 pandemic has undergone a significant transformation. The obtained data indicate a critical, rather negative attitude to the introduced restrictions and their consequences for the widely understood fitness, physical activity and sports sectors. I hope that this small fragment of the reality related to participation in the fitness culture and the struggles of people in the pandemic era, which I mentioned in my

article, will be a contribution to further research and will encourage reflection on the fitness culture, social and socialization values of sport and our future.

Keywords:- Covid - 19, coronavirus, sport, Culture, fitness, physical activity, personal trainer, training, fitness clubs, gyms.

Introduction

One of the most recognizable signs of our times is ubiquitous and pervasive change. Impermanence and uncertainty are inscribed in the times, in which it came for us to live. We are witnesses to incessant changes encompassing with their range all aspects of social life. This evolution and continuous metamorphoses are connected with globalization processes and the advent of times described as post modernity or liquid modernity. We live in the world full of change, uncertainty, evanescence, risk and fear. „The world I call 'liquid' because, like all liquids, it cannot stand still and keep its shape for long. Everything or almost everything in this world of ours keeps changing: fashions we follow and the objects of our attention (constantly shifting attention, today drawn away from things and events that attracted it yesterday, and to be drawn away tomorrow from things and events that excite us today), things we dream of and things we fear, things we desire and things we loathe, reasons to be hopeful and reasons to be apprehensive. And the conditions around us, conditions in which we make our living and try to plan our future, in which we connect to some people and disconnect (or are disconnected) from others, keep changing as well. Opportunities for more happiness and threats of misery flow or float by, come and go and change places, and more often than not they do all that too swiftly and nimbly to allow us to do something sensible and effective to direct or redirect them, keep them on course or forestall them. To cut a long story short: this world, our liquid modern world, keeps surprising us (...)" (Bauman, 2011, p.1).

The dynamics of ongoing changes (metamorphoses) in social reality means lack of ready and limited possibilities of scenarios for one's own life. It determines the necessity and need to "adjust to new requirements"¹ (Leszniewski, 2007, p.1), being flexible (Beck, 2004; Giddens, 2001, 2010; Bauman, 2011) and "experiencing yourself in freedom and taking responsibility for your own life" (Berger, 1995, p.167), leading to the fact that "ability of a human being to move effectively in the world requires constant learning of new skills and a reflective approach to their life and the choices made" (Leszniewski, 2007, p.1).

Perfect depiction of aforementioned words about liquid reality and incessant need to reinterpret and self-create one's own life and designing new ways of acting in the face of surprising changes in the social reality is the current Covid-19 pandemic. This extraordinary time of the pandemic unquestionably influenced immensely our functioning in our well-known ordinary lives and completely revolutionized every area of social life. One of the sectors which were hurt the most is sport, space for physical activity and the fitness world, the areas which are at the centre of my deliberations.

Sport was an inseparable part of our culture and a real phenomenon since the dawn of times. As a part of our reality it accompanied individuals in different forms throughout their whole lives, carrying with it socializing and universal values, as Błajet (2012, p. 89) mentions "it is (sport) not only the model reflection of social life but also autonomous being, in different ways anticipating social trends".

Therefore, as you can surmise or base on your own experiences as an observer and a first-hand witness being in the centre of currently crystallizing changes in social reality connected with the emergence of Covid-19, you can see that the ongoing changes and resulting from them commonly introduced particular actions aimed at prevention of spreading the danger, have not bypassed widely understood physical culture with all of its derivatives. Colossal metamorphosis, which stopped everything, has ensued. The effect of those changes was suspension of operation of fitness facilities involved in fitness culture, including fitness clubs or gyms and reduction and shrinking of possibilities to engage in activities within active participation of fitness culture. There are numerous effects of these activities. In this article I will focus on the fitness culture, created along processes of emerging modernity, and then liquid modernity (post modernity). Simultaneously, with the changes ongoing in social reality, as the presence of consumptionism, instant culture, visual culture, free time culture, society of risk and ubiquitous individualism and incessant reflections of one's life, chasing the new, the unknown, the pleasure, the self-improvement, reinterpreting your own identity and relationships with others, there was a new space created, known as fitness culture. Concurrently, the narration which noticed possibilities of creating and anchoring these currents in the body has emerged.

What is fitness, what is fitness culture? Fitness may thus be understood as a cultural field, a set of relatively structured positions within which individuals and institutions, producers, and consumers struggle over the status and definitions of fitness and fit bodies. These struggles occur through the mobilization of particular forms of resources or stakes, some specific to the field – such as physique and sport science expertise – and some generic to consumer societies and services economies – such as impression management and the cultivation of status. The development of the contemporary commercial fitness field has involved the institutionalization of specific social settings (particularly, the health club), a variety of media forms targeting both the consumer (such as exercise manuals and magazines) and the producer (occupational texts and manuals), a cadre of professional producers (such as personal trainers and aerobics instructors), and a range of field-specific goods to signal participation” (Smith Maguire, 2008, p. 21). Fitness culture is a socio-cultural phenomenon centered around physical activity, health, body, and appearance - to create your own identity, take responsibility for your fate, control your life and try to feel safe, where “Fitness gyms are at the core of a much broader fitness culture” (Sassatelli, 2010, p. 11) and people (especially trainers, instructors) become both: creators and consumers of this culture (Sassatelli, 2010; Maguire, 2008). The society of creators, as well as the fitness consumers, collided with new reality and new challenges. The loss of workplaces, eg. of personal trainers and the lack of spaces to do physical activities have immensely influenced how sport activities look like currently for the subjects actively taking care of their health, physical condition, their bodies and appearance.

Material & Methods

The researchers had an exploratory character aimed at learning about the experiences and the way of interpreting daily life and work reality in which personal trainers work and live with particular regard to their role in physical culture from the perspective of changes prevailing and resulting from the pandemic, especially with the regard to limitations resulting from the governmental regulations and their effects on limiting physical activity. The research

was conducted through in-depth interviews with representatives of the fitness culture, namely personal trainers. The interviews were realized online or face-to-face with 10 trainers aged 29-39 years. Women as well as men participated in the research. The criteria of choice were, work experience (at least 3 years of experience as a personal trainer); city, Hubballi Karnataka; the place of work before the restrictions were introduced, fitness club or gym. Sample selection was deliberate, whereas the participants were recruited using the snowball principle method. The material collected, which was recorded to archive the content, was then subjected to next steps in the research process, preparing transcription and double analysis to distinguish and identify main topics from the answers of the subjects.

The aim of the qualitative and phenomenological analysis was detailed and in-depth recognition and understanding of experiences of trainers as the main subjects functioning in the fitness culture modified by the pandemic. The trainers answered the question whether the emergence of danger connected with the presence of Covid-19, the necessity of isolation, "quarantine", limitations connected with introduction of restrictions connected with physical activity influenced their work as a personal trainer and what changed. The lengths of the interviews were from 40 minutes to 110 minutes.

Gathered data show critical approaches towards the restrictions introduced in the fitness sector, physical activity and sport. The participants were showing rather negative attitudes and they emphasize the necessity to reconstruct pre-existing experiences connected with the profession of personal trainers. Thematic areas that emerged based on the collected material were concerning: 1) Reactions for the introduction of changes, reaction for the closing of fitness clubs and gyms. 2) Reflection on life. 3) New possibilities. 4) Place / space for work and meetings. 5) Interpersonal relationships & 6) Reflection on future.

The results show new insights of the professionals from the fitness sector and those could be the basis for the future research connected with changes and adjustment to currently prevailing work conditions and actions in the space of fitness culture.

Results

The main overtone of the researched topics showed a strong negatively marked approach to the experiences which took place in the lives of the research subjects. Negative and critical approach was discerned in all of the experiences of physical trainers in the perspective of finding themselves in a new reality of the fitness culture after the changes and restrictions were introduced resulting from the emergence of dangers connected with the Covid-19 pandemic.

All participants of the research in most of their statements included key words which expressed a critical-negative approach. All participants reconstructed their experiences descriptively in new reality, using phrases such as "all negatives", "dramatic", "critical", "terrible", "awful", "misguided", "harmful", "inappropriate". "reprehensible", "unacceptable", "ridiculous", "dishonest", "ruin", "destruction", "arrogant". Aforementioned phrases were notoriously repeated in most of the statements. Four of the researched men (Mar 32, Kub 33, Mich 34, Dom 29) and one woman (Mag 39) uttered a sentence describing their opinion and approach to the changes introduced into the fitness culture, formulated like this: "what was introduced is ridiculous", "what was proposed is ridiculous". Mat 34 stated: "This is nuts. I

didn't know if I should laugh or cry. They have no idea what they are doing. It is pathetic that someone decides so mindlessly about everyone, about the whole fitness. (...) F***, to destroy everything, the whole fitness market, it must be a joke". Joa 35 : "It's some kind of misunderstanding, I don't know what to think anymore. (...) This [introduction of restrictions, closing fitness clubs and gyms] is harmful for the whole society, for the economy, for everyone, for people". Jol 31: "I'm waiting for this nightmare to end". The research subjects were very strongly remarking on the current situation, using a lot of vulgar words emphasizing their anger. Mag 39: "I've got only one word on my mind: f*ck! F*ck! F*ck!". The statements of the trainers were filled with anger but also with the feeling of helplessness. Grz 32: "What am I supposed to do?! I know this is a nightmare but it has to be somehow. I don't accept what the order us to do". A lot of people are waiting with impatience for the end of current restrictions and introducing new actions, as Woj 37: "I'm seriously waiting for this to end. Until this circus ends. Because it is a circus, it's one big misunderstanding, you know, we want to work normally, not wait, ekhm, for Almighty knows what".

Theme 1:

Reactions for the introduction of changes: Reaction for the closing of fitness clubs and gyms. Among the reactions for the introduction of restrictions resulting in the closing of fitness clubs, gyms and other places used for physical and kinesthetic activity, the whole variety of emotions and responses emerged, which show mixed emotions and responses connected with the extension of restrictions introduced in March of 2020 and the next stages of the pandemic. Dominant emotions were fury, anger, fear, helplessness, breakdown. Mag 39: "You know, it was pretty scary at the beginning. I was awfully furious, there is no word to describe what I was feeling. Furious, but I just lived through some kind of a shock, breakdown, I was afraid. What was I supposed to do? Overnight, ah, ok, we're closing you... I was terrified." Another test subject metaphorically presented how strong was the blow, the feeling of helplessness, terror, again fear and the feeling of breakdown. Woj 37: "It was a nightmare! So many years of hard work. You know what, it's difficult to say, but it's like you were working hard, sacrificing yourself, you arrived at the top, let's say 10th floor, and suddenly boom. You are at the bottom. You know, so surprising, you take a step, you have plans, you know what to do, you have everything sorted out and... there is no you anymore.

Theme 2

Reflection on life: Describing what they experienced and are still experiencing in their "professional" lives as personal trainers living in reality distorted by the coronavirus, is, as emphasized by a few of the test subjects, a huge collision with reality. The necessity to stop, to reflect on their lives, to draw conclusions. Jol 31: "Because you know, it's like some kind of a bell woke you up, you are a princess and then you are woken by, not a prince, but by the coronavirus, and you are like in a trance. Ok, we are closed, all right for two weeks, but what am I supposed to do now?! And you know, you wake up and you don't know what to do (...), you have no plans, you cannot meet anyone, you won't go shopping, you won't travel anywhere. And suddenly you are totally alone at home, within four walls and you are thinking (...); you have nothing, no life, because from the morning until evening you were running from one workplace

to another, to another gym and for another training. OMG! How does my life look like now? I don't have any life, I live only for work (...).

Theme 3

New possibilities: Immediately after the participants noticed the chance that was given to them by fate to consider how they want to live, how they want their everyday lives to look like, they thought about their losses and profits and as Joa 35 stated: "I made a comparison of advantages and disadvantages, of profits and losses. And I can tell you that it was a very eye-opening experience. There is nothing to fight for, because there is nothing to fight with, it is as it is but now I'm only positively looking forward to the future. Obviously, don't think that I'm emotionally unstable, at one moment it is good, at another, it's bad, but I am still scared and I'm looking for the ways in which to spend this time. I just hope it's not going to be worse".

Theme 4

Place/space for work and meetings: Talking about the frustration and new possibilities, I smoothly proceed to the next theme, which was clearly emphasized in the trainer's statements. Closing of the fitness clubs and gyms caused the loss of work and the loss of steady income or, at least, problems with financial liquidity. The facilities in which sport life was going on were closed and, therefore, fitness culture lost its spaces. Apart from the layoffs, terminations of contracts with the trainers, they also lost their workplaces with all necessary equipment and tools. That was a huge issue and a very difficult experience for the test subjects. Jol 31: "I was working in 5 fitness clubs, now I have nothing left.

Theme 5

Interpersonal relationships: Proceeding from the theme of gyms, fitness clubs as specific places, spaces for the work on your own body to the spaces where fitness culture is still alive, I cannot omit another, the last main theme, that was emphasized in the remarks of researched trainers about their experiences. The trainers, as they emphasized in previous aspects, showed that fitness clubs were the places to which you come in with a particular motivation, plan and with a certain goal. It's the place where you know you are surrounded by people with similar interests, with similar aims and similar problems. How do the relationships look like now? Joa 35: "It's a bit different, and I'll admit it honestly that I miss it terribly.

Theme 6

Reflection on the future: The last important thing for trainers which was mentioned in their statements was reflection on the future of fitness culture and people, especially in terms of caring for health, a rational approach to a healthy lifestyle, and physical activity. They focused on incomprehension towards the decision of the Polish government and lack of proper education in terms of health and physical activity as a basic, the most fundamental quality of life of people. Kub 33: "I do not understand the government's decisions and their groundless arguments, as e.g. low ceilings in clubs. And this is the reason for closing us (fitness world)?! Isn't that important? How will people live in the future? Will they choose sports or stay at home – which attitude will be better? Only one answer is correct, unfortunately...

Discussion

Trying to answer the question of how the fitness culture looks like in the era of Covid-19, appealing to my own research presented before, it needs to be firmly emphasized that it underwent some sizeable changes. It seems different, though maybe thanks to it even more, especially in some sectors, some features of postmodernist society were highlighted, such as ubiquitous fear, anxiety and uncertainty, which were visible in relation to the reactions of trainers to the changes taking place. Apart from a lot of initial negative experiences, “the change was seen as a new chance” (Heinemann, 1989; Sztompka, 2002; Czerska, 2003). Through exploiting moments of standstill for the whole sport space, the trainers reflected on their whole lives up to this point and they took responsibility for their own fates and futures. Recognizing new possibilities, and adopting proactive attitudes regarding the reality surrounding them, showing courage and facing the risks. Despite the fact that in the era of coronavirus, the fitness market stopped, personal trainers acted according to the future oriented idea, they take care of their education, expand their competences and acquire new skills by participating in courses and workshops organized online. “Personal trainers do not simply stand between the consumer and the fitness field; they actively weave the two together through their own commitment to the field. They are thus a particular brand of service workers, involved in both the production of the fitness lifestyle and its consumption – for it is their own lifestyle that they are selling (Bourdieu, 1984)”.

Referring to the next thematic area that was distinguished at the stage of the analysis of my own research, it is the fact that the "experiencing of sports" has also changed a little, which is related to the closing of gyms and fitness clubs and the transfer of this experience through the body to outdoor spaces, as well as home space by conducting online classes (Gerrish, 2020).

Referring to the theme of the relationships sector, we need to confirm that the trainers are not only “educators” of a healthy lifestyle and correct physical activity but the relationships between the trainer and their trainee, their client are based on something deeper. As mentioned in Maguire (2007) “Trainers work as body and exercise experts as well as emotional workers, mediating between the precise promotional needs of the fitness industry and the often vague body aspirations of the clients. Like theme park animators, fitness trainers have to get consumers to partake in a meaningful experience, inducing them to experience things in a particular way, furnishing them with a series of cognitive and emotive instruments to read and enjoy the scene which they are entering. They are key resources to qualify as free, self-gratifying, personalised, amusing, and creative a place like the gym which could otherwise be felt as too instrumental, rationalised and standardised” (Sassatelli, 2008, p. 17). Immensely crucial, simultaneously being a vital symbol of the fitness culture are fitness clubs and gyms, which are experienced not only as an ingredient in the search of a perfect body but also a well-organized place where you can negotiate a variety of meanings and identities; “having a relationship with the development of a certain club atmosphere which provides the client with crucial relationship stimuli” (Crossley, 2006). As stated in the last theme which focused on the future, we can see that trainers perceive themselves as an important link in the process of health education and sports socialization. They wonder how the current situation (closing the gyms, deprivation of the places of cooperation and deprivation of the common (controlled) space

for fitness culture will affect our society. “The gym, however, offered far more than a utilitarian function of building muscle. It provided a sense of escape and therapeutic, ritualistic and remedial qualities. The familiarity of routine itself provided security and structure in response to the chaos of the outside world” (Brighton, Wellard, Clark 2020, p. 3). Familiar space, familiar people, controlling the body, expert knowledge are just examples that can be used to take control over your own life and increase your sense of security. This is one of the reasons why the fitness culture, fitness club, gyms and personal trainers are vital elements in our lives, which I tried to present in my article. Even Plato emphasized the importance of regular practice and the significant impact of physical activity on the quality of life, which is articulated in this sentence “Lack of activity destroys the good condition of every human being, while movement and methodical physical exercise save it and preserve it” (Kumar, 2017, p.1).

Conclusion

Fitness Culture in the era of Covid-19 refers to the new reality and new problems connected with physical activity. Personal trainers as subjects in my studies emphasize the need to adapt to changes and look for new opportunities, but at the same time, they look with some fear in the future. I hope that this small fragment of research of fitness culture will have an influence on the perception of the fitness culture, fitness clubs, trainers and people belonging to this community as activities not only aimed at appearance and body, and will show the more important side of practicing physical activity focused on health understood holistically (both physical, mental and social health). The changes mentioned by the surveyed trainers show them as entities aware of their role in society. They notice the changes taking place and try to follow the course of time and adapt to the current conditions. More importantly, I hope that readers will start to see, for example, opportunities to fill the gaps related to inappropriate physical education, insufficient sports socialization, global health problems connected with obesity and sedentary lifestyle in personal trainers and fitness clubs and the entire fitness culture. This research is only a small fragment, a section of changes happening in the fitness culture due to the Covid-19 pandemic, though it can be a basis for further research.

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