Organizing and conducting sporting events online: A study of the 2011 CrossFit Games

by

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Organizing and conducting sporting events online

Abstract

In a world where everything from dating to shopping to conducting business can be performed online, competitive sport has remained an activity in which its online component is mostly relegated to news, chat or fan forums, or fantasy-league interactions. The physicality of competitive sports does not lend itself to an online format—until now. CrossFit (CF) is one of the fastest growing new fitness programs in the world, and is based largely on online communities and networks. In 2011, CrossFit Incorporated (CF Inc.), the creator of this worldwide fitness network, conducted the world’s largest online CF sporting competition, where individuals recorded their performances online for public consumption, interaction and judging. Over 25,000 individuals and teams from around the world participated in 2011 which relies heavily on participation and feedback, trust, social media and networking for its success.

By uncovering the essential components of the unique operating community of CF through analysis of quantitative data, in-depth qualitative interviews, and textual analysis, this paper suggests a model for producing a successful global sporting event online and discusses whether it may be applied to other athletic organizations to increase their worldwide exposure and increase members access to global opportunities. Findings determined a mix of criteria including attracting and retaining like-minded individuals through a strong focus on cohesion, inclusion, and competition; strong local autonomy and control; and a willingness on the part of members to promote the sport for the perceived wellbeing of others as necessary to a strong, effective online component in facilitating global competition online.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, interpretive theory, online communities, sport, Internet, organizational culture
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This study of the CrossFit (CF) community, with its aim of determining the criteria needed to implement a successful global online event (even in the absence of traditional marketing and promotion methods) is significant because the 2011 CrossFit Games Open is the first time a large-scale competitive sporting event has been held almost entirely online; it may provide a benchmark model through which other sports or fitness organizations can conduct legitimate, judged athletic events online in order to include a much broader demographic of individuals, and utilize the power of social media and networking to create a self-promoting, self-sustaining and self-perpetuating global support system. My research may also help to extend existing work on organizational culture as it relates specifically to sports-focused online groups. Questions that framed my research include: What is the CF model that allowed for the first-ever global online sporting event? How can this be applied to other sports organizations? What are the unique elements of the CF community that makes its online operations so successful? What are the barriers to other organizations behaving in a similar manner and conducting sporting events online?

Through an open survey of the global CF community distributed through the very online channels they use to grow and maintain their operations, as well as more in-depth interviews with a selection of CF athletes and gym owners and textual analysis of the group’s own descriptions and cultural materials, I have developed a set of criteria that may assist a similar online group in developing the cultural and communication components needed to conduct competitive athletic global online events of their own. Applying sociocultural theory with an interpretive and applied analytical framework, I interpreted CF’s online processes so that others may learn and benefit from
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their model.

CF is a competitive, evidence-based fitness program. However, it is also dubbed in its community as “the sport of fitness” and is now considered by its members, and increasingly by the media and larger community as a competitive sport in addition to a fitness program—as evidenced by its international Games event broadcasting on ESPN (Riche, 2011).

Using an online-based, free programming format via the CrossFit.com website—which posts the daily workouts and explanatory videos; highlights athletes and gyms and local competitions; and offers nutrition advice and provides a general blog for discussion, posting results and interaction—it has now grown to thousands of affiliated gyms around the world and hundreds of thousands of followers of all ages, races, backgrounds, and interests (Glassman, 2002).

The “athletes” (as all CrossFitters are called, regardless of their abilities) share a common interest and language: words like WOD (workout of the day) ROM (range of motion) and AMRAP (as many rounds as possible) as well as standardized, named workouts like Cindy and Annie enable strangers across continents to recognize each other’s accomplishments and bond over shared experiences (CrossFit.com, n.d.). The workouts are posted every day from the main CrossFit.com website and distributed globally through it and other CF-affiliated gym’s websites, meaning everyone can do the workout on the same day regardless of location and has an opportunity to comment, ask questions, and discuss in real time (Glassman, 2002). The CF community enjoys a language and culture that, not unlike music, transcends geographic, cultural, and even language barriers.

The CF Games is an annual international competition held in California in July. The Games season is a three-stage process, comprised of the Open, Regionals, and the world championship in
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California, whereupon one man and one woman are crowned the Fittest on Earth™ (The games season, n.d.). In 2011, the online Open event was conducted for the first time ever; previously it was called “Sectionals” and consisted of smaller, localized events that prequalified athletes for the larger, more competitive Sectionals event (the games season, online). In 2011, CrossFit Inc. collaborated with Reebok on a promotional partnership whereby Reebok sponsors the annual event, leading to a mutually beneficial partnership where both receive promotional opportunities and can tap into each other’s overlapping target audiences for increased exposure and awareness; however, Reebok does not specifically advertise for the CF Games and the two group do not collaborate on their marketing campaigns as they are only loosely connected—Reebok promotes its CrossFit-centric apparel and fitness facilities while CF continues its operations but recognizes Reebok as a sponsor. CrossFit Inc. continues to rely on grassroots promotion and not on corporate partnerships (T. Budding, personal communication, February 7, 2012).

**Literature Review**

As CF is relatively new, there is virtually no academic research on the sport, the community, or its events. However, CrossFit Inc. and founder Greg Glassman, through various CF and Games-related websites, offer a wealth of knowledge on the creation and growth of the fitness program and its innovative use of global networking, social and viral media. There also exists a growing body of non-academic literature on CF with regards to community which set the framework for the way the community views itself and recreates its own identity through shared beliefs and values.

This literature review also covers academic texts relating to online communities in order to understand how they differ from traditional, face-to-face groups—how they are formed, enacted,
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maintained, and grown, and how these online communities relate to corresponding physical communities. Here, I also present findings from a sports marketing body of literature with a focus on sports and online media to understand the current state of online interaction between sports groups and their members; how sporting organizations build and grow communities (and their businesses) online; and the necessary elements for creating and maintaining an online community. With the knowledge and background information on sports and online community-building gained from this literature review, I am able to create a framework of understanding for how CF was able to succeed in growing its own community and how it is (or isn’t) unique from other online sports groups.

**CrossFit**

According to a phone interview with CrossFit’s Director of Media and Web Content, Tony Budding, there were 4 million unique visits to the CF Games website in 2011 season, and 40 million page views. In 2011, 26,000 signed up to compete in the Open. In 2007, the first year of the Games, there were 70 competitors total. (In the 2012 Open season, there were over 60,000 athletes signed up for the Open) (T. Budding, personal communication, Feb 7, 2012).

Free online articles by CF founder Greg Glassman provide a high-level, general overview of the program, but more importantly, highlight key aspects about the community in which it operates, and what you can expect to gain from joining the community—including an encouraging, judgment-free, knowledgeable, and friendly fitness environment (2002). To set the groundwork for understanding the uniqueness of the CrossFit community, his articles help to illuminate the intimacy of the group, the tactics that spurred its relatively recent and substantial organic growth, and how it supports and interacts to form a cohesive, global online unit. One such article, titled
“What is CrossFit” and available on the CrossFit.com website, and states that the motivation behind their program of fitness is

“simply to ensure the broadest and most general fitness possible. Our first model evaluates our efforts against a full range of general physical adaptations, in the second the focus is on breadth and depth of performance, with the third the measure is time, power and consequently energy systems. It should be fairly clear that the fitness that CrossFit advocates and develops is deliberately broad, general, and inclusive. Our specialty is not specializing. Combat, survival, many sports, and life reward this kind of fitness and, on average, punish the specialist,” (What is CrossFit, 2002).

Glassman further explains the reasoning behind this broadly general fitness program:

“From the beginning, the aim of CrossFit has been to build a program that would best prepare trainees for any physical contingency—prepare them not only for the unknown but for the unknowable. Looking at all sport and physical tasks collectively, we asked what physical skills and adaptations would most universally lend themselves to performance advantage,” (Glassman, p. 1, 2007).

The focus of this training program, then, is to be competent across a broad range of physical capabilities, as well as mental toughness training; the overarching idea behind CF is to be mentally and physically prepared for any challenging situation that may arise.

CF is a tight-knit group proud of their exclusive, yet welcoming community. A strong vein throughout almost every text on CF you can find online—including information pages on affiliate gym websites, promotional texts or gym-related human interest pieces—is that members take pride in welcoming individuals of any fitness level and background and helping them become the most mentally and physically fit people they can be. This includes teaching mental and physical toughness, life balance, and nutrition, among other key components. There is, though, an underlying sense of exclusivity, as they perceive themselves to be a unique group separate from the masses in seeking a specific and noble goal, which may assist in producing and maintaining a loyal,
Organizing and conducting sporting events online involved group, both on and offline. It is an interesting dichotomy where the group vocally welcomes anyone who is interested in improving themselves and aligning themselves with the CF values, but just as openly prides itself on being a group that is not appropriate for everyone, and that not everyone will understand or appreciate. Plainly stated in an explanatory text called “Foundations,” “CrossFit endeavors to bring state-of-the-art coaching techniques to the general public and athlete who haven’t access to current technologies, research, and coaching methods,” (p. 1, n.d.) Yet as one member put it in an article titled, “You Heard of CrossFit?”

“An external crowd may never truly get CrossFit, but that’s not the point. The point is that we never compromise our position so that they do. Progress and improvement are only possible with integrity and discipline: two qualities CrossFit presents in spades,” (Bunch, p. 5, 2012).

Bunch clearly expresses that CF may only appeal to a specific sub-group of the general population that is dedicated to improving themselves through fitness and discipline—and further, that the CF community is not concerned that it may not be accepted by the larger community. Edgar Schein defines organizational culture as “the basic tacit assumptions about how the world is and ought to be that a group of people share and that determines their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and, their overt behavior,” (1996, p. 16) and it is apparent that the CF community has clear assumptions about health, mental strength, and discipline that help to solidify and unify the group internally.

From the beginning, the CF marketing model was one of grassroots, online promotion and discussing, allowing members to take control of their own experience and learning. “Our charter is open source, making co-developers out of participating coaches, athletes, and trainers through a spontaneous and collaborative online community. CrossFit is empirically driven, clinically tested, and community developed,” (Glassman, p. 2, 2007). While the sport’s online community and
interactions seem inextricably linked to its physical component, they harness the traditional enthusiasm and camaraderie of in-person interaction to carry over into its online component. “In implementation, CrossFit is, quite simply, a sport—the natural camaraderie, competition, and fun of sport or game yields an intensity that cannot be matched by other means,” (p. 2). The combination of traditional grassroots communication and promotion with a strong element of online communication begs the question: why is this particular group able to harness both cutting-edge technology and classic, universal communication methods to conduct high-level online events that have not been seen elsewhere? What, if anything, is unique about its organizational culture?

**Online communities**

MacFadyen’s article outlines key concepts—cyberculture, netiquette, and virtual communities—that help frame my research of the online CF community. The values of cyberculture, or the grouping of like-minded individuals in a primarily online setting, include speed, reach, openness and quick response (MacFadyen, 2004, p. 14). Netiquette is the concept of “rules” of the Internet, including language and behaviour, which are “normalized, maintained and manifested via specific communicative practices,” (p. 25). Virtual communities are a “constantly evolving ‘collective intelligence’” (p. 35) and share a number of common features including use and development of specific language, style, group purpose and participant characteristics, forms of communications, laws, social morality, opposition to censorship, frequent conflicts, and strong affinities and friendships (p. 36). These key terms are all directly applicable to my research of the CF virtual community, as I demonstrate the “common features” and rules that makes the community so strong and fast-growing, including their values, ways of communicating, laws, and common understandings.
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A large part of the online CF community is knowledge sharing: whether the knowledge involves individual goals, fitness resources, or programming, the exchange of information assists in creating a trusting, cohesive online unit. In their study on why people share knowledge in virtual communities in communities such as Yahoo! and Answers.com, Shu and Chuang (2011) determined from participant interviews that self-esteem, absorptive ability, and trust are the driving forces behind online information sharing. The researchers applied their findings to a model based on the theory of reasoned action (TRA), which states that individual behavior is determined by behavioural intention, which is determined by a subjective, culturally established norm (p. 672). Clearly, the behaviour of individual CF members is a result of expressly stated and improved upon subjective norms—being fit, striving for improvement, and helping others achieve their goals, among other concepts. Interestingly, the researchers did not find that expected return had an impact on knowledge sharing (p. 685). They determined that less tangible returns like inclusiveness and trust are expected for those who have a deep involvement in the community (p. 687). These discoveries support my research as so much of CF’s success is based on “free” promotion via online social networks; word of mouth marketing and referrals from individuals who receive no compensation other than a feeling of wellbeing, purpose and inclusiveness.

Another concept raised by researchers to help explain the necessary components of a collaborative online social network appears in the work of Wellman and colleagues showing that these networks overlap with in-person networks, and how these new networks are changing the nature of work, collaboration, and interaction (1996, p. 216). Their study of office workers in an online setting shows that virtual communities are often more uninhibited and creative than in-person communication. (p. 216). Further, they discuss the suitability of virtual communities for
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narrow, specific foci, and how this helps the groups accomplish cooperative work despite physical
dispersion of team members (p. 222). The article discusses the separate set of rules and norms that
are formed in online interactions that may not apply to the off-line interactions of the very same
group. Finally, the article identifies the societal implications of this fostering of global interactivity
and connection with regards to increased access to team members and information, and more
collaborative global groups (p. 227). My study examines how CF employs similar cultural rules
both on and off-line with regards to interaction, behavior, mentoring, and communication exchange,
which may prove to be a factor in the strength of their community and their ability to produce high
level community-based events both on and offline.

In “Society Online: The Internet in Context,” the authors suggest that most Americans feel
that membership in online communities widens and deepens their social relationships rather than
hinders them (Howard & Jones, 2004, p. 5). Studies of online users also found that people who join
online societies believe that they learn more, and know more people as a result (p. 17). Another
benefit to online collaboration is that textual communication via the Internet removes many visual
and aural cues of social identity, including gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status, making for
a more inclusive setting (p. 33), although the strong visual component of CF’s online operations—
through pictures and videos of members performing athletic feats—may mitigate this fact.

CrossFit is not only a product of our online age and the emergence of new media; it’s also
about “multi-platforming,”—as described by Matt Hills in “Digital Cultures: Understanding New
Media”—a concept where media texts and audiences move seamlessly across different platforms
such as Websites, podcasts, user generated content, digital video, and mobile and wireless devices
(Creeber & Martin, 2009, p. 107). CF’s ability to produce sporting events online, streaming and
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archived, may appeal to the new generations desire for on-demand access to content, where “users expect to be able to access media content when they want to and where they want to, being bound neither to broadcast times (and places)…” (p. 113). In an increasingly impatient world, the highly visual and immediate context of CF’s online operations may prove a beneficial model for other sports organizations wishing to grow their membership.

**Sports and online media**

The Internet is no longer simply used as a supplementary information source for sports related information and news; it is increasingly the major, or only source of information for many individuals as it can be updated and distributed in real time (Rowe, 2004, p. 331). This growth reflects the fact that the Internet is becoming one of the most important revenue sources and means for growing membership for sport organizations. In their study on motivations for online sport consumption, researchers Hur, Ko, and Valacich agreed, stated that “…consumers visit sport-related websites not only to purchase sport products but to obtain sport-related information and enjoyment. It is clear that, as has happened in virtually every industry, the Internet has become an important part of the sport consumer marketplace,” (p. 12, 2007).

Researchers Mahan and McDaniel also agree that the Internet as a global multimedia platform increases the potential for interactivity and personalization of experience, and has changed “the ways in which sport media is produced, distributed, and consumed,” (2006, p. 409). These studies support the popularity of online interaction for the CF community, as a study of the CF community reveals that competing and interacting with members globally—as well as conducting events and selling product—is an elemental aspect of the group’s operations.

Recent research shows that consumers of online sports media are moving from simply
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consuming to producing as well. “Sports fans have gone digital in communities across the world equipped with the means to produce their own online content,” (Mahan and McDaniel, 2006, p. 424). This is reflected in my data gathered on the CF community, as individuals and sub-groups are actively producing and reproducing many components of the CF culture: networking and competitive events, training and teaching opportunities, and even artifacts such as branded equipment and clothing, all online. This is a positive evolution from a business and organizational perspective as it allows ever more opportunity to grow a group and a business, as well as promote and sell its products or services to an almost infinite audience. The increasing services offered online have in turn increased the presence of fans and professional teams, amateur athletes, college level sports and other sports groups (p. 425). While this research supports the participatory and leadership-driven approach of the CF community, there is very little published information about organizations actually conducting events online; rather, the sports participants and fans have traditionally been limited to online registrations, chat rooms and information listing, focusing more on the enhancement of communication than conducting actual events (p. 428). Still, this research opens the door for study that focuses specifically on online sporting events, even if only to highlight what gaps currently exist in online interaction and resources for sports groups.

The use of the Internet for marketing and business purposes in football and soccer clubs has been studied extensively; one high-level study of how national sports clubs are engaging with their fans online revealed that while all of the studied groups provided at least one user-interactive service, most of the groups sites were found to be lacking in at least one key area, be it interactive fan forums or other services seen as desirable by the fan base (Ioakimidis, 2010). My research findings support that CF is a leader in its efforts to provide the resources its members need,
Organizing and conducting sporting events online especially in the arena of communication and interaction, without the expensive marketing and infrastructure enjoyed by other, larger groups.

Focusing on National Football League (NFL) teams, one study compared how public relations practitioners use the NFL teams’ websites and Facebook pages to cultivate relationships with fans using stewardship strategies, and results indicated that NFL teams preferred their own corporate websites for relationship building over more informal social media sites like Facebook (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2010). This research can serve as a challenge to the success of informal online social networks in the CF community; the use of both formal, corporate website promotion (cf.com) and social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and public-domain blogs sites has worked well for the community thus far, however this football study may provide evidence for the need for further investigation into how CF, as it grows, may create better return on their various social media and online promotional strategies through heightened control by the governing body.

The story of CF also parallels a study of Spanish football fan websites, where the researcher determined that “in supporting their club, fans are signing up for something more than an interest in the club’s results. They are agreeing to accept a set of norms and behaviours and then themselves become part of the identity of the club,” (Crolley, 2008, p. 723). This study outlined the importance of websites versus traditional methods like TV because with a self-owned website, the group can control the specific message, imagery and information it wants to convey, when and how it wants to convey it (p. 723). This football study mirrors CF in the importance of its specific use of language on the website, and that an online club must “understand its fan-base…this should include an awareness of the extent of digital literacy, regional and demographic variations and of the integration of the Internet into the communication patterns of its fans,” (p. 735). Mirroring this
study’s proposed criteria for success, I believe my study reveals that the organizers of CF online media are well versed on the demographics of their readership, allowing them to provide a highly tailored online resource that keeps their members content and coming back.

In a recent qualitative study on English and Greek football club websites, the researchers examined the growing volume of marketing content on the top six most successful websites from each country to determine the differences between the two country’s approaches (Kriemadis, Terzoudis, & Kartakoullis, 2010). The researchers determined that a major advantage to marketing, market research and awareness building was the Internet’s global communications potential, as the Internet “eliminates the time of transaction and reduces the cost of establishing physical distribution channels for business,” (p. 292). The free market of the Internet also allows business to dialogue directly with fans or members to build long-term relationships and enhance their organizations image by gathering information on their members’ needs (p. 294), which I believe my research will show is a significant part of CF’s success in establishing a loyal, tight-knit online community.

Brown (2003) conducted a qualitative survey of 750 randomly-selected sports organizations to study online marketing in the sport industry and determine whether the organizations’ tactics assisted in their goals to increase business (p.48). Brown argued that more marketing resources should focus on the consumer/seller relationship to increase the effectiveness of marketing strategies (p. 48). This is relevant to a study of the CF community as my research shows the organization does an excellent job of establishing strong relationships between CF Inc. and its members; so much so that members become marketers themselves, passing along information, promoting the organization, and recruiting members effectively.

Using netnography research, Fuller, Jawecki, and Muhlbacher (2007) focused on online
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consumer communities for basketball shoes, and showed that the general willingness of community members to share their ideas with producers assisted with an organization’s innovation, as business owners would utilize the feedback and ideas of the community to produce meaningful and desirable product (p. 60). This study parallels the success story of CF: how by listening to and allowing feedback from its members, it has been able to innovate and grow, taking advice from its consumers and listening to their needs in open online forums, and allowing the excitement and enthusiasm for the sport to start from the ground up, rather than from the top down. Ioakimidis (2010) investigated the media-based content and opportunities for fan interaction used by select professional sports teams in North America and Europe, outlining which organizations employ more online marketing and media-based marketing strategies than others (NHL uses more than NFL, for example), and the implications of this increased Internet presence in their respective marketing strategies—and also found that user interaction and online multimedia were powerful factors in the group’s marketing success (p. 280). Ioakimidis determined that all of the professional sports teams could employ more interactive online resources for fans and consumers, and that further research is required in the second- and third-tier professional and non professional sports team realms, a category into which CF currently falls. This research paves the way for determining basic criteria for a sports organizations online interactions, and also introduces recommendations for further, in-depth research, which I explore in my study

Research like Maguire’s (1999) and the collection by editors Raney and Bryant (2006) on the globalization of sport, its historical basis, and implications for the future can provide a benchmark for my study about the globalization of CF via its online community. Quantitative data from chapter 20 of Miller and Washington’s book, Sports Marketing (2011), helps to lay the
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groundwork for the emerging trend of online sporting events, and certainly the growing popularity of online sports communities and organizations—essentially validating that this research study is important due to the increased presence online for sporting communities. Additionally, Wenner’s (1998) work gathering lead experts thoughts in the field of sports journalism provides information on what constitutes effective marketing of a sports organization to enhance its growth and public awareness and how the Internet has effected the globalization of sport (1989).

My research suggests that CrossFitters are a group of individuals who display above-average Internet savvy. Schreier’s and Oberhauser’s (2007) article on “lead users” can be applied to the operations of CF as the research applies to the adoption and diffusion of online events as well as products; it can help to determine who in the CF community qualifies as a lead user (and may confirm my assumption that CF attracts individuals who tend to be lead users) and how they assist in promoting and developing the sport.

Vail’s article (2007) outlines the challenges facing sports organizations in retaining and growing participation. Using tennis as a focal point, this study assessed the impact of a community development approach based on three key elements: identifying a community champion, developing collaborative partnerships, and delivering quality sport programming (p. 587). This article’s recommendations, which include autonomy for specific groups to determine their organization and methods, collaborative leadership, and reaching out to communities where there is a readiness and capacity for change (p. 593), mirror the community-based approach that has been so successful for the CF community.
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While there is currently no academic study on the online CF community, there is substantial research on online communities in general and their operations; there is also a significant body of research on the online operations of sports organizations and the methods they employ to gain membership and consumers for their benefit, which I have attempted to summarize here. There is an overarching theme from this research that online groups must have a certain level of cohesiveness, collaboration, autonomy, and control, and intangible, culturally-related rewards for its members in order to succeed. This research also introduces the notion that many online sports groups are not doing enough to encourage interactivity between its members and its community, although this interactivity is shown to be key in growing organizations, encouraging innovation, and rewarding members; this leads the way for my research into what additional characteristics of the CF community have allowed for such fast growth, unflagging cooperation and support, and adaptability in conducting new events online using a combination of new technology and traditional communication methods.

Research Methods

Research Design

Data was gathered via in-depth one-on-one interviews, an electronic survey delivered to the community at large via several Internet channels, and textual analysis of existing CF-related content via the web. As the goal of my research is to thoroughly understand an online-subgroup within the larger context of Internet culture and general organizational culture, and apply this understanding to other organizations in order to improve their operations, the data was quantitatively measured and qualitatively analyzed within an organizational framework, using an interpretive sociocultural
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theoretical approach, and incorporating an applied strategy in order to provide concrete, real-world recommendations.

**Sociocultural theory**

My research incorporates a sociocultural theoretical frame, which is the creation and enactment of social reality through interdependence and communication, including the mediated reproduction of culture and identity (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996), as it is the CF community’s loyal enactment of and belief in their stated culture that makes the group such a cohesive, participatory online community and allows for the implementation of such highly organized and broad-reaching competitive online events—as well as their ability to adapt quickly and positively to massive changes within their organization framework, including a switch to an online competitive format. Hecht and Ribeau, in *Sociocultural Roots of Ethnic Identity*, stated, “One test of a culture is its ability to dynamically adapt to a changing world,” (1991, p. 503). The CF community was forced to change dramatically and quickly in 2011 when its largest competition moved from the familiar in-person Sectionals event to an online format; the ease and positivity in which the group collectively accepted and supported this change speaks to the strength and cohesiveness of the group.

According to the tenets of sociocultural understanding, in order to gather the information necessary to present the CF online organizational model for conducting a successful online sporting event, I must understand the people who make up the community and their unique cultural traits (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). Edgard Schein’s definition of culture relies on key concepts including structural stability, depth and breadth of the organization’s functions, and pattern
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formation (2004, p. 13-15); he goes further to outline the three levels of culture—artifacts, the surface elements such as dress; espoused values, the conscious strategies, goals and philosophies; and basic assumptions and values, which are harder to discern but are the core of a culture because they exist on an unconscious level—all of which are outlined relative to CF in the preceding literature review. The community has made a conscious effort to be transparent in communicating not only their artifacts and espoused values (the way they dress, speak, and their goals) but also in their basic assumptions; they are proud of their chosen lifestyle and want others, both within and outside of their community, to understand the choices they make.

In understanding this group, I must uncover how they come to understand themselves, and one another, within their group interactions. In Hecht’s and Ribeau’s paper on the sociocultural roots of ethnic identity, they describe their approach to understanding any defined group from a sociocultural perspective. “… as identities evolve and emerge out of social interaction, identity types begin to take shape and define social existence. Thus different identities emerge out of different constructs of social reality,” (1991, p. 501). Thus, in my study, I asked participants to relate their attitudes and behaviours within the CF community to other online communities, and the larger communities in which they find themselves, in order to understand and begin to differentiate the key characteristics and behaviours that are unique within the CF sub-group.

In order to achieve a rich understanding of the unique characteristics of the online CF community, I employed research methods both qualitative and quantitative: open-ended interviews with a small, random sample of athletes and gym owners throughout North America who participated in the 2011 Games Open, as well as an online questionnaire distributed via accessible, well-known Internet channels to the general CF community with the goal of as many respondents
as possible from every facet of the community: male and female, all age groups, and across a range of abilities, CF experience and geographic location. The combination of both qualitative, in-depth conversations and quantitative number gathering, while broad, strengthen my findings as the personal information gathered from the interviews bolster the facts gained through the statistics obtained via the survey. Deetz’s interpretive theory and Schein’s concepts of the cumulative nature of organizational culture all strengthen my position that in order to fully understand the CF online culture, in an effort to communicate a model that may be applied to other organizations, requires a range of in-depth research and data collection that is always grounded in an understanding of the larger concepts of online communities and organizational behavior. As researcher Samantha King states in her paper on sociocultural sport studies,

“New ways of researching and writing are drawn into the mix all the time, challenging or reframing existing modes of inquiry. And although the field seems as heavily weighted towards qualitative research as it once was to quantitative research, the diversity of methods within both categories has grown tremendously. This may suggest that the irresolvability of methodological disputes is in fact productive for the field,” (2009, p. 105).

King, above, reinforces the need to continuously strive for a broad, in-depth mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Through the responses to the survey I determined, quantitatively, how many respondents enjoyed the online format of the 2011 Open competition; how many use various online channels for learning and interacting within the CF community, and whether the community as a whole believes the online component of the community crucial for its success, among other questions. The more in-depth, open-ended interviews corroborate my survey findings with more thorough responses to these same questions.
Interpretive analysis

Data collected was subject to an interpretive analytical framework that focuses on understanding, uncovering and discovering answers through open-ended research (Deetz, 1982).

Interpretive study

“focuses analysis on the processes by which the meanings of organizational events are produced and sustained through communication. An organization's culture consists of whatever a member must know or believe in order to operate in a manner understandable and acceptable to other members and the means by which this knowledge is produced and transmitted,” (p. 133).

Through in-depth, open-ended interviews and open-ended survey questions, my research provides the answers to how the CF community regards itself and its operations; I then interpret this data through an internal, organizational culture lense to arrive at a more objective, high-level understanding of the community’s characteristics. An interpretive approach is useful in providing an in-depth analysis of this group and how they construct and reenact their culture, as “…by focusing on the questions of meaning construction and by emphasizing the variety in audience interpretations of media content, interpretive research has contributed to the growing abandonment of simplistic models of ideological domination and hegemony,” (Carragee, p. 86, 1990). Further, interpretive research has “made questions of meaning central to the examination of mass communication processes,” (p. 86). Here, it is important to understand that in analyzing the data obtained from the CF community, I am not only processing their comments, but interpreting their meaning in the broader scope of online communication and organizational culture in order to provide a more widely relevant and applicable recommendation for other online groups.

Jürgen Habermas notes a criticism of interpretive study that in “understanding an actors
intent and behavior” a critique of the ideologies and social structures that influence action are often neglected (p. 87). By incorporating an understanding of modern online sports organizations, Internet communications and marketing, I will ensure that I place my findings in meaningful social and cultural contexts for a balanced understanding.

**Applied paradigm**

My research analysis also takes from the applied paradigm, as my approach has an aim of not only understanding the phenomenon of CF’s online competition, but also enabling others to use and apply this information for practical, beneficial purposes. As Lawrence Frey says in his paper “To be Applied or Not To be Applied,” my job, then, as a researcher, is to

> “go beyond the descriptive task of studying ‘an other’ and…demonstrate how scholars can bring their communication resources to bear to make a difference in people’s lives. Description has certainly served a useful purpose in applied communication scholarship, but…it is now time for scholars to move beyond description and implement the communication knowledge that has been acquired,” (p. 181, 2000).

By Frey’s definition, my applied approach also involves collaborating with the actual members of study, as there is a vested interest in the community to understand its nature and operations in order to continue to improve and grow: “…the applied communication researcher…must engage—hopefully, often in a collaborative research relationship with sponsors, organizational leaders, research participants, and others—in the translation process,” (p. 181). Ultimately, my goal is to understand the community and its online operations and communications (goals conducive to sociocultural theory as well as applied and interpretive research) and understand its success in conducting an online sporting event in this context, as the contextual circumstances in which we
Organizing and conducting sporting events online communicate—when, where, why and with whom—determines how we communicate (Keyton, Bisel and Ozley, 2009).

**Participants and procedure**

In February 2012, I distributed a 28-question electronic survey to the global CF community via Facebook, Twitter, and email; my plan was to make the survey as accessible to the community as a whole by posting it on the major online channels that are used at the most basic level. A link to the survey was also posted on the international CrossFit Games Facebook page by the pages’ administrator. While I distributed the survey via general channels (my personal Facebook page and Twitter account) my efforts to track its movement saw the survey being sent to various communities throughout North America via personal emails, re-Tweeting, and Facebook link sharing and re-posting. Due to time resources and permission requirements I was not able to post the survey on individual CrossFit affiliate gym websites around the world, but hoped the survey would spread organically throughout the community. Further details about the survey participants can be found in the following “Findings” section. The questions centered on the CF community’s online interactions, how they used the various online communications channels, how frequently, and whether they considered them important to the success of the group and the satisfaction of its members. The survey was both qualitative and quantitative, and was an attempt to measure the community’s dependence on and involvement with CF online; whether they were happy with their resources and interactions; and to determine why they thought CF has been so successful in the absence of traditional marketing. These questions were all structured around the 2011 CrossFit Games, as it was the first time a prequalifying sporting event was implemented on a global scale via
online communications channels and as such would be a recent, popular focal point with regards to the community’s online operations and communications.

In addition to the general survey open to everyone, I conducted more in-depth, open-ended personal interviews, meant to enhance and expand upon the information I uncovered during the survey. This was also done in a somewhat random and organic fashion; I approached two gyms that I had a connection with (one in Halifax, Nova Scotia and another in New York) and asked if any gym owners or athletes would like to participate in my thesis research. I wanted to get an equal number of athletes and gym owners, and mentioned that I would like to interview women and men of different age groups; but otherwise, I generally interviewed whoever agreed to participate. From there, I would ask the interviewees if they knew anyone in a different geographical area that would be willing to participate, and the spread from there. Ultimately, I conducted 18 interviews either in person or via email throughout North America, ranging from British Columbia and California in the West Coast to Halifax, New Brunswick, and New York on the East Coast (Further details are provided in the following Findings/Participants section on page 26). These interviews are meant to provide a more textual, intimate context for the answers found in the survey, as my expectations were that the general sampling would reflect the responses from the larger community.

My analysis of the data incorporates both applied and interpretive components, as I am interacting with individuals, gathering open-ended data from human subjects in a journalistic style, and interpreting their meaning in the context of the group and in the larger context of online communities in general. This, in combination with my rather broad range of data being collected (from surveys, interviews, and existing texts) falls in line with Deetz’s theory that interpretive research is transactive; each piece of information only has meaning as it relates to the larger
organizing and conducting sporting events online framework, and vice versa (1982, p. 145). This approach is appropriate because my goal is to understand a community and interpret their thoughts, observations, and actions (individual data) in order to solve a real-world issue (larger framework) rather than a theoretical one: how CF’s unique community and online operations are successful, and whether the main components of their online community can be applied to other sporting organizations for their benefit. My analysis will also incorporate Edgard Schein’s theories on organizational culture; he states that culture is “what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems…” (1990, p. 111). He further states that the common assumptions, beliefs, and behaviours that result act as an anxiety-reduction function, a necessary element of a successful group; I would argue this falls in line with findings from my study, as CF members are generally so eager to be helpful and a part of the online group for intangible rewards like trust and inclusiveness, key components of anxiety reduction.

Findings

Through interpretive and applied analysis of my survey and interview data, I have developed a set of criteria the online CF community employs to grow, support and evolve their community (see Conclusions section, page 34). I have divided my findings into the following categories for analysis: an overview of the participants’ demographics; participant response to the newly-introduced online completion (CF Games Open); and participant perception of their online community. My analysis of these findings provide the framework for my conclusions and recommendations.

Participants

During the month of February 2012, I collected 657 survey responses. Just under 59 percent of the respondents were in the 26-35 age category, with most of the rest split almost evenly between
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the 18-25 and 36-45 age groups. Two thirds of the respondents were male. The largest percentage of respondents, at 40 percent, were relatively experienced CrossFitters, stating they have been involved in CF for more than two years. More than half of the respondents competed in the 2011 CrossFit Games Open, allowing for an even more immersed, knowledgeable group for feedback, as these individuals would have been using the online tools (CF Games website, etc.) more frequently than non-competitors in order to post and validate scores, register for competition, post profiles, and discuss competition results. For the 18 in-depth interviews, the above demographics are mirrored, although the respondents are split evenly by gender and coast (Half female/male, and half from the West Coast/East Coast). All interviewees participated in the 2011 CrossFit Games either as an affiliate gym owner or a competitor.

Although the CF fitness program is available to anyone for free online via a number of channels, 82.6 percent of survey respondents attended an affiliate gym versus working out in a non-CF gym—despite the fact that CF gyms are, in general, significantly more expensive than non-CF gyms. Through my own research of “regular” gyms in New York City and CrossFit gyms, I found the average CF gym to cost $233/month while the average regular gym cost $109/month. Furthermore, 91 percent of respondents stated they subscribed to CF-related Facebook pages and 45.3 percent subscribed to CF-related Twitter accounts. Just over 86 percent of respondents believe that an online/social media presence is essential to the success of CF, and two-thirds reported that CF Headquarters is using social media and its online presence effectively in communicating with the community—almost everyone else responded “somewhat,” showing that there is room for improvement.
Response to and support of online competition

As 2011 was the first year the CF Games Open was conducted online, there were a number of technical glitches regarding accessing material and streaming videos and posting competitor information; two thirds of survey respondents reporting experiencing a technical glitch or problem while navigating or using the site during the Open season. However, 71 percent of those respondents reported that the issue was dealt with to their satisfaction. Another area for improvement may be responsiveness by the CF Games website administrators, as only 38 percent of respondents believed they were responsive to comments, feedback, and suggestions, while the majority of respondents at 52 percent stated they were “somewhat” responsive.

The respondents indicated that the CF community is highly dependent on, and avid readers of, online CF-related content. Just under 43 percent checked the Games website daily during the 2011 Games season, followed by 33.7 who checked it multiple times per week; only 11.3 percent said they never checked it. Almost three quarters of the respondents (72.8) felt the Games site was easy to navigate and contained information they were looking for. The CF community also considers itself well versed in online use; 65 percent believed the community in general is Internet savvy, followed by 34 percent saying they were average, and only 1 percent believing they were below average.
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**Figure 1:** Survey question regarding online habits of CF community.

**Figure 2:** Survey question regarding CF community response to 2011 CF Games Open format.
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**Figure 3:** Survey question regarding preferred format for CrossFit Games Open.

**Figure 4:** Survey question regarding transferability of CF model to other online sports groups.

A major question I hoped to answer via the survey is whether the community liked the online format of the Open prequalifying competition, or whether they preferred the face-to-face,
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physical format of the Sectional competitions that were the norm previous to 2011. The survey found that 61.5 percent of respondents liked the online format, with 31.2 responding that they “somewhat” enjoyed it—an answer open for interpretation, but worth noting that only 7.3 percent of respondents stated that they did not like the online format. In another question, respondents were explicitly asked which method they prefer, and the highest response rate, at almost 50 percent, preferred the Open format; 20 percent preferred the physical Sectionals competition, and 31 percent responded that they didn’t have a preference. As one female athlete in New Brunswick describes in an interview, despite the larger geographic spread of the competition in 2011, it was actually more standardized and fair than in previous years: “The online format was cool because everyone in the world was required to do the same workouts to qualify, unlike past years where the separate sectionals (competitions) were programmed by the individuals running them.” The support of and adaptability to this completely new form of competition within the CF community—key aspects of successful sports organizations, according to Mahan and Daniel—reflects their ability to adjust to new norms and accept new forms of online interaction in a way that assists in reinforcing their strong organizational culture.
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Through the interviews and surveys, the most commonly cited pros and cons of the CF Open, as perceived by CF community members, are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros of Online Competition</th>
<th>Cons of Online Competition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convenience: athletes didn’t have to travel, take time off work, and spend money</td>
<td>Excitement, spectator value: the atmosphere, excitement, and spirit of in-person competition may be lost or reduced for some competitors and spectators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease: you could stay at your own gym and have someone you know, trust and are comfortable with validate your results</td>
<td>Duration: you have to alter your training and life for up to six weeks, rather than a long weekend for the in-person Sectionals competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility: the convenient local format allows a much larger pool of athletes to participate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5: Summary of pros and cons of online competition*

Another major question I hoped to answer through the survey is regarding the transferability of this online competitive format to other sports. Survey respondents overwhelmingly, at 65 percent, stated that it “depends on the sport” while 15 percent were not sure and 10 percent each replied either yes or no.

A gym owner in Halifax believes it may be possible to replicate the online competition with other sports, but CrossFit is uniquely poised for this because of the nature of the competition. “Think about cycling: are you going to get the exact same terrain around the world? No. A twenty-pound wallball is a twenty-pound wallball, no matter what gym you go to. It’s more controlled, less environmental variables.”
Perception of online community by members

Throughout the interviews, I discovered that almost everyone heard about CF for the first time either through conversations with a trusted friend, or through an Internet search. The interview also reflected findings in the survey that while CFers are very active online, connecting with other athletes through Facebook, Twitter, and various CF sites, they were much more likely to comment, post, and be an active versus passive participant on their local websites versus the main CrossFit.com website, where they knew the other individuals posting and interacted with them in-person as well as online.

From the interviews, it was apparent that online promotion and communication is a crucial component to CrossFit’s success on an individual gym-basis. Bryce, a gym owner in California said, “[Online marketing] is how the majority of people find out about the gym. Thirty percent of new business comes from member referrals, the rest is from people finding the website while searching for CrossFit in their area.”

Jim, a gym owner in Halifax said, “People don’t pick up the newspaper anymore. This is the way to get news to people. If we did a news blurb, less people would see it than if we put it on Facebook.” Patricia, an athlete at a Halifax CF gym echoes this statement concerning the power of social media for engagement, saying,

“If it wasn’t for the online community, in the beginning, I would have had nothing. Now that we have our own gym and our own community, I don’t feel that I need the online to continue, but it’s still a major part of my training and CrossFit in general. If it wasn’t for the online stuff at the beginning I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Mike, an athlete and trainer in New York said it was the expansiveness and global learning opportunities that attract him to the online component of CrossFit. “I think the online component of
CrossFit makes a big difference in my continued participation. It gives you a place to go online and interact, learn things; you see stuff that you don’t see in your own box.”

Tracey, an athlete in New Brunswick says online communication keeps her feeling a part of the group, even when she can’t physically interact at a gym. “Where I don’t belong to an affiliate gym anymore, I rely on the online resources to help me with my own personal fitness programming.”

So what makes the CrossFit community so receptive to a strong, grassroots Internet community and marketing plan? Through the survey and the interviews, the most commonly cited characteristics of the community were, in their words, “involved,” “passionate,” and a sense of altruism, as well as clearly shared values, goals, and beliefs. Some interviewees described it thusly:

“CrossFitters want to see others succeed, and celebrate that success more than in any other sport I’ve seen.” Dai, CrossFit Gym owner, California

“I think it’s the willingness to help each other is what makes us different. You see people struggling with something that you may have already gone through, and you want to help them. It could end up making them better than you, but there are no secrets. It’s about fitness. We might as well get through it together.” Jim, CrossFit Gym owner, Halifax

“CF helps us to connect with people because we have no choice but to scream, sweat, bleed, cry, laugh, barf, hug, high five and help them while we workout…We are a tribe and tribes do pretty much everything together.” Louise, Athlete, British Columbia

“CrossFitters quickly identify with each other no doubt in part to being a self-selecting group but also because we are all experiencing common obstacles and successes through CrossFit.” Mike, CF Gym owner, PEI

“The CF community has a culture that is inclusive, competitive, supportive, informative and motivating all at once while maintaining the feeling of a special club on a international scale.” O’Neil, Athlete, British Columbia
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In my interview with Tony Budding, the Director of Media and Web Content for CrossFit Inc. (responsible for the CF Games) I hoped to gain an understanding of the thinking and strategy behind their online interactions and lack of traditional promotion and marketing, and how it has been so successful. According to Budding, during the 2011 Games season, there were 20 people working fulltime on CrossFit media, and another 50 writing part time, doing photography, handling social media, and otherwise assisting in the online component of the Games (personal communication, February 7, 2012).

The decision to change the prequalifying competition for the CF Games from physical Sectional competitions around the world to an online Open event was an answer to the following challenges: “How do we create something online where we’re confident that the people who win are the ones who really performed the best? How can we access the most people and still have an accurate test of fitness? How can we be fair?” (T. Budding, personal communication, February 7, 2012). Their answer was to switch from a localized Sectional competition to a completely open online format, where anyone and everyone had the same opportunity to perform the same activities and be judged in a consistent manner.

Limitations, Discussion, and Conclusions

Limitations

Since the sample of respondents was self-selected rather than randomly selected, it is not possible to generalize these findings to the total population of participants. And, as survey questions were not mandatory, not all questions were answered by all respondents. Another limitation of the information gathered in this study is the geographic scope, as the majority of
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respondents (85 percent) and interviewees (100 percent) were located in North America, to the exclusion of the community in other continents. Time and resource limitations were a factor in deciding to focus on the North American population. Further, while every attempt was made to make the survey available to the global community via the highest traffic online channels, it may be assumed that the more experienced, involved CrossFitters would be more active online, thus more likely to gain access to the survey.

Regarding responses to frustrations relating to online resources and websites, as 2011 was the first year the event was conducted online, it can be assumed that many kinks and issues that arose during its inaugural event will only be improved upon in successive years—thus, feedback on the usability and ease of the online resources may be different in future years once the program and event has been implemented and improved upon further.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

In understanding organizational culture, Edgar Schein suggests examining your own assumptions about how organizations work, and

“…begin to test whether these assumptions were in line with the assumptions of those in the group. This cultural analysis of comparing your assumptions with those in the group helps provide a deeper, more thorough understanding of how you came to your understandings,” (2004, p. 5).

The more you are aware of the assumptions and experiences you bring to an understanding, the better you can see the situation through an interpretive, “cultural lens,” as Schein puts it, better able to “perceive and decipher the cultural forces that operate in groups…” (p. 5). Through an interpretive and applied analysis of my own understanding of the CF culture, combined with an analysis of how the study participants view their group, as well as an understanding of the
cumulative and integrated nature of organizational study, I have developed a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics applicable to said group as well as its implications for larger online sporting communities (discussed further below). The nature of interpretive study is such that meaning is only understood in context; by comparing the results of my study against similar studies of other online sports groups mentioned earlier we can arrive to a more relevant and real-world explanation of the success of CF. This analysis has proven that while CF mirrors other online sports groups in many ways (a desire to interact, learn, and produce online), it is unique in others (a high degree of interactivity, control given to members, enthusiastic grassroots and unpaid promotion, and easy standardization of operations).

While CF is uniquely positioned to conduct an online sporting event because it A) originated online with grassroots online marketing; B) is an individually-based, easily standardized and judged sport; C) now has a significant physical network of affiliate gyms around the world with which to support its events globally; and D) enjoys a particularly motivated, involved, and interactive community, there is certainly room for similar events to take place in other groups with similar characteristics in a broad-based format. One recommendation, brought forth by my study participants, to improve the efficiency, credibility and acceptance of a global online event is to create a standardized judging certificate that will help ensure a fairness and consistency globally, whether the competition is held online or physically, although it should be worth noting that the geographically dispersed online competition format is not found to breed inconsistency necessarily: Budding says, “An online competition will always have limitations. Judging is always controversial, whether it’s online or not,” (personal communication, February 7, 2012). Budding also mentioned that as of February 2012, a judging certification program for CF was being
In an increasingly virtual world, where newer generations rely less on traditional promotional methods such as newspaper, print and television advertising, the proactive, involved online community will gain ever more traction in promoting groups and events, going back to a grassroots-style of word-of-mouth promotion, but on a larger, faster, and more efficient scale. Based on the most commonly-cited recommendations and feedback and data collected from the CF community, as well as information on successful online groups gathered from existing data mentioned in the literature review, I suggest the following model for implementing a successful, global and almost entirely virtual sporting competition in a way that brings group members together in a spirit usually only reserved for physical competition:

- A cohesive, Internet savvy online group with access to necessary resources and materials (Internet, file and video sharing software, etc.).
- A group built around involvement, acceptance, and helping one another that is given significant autonomy and control over local decisions and operations.
- An accepted group understanding that the community’s online component is crucial to the group’s success and harmony.
- A precedent or base of grassroots, word-of-mouth advertising.
- Must be an individual sport, with clear scalability and uniform judging.
- Clear standards and scoring.
- Use it as a broad instrument or prequalifier for a final physical competition, rather than as a complete replacement.
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It is my assertion that in the case of athletic groups, online communities will not replace or upstage the physical ones; rather they are meant as a way to enhance and expand the communications and operations of a group on a global scale, opening up the group to greater accessibility for members—regardless of physical location—and thus more experience, interaction and knowledge. As CrossFit Media Director Tony Budding said, “CrossFit from the beginning has been an unexpected combination of the virtual and the real. People do the workouts for real; it’s not a virtual competition. They’re just accessing and sharing information virtually.” Still, going back to the work of Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, and Haythornthwaite (1996), regarding the differences between in-person and virtual networks, my study’s findings reveal that despite the physical activity around which the group is built, many individuals prefer online interaction to in-person interaction; it seems that the fluidity of organizational behaviours, norms, and understandings from in-person interactions to virtual ones enables an ease of transition that may not be seen in other groups that harbor slightly different rules and norms for their virtual interactions.

My findings certainly strengthen the idea from “Society Online: The Internet in Context,” that most Americans feel membership in online communities widens and deepens their social relationships rather than hinders them (Howard & Jones, 2004, p. 5) and that people who join online societies believe that they learn more, and know more people as a result (p. 17). Based on my survey results, respondents used their online resources for learning, interacting, and networking in a way that they feel would not be possible with in-person only interactions.

My research supports Shu’s and Chuang’s study findings that tangible return is not a key component in knowledge sharing in virtual communities, while self-esteem and trust are (2011). It is apparent through my research that the CF community is actively involved in promoting the sport,
teaching, and interacting with each other, with no tangible personal benefits other than the feeling of inclusiveness they receive from being a part of the group. Edgard Schein says that “culture perpetuates and reproduces itself through the socialization of new members entering the group,” (p. 115). This is evident in the enthusiasm for member recruitment and mentoring within CF; why there is such an overt willingness to help one another for no reason other than its less tangible cultural rewards.

My research findings effectively expand upon the concepts introduced by Mahan and McDaniel regarding the switch from passive online users of sports media to active participants (2006). As it was the members of the CF community that unified to promote, conduct, market, and sell the fitness program and sport to an ever-increasing audience almost exclusively through online interactions and social media efforts, this organization demonstrates the depth and breadth of what can be done to strengthen a sports entity online with virtually no traditional advertising or marketing. That CF’s success is because of, and not in spite of, its lack of formal marketing also echoes the sentiments of Kriemadis, Terzoudis, and Kartakoullis (2010) who stated that the free market of the Internet allows for a greater interaction with, and understanding of, target audiences.

Finally, findings from this study support the research done by Vail (2007) who, in studying sports organizations to determine factors in participant growth and retention, recommends autonomy for groups to determine their organization and methods, collaborative leadership, and reaching out to communities where there is a readiness and capacity for change—this is mirrored in my study as the CF community has always allowed for local autonomy as well as free-exchange of ideas at all levels; collaborative leadership from the top down and between affiliate gyms all over the world, as well as a willingness to reach into the broader market (for example, with its recent
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Reebok partnership); and reaching out to a community with a capacity for change, which is clearly evident in the CF community which attracts members who are already searching for a lifestyle change and are willing to go to great lengths to achieve it.
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Appendix 1 – Research Consent Form

My name is Ashleigh VanHouten and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master of Professional Communications degree at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by telephoning Jennifer Walinga, at or

This document constitutes an agreement to participate in my research project, the objective of which is to study the implementation process of the 2011 CrossFit Games Open in determining the unique characteristics of the organization and the community which allowed its success, ultimately as a model for other sporting organizations to conduct similar events online to increase their visibility, growth, and global participation.

The research will consist of an open-ended interview, conducted either in person or by phone, and is foreseen to last about twenty-five minutes. The foreseen questions will refer to your thoughts about the 2011 CrossFit Games open, CrossFit’s online community, and your opinions on CrossFit in general. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Masters degree in Professional Communication, I will also be sharing my research findings with CrossFit, Inc. as well as the community in general via a number of online channels.

Information will be recorded in hand-typed and audio/video format and, where appropriate, summarized in the body of the final report. You may choose to have your identity withheld from the final paper. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. Upon completion of this project, the raw data will be kept by me, confidentially, for a period of two years. Any data pertaining to an individual who has withdrawn will be immediately destroyed.

You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): __________________________________________________

Signed: _____________________________________________________________

Date: _______________________________________________________________

I would like my name and any other identifying information withheld from the final research paper: YES / NO
Appendix 2 - Interview Questions for CrossFit Athletes

- Name
- Age
- Where do you live?
- What CF gym do you attend?
- How long have you been CrossFitting?
- How did you hear about CrossFit?
- How often do you visit your gym’s website?
- How often do you visit the main site? What are you looking for when you visit?
- Would you consider yourself an active or passive user of CF’s online resources (Facebook, website, etc.)? Explain.
- Do you regularly post information on your gym’s blog?
- Did you like the online format of the 2011 Open portion of the games? Why or why not? Compare it to the physical, in-person competition from the year before.
- Did you submit video, or did you participate at an affiliate? Why?
- Do you think the online process for the Open could have been improved? If so, how?
- What do you think of the CrossFit Games website in terms of functionality, usability, resources, etc.?
- Did you experience any technological/communications obstacles in your participation in the Open? If so, please explain.
- Do you think the format for the online competition designed by CF could be applied to other sporting events, or is it unique to CF?
- Do you think CF Headquarters utilizes social media and web technology effectively? Why or why not?
- Do you consider yourself an Internet-savvy person? If so, explain why.
- Does CF’s online culture contribute at all to your continued participation in the sport? Why or why not?
- Tell me, in your words, what you think is unique about the CF community and culture.
Appendix 2 Continued - Interview Questions for CrossFit Gym Owners

- Name
- Age
- Where do you live?
- Name of your CF affiliate gym
- How long has your gym been open?
- How long have you been CrossFitting?
- How long have you been teaching/ a gym owner?
- How did you hear about CrossFit?
- Do you manage your gym’s website? Do you have a Twitter feed, Facebook page, or other online social media resource?
- How do you communicate information about your gym, events, etc. to your members?
- Do you consider the online component of your business crucial to its success? Why or why not?
- How often do you visit the main site? When you visit, what information are you looking for?
- During the Games last year, how often did you visit the games site? What information were you looking for?
- Do you think the CF games website is user friendly? Does it provide the information you’re looking for as a gym owner?
- What did you think about the online format of the 2011 Open portion of the games? (Liked it, didn’t like it, why or why not)
- Did your gym participate as an affiliate gym for competitors? Tell me about that process (registering, organizing, and technical/web glitches and how they were handled, etc.).
- Do you think there was consistent/clear/transparent communication between CF headquarters and the affiliate gyms in order to properly manage the Open portion of the event?
- Do you think the online process could have been improved? How?
- Do you think the format for the online competition designed by CF could be applied to other online sporting events or global sports groups, or is it unique to CF?
- Do you think CF utilizes social media and web technology effectively? Why or why not?
- Do you consider yourself an Internet-savvy person? Why or why not?
- Tell me, in your words, what you think is unique about the CF community and culture.
Appendix 3 – Survey Questionnaire

1. The information collected in this survey will be used in my thesis research only. Your name will not be used; your responses will be added to a quantitative research aggregation. By agreeing to participate in this study, you are giving permission to include any information you provide here in my final research paper, as well as any iterations or communications I create resulting from my research paper. Thanks for your participation--let's get started! Do you agree with the terms listed above?
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Where do you live?
5. How long have you been doing CrossFit?
6. Do you attend an affiliate gym?
7. If yes, which gym?
8. Do you subscribe to CrossFit sites (Twitter, Facebook, on RSS)?
9. Do you comment on your own local CrossFit blog?
10. Do you comment on the mainsite CrossFit blog?
11. When you visit a CrossFit blog/website, what are you mainly looking for?
12. Did you compete in the 2011 CF Games Open?
13. Did you compete in any qualifying events for any CrossFit Games prior to 2011?
14. Did you like the online format of the 2011 CrossFit Games Open pre-qualifying competition?
15. Regarding the 2011 CrossFit Games Open, what was the major advantage of the online format? (One point in a brief sentence will suffice).
16. Regarding the 2011 CrossFit Games Open, what was the major disadvantage of the online format? (One point in a brief sentence will suffice).
17. Which format for the pre-qualifying section of the CrossFit Games do you prefer?
18. How often did you visit the Games website during the 2011 Open?
19. Was the 2011 CrossFit Games site easy to navigate and find the information you were looking for?
20. Were the Games organizers responsive to comments, feedback, suggestions, or technical glitches throughout the 2011 Open?
21. Either as a fan, gym owner, or athlete, did you experience any technical glitches when navigating/using the CrossFit Games website during the 2011 Open?
22. If yes, was the issue dealt with/fixed to your satisfaction?
23. Do you think the online format for the 2011 CrossFit Games Open could be applied to other global sporting organizations?
24. Do you consider yourself Internet/social media savvy?
25. Do you think the CrossFit community is Internet/social media savvy?
26. Survey of CrossFit community regarding online/social media and the 2011 CrossFit Games Open
27. Do you think an online presence/social media is essential to the success of CrossFit?
28. In one sentence, explain why you think the CrossFit community is unique amongst other fitness or sporting organizations.
Organizing and conducting sporting events online

**Appendix 4 – Findings Tables**

Table 1

*Survey of CrossFit community regarding online/social media and the 2011 CrossFit Games Open (Part 1)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you attend a CF gym?</td>
<td><em>82.6</em>*(535)**</td>
<td>17.4(113)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you compete in the 2011 CF Open?</td>
<td>52.7(274)</td>
<td>47.3(246)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you compete in any prequalifying events prior to 2011?</td>
<td>13.8(72)</td>
<td>86.2(449)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like the format of the 2011 CF Games Open?</td>
<td>61.5(294)</td>
<td>31.2(149)</td>
<td>7.3(35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the 2011 CF Games website easy to use?</td>
<td>72.8(343)</td>
<td>27.2(128)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the Games organizers responsive?</td>
<td>38.1(163)</td>
<td>52.1(223)</td>
<td>9.8(42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you experience any technical glitches?</td>
<td>66.0(309)</td>
<td>34.0(159)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, was it dealt with to your satisfaction?</td>
<td>71.1(243)</td>
<td>28.9(99)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think CF HQ uses social media /Internet effectively?</td>
<td>66.6(327)</td>
<td>30.5(150)</td>
<td>2.9(14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is an online presence key to the success of CF?</td>
<td>86.3(422)</td>
<td>13.7(67)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *=percent of respondents; **=total number of respondents*
Organizing and conducting sporting events online

Appendix 4 Continued – Findings Tables

Table 2

Survey of CrossFit community regarding online/social media and the 2011 CrossFit Games Open (Part 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you comment on your local CF blog?</td>
<td><em>29.4</em>*(154)</td>
<td>45.3(237)</td>
<td>25.2(132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you comment on the CrossFit.com blog?</td>
<td>1.7(9)</td>
<td>28.7(149)</td>
<td>69.6(362)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>Below Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>Above Average</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you consider yourself Internet/social media savvy?</td>
<td>43.3(213)</td>
<td>4.1(20)</td>
<td>52.6(259)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the CF community is Internet/social media savvy?</td>
<td>33.7(166)</td>
<td>1.0(5)</td>
<td>65.3(322)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *=percent of respondents; **=total number of respondents*