

## Social Media: Fitness Maven or Ignoramus?

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**ABSTRACT:** In a world where social media and the internet are endlessly aligning with our real lives, their impact on many of our daily activities rarely goes unnoticed.

Social media has gone from being an add-on option, to possessing a certain degree of necessity for almost every facet of life, be it business, law and order, politics, or communication.

This paper aims to throw light on social media's impact on the way people go about pursuing better health. In doing so, we tend to follow celebrities, athletes, trainers, enthusiasts, and unknowingly, anybody with a camera and an aesthetically pleasing physique. Corporate giants in the sports industry are successfully capitalising on the situation, as they look to increase sales, and endorse their products through global ambassadors.

Over the years, eating disorders in teenagers have been on a rise, partially attributed to the unrealistic standards of a 'good body' set by fitness bloggers, models, advertisers, and supplement sellers, among many others.

Exercising, meal planning, and a general sense of living are all very subjective terms. Their nature may vary from person to person, region to region. Many factors come into play here, ranging from basic anatomy of oneself, ideologies, economies, standards of living, peer influence, and education and awareness about fitness. While we are intrinsically aware of these factors, it is difficult to give them appropriate attention when we are surfing online, going through "tips, tricks, and shortcuts" to a better body.

To draw the curtain, one can agree that there are thousands of sources out there, all of which claim to be doing it the right way. It is upon us, as responsible individuals, to tread carefully and not follow every Ordinary Joe before knowing the science behind their claims, and knowing our own selves; in it, our strengths, weaknesses, and limitations.

**Keywords:** Fitness, Social Media, Technology, Internet, Integration

### 1 INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the century, we were getting used to the concept of the mobile phone. A few years later, we found ourselves creating Facebook accounts because everybody at work or at school were doing so, and standing out wasn't an option. People went from accessing the World Wide Web from their computers, to laptops, and finally, to the smartphone sitting in their pockets. Eventually, everything seemed to be moving to online. Bodybuilders no longer remained exclusive to magazines and newspapers. Health tips and weight reduction 'hacks' were leaving the trained nutritionist's office and finding room on the Internet.

Because of the drastic drop in costs related to online product/service marketing compared to its physical

counterpart, social media became widely popular, very soon. Videos, pictures, blogs, and other interactive media like quizzes, forms and contests took over the ordinary billboards and flyers across town. Not only did the corporate, even individuals took advantage of this rapid shift. Certified (and uncertified) trainers and professionals started uploading tutorials in the form of videos, pictures, and checklists. Because training people online was much easier and earns the same amount of money (more in case of established personalities) as training physically, this method became popular.

Soon after uploading content became the modus operandi, technology advanced and we saw wearable technology (software which kept track of components like heart-rate, stamina, total steps, etc).

Outside the fitness sphere, we had more cars than bicycles; dishwashers replaced manual labour, and elevators and escalators rendered stairs useless. As the years roll by, we saw ourselves become further and further dependant on technology and engineering. This led to an inversely proportional impact on the level of physical activity. However, while technology may have brought about a decline in the physical activity levels globally, it has its own merits, like i) the ability to recruit large populations, ii) individualisation of marketing and delivery methods, and more, discussed later in this paper.

Although physical activity and exercise are not the same, both are beneficial and recommended by the American College Of Sports Medicine (*Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* July 2011). These terms may be used interchangeably throughout the course of this paper.

## 2 BODY

Our ancestors lived lives where fitness was pivotal.. They did not have gym membership equivalents. Their lives, in themselves, involved everything we'd do at a gym today. They climbed trees, hunted animals, ran, hid, crawled, and swam, just to survive. Dating back to around 10,000 BC, when humans first walked upon the planet, this was the way of life. Being unfit was not an option. You were either fit or food.

Fitness, as one may look at it today, is a very modern invention. Complex machines at the gym to focus on specific muscle groups, watches and belts that track your performance, and shoes that lace themselves. While these are very fitness specific innovations, general advancements like an increased number of affordable automobile manufacturers, electronic bikes and even electronic skateboards have played a hand in lowering the daily activity levels among people of all groups. Thanks to science, innovation and creativity, man sure has come a long way.

Not only do we see regular developments in the physical world, there are also constantly strengthening ties between fitness and social media. Since Facebook went global in 2006, and Instagram four years later, people have been using them as platforms to display their progress inside the weights room, on the treadmill, and even in the kitchen.

Because who doesn't like a daily dose of motivation, ideas and 'science'?

Before we discuss the pros and cons of social media's integration with the fitness industry, we must list down the important components which make up most of the content we interact with online. These components are:

- **Famous personalities:** This group covers all sorts of performers, entertainers, and athletes. They use social media as a way to stay in touch with the public, and sometimes, outsource it to their social media/marketing team. A lot of times, we see these people uploading content related to their workouts, meals, and clothes, which may be paid advertisements. They endorse products, which influence us to buy them. We see Dwayne Johnson, Time's 'People's Sexiest Man Alive', endorsing brands he's associated with, like Under Armour and Ford. This obviously impacts our decisions the next time we're at the store.
- **Researchers:** People in the academic side of the fitness industry also use social media and the internet to log their findings and observations, which is usually in the form of a journal or a magazine, sometimes even a blog. This information is then carried by newswires, which act as a bridge between the researcher and the academicians, and the general public. American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), the world's largest sports medicine and exercise science organisation, publishes journals and magazines which carry these research results and e3developments.
- **Brands:** Social media has a big hand in promoting the fitness industry. Prominent companies like Nike and Adidas have time and again launched successful social media campaigns to promote their products. Nike's "Be Mercurial" campaign to promote Mercurial Vapor IX boots or the #BetterForIt campaign that encourages women to challenge themselves are some recent campaigns that boosted sales and brought in high customer engagement. Adidas' #allin campaign during the 2014 FIFA World Cup Final brought it 1.59 million mentions across social media platforms. Such high customer engagement goes

a long way in attracting customers, resulting in higher conversions<sup>[1]</sup>.

- Peers: The component closest to us is the people we interact with on a regular basis. Family, friends, co-workers. Their activities online have quite a significant effect on our behaviour, whether we notice it or not. Positive reviews of places they've been to, product ratings, and general posts about preferences and leanings impact us in some way or the other, with the magnitude varying from person to person. Not only products and services, even their own pictures, posts and videos act as a factor. We may find content motivating, inspiring and sometimes even distracting.

## 2.1 The Good

As of 2015, the internet hosts over a massive 3.17 billion active users, with 2.3 billion of them active on some form of social media<sup>[2]</sup>. As of the last quarter of 2015, there are 1.71 billion active users on Facebook, 500 million on Instagram, and 313 million on Twitter; three of the most widely used platforms<sup>[3]</sup>. As of 2016, people have an average of 7 accounts on the internet<sup>[4]</sup>. With such overwhelming figures on the table, it doesn't take an expert to conclude that the world has moved online.

Newspapers may still grace reception tables and airport lounges, but one can clearly see the shift from print media to social media. Corporations in the sports industry and elsewhere have noticed this trend, and worked upon their delivery tactics, to ensure better sales and optimum profit. Research shows that as much as 91% of retail brands across the United States ensure an active presence on two or more social media platforms<sup>[5]</sup>. Aside from corporations, even athletes, superstars and other renowned personalities endorsing sport shoes, apparel, supplement, and even ideas and concepts have a strong effect on our decision making.

A few reasons behind the mass migration to the online world:

- Convenience: Since we were familiarised to the internet, the distance has been reducing. More

and more activities which would've required physical effort are now doable straight from the couch. People no longer have to walk to the banks or the shops, or to the fitness pro's office. Organisations like bodybuilding.com, Muscle&Fitness, and many others are actively engaging in providing meal plans, exercise routines, and even fitness apparel. This helps busy individuals as well, who may not have time to strategise about their next workouts. 10 minute home exercises, HIIT sessions, and other such time-saving ideas

- Massive population: With advent of the internet and social media, recruitment has become simpler. Reactive recruitment occurs when the potential client reacts to an advertisement, while proactive recruitment involves directly approaching the client and selling the product. Through proactive and reactive recruitment, content providers are now able to attract bigger numbers, thanks to the geographic and financial boundary somewhat eliminated.
- Geography: With the internet, the location or distance of a place from one's position is not such a worry as it used to be. Connecting to the point above, people could now access products and services that were not available in their country or region. People in small, remote towns or underdeveloped countries can and are hugely benefitting from the internet, as they now have access to an ocean of resources, just a click away. Online shopping, consulting, and even training (athletes training clients via videos, live video chats, emails, etc) started growing in popularity, all because of one big reason.
- Cost: The online marketplace was cheaper compared to the physical world, and many times more penetrating. Advertisements on Google, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and almost every other website meant nobody would miss out. The internet majorly eliminated the cost that came with physical premises, like rent, warehousing and storage, maintenance, and labour employment. This meant lower prices for the end

consumer as well, which led people to liking the idea of finding motivation, science, and guidelines of exercising online, rather than at the fitness centre. Even though we ultimately end up at the gym, the source of our knowledge is increasingly becoming the internet. YouTube videos have also been gaining popularity, because of their simplicity and ease of access.

- **Common Platform:** The internet not only opened doors to resources never accessed before, it also brought together people of a similar mindset, sharing common goals - in our case, probably a healthier body, better health, and specific interests. There were applications which helped us keep track of our fitness metrics and upload them on servers for other app users to see and probably compete against; cultivating and promoting healthy competition.
- **Source of motivation:** With the number of people involved in the same activity as one's preference, finding motivation is not difficult. Seeing others achieve their goals, push their bodies to the limit, and come out stronger is basically the essence of every motivational video or post. Articles which talk about transformation stories, before-after shots, and even short videos depicting one's journey to a fitter version of themselves, all act as motivational factors.

## 2.2 The Bad

In the points above, we saw that there were a lot of takeaways for both, the source and the consumer. Trainers and enthusiasts had a platform to share and distribute their content professionally for a cheaper rate, and the consumers had an easy all access pass to the fitness world, at lower prices and higher convenience. Keeping these in mind, there are also a few drawbacks. While every coin has a flip side, it is our responsibility to weigh both of these carefully, and make an informed decision. The biggest, most superficial dark spots are:

- **Reduced individualisation:** While the internet is an interactive medium, certain content is not modifiable as per the needs of the person concerned. Articles which, say for example, focus on the SITS group of muscles on the shoulder joint, may work for a bodybuilder, but will definitely not work for a person with a damaged rotator cuff. In the same way, every exercise, meal plan, supplement program and apparel may work for a certain percentage of the population, but will definitely not work for a broader spectrum. The general population, unaware of these differentiating factors, may be vulnerable enough to buy into products and services their bodies aren't meant for.
- **Unrealistic standards:** Promoting a healthy body image is one thing and forcing one body type is another. While there is truth in the statement 'be comfortable in your own skin', a lot of people are losing faith in themselves, after not being able to achieve the body type of athletes, body builders, performers, or models. Bombardment of such images and lifestyles puts the ordinary person under a lot of pressure. However, many fail to realise that these athletes and superstars go through a lot of pain and hard work to get where they are today. Their main focus is to stay fit and perform, which is why they spend countless hours at the fitness centre, and thousands of dollars in the kitchen. This elite group of people also have experts working for them, making no mistakes when it comes to exercise prescription, meal planning and supplementation. An ordinary sitter cannot be expected to look like an accomplished athlete or supermodel, because their lifestyles and foci don't match on any level.
- **Science is blurred:** Since the fitness industry is quite a lucrative one, a lot of enthusiasts and entrepreneurs gave it a hand. In 2014, the global health club industry was worth over 84 billion U.S. dollars, an increase of more than 17 billion

U.S. dollars compared to the 2009 figure<sup>[6]</sup>. The number of fitness centres globally rose from 128,500 in 2009 to 186,850 in 2015<sup>[7]</sup>. Along with these, online personal training also picked up pace. Athletes, bodybuilders and models started sharing their ‘secrets’ to a better body, which included snippets from their exercise programme, nutrition planning, and wardrobe choices. However, not all of these entities were certified and eligible to recommend or prescribe exercises, let alone meal plans and supplementation. This puts the client in a risky position, because i) the uncertified entity does not have a scientific base to his recommendations, ii) there is no regulating body over fitness promoters online, making it all the more difficult to file for damages.

- Governing body: The absence of a governing body makes it very difficult for organisations to implement a standardised structure or protocol. Although a number of organisations may follow suggestions by reputed bodies, a number may not. This exposes the public to a rather risky approach to fitness and better health. Imagine any sport without a governing body - say, English football without the Football Association (FA), or even global football without FIFA. Where products are concerned, most sellers have a no refunds policy, which nullifies any scope for a quality check and subsequent product return.

### 2.3 Science and Certification

As clearly stated in the abstract and introduction of the paper, prime importance should always be given to the science behind the exercise or meal plan. Where we talk about buying and investing in accessories, gear and apparel, people tend to have different approaches, which are affected by i) quality, ii) cost efficiency, iii) peer pressure, and even iv) advertisers or ambassadors, among others. With fitness instructors however, be it online or physical, certifications are not always trustworthy.

A number of certifications are available in the U.S., although a number are not accredited. Most require a high school diploma, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and some kind of automated external defibrillator (AED) certification, with an examination.

A 2002 investigation<sup>[8][9]</sup> evaluated a random sample of 115 personal trainers using the Fitness Instructors

Knowledge Assessment (FIKA) (which measures knowledge in nutrition, health screening, testing protocols, exercise prescription, and special populations). The study described that:

- 70% of those surveyed did not have a degree in any field related to exercise science.
- Those who did not have a bachelor’s degree in an exercise science-related field scored 31% less on average than those with a bachelor’s degree or higher in the field.
- Those holding one of two specific certifications (the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) or the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) certification) scored 83% of the questions correctly on average. Those holding any certification other than ACSM or NSCA answered only 38% of the questions correctly.

This tells us that a lot of trainers may be certified, but the credibility of the certification may be questionable, if it is not recognised by organisations like the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCAA) in the United States. Other countries usually follow NCAA guidelines, or adopt a course recognition commission themselves.

### 2.4 The Latest Trends

According to annual surveys carried out by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), the biggest trend of 2017 is wearable technology<sup>[10]</sup>. Wearable technology includes activity trackers, smart watches, heart rate monitors, GPS tracking devices, and smart eye glasses (designed to show maps and track activity). Examples include fitness and activity trackers like those from Misfit, Garmin, EFOSMH, Pebble Time, Juboury, Samsung, Basis, Jawbone, and Fitbit. The newly released Apple iWatch® (Cupertino, CA) is another example.

“Technology is now a must-have in our daily lives. Everyone can easily count steps taken or calories burned using a wearable device or a smart phone,” said Walter R. Thompson, Ph.D., FACSM, the lead author of the survey and associate dean in the College of Education & Human Development at Georgia State University in Atlanta. “The health data collected by wearable technology can be used to inform the user about their current fitness level and help them make healthier lifestyle choices.”

Now in its eleventh year, the survey was completed by more than 1,800 health and fitness professionals worldwide, many certified by ACSM, and was designed to reveal trends in various fitness environments. Forty-two potential trends were given as choices, and the top 20 were ranked and published by ACSM.

“Body weight training, high-intensity interval training (HIIT) and educated, certified and experienced fitness professionals also remained highly ranked on the survey,” said Thompson. “These trends reflect continued strong consumer interest in strength training and functional fitness.” Even though wearable technology has taken top spot, we look at the need for educated, certified and experienced fitness professionals, which will always be one of the main prerequisites for a well established fitness centre.

### 3 CONCLUSION

While there is an endless supply of information on the web, we, as individuals, must be wary of what we hear and what we listen to. Social media has, in the last few years, done what was once unimaginable. It brought together people of a similar mindset, a niche interest, a common factor. However, it has always been a medium. Quality control has never been one of its jobs, and it probably never will be. It is thus our duty, and more so, our responsibility, to seek only what is scientifically proven, and applicable to us.

Finding a proper line between the acceptable and unacceptable is a very subjective task, and will vary from person to person. However, the common focus that should be kept in mind is the science behind the content we go through. If it does not have a scientific background, it's probably not worth pursuing it. With science dominating the exercise prescription sphere, we're left with other factions, like apparel and meal planning, and supplementation.

While apparel buying varies strongly from person to person, one should understand that nutrition plans are to be prescribed by certified nutritionists and dieticians only. Supplementation once again, requires proper guidance from experienced, certified professionals. Blindly following personalities on the internet may not sound so risky, but the reality is quite opposite. Protein, carbohydrate and fat

requirements varies among people depending on factors like age, weight, profession, daily activity level, etc. Replicating an athlete's meal plan is thus not the answer.

To conclude, we might agree upon the following:

Social media and the internet have had a massive impact on the fitness industry, through connecting people across countries, cutting costs, deepening campaign impacts, and providing a platform for providers and consumers to interact with each other and related content. However, it has also become a space where science has somewhat lost importance, and aesthetics have taken over. This also leads to body shaming, and subsequent cognitive problems.

The goal must always be to strike a balance when it comes to our dependence on social media, because too much dependence leads to issues like lowered self worth, frustration over the inability to replicate the people online, and a disconnect with science and reality, while too little dependence may desert the person from the world to some extent.

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