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CrossFit, Community, and Identity: A *Gemeinschaft* in a Liquid Modern World?

Sociological Research Online

1–17

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Chris Till** 

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Abstract

This article applies Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity to understand the dynamics of temporary communities through the branded strength and conditioning programme of CrossFit (CF). By drawing on 18 semi-structured interviews across 4 different UK CF gyms, we argue that to some participants CF offers a temporary return to a modified version of the strong social bonds associated with older forms of community (described by Ferdinand Tönnies as *Gemeinschaft*). These close communities, however, are modified by their intermingling with contemporary capitalist relations and their service to the development of individual identity and body projects consistent with recent re-conceptualizations. These new forms retain some *Gemeinschaft* characteristics, such as a space for friendship and camaraderie, while also providing opportunities to work on individual life and body projects. Ultimately, due to their temporary character and focus on self-development, we argue they are best categorized as what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as 'peg communities'.

Keywords

community, CrossFit, *Gemeinschaft*, *Gessellschaft*, health, identity, liquid modernity, peg communities

Introduction

CrossFit (CF) is an approach to high-intensity interval training and a global brand which over the last 23 years has grown to be practised by 4 million people around the world. In

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2018, CFs affiliate gyms numbered 15,500; however, after CEO Greg Glassman's controversial 2020 tweets following the death of George Floyd, around 500 disaffiliated while many who remained publicly asserted their commitment to diversity and inclusivity (Edmonds et al., 2023; Gorman and Taylor, 2020). More closed during the COVID-19 pandemic leaving just 9400 in 2021. However, recently, numbers are back above 15,000 across 120 countries (CrossFit, 2020, n.d.; Galic, 2023; Mansour, 2019). Some have characterized CF as cult-like due to mutual surveillance and a strong sense of identification; however, it remains an ostensibly open group with a self-image of an ethical enterprise (BBC News, 2020; Beck, 2017; CrossFit, 2020; Dawson, 2017).

In this article, we argue that CF is characteristic of a form of sociality consistent with the complex interplay between attachment and detachment found in 21st-century 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). We explore the cultural practices within boxes, CF terminology for individual gyms, that create and foster a community while suggesting an important tension due to its embeddedness within a 21st-century, post-industrial context. The CF gym culture is neither an individualized nor asocial space nor is it an oasis of traditional, close, personal *Gemeinschaft* style social bonds like those observed by Ferdinand Tönnies (Kamenka, 1965). Rather, it represents a balance; a form of meaningful collectivity but one which is driven by the desire to achieve individual goals and express an individual identity. The negotiation between individual and collective produces a (con)temporary form of sociality, since it is ever-changing, 'liquid', not fixed, and therefore more akin to Bauman's (2000, 2001) notion of community. Specifically, it combines strongly felt social bonds with an instrumentalization of community to facilitate self-development in a manner consistent with neoliberal subjectivity suggesting CF can be seen as a 'peg community' (Bauman, 2002).

The first part of this article provides a critical review of existing literature and an outline of how we use Bauman's notion of liquidity to understand the community of CF. After outlining the methodology and data drawn from four UK CF gyms, we then provide an analysis to explain how CF provides a 21st-century liquid community through its unique practices.

CF, gyms, and community

In this section, we discuss relevant existing work on fitness/gym culture, CF, and community and suggest that the notion of community has often been assumed rather than fully interrogated. However, we find conceptually useful tensions between the identification of strong, supportive bonds, a nostalgic disposition, and rejection of anonymized, corporate fitness experiences on the one hand and the neoliberally oriented, competitive edge of CF on the other.

Self-development

CF emerged in part as an attempt to produce a more authentic and collective experience in response to the more sanitized and anonymous environment of the commercialized gym chains (Andreasson and Johansson, 2014, 2016; Edmonds, 2020; Pickett et al., 2016). This commercialization has developed in the context of what has often been perceived as a long-term increase in individualization and breakdown of traditional social

and community bonds in society in general (Bauman, 2001). During this process, fitness gyms have become a central part of social life for many people and while gyms are potential sites to make social connections, they can be individualized spaces with a focus on ‘machine training’ and ‘reciprocal civil inattention’ (Doğan, 2015; Stewart and Smith, 2014). Gyms have thus been conceptualized as places to ‘turn off’ consciousness and build embodied identities in the absence of traditional work-based identities (Crossley, 2006: 43; Johansson, 1996: 44; Wacquant, 1995a). CF has similarly been conceptualized as a ‘re-inventive institution’ often strongly aligned with ‘postfeminist’ and ‘hegemonic masculine’ ideals and as a self-branding and self-sculpting activity aligned with neoliberal discourse (Dawson, 2017; James and Gill, 2018; Nash, 2018). We concur with the re-inventive potential of CF but it is its communitarian aspects which enable this, rather than an individualized opportunity to work on the body.

Gemeinschaft bonds

Existing work on community in gyms and fitness centres has suggested a connection between social capital and health (Crossley, 2006; Kawachi and Berkman, 2000; Lee and MacDonald, 2009; Stewart et al., 2013). Some work has argued corporate fitness franchises may even have their highly rationalized systems actively subverted by members collectively pursuing community goals (O’Toole, 2009). Others have used the spread of gym culture, and CF specifically, to counter the narrative of individualization and community fragmentation (Belger, 2012; McKenzie, 2013: 168–172).

In comparison to mainstream gyms, CF has been found to have higher levels of social capital and sense of community due to consistency of experience between boxes, common goals, and greater identification with the group (Bailey et al., 2019; Pickett et al., 2016; Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). This has led some to suggest that the group shares some characteristics with military and religious organizations characterizing it as a ‘greedy institution’ which demands total commitment and loyalty but also a greater sense of social solidarity (Dawson, 2017; Lenneis et al., 2023). Other work has found CF to be an opportunity to ruthlessly construct ‘bodily exceptionalism’ and hierarchies of bodies through competition (Butcher et al., 2023). However, studies have also suggested that CF does not represent a strictly neoliberal framing of individual bodily achievement but draws on collectivity as a response to the anxieties of ‘reflexive modernity’ (Thompson and Isisag, 2022).

Such findings and analyses are somewhat congruent with our own but tend to see the CF version of community as largely consistent with traditional understandings. A greater emphasis on how the form of community found in CF both critiques and incorporates contemporary neoliberal, capitalist social forms is needed. Our analysis suggests that community relations are seen as of intrinsic worth but also, and principally, valued for their utility in constructing personal body projects.

Productivity and commercialism

While gym use is ostensibly categorized as leisure and members use them for personal development, it has also been identified as providing a sense of productivity useful for work lives and as being connected to industrial capitalism through its concern with

enabling bodies to be more productive for longer periods while minimizing fatigue (Doğan, 2015: 447; Johansson, 1996; Sassatelli, 1999a; Stewart and Smith, 2014: 46). However, this is perhaps the ideology which the gym industry portrays rather than one of its aims as such because the profitability of gyms is dependent on most users believing in their effectiveness rather than necessarily achieving it.

Although CF purports to present higher levels of authenticity and collectivity it remains a highly branded experience but with fitness, there is a less replicable product or outcome as this is dependent on the practice of the customer so ‘the doer becomes the brand’ (Pickett et al., 2016; Powers and Greenwell, 2017: 535). The ‘authenticity’ which CF offers is, then, one which is constructed through a symbolic rejection of elements of contemporary society that represent a nostalgic desire for a place that never existed (Edmonds, 2020). Rather than representing a pre-modern collectivity which minimizes the significance of the individual CF has a neoliberal focus on self-determination, objective quantitative measurement, self and peer surveillance, and constant improvement with a primarily professional middle-class clientele and a franchising system which places all of the risk on individual entrepreneurs (Edmonds, 2020; Nash, 2018). Health and fitness have also often been framed in terms of productivity, self-management/development, and responsibility (McCarthy, 2021; Nash, 2018).

Such characteristics are incompatible with traditional definitions of community and will certainly not fit the understandings formulated by Tönnies or Bauman and specifically that captured by *Gemeinschaft*. CF boxes are not spaces devoid of competition and individualisation, rather, they are arenas in which measurement, competition, and encouragement service individual performance and self-development. In the following section, we present a version of community, derived from Bauman’s theorization of liquid modernity, which helps to understand how CF rationalizes the seemingly contradictory characteristics outlined above.

Peg communities

Bauman (2000: 178) has been one of the most prominent theorists of the changes to the dynamic contemporary community suggesting that individuals’ lives have been disembedded from their context with identities becoming fragile and temporary and with individuals being left to their own resources to construct and reconstruct them. His analysis draws on Tönnies’ elegy for the loss of *Gemeinschaft* style bonds associated with kinship, blood, friendship, understanding, and neighbourhood; replaced in the period of industrialization by the *Gessellschaft* bonds characterized by the ‘rational will’ and the ‘cash nexus’ (Kamenka, 1965). Although Bauman (2004) may seem to revere community he is always aware of the necessarily exclusionary tendencies of communities old and new which are as much characterized by those disallowed access as those on the inside. However, even if it were desirable, a return to *Gemeinschaft* style bonds is not possible in liquid modernity as its natural, shared understanding cannot be generated artificially and is destroyed by self-conscious observation; an artificially or consciously fabricated community by definition is not (Bauman, 2001: 11–14). The only form of unity possible in liquid modernity is a ‘republican’ version built out of negotiation between diverse individuals pursuing self-identification through consumption with

exclusion of the result of insufficient resources leading to the status of the ‘flawed consumer’ (Bauman, 2000: 178, 2005b). Any unity which is attained is thus temporary and closer to ‘motel accommodation’ than a ‘permanent home’; like the latter, the *Gemeinschaft* community was universalist and unchosen with the individual fully embedded whereas in liquid modernity the community is chosen because it expresses an identity (Bauman, 2000: 171–178, 2001: 15).

In the liquid modern world, with communities largely containers for individual identities, they constitute a new form, Bauman (2002) called ‘peg communities’ which offer the *experience* of belonging rather than the real thing, they are ‘formed by the act of hanging individual concerns on a common “peg”’ (p. 176). Peg communities allow individuals to temporarily align their strivings to define and construct their own identities with others without their problems being translated into public issues, which would be the hallmark of a true community; instead, people persist in finding ‘biographical solutions to systemic contradictions’ (Bauman, 2002: 168). For Bauman (2017: 152), then, we seek groups which are useful for our identity projects and provide some external expert guidance to provide a temporary security and quell our nostalgic yearning for the security of *Gemeinschaft* while managing our psychological insecurities and anxieties through an inward focus on the body. This is in part a response to the freedom from standardized expectations, and resulting sense of insecurity, characteristic of liquid modernity. Furthermore, according to Bauman (2005a; Higgs, 2012), ‘fitness’ is characteristic of the current phase of modernity, whereas ‘health’ held this position in ‘solid modernity’. The latter is characterized by normalization and standardization as well as belonging and inclusion but also centralized surveillance. Fitness, alternatively, is more vague, troubling, and individualized with no upper limit so one can always be fitter, work harder, and the self-work is never finished thus encouraging ever greater levels of competition and self-dissatisfaction (Butcher et al., 2023: 469; Cederström and Spicer, 2015: 39). The ‘fit’ body is one which is consistent with a society built around consumption, rather than production, and the constant search for sensations and experiences.

Bauman’s critique of peg communities as a sad and shrunken version of the real thing has been critiqued by David Bell (2006: 131) who proposes, rather, construing them as ‘pure communities’ (akin to Giddens’ ‘pure relationships’). These are not comprised of traditionally understood *Gemeinschaft* style bonds, they are ‘mobile, multiple and often mediated – but this doesn’t [make] them weak or thin’ (Bell, 2006: 132). We draw on Bell’s more positive reading of peg communities and apply it to CF in a similar fashion to Pedersen et al.’s (2018) analysis of ‘serious running’s’ ‘aesthetic communities’ built on ‘explosive events; short and stormy and tied to a single aspect or goal’ (p. 237). These are meaningful to members but are disposable and often have a fleeting, compartmentalized impact on their life with individuals gathering as ‘swarms’, moving together for safety and companionship but with little ongoing, deeper affectual connection (Pedersen et al., 2018).

This position is consistent with recent work on community which has shifted from seeing it as an organized set of social practices to something which is composed of attachments which are made and remade through participation by groups who exist side-by-side but overlap (Jackson, 2020: 519–521). Community has not been lost but re-conceptualized as ‘elective belonging’ and as ‘connective and communal urban practice’

(Neal et al., 2019: 72). This approach sees sociality as inherently plural as opposed to the more constrictive homogenized notion of community seen in Tönnies' work. Connections might not be *Gemeinschaft* style bonds, but nevertheless, they are meaningful, (some-what) persistent, and constitutive of communal feeling.

In CF, we suggest community is significant but temporary and prominently focused on identity building. It provides a common peg on which individual identities can be hung in a way which is consistent with the dynamic and shifting bonds of liquid modernity. We identified this through exploration of the question 'What kind of community do CF boxes enable'? The next section of this article outlines the methodology and how the project was designed and carried out to answer this question.

The study

The method employed during this study was by way of 18 (10 male and 8 female participants aged 21–37) semi-structured interviews across 4 different CF affiliated gyms, 2 in the north of England and 2 in Wales. One of the authors was a CFer (for 5 years), he therefore took a reflexive approach by being 'actively engaged' (Mason, 2002: 4) in designing the research and considering his positionality as both a CFer and an academic, and how he was and is embedded in both communities. This meant asking critical questions about his own values, expectations, and understandings and those of the CF and academic communities he is or was part of. His connections at the affiliate, knowledge of CF as a training regimen and his participation in local and national competitions, the types of programming within CF that occurs, the community practices and terminology, and his participation in social events have all informed his understanding of how CF community is created, fostered, and maintained. Indeed, his role as a CFer and as an academic have informed the design of the interview schedule, structured around four key themes: context, fitness/performance, gender, competition/measurement, and community.

Research participants, interviews, and analysis

Research participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Gray, 2004: 88 + 324). Requests for participants were disseminated, via a head coach, on one box's Facebook group with follow-ups via email. At three other boxes, members of the research team contacted members through personal connections and snowballed from there.

The semi-structured interviews were designed and conducted through a series of open-ended questions guided by a set of aims relating to community formation and maintenance (Denscombe, 2017; Flick, 2020). This allowed participants space and time to answer questions and facilitate a two-way communication process by way of asking the researcher questions too. This allowed for rich, thick descriptions of experience and views and values to be discussed. The strengths of this method are well documented and largely concern the ability of participants and the interviewer to develop a rapport and explore areas in detail.

After data generation, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify 'patterns of shared meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 593 emphasis removed) which could be articulated

as a core concept. This involved data being interrogated and coded independently by the two-person research team to ensure rigour before the codes were developed into themes through exploring similar ideas and meanings expressed by different participants (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 77). Often these were conceptual and required moving beyond merely describing the content of the discussion through the application of theory and concepts which can help to draw out latent meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 204).

Analysis: community formation

Our analysis centres around the notion of how community is formed and maintained. Our data reveal that this begins in an informal way when members first enter the gym; coaches introduce people to each other when they are new and there are a series of partner and team workouts to complete during some scheduled classes. Partner workouts are held around once a week, these involve members of similar ability working together to complete a workout. Generally speaking, the workouts will be focused on completing ‘As Many Rounds As Possible’ within a set time or completing a set number of Rounds For Time, which involves completing a set number of movements as quickly as possible. There are also larger ‘team workouts’ usually held on bank holidays or festive occasions such as Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve. Through these workouts, routines, and practices, durable friendship bonds and camaraderie are established. However, these are bonds which are distinctive to the liquid modern world as while they are strong and meaningful they are also in service of individual life and body projects consistent with a neoliberal orientation towards the self and are closer to peg communities which are picked up when useful and later left behind.

Gemeinschaft bonds

The character of the social bonds initially appears as strong *Gemeinschaft* style connections somewhat reminiscent of traditional notions of community.

As one interviewee states:

Basically, you are encouraged to get to know people . . . people you do the classes with and things like that . . . and to get to know people outside the gym as well . . . maybe once a month, go for a beer with everybody. You know it does make the experience more fun if you get to know people because you can talk to them before and after the workout. So . . . it is just that you are encouraged to get to know everyone and that just creates a better social side in that gym (P8: male, age 21, member).

This is consistent with the ‘fulfilling leisure experience’ observed by Crossley (2006: 26). Another member expands on this point and explains a key distinction between CF gyms and other gyms:

the fact that I can go there [to the box] and you sort of know everyone when you turn up, whereas if you just went to a normal gym you’d see people you’ve never seen before (P1: Female, aged 23, member).

Mainstream gyms can sometimes lead to anonymous experiences and possibly alienation/atomization as has been identified as being prevalent with ‘machine training’ and in commercial, franchised gyms (O’Toole, 2009; Sassatelli, 1999b). This parallels the individualization seen to be widespread in, and fundamental to, societies dominated by the weak temporary ties associated with both *Gessellschaft* style social bonds and liquid modernity. The experiences highlighted in our data instead are more akin to the community spirit identified in organizations drawing on ‘love’ and ‘virtue’ to foster commitment (e Cunha et al., 2017) and the resistance to rationalization occurring even within heavily controlled fitness environments (O’Toole, 2009).

One respondent also makes a similar point to P8 above; there is a regularity around seeing people they know with friendships becoming firmly established through the structure of workouts and class times:

you will meet people that will become friends for life, basically and you will go to a class and you will see people there that you see regularly and you will continually see them every week and it always makes you want to go because you want to see the people that you regularly see (P1: Female aged 23, member).

Another member while praising the strong social bonds (‘tight community’) at their box clearly characterizes these as being in service of motivation:

I think we’ve got quite a tight community here. So, definitely it’s a community, the encouragement, the motivation. I can come in here and be totally demotivated, but everybody else will lift you and motivate you, so it’s definitely a community in that sense (P2: Female, aged 37, member).

Friendships have also encouraged a maintenance of community even when people have not felt like ‘working out’ on that day. Similarly, O’Toole (2009) identified fitness club members who often prioritized socializing and community organizing over exercise but within the context of their fitness centre.

This section has established that strong social bonds are valued by members and are a prominent factor in their engagement with CF. However, the collectivity is framed in terms of its motivational influence. The following section will explore how this motivational force is channelled for self-development consistent with neoliberal ideals.

Neoliberalism and productivity

From the quotations presented above, community bonds are clearly significant for our participants and central to their experience of CF; however, these are often seen as being in service of the development of individual body and life projects. The self-improvement offered by participation in CF clearly involves individuals ‘working’ on their bodies and while this is not specifically in the context of unemployment as observed by Wacquant (1995a), it does feed into their broader experience of productivity:

I got a 1st class honours degree and I attribute that quite a lot to CrossFit and the energy it was giving me and also the distraction it was giving me, so it was like 2/3 times . . . 2/3 hours a day

training and then work on [my] dissertation the rest of the time, or, my course work in the 3rd year, and that really helped in getting it done (P1: Female, aged 23, member).

This respondent identifies both a direct performance outcome in their high level of academic achievement and attributes the experience of feeling more energized to their engagement with CF. This is consistent with Stewart and Smith's (2014: 46) assertion that gym usage serves capitalism through its potential to increase productivity and reduce fatigue. Furthermore, this chimes with Crossley's (2006: 43) assertion that exercise activities are used to escape sedentary work activities and disengage consciousness.

A focus on performance is placed within a tension between individualism and community by a member who again presents the latter as useful for self-development:

I think the encouragement and the community spirit behind it (CF), although it's very much individual, it's not [just] individual, its everybody encourages and helps everybody else from the elite guys to not so elite guys, everybody will encourage and talk to you about how you are progressing and give you tips to do that (P5, male, aged 33, member).

This speaks to 'a mix of *Gemeinschaft-Gessellschaft*' (Blum, 2003: 176 cited in Jackson, 2020: 521) in which competitiveness is set within, and enabled by, a context of camaraderie which is further articulated below:

Yeah, the way that everybody is kind of chasing similar goals, but [it's a] little bit different, but then you've got that group workout where everybody is doing the same to their level, but they are all in that same boat, so you are kind of bonded together by that one goal that you know you are chasing in say a half an hour workout (P2: female, aged 25, member).

The homogeneity of movements and goals seems to align with a *Gemeinschaft* form of sociality and with Sassatelli's (1999b) assertion that simultaneous or uniform movements 'collectivize' the experience, thus generating and strengthening social bonds. Similarly, Neal et al. (2019) found in their study of social leisure organizations, that the mutualizing focus on the 'rules of shared tasks . . . can facilitate commonalities and connections' (p. 81). Moreover, it is the stimulation of social bonds which enables our participants to develop themselves both in improving their performance and in keeping up consistency of exercise over time. While there is a shared task and sense of community, this is also experienced as competition:

[Competition] that's what pushes a lot of people on, like when you are doing a WOD [Workout of the Day] and there someone doing the same stuff next to you there's always that part of your head going, I want to do one more than them. . . . But then that's good for improving yourself and pushing yourself that little bit further, I suppose, I'm guilty of certainly doing a WOD myself I wouldn't push myself as hard as I would if there was someone else next to me doing it, at the same time (T1: Male, coach).

The communal aspect here turns into comparison and 'light' competition used as a motivational tool which another member articulates more formally in the discussion of what kinds of people are most suited to CF:

I think ambitious [people], you know people who are into achieving things and targets its very good for that. Because it is . . . very measurable you know, especially with the invention of things like Wodify,¹ which is an online training system . . . you log in and report all of your training. So you are kind of accountable . . . we have got a range of members and people that are coming every day and obsess over [that] but then we've got like the Moms that are coming to the 10 o'clock class. It's more of a social thing for them you know, they have a break from their kids for an hour you know (T2: male, coach).

Here a hierarchy is established between the ambitious and obsessive members inputting data and the 'Moms' having a break from their kids. Again, the community is at service of the ambitions of individuals and a focus on quantitative measures is consistent with the neoliberal framing of health and fitness identified by Nash (2018). The negative impacts of the competitive atmosphere are also highlighted by another participant:

Well, its constantly very high intensity training and that's one of the things I like about it. its constantly varies; you never get bored cause its always different. And sometimes like that's hard . . . I just got mentally drained with it . . . the added pressure of competing as well as again the 5 times a week training at a very high intensity for over an hour and a half a day (T1: male, coach).

Here the pressure of intense training five times per week plus competing in CF competitions became mentally challenging. Another participant suggested that competition within the box had similar impacts and somewhat diminished the positive aspects:

The worst bit is the competition aspect; you can't just go and have fun. You're always under pressure to perform in some sort of way even though people always talk it down 'oh no you just do it for yourself', but actually you have to record . . . how much you've done, everyone can see that, you have to write it on the board and what time you did the workout in which way . . . there is a lot of comparison and yeah people deny that . . . And I think that's probably the worst part of it. I wouldn't say necessarily its bad, it becomes quite life consuming if you're ok with that . . . If you're in a relationship and your partner is doing that as well can be a good thing. [If] your partner isn't doing it, its probably quite isolating cause it becomes very consuming, time-consuming (T4: male, member).

The above speaks to a highly competitive culture focused on individual performance with community aspects as secondary with speculation as to potential damage to personal relationships.

This section has established that the community aspects of CF are often seen as a tool for achieving individual ambitions and while the friendly community is valued, its value is framed through its impact on motivation and quantified outputs. The following section shows how the utility of the strong social bonds and their impact on motivation and self-development contribute to constructing CF boxes as peg communities.

Self-development and peg communities

Although the term community is used by most participants, it appears to denote something closer to a peg community (Bauman, 2002) as the collective aspects are considered

to be nice, but not essential. It is a form of community which is ‘positive’ (Bell, 2006) for participants, ‘aesthetic’ (Pedersen et al., 2018), and offering ‘elective belonging’ (Neal et al., 2019) with a focus on identity building. Our research did not identify religious or military-style ‘greedy institutions’ (Dawson, 2017; Lenneis et al., 2023) or extreme bodily exploitation, competition, and individualization (Butcher et al., 2023). Rather, the community is considered intrinsically meaningful but somewhat sequestered from the rest of society, ‘picked up’ when necessary and valued because it is useful for individuals’ body projects. This section, then, shows how the strong social bonds and focus on competition and measurement described above contribute towards a form of peg community. One participant highlighted how the insulated character of the CF box helps them to develop:

the first bit of advice I got at my current box was leave your ego at the door . . . you know it doesn’t matter how much you have lifted in the past or what the person next to you lifts (P5: Male, aged 33, member).

The CF community is presented as distinct from the broader context and one in which participants’ outside achievements or personalities do not matter; everything is subordinated to performance. One respondent highlights the limit of the social bonds formed within CF specifically contrasting them with familial bonds, seen as the archetypal *Gemeinschaft* bonds, they found in team sports:

you do become a family in the rugby squad because you watch each other’s backs on the pitch. You know you like . . . don’t know if I’m explaining myself very well but in CrossFit, it doesn’t quite have that definitely. Although you do meet new people and you train together as friends. You make friends, you train together. But because its still an individual kind of sport, you don’t get that family thing. As a team whatever your team is, whatever you do affects your team mate (T2: male, coach).

Here the sense of community is qualified with a prominent individuality which is presented as an inherent quality of CF. Similarly, another participant stated:

I like to train on my own in my own time but I do like the community aspect as well . . . you can talk to people but at the end of the day, you have to complete the workout by yourself. Nobody is . . . helping you to do the lift or anything. So you’re still left to your own devices and strength but doing it with others together at the same time (T3: male, member).

Another member *does* characterize their box as akin to family; however, this is still restricted:

The encouragement you get from it and from other people and when I talk about this, I talk about mainly here, like for me CrossFit [city name] is my home and I think it’s really kind of more like a little family, you know? And you do get that in the wider community, but it’s not as strong as what it is in here. You could come here feeling crappy and you go out feeling brilliant . . . a big family that supports each other in getting the best out of a yourself (P2: Female, aged 37, member).

The participant here emphasizes the difference between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the box which has a rejuvenating effect on their sense of well-being. This is demonstrative of CF functioning as a peg community in the sense of a haven from a more difficult external world which has made them feel ‘crappy’. This would not seem to represent the deep, embedded connection, collectivity, and sense of home associated with *Gemeinschaft* bonds as described by Tönnies. Rather, it can be seen as closer to the motel accommodation described by Bauman (2000: 171–178) which is engaged with because it expresses a chosen identity.

Participants *did* conceptualize their group feeling as a sense of community which is what has kept them returning over a considerable length of time, as one member explains:

The community aspect was really big in keeping me in here . . .

having that community . . . has been brilliant, but at the same time I can do it [training] with or without the class atmosphere, though I’d rather do it with (P3: Male, aged 29, member).

The above quotations demonstrate the dedication participants show to training, but also that they can and will train on their own. Their commitment and self-discipline are evident, with or without CF, but the fact that they have a community they can train with enhances their enjoyment and by extension supports their training goals. This also speaks to characteristics of the peg community with the communal aspects being highly valued, but the individual continues to function effectively without this support. Community support and encouragement is a welcome and useful tool for individual development, but can be picked up or left behind without too much concern. The community feeling is crucial in enabling CFers to achieve their goal of developing a ‘better you’ (Powers and Greenwell, 2017: 13) and helps CF to function as a ‘re-inventive institution’ (Doğan, 2015). As one respondent describes how the collective experiences help towards achieving individual training goals of improved performance:

[You] continually create new friendships and that being the reason that you keep going back and I think also if you keep going and keep working at things, you will get something out of it and I think that’s what it tries to push and that’s why they repeat workouts, they do set workouts each week, or do the benchmark workout,, it is just trying to continue to better yourself rather than being better than everyone else (P1: female, aged 23, member).

Other respondents add to this point:

I hate working out on my own, CrossFit has never been about working out on my own, so then when it comes to working out it’s more about being with people . . .so I try to get [two regular training partners and friends to join me] and workout with them (P2: Female, aged 37, member).

if you are not feeling so great other people will kind of pull you around, or make you feel more positive, it just keeps you going, like your friends are here, so you can actually come here, even if you aren’t training, and socialise [with them] (P2 continued).

The CF box appears to facilitate a ‘swarm’ of individuals, characteristic of liquid modernity, who come together to work towards similar goals and in the process peg their

identities on similar actions in the same location (Bauman, 2002; Pedersen et al., 2018). Although, perhaps often deeply felt the bonds are meaningful because they are useful in each individual's quest for self-development and progress which is now solely the preserve of the individual rather than the collective (Bauman, 2000: 135). While the accommodation and pegs might not be a permanent fixture, we suggest some nuance is required here as some members have been an affiliate for over 10 years. Therefore, we argue that there is a 'durability of community', which to an extent challenges Bauman's notion of temporariness.

The way in which friendships and community attachments are seen as important motivational tools (as well as being valuable in themselves) is consistent with Dawson's (2017: 365–366) suggestion that CF is formally similar to religious and military communities due to bonding through adversity and the use of guilt and piety as motivational tactics. Perhaps due to the different methodological approach taken (interviews vs previously published testimonials), we did not detect a strong religious strain but the military-style focus on strong, intimate bonds as a driver of performance was clearly present, with some qualification. Consistent with Bauman's definition of fitness as characteristic of liquid modernity with its lack of limits and normalization what is being sought by CFers is not to attain a standardized body to be a well-functioning cog within a military-style unit but to use their strong bonds with others to attain ever greater levels of performance. Participants 'yearn to be pressured' (Bauman, 2017: 150) by their peg communities as a stimulus for their own goals and to help them compete with other members.

The activities of our participants represent 'shared materialities that [. . .] are] able to generate bonds and durable connections beyond the activities themselves' (Neal et al., 2019: 81). But they do this without requiring the homogeneity and constant mutual surveillance which characterized *Gemeinschaft* style bonds. Rather they are part of the 'plurality, hybridity and multiplicity of communing we experience daily in our own lives' (Studdert, 2016: 623). However, while strongly and meaningfully experienced they are often subordinated to individual personal development of the kind encouraged in neoliberal societies. The CF communities described by our participants thus represented peg communities which were useful to the participants and significant to their identities but largely confined to certain areas and times of their lives.

Conclusion

While CF retains a commercialized and branded element to its formation consistent with more mainstream corporate fitness chains, we found that the emphasis placed on collective activity and community enables it to form a somewhat distinctive character. Most significant for our participants was the sense of camaraderie and belonging they felt and the impact it has on their experience of working out and the outcomes they achieved. We did not find it to be 'no place for sociability' (Wacquant, 1995b: 164), rather our findings shared others' insights that standardized activities and exercises helped to generate a sense of collectivity among members (Bailey et al., 2019; Lenneis et al., 2023; O'Toole, 2009; Pickett et al., 2016; Sassatelli, 1999a; Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). However, community bonds were often seen as tools for achieving individual goals. It is the motivation for personal development, both physical and in their broader personal lives (e.g., in work or education), which drives their engagement with the CF community.

The sense of community established through the CF boxes was not consistent with *Gemeinschaft* style bonds, or the sense of home Bauman suggested had been eroded. It is, nevertheless, a form of sociality both meaningful and productive but one which participants can leave behind when it is no longer necessary. The basic, low-tech, austere philosophy and aesthetic of CF and its boxes are illustrative of a nostalgic tendency within the organization. CF as a corporate entity and community often defines itself in opposition to traditional chain gyms (Pickett et al., 2016). This outlook is consistent with Bauman's conceptualization of liquid modern peg communities which harken to a mythical lost time that is always constructed in the present. Indeed, for Bauman, the very articulation of community as existing in a particular scenario is an indication that it no longer really exists. Bailey et al.'s (2019) study found a common mind-set of 'leave your ego at the door' (pp. 202–203) as did one of our participants (see the 'Self Development and Peg Communities' section) among CFers discouraging members from too much self-admiration and to focus purely on their measurable achievements in the box itself. This further speaks to the peg community in which a box is seen as a distinct and special place where the norms of the outside world do not necessarily apply. Although CFers do see their participation as affecting their lives outside of the box, and transformation of personal and professional lives seems to be a key motivator, there is an awareness that the box is a distinctive space where one must act and think differently. A constructed, nostalgic haven which helps to prepare members to compete in a neoliberal world both professionally and socially.

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Note

1. Wodify is defined on the company's website as 'a comprehensive customer retention platform that not only streamlines operations and enhances coaching, but also provides data insights that help gym owners track important metrics and gain a better understanding of their business's health. With Wodify (n.d.), coaches can tailor programming to clients' needs, resulting in improved client engagement and increased revenue for the gym'.

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