



# Branded fitness: Exercise and promotional culture

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## Abstract

This article develops a theory of branded fitness within the United States through a focus on two of its most visible examples: CrossFit and Bikram yoga. We argue that highly successful forms of branded fitness such as these give insight into the enormous power and permeation of branded sensibilities into everyday life – in this case, going so far as to inform how we relate to, and attempt to modify, our own bodies. However, we argue that a close examination of branded fitness likewise reveals the inconsistencies, trouble spots, and extraordinary limits of the brand as a way to build a fitness movement – which we contend is instructive in thinking about how branding more generally relates to mediation, community, and cultural commodification.

## Keywords

Branding, exercise, fitness, promotional culture, consumer culture, CrossFit, Bikram

## Introduction

“Working out” is a daily element in the lives of millions of consumers. First thing in the morning, during our lunch breaks, or stopping over on the evening commute, we suit up or strip down to spend time moving our bodies. This motion, we are told, will help keep us slim and healthy, will stave off the decrepitude of old age, and will counter the sedentary hours we spend working behind desks and in front of screens.

Since the modern American fitness movement ignited in the 1970s, numerous fads, movements, and activities have come and gone. Beneath these more capricious changes, however, has come a steady, profound shift that has affected not only how people exercise but what role exercise plays in their lives. Chief among these is the recent rise of what we call *branded fitness*. Branded fitness departs from modes of exercise that dominated throughout the second half of the 20th century.

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Unlike the at-home video market and member gyms, where individuals performed self-guided workouts in quasi or actual isolation, these newer forms of exercise involve a coach or instructor who guides groups of participants through highly regimented set of actions; members of the gyms or studios frequently enjoy strong community. Branded fitness, in this way, resembles sports (and some even identify as sports), but they are different, too: they happen not outdoors or in public but inside dedicated spaces (often with hefty membership fees), and they are inscribed within and accented through the telos of the brand: foodstuffs, gear, props, services, and social media. People who adopt branded fitness as their routine often transcend regular gym members and even “gym rats” in their devotion, becoming proselytes engaged in a “way of life” that warrants substantial time, social, and financial investment. In giving rise to these faithful hordes of exercise elite, branded fitness symbolizes the thorough permeation of branded sensibilities into everyday life – in this case, going so far as to inform how we relate to, move, and attempt to modify our own bodies.

This article charts the emergence and cultural significance of branded fitness within the United States with a focus on two of its most visible yet under-researched examples: CrossFit and Bikram yoga. We argue that these highly successful forms of branded fitness illustrate both enormous power and the extraordinary limits of the brand – especially when branding is applied, quite literally, to something as varied, incomparable, and potentially resistant as the human body. This recognition provides important perspectives to scholarly work on branding and promotional culture, which so far has not fully considered how brandedness might shape the body. Furthermore, this article seeks to prompt more discussion about fitness and exercise within media and cultural studies. While there is work within media studies on sports, the emphasis tends toward viewership and audience (Dart, 2014; Horne, 2006; Moor, 2006, 2007). Sports are also studied from various angles within sociology and cultural studies with topics from gender inequality in sports (Schultz, 2014) to gambling (Figone, 2012) to childhood play (Willis, 1991) to subcultures (Palmås, 2014). Fitness, an activity that we distinguish from sports, often gets lost within these texts. Finally, we hope this work enriches sports studies with a deeper awareness of branding and promotional culture.

In what follows, we use a mixed methodological approach drawing upon history, critical cultural studies, journalistic analysis, and auto-ethnography. We begin by situating the rise of branded exercise within the longer history of fitness culture in the United States. We subsequently draw from the growing literature on promotional culture to theorize the nature of branded fitness; then, we detail our two cases, CrossFit and Bikram. As we explain below, the relative newness of these programs and the proprietary, litigious nature of their ownership mean that despite their popularity and visibility, neither has attracted much scholarly attention. For this reason, we utilize a combination of journalism, trade books, Internet resources, and experiences of both authors as regular practitioners of CrossFit and Bikram to make our case. Our conclusion discusses the implications for branded fitness for scholarship as well as for its legions of enthusiasts.

## The commodification of fitness in the United States

The mainstream appeal of exercise in the United States has waxed and waned over the years, not only as a national pastime but also as an entity of governmental support. In the late 1960s, the work of Dr. Kenneth Cooper helped ignite the development of dozens of types of exercise programs for Americans (Hentges, 2014: 13–14). His 1968 book *Aerobics* became an international bestseller; a decade later, the American College of Sports Medicine moved to recommend exercise three to five times per week – a recommendation that has stayed nearly the same for four decades (Ewing Garber et al., 2011; McKenzie, 2013: 1). For this reason, the 1970s are widely considered the pivotal moment in the development of fitness as an activity for all Americans although histories of fitness also credit earlier fitness promoters such as Jack LaLanne and Charles Atlas (e.g. Black, 2013; Hentges, 2014; McKenzie, 2013).

Government-supported research and shifting public attitudes coincided with the increase in commercial gyms in the 1970s and the 1980s (Smith Maguire, 2007: 4). This change stems in part from fitness being considered a personal responsibility rather than a societal one – a point many fitness centers emphasize in their marketing (Sage, 1998: 118; Shilling, 2012). During this period, the Bally model – franchises with deluxe equipment, daily group exercise classes, personal trainers-for-hire, and ironclad contracts – was replicated by many other companies as Americans joined gyms in droves (Herz, 2014: 175–177, 183). With the increase in offerings, gyms sought to distinguish themselves from one another; for example, Gold's Gym attempted to attract “hardcore” male bodybuilders (St Martin and Gavey, 1996).

Fitness media grew during the 1980s. By 1983, Jane Fonda's workout video, released a year earlier, sold more than 200,000 copies to become the era's the most popular video, as well as the catalyst for a burgeoning “self-help” video market (Klemesrud, 1983). Fitness topics also began to proliferate in print and audio media. By 1985, an “explosion” of magazine titles launched, catering to a range of demographics, lifestyle categories, and niche interests such as bodybuilding or cycling (Stevenson, 1985). The book market following suit, jumpstarted once again by a Jane Fonda product (her 1981 workout book), and workout LPs also appeared, with titles such as *Linda Evans's Crystal Light Body Workout* and *Mary Lou Retton: ABC Fun Fit Kids' Workout*, among others.

The rise of these media highlights the celebrification of fitness. The number of celebrities who made their name via fitness swelled in the 1980s and 1990s, as figures such as Richard Simmons, Denise Austen, and Les Mills became beloved icons of health and vitality. Fitness also began to attract movie stars, musicians, and models, such as Olivia Newton John, Marky Mark, and Kathy Ireland, who boasted about the impact working out had on their bodies. Soon, making a fitness video, like lending one's image and name to a bottle of perfume, became a common part of the celebrity product line. For example, supermodel Cindy Crawford co-created a workout video in 1992 with her personal trainer, Radu Teodorescu.

Teodorescu, who holds two master's in physical fitness, had over a decade's experience when the video was made (Bessone, 1992) and yet it is Crawford who appears in the video and whose name is used. What Crawford lacked expertise in fitness and body mechanics, she made up for in physique, marketability, and celebrity status; within two years, the video sold over three million copies and was ranked as a top seller in the overall video market (MacNeill, 1998: 166).

The years since then have intensified many of these trends. Popular media remains strongly focused on fitness, whether through coverage of diet and exercise crazes, health research, or celebrity figures. In addition, as stars flock to different exercise programs – such as yoga practitioner Jennifer Aniston or Soul Cyclor Charlize Theron (Aldridge, 2012; Black, 2014) – their official and unofficial endorsements help boost these programs' cachet. Even more recently, fitness has become a frontier for new media, as fitness trackers and mobile apps focused around “bettering the self” (Millington, 2014: 480) flooded the marketplace, costing their users both money and personal data.

As this brief history suggests, staying fit – among the rare activities that do not require the doer to purchase something in order to participate – has nonetheless become a powerful force within the economy. The fitness industry generated US\$26.5b in 2014, a 2.3% growth over five years – and, notably, this period was the Great Recession (Turk, 2014). Over 54 million Americans currently have a health club membership (Turk, 2014: 5). Both of the branded exercise programs we discuss here grew during the economic downturn, despite their expense. This is in contrast to the other major growth sector within the fitness economy: of low-cost, contract-free gyms such as Planet Fitness, which are siphoning members away from “full service” gyms such as Bally and Gold's (Turk, 2014: 7–8).

There are numerous fitness activities to choose from, ranging from free, such as running outside, to high-end personal trainers that can cost thousands per month. As in many other businesses, fitness companies compete to gain a fraction of rising sales, and adopt many familiar strategies such as advertising, celebrity endorsement, synergy and cross-promotion, and market segmentation. Although much of the gear one needs for fitness activities is utilitarian (e.g. a bike or shoes), there is wide variation in the price of these items; a set of free weights, for example, may cost as little as US\$10 or more than US\$500.<sup>1</sup> The fitness market has recast many of these functional goods as fashion items, including clothing or sweatbands festooned with logos or yoga mats meant to be cool, or environmentally-friendly/“green.”

Scholars generally agree that fitness activity has become commodified (Millington, 2014; Scott, 2011; Smith Maguire, 2007). There are several ways to theorize this shift. First, nations that once pushed fitness as a means of building a strong citizenry for military service now emphasize health management for disease prevention, a much more individualized pursuit that more easily lends itself to marketization (Shilling, 2012; Smith Maguire, 2007: 21). Second, within an “appearance driven culture,” fitness is increasingly becoming as a way to look better rather than achieve health goals (Bolin and Granskog, 2003; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Hentges, 2014; Schultz, 2014), with significant implications along

lines of gender and heteronormativity (Mansfield, 2013; Schultz, 2014; Willis, 1991). Thus, the anxieties regarding appearance and desirability that are fanned elsewhere within the marketplace have been extended to the body itself; it is not just that we purchase this lipstick or that outfit to feel attractive and secure, but we must also buy into fitness programs that will modify our physiques and exteriorize our health for others. As Shilling (2012) notes, today, we tend to experience our bodies not as natural but as a “phenomenon of options and choices” and “an entity in the process of becoming” (pp. 5, 6). To achieve the body we want, we must work and, increasingly, buy access, goods, and products to aid that working.

There are many parallels here with commodification of sport. Like fitness, sports have been annexed to the interests of capital, from the athletes who endorse various brands to the sports arenas that are subsidized by major companies, from the brand extension and merchandising of sports teams to the profligate advertising surrounding any major sporting event (Andrews, 2006; Messner and De Oca, 2005). Yet, there are at least two reasons to consider the commodification of sport as distinct from that of fitness. First, the players of professional sports make a living doing so,<sup>2</sup> which means capital exchange is endemic to the activity.<sup>3</sup> Second, the vast majority of people experience commodified sport as a spectator rather than a practitioner, making commodification less personal or intimate.

For these and other reasons, we argue that the advent of branded fitness deserves treatment as more than just the latest trend in exercise. In a milieu where fitness has been commodified, personalized, and turned into a site for self-actualization, a market for high-end fitness has flourished. These fitness products – often more than double the cost of a standard gym membership – align with general consumer trends toward luxury (Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Silverstein and Fiske, 2003), but also mark a shift in how we consume exercise and imagine its benefits. Fitness can act as a marker of status, a form of social capital, and a way to invest (and communicate investment) in one’s well-being. It is, in short, an element of one’s personal brand, and also a brand itself.

## **Promotional culture, capital, and the body as brand**

Within media and cultural studies, promotional culture has come to signify the widening presence of promotional activities, behaviors, sensibilities, and forms of communication in contemporary society (e.g. Aronczyk and Powers, 2010; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Wernick, 1991). One primary asset of promotional culture is the brand which, most straightforwardly, is the core image or identity an entity desires to communicate to its public. As Arvidsson (2006) explains, brands “work as a kind of generalized medium of communication” that “ensures the global communicability and compatibility of a particular quality” (pp. 130–131). Characteristic of this generalizability is that, to an even greater degree than advertising, branding takes place within and across a wide range of locations; elaborating on this point, Moor (2007) suggests that branding “tends to have a much more expansive notion of the appropriate *media* for communications than either advertising or other aspects of

marketing, and it tends to take a much more strategic, programmatic and totalizing approach to such communications” (p. 8). It is for these reasons that having a brand has become a signature of contemporary times, as relevant to companies and products as it is to political movements, ideas, and individuals, both famous and less so (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010: 2–3). Being branded articulates not only a sense of expertise but also a practical grasp of the importance of communicating in a strategic, marketable, and “on message” fashion at all times – of tremendous importance in an era of omnipresent, attention-seeking social media.

In some ways, it is not particularly noteworthy that branded fitness would emerge within this climate. One might argue that branding is an imperative for any competitive company, no matter what its core business, and as noted above, the corporatization of fitness has been underway for several decades. Moreover, myriad companies have utilized sports and exercise to articulate a brand identity, including retailers of products necessary for fitness participation (such as equipment or apparel), diet, and health-related goods (supplements, vitamins, or injury prevention/care), and those commodities that benefit from association with health and well-being even if not solely or explicitly created for such purposes (food or beverages, destinations).

Yet unlike these products, services, and even locales, branded fitness requires the reconsideration of what the brand is, where it resides, and how it is realized, for at least two reasons. First, although brands have been understood as having both tangible and intangible components – which may manifest in experiential or relational ways (e.g. Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007; Wood and Ball, 2013) – branded fitness goes beyond these formulations to be quite literally embodied: experienced within the devotee as well as on display, sometimes in highly promotional ways, to those with whom the devotee interacts. Embodied brandedness relates to issues with mature scholarly understanding, such as how the clothed body may act as a billboard for logos and other commercial messages (e.g. Coombe, 1998; Klein, 1999); how capitalism and the state have exercised biopower to discipline the body into a productive asset (Foucault, 1997: 239–240; Shilling, 2012: 75–81); how a fit body may produce physical capital for the person who possesses it, reflecting a sense of diligence, self-care, and self-worth (Stewart et al., 2013: 547; see also Shilling, 2012); or how biovalue and biocapital may arise from vital processes themselves (Rose, 2007: 7). Likewise, scholarship interested in the branded self has examined how social media and reality television insist upon the immaterial labor of image enhancement and self-spectacle in ways that can result in many different forms of capital (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2008). Yet, none of these conceptions fully explicate when the body itself labors as, and therewith creates value for, a brand. The body is the medium of branded fitness. Branded fitness thus most closely resembles branded forms of diets or weight loss programs (such as *Weight Watchers*) where, by subjecting one’s body to specific controls, one proves the effectiveness of the program.

Yet, this does not go far enough in describing branded fitness. Unlike diets, where the embodiment of the brand happens primarily via how the body looks,

branded fitness is also what the body *does*. Branded fitness is intrinsically phenomenological: it manifests in, and is realized through, movement. Despite that no one can “own” a squat or a yoga pose,<sup>4</sup> branded fitness emphasizes that a particular philosophy, series, or prescription of movement can, if not rise to the level of intellectual property, at the very least *belong* to its actors. A possessive relationship to movement means that those who participate in branded fitness can do things that other people cannot do – not just run faster, stretch farther, or lift more weight, but actual body contortions that would be difficult if not impossible for non-practitioners to do.

Rich Froning, at the time of this writing the most celebrated and decorated CrossFit athlete, is a case in point. Froning rose to fame after four consecutive wins at the CrossFit Games, an annual Olympics-style competition which since 2011 has been sponsored by Reebok. Regularly referred to in the media as the “fittest man on earth,” Froning generates a great deal of publicity for CrossFit through news and magazine coverage as well as his endorsement and merchandising deals with Reebok. Videos of Froning performing CrossFit workouts are popular on YouTube, with several generating more than 500,000 views. And in spite of his professional status and extraordinary athletic gifts, Froning’s muscled physique is another kind of value – it is proof that CrossFit works, as he becomes the archetype of the brand, capable of achieving feats of athleticism many would believe are impossible.

It is in this way that CrossFit and other forms of branded fitness act similarly to what Rose (2007) calls “technologies of optimization” – interventions meant to alter what the body is able to accomplish (p. 16). However, although informed by the same logic that trumpets designer drugs, stem cell treatments, and outpatient plastic surgery, branded fitness’s manifestation need not be hi-tech. The forms of branded fitness described here tend to take place in rudimentary spaces where props are either simple (a towel in Bikram) or easily replicated at home (CrossFit); both focus primarily on the body rather than on expensive equipment or technological intervention. Instead, knowledge exchange is the primary focus – whether the student is getting verbal or physical cues from teachers or fellow practitioners.

The result is that our bodies, which have since modernity been considered physical manifestations of our souls, moral worth, and will (Goldstein, 1992: 75), are now also potential avatars of brand value. Despite that an increasing number of American workers perform jobs requiring minimal physical exertion, fitness is “bodily capital” that communicates not just a sense of discipline, health, and self-care (Stewart et al., 2013) but also that the workouts we do are effective. Branded fitness exploits this bodily capital as its participants personify the brand, unite with others, and advertise it to non-practitioners through their dedication, evangelism, and self-transformation. If biopower (Foucault, 1997) is the means through which the state disciplined and took advantage of the corpses of the citizenry, then branded fitness is its 21st-century corollary and its full-scale privatization.

## **CrossFit and Bikram**

Cultural studies and related fields have produced a small corpus of scholarly work on CrossFit (e.g. Heywood, 2015; Knapp, 2014; Dawson, 2015) and Bikram (Fish, 2006; Philp, 2009); there is a bit more in fields such as health and medicine (e.g. Ferrera et al., 2014; Hak et al., 2013; Hunter et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2013). Due to this scarcity, we employed personal experience or auto-ethnography to add richness and depth to our discussion. Like Hentges (2014), Spencer (2014), and other fitness culture researchers, our personal histories with fitness provided unique access into these particular fitness brands. In addition, we were able to see how individual franchises deviate from corporate branding and policy in order to adapt to their microenvironments. While we know that this perspective is not easily universalized, it provides a crucial entry point for thinking about the limitations of branding from both a practical and theoretical perspective. Our hope is that this research lays the groundwork for other explorations into branded fitness in general, as well as Bikram and CrossFit in particular.

Both CrossFit and Bikram may be categorized as “extreme” fitness. We define extreme fitness as exercise programs where participants push themselves beyond recommended exercise requirements, testing the limits of human strength, endurance, and tolerance. There have been general studies of extreme sports and fitness activities (e.g. Donnelly, 2006; Le Breton, 2000) as well as some limited research on specific types, such as ultramarathons (Simpson et al., 2014), triathlons (Lamont and Kennelly, 2012), or strong man competitions (Gieseler, 2014). However, what counts as extreme fitness is culturally and historically contingent; much depends on dominant paradigms of health science, quotidian practices, and fashion. For this reason, we are agnostic as to whether people should or should not participate in these exercise programs, but acknowledge that many people, including health care professionals, warn against them. We suspect that this might contribute to the strong level of devotion their fans feel toward these forms and their participants, yet full discovery of that point will need to be reserved for future research.

### ***CrossFit***

CrossFit is the brainchild of Greg Glassman, a Santa Cruz-based former gymnast and personal trainer (Stoddard, 2011). After years of observing different types of athletes, in 1995, Glassman began experimenting with combining exercise practices usually considered distinct – namely, gymnastics, Olympic lifting, and conditioning – into a hybrid that would result in a level of fitness that surpassed what any of those activities could produce on their own (Heywood, 2015: 24–25). The result was CrossFit, which promotes itself as “functional fitness.” As explained in their guide for prospective trainers,

We sought 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... In sum, our specialty is not specializing. (CrossFit Training Guide, 1)

Glassman tested his method on his personal training clients before the Santa Cruz Police Department hired him to train their officers. As CrossFit caught on locally, Glassman opened the first dedicated CrossFit gym (known as a “box”) and began serving a growing client base, many of whom were elite athletes or police (Herz, 2014: 19–26). In 2001, Glassman took his training method online, initially so that traveling CrossFitters could exercise on the road (Herz, 2014: 43). The site featured a workout of the day (WOD) and a section where anyone who completed the workout could post their scores. Quickly, CrossFit.com became not just a hub for those who already trained with Glassman, but for other fitness buffs who were drawn to the intensity of the workouts and liked sharing their experiences (Heywood, 2015: 22). CrossFit also became popular in the military, as soldiers found the workouts online and did them while deployed (Herz, 2014: 91). By 2002, enterprising CrossFitters in Seattle and Jacksonville, Florida, asked Glassman if they could open up local CrossFit gyms, beginning the spread of affiliates (Herz, 2014: 184–185).

CrossFit’s program is intense and unconventional. A typical workout might include rounds of Olympic weightlifting sandwiched between medium distance sprints, or an extremely high volume of repetitions of already challenging exercises strung together (e.g. 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, and 300 deep squats). These routines are done for time, which adds a competitive edge and demands that CrossFitters work at maximum levels of exertion. That the workouts are so taxing is a point of pride that unites CrossFitters; early on, CrossFit’s unofficial mascots were Pukie the Clown (named for how workouts often cause vomiting) and Uncle Rhabdo (for rhabdomyolysis, a life-threatening condition brought on by extreme physical exertion). Acceptance of discomfort and pain contributes to the cocky front that CrossFit carries. (An illustration: a favored saying comparing CrossFit to other styles of exercise is “your workout is our warm-up.”)

Yet, the mixture of maximum effort, competition, and tribalism has given rise to more than 10,000 CrossFit affiliates worldwide today (CrossFit.com). As CrossFit boomed, Glassman moved to Phoenix, where he established CrossFit Headquarters. The main occupation of Headquarters is to license affiliates (who as of 2015 pay US\$3000 per year to use the CrossFit name; older affiliates pay whatever was the going rate when they opened, which can be as low as US\$500) and to run certification seminars for aspiring trainers (an initial, “Level One” weekend training seminar costs US\$1000). In 2013, the company generated more than US\$100m in revenue – an impressive sum, but one which Glassman achieved by breaking much of the advice that ballooning business enterprises typically follow (Helm, 2013b). For example, despite the spread of affiliates, WODs are still published daily via CrossFit.com. Affiliates have few other stipulations other than to maintain an active website which lists WODs and posts workout photographs. Unlike franchises in many other sectors, nothing prevents a CrossFit gym

opening up next door to a pre-existing one (Herz, 2014: 188). Finally, although CrossFit has sponsored the CrossFit Games since 2007 (which have been co-sponsored by Reebok since 2011), Glassman himself has not ventured further into the co-branding universe of merchandise, supplements, or gear, although he has not prevented others from doing so (Belger, 2012; Helm, 2013b; Heywood, 2015). Taken together, Glassman's behavior reveals his deep libertarianism, as well as the distributed, user-generated nature CrossFit acquired during its life as a web-based phenomenon.

The bottom-up, laissez faire ethos that infuses much of CrossFit goes only so far, however; as one journalist contends, "CrossFit is a trademarked brand protected as viciously as a Hells Angels jacket" (Helm, 2013a). He further explains,

CrossFit now has seven lawyers on staff and at any given time is engaging 12 to 20 outside legal firms to pursue trademark-infringement cases. CrossFit has a database of more than 5,000 possible infringements and is litigating a dozen lawsuits in the U.S. and several more internationally. This traditional legal effort is paired with an aggressive social-media operation... [tasked with] closely monitoring what they call "the wide world of Internet assholes": chronic complainers, trolls, Wikipedia page editors, cynical bloggers, even the American College of Sports Medicine, which [they] believe has it in for CrossFit. (Helm, 2013a)

Efforts to stifle negative publicity, brand dilution, and genericide contradict other aspects of CrossFit, which are quite free and open. Perhaps, too, they further display CrossFit's libertarian essence, dedicated to the countervailing notions of free action and personal property. What it demonstrates, at any rate, is how essential it is for CrossFit to develop into something that transcends its exercises and its name. What will sustain CrossFit from attacks to its program and identity is the culture of CrossFit, its fierce army of supporters.

Over time, CrossFit has developed a distinct culture that extends beyond the shared movements and workouts. It is an "immersive" (Heywood, 2015), highly social, and "reinventive" (Dawson, 2015) form of exercise that encourages those who do it to share their experiences with those around them. Team exercises, the public posting of workout times, the photographing and sharing of pictures from the workout on affiliate websites and social media, and the neighborhood rooting of many boxes mean that unlike more impersonal gyms, members tend to know each other and may even socialize regularly outside of classes. For example, the gym where one of the authors exercises regularly hosts barbecues, in-house competitions, and happy hours; there are birthday celebrations and "wedding WODs" for newly wed couples. To those used to working out in the isolated company of strangers at traditional gyms, these characteristics can be off-putting, evidence that CrossFit is less an exercise program than a cult. Yet for those who do it, this is the catnip that keeps them returning and bound to one another. As a *New York Times* article explained, "[p]erhaps more than disciples of any other type of exercise, people who participate in CrossFit can't help being drawn to people who do the

same” (Rubin, 2014). Moreover, CrossFit changes your body in ways both large and small, from muscles to calluses; and its most religious practitioners also “go Paleo,” adopting a protein-heavy, low-carb, and dairy-free diet that requires hyper-vigilance. CrossFitters can take comfort in being around others who do not question these choices.

## ***Bikram***

In 1973, a young Bikram Choudhury was sent to California by his teacher, Guru Ghosh, to start yoga schools for Americans. Born in Kolkata, Bikram achieved notoriety when, at age 11, he became the youngest participant to win the National India Yoga Competition. After a weightlifting accident at age 17, he was told he would never walk again and returned to yoga to restore his health. He began teaching yoga to fix himself, but quickly adopted a signature set of 26 poses, which he used to help others (Fish, 2006). Upon his arrival in the United States, he started offering free classes and teaching yoga to anyone in Los Angeles who was interested. According to legend (Novy-Williams, 2011), he helped President Nixon cure his phlebitis with yoga and was granted a visa and tax payer money to start his work in the United States.

While most forms of yoga practiced in the United States vary routines on a daily basis, Bikram’s style always offers the same 26 poses in a room heated to 105°. Known colloquially as “Bikram’s Torture Chamber,” students sweat profusely during the 90-minute class, which can result in symptoms of dehydration. Teachers teach the same class each time, including the same instructions such as “lock your knee” and “slowly push your head back until your neck hurts a little bit” (Bikram’s Yoga College, n.d.). The poses are one right after another with short rests during the second half – much different than the vinyasa style yoga that is more popular in the United States. In addition, Bikram encourages competition among his students.

Actress Shirley MacLaine was one of Bikram’s early adherents, encouraging him to start charging for classes and inviting friends to learn his unique style. She helped him promote his work in Hollywood and it quickly caught on among stars looking to get fit (Philp, 2009). Over the years, George Clooney, Madonna, Lady Gaga, David Beckham, Carmen Electra, and other stars have promoted Bikram (Bikram Yoga Vancouver, 2011). These celebrity endorsements are no doubt one of the reasons the style has become one of the most well-known forms of yoga in the United States.

Bikram’s name became the brand for his style of yoga and his company. Other examples of this include Forrest yoga named after Ana Forrest, Iyengar yoga after BKS Iyengar, and Sivananda yoga after Swami Sivananda. However, no other brand of yoga is as controlled by its founder as Bikram. He not only requires studios to pay yearly licensing fees, but all potential teachers must attend the teacher training that he leads so that he can maintain complete oversight.

Bikram requires all trainees to memorize the dialogue, or the official 90-minute class routine they will give as long as they continue teaching (Bikram’s Yoga College, n.d.). He places strict controls on temperature and on details such as

not wearing green.<sup>5</sup> The nine week training costs over US\$11,000 at the time of this writing, not including airfare (the 2015 training took place in Thailand). Teacher trainees sign a lengthy legal document which explains that they may not teach a Bikram yoga class outside of a Bikram studio and that they may not add, subtract, or modify poses from the series laid out in the document. Teachers themselves may not use the Bikram license, mark, or copyright (Bikram's Yoga College, n.d.).

Tight regulation of the brand has earned Bikram a reputation in the yoga world; his 2011 lawsuit against Yoga to the People led to the US Copyright office suspending copyrights on yoga asana sequences (Rosen, 2011). This has not stopped Bikram from continuing to protect his brand. Part of the yoga teacher training agreement is a clause that limits trainees from using social media to talk about or post photos of themselves during training. They may not "insult, disparage, disrespect or defame Bikram or members of the Bikram Community," "disclose Bikram's trade secrets," or "write or post anything that leaves readers with the impression you are speaking on behalf of Bikram" (Bikram's Yoga College, n.d.). Any violation might result in a trainee being denied certification.

Bikram's success, however, is likely not attributable to his brand despotism, but instead to his entrepreneurial nature. With over 350 studios in the United States and branches on six continents, Bikram has certainly developed a business model that extends his brand worldwide. Bikram studios are set up as franchises and must adhere to precise guidelines that Bikram's Yoga College of India have set up, so in effect each studio is offering the exact same sequence and similar floor plans as every other Bikram studio (Bikram's Yoga College, n.d.). It is no wonder that students would feel at home doing Bikram anywhere in the world. He has also used celebrity to his advantage and continues to use his own reputation to grow the Bikram community. He once bragged to a reporter, "I'm beyond Superman" (Keegan, 2002). Numerous articles have accused him of running a cult (Martin, 2011; Sanchez, 2013; Wallace, 2014) and the *Yoga Journal* even has dubbed him "Yoga's Bad Boy" (Depres, 2007).

Branding does have its limitations and problems, however. In 2013, Bikram was sued (Wallace, 2014) for having inappropriate relationships with teacher trainees. The press has often depicted him as a self-obsessed, Speedo-clad debauchee who, despite being able to perfectly execute yoga poses, is far from being spiritual or meditative. (Martin, 2011; Schickel, 2003). How this type of bad publicity affects the brand of Bikram is unclear. Recent legal troubles, including accusations of sexual assault, have both served to sully Bikram's image as well as increase media exposure. Only time will tell whether Bikram – the man and the yoga brand – can weather this type of negative media attention.

## The making and unmaking of branded fitness

One of the benefits of brands is that consumers, in theory, know what they will be getting. Whether this is a particular flavor of beverage, the effectiveness of a medicine, or the quality of a jacket, branding helps consumers make purchases

efficiently and enjoy replicable experiences. When it comes to fitness, however, the guarantee behind the brand is less clear. While a recognizable name promises some level of consistent experience (similar floor plans and equipment, familiar movements, and to varying degrees likeminded clientele), there is no tangible “product” one is purchasing, and thus no clear barometer to determine efficacy or replicability. Instead, consumers have to believe that the program will help them meet their goals, whether it is to build muscle, lose weight, become more flexible, or simply be healthier.

In one sense, then, all commercial fitness enterprises sell the same thing: a path to a “better you.” But fitness brands are particular in the degree to which they push the onus of brand efficacy onto the body itself. In essence, the doer becomes the brand, and it becomes that person’s responsibility to fully realize that brand within him/herself. In Bikram, this manifests in the constant exhortation to “push” to one’s limits and “lock” difficult poses or a competitive pressure to not drink during “party time” – the built in break for students to drink water. In CrossFit, while one may “DNF” a workout (meaning “Did Not Finish”), the community norms discourage it; coaches and other classmates will egg you on, even if you are breathless, spent, and nearly sick. Results, in this case, require eclipsing what you think is possible of yourself, suffering in order to succeed and, perhaps most importantly, taking personal responsibility for one’s deficiencies. A telling example is in the case of injury, where branded fitness becomes the solution for injury, even if it is also the cause. To cope, branded fitness often pushes a deeper commitment to the routine, including dietary changes (Ayurvedic for Bikram, Paleo for CrossFit), clothing or gear that in some way manages discomfort, and advice sought from teachers or coaches instead of medical professionals.

CrossFit and Bikram rely on other forms of persuasion than the production and promotion of fit bodies. As branded forms of fitness that must survive in a competitive marketplace, they make claims that they will be more efficient, effective, or fun than the other forms out there. Nestled within both of them are the seemingly competing logics of cutting edge, contemporary science, and ancient heritage and myth. For example, CrossFit vaunts that it works based upon the science behind “maximum effort”: that high-intensity exercise offers metabolic, aerobic, weight loss, and mood benefits far beyond those of longer, lower-impact workouts (Herz, 2014: 9–17). Yet at the same time, CrossFit accentuates its ancient roots as a form of “functional fitness” that has no need for the new-fangled machinery of modernist gyms. The Paleo diet also harkens older, “purer” ways of eating in its rejection of the processed, carbohydrate-heavy diet creations of the modern food industry. While Bikram does not dictate a particular diet, he offers information on Ayurveda on his website and in many studios. Ayurveda is a combination of diet, supplements, and yoga that draws from ancient traditions to heal the body rather relying upon than Western medicine. In this way, both forms appeal to middle-class sensibilities that want to go “back to the land.”

The science and history upon which these claims are based are at times questionable – for example, although most of the poses Bikram incorporates in his

sequence were created less than a century ago (Broad, 2012), he continues to promote the idea that his practice is part of an ancient tradition. That said, it is beyond the scope of the present project to debunk every bogus claim made on behalf of these styles of exercise. Our larger point is that these claims aim to convince people that these forms of exercise are good for them because they were good for ancient people in faraway lands, they are natural, and they get results that can be proven, and can work for you.

However, despite the power of this rhetoric, nothing works out quite so neatly in practice. Not everyone who walks into a CrossFit box or sweats through Bikram will love it, and not all who do will someday resemble a textbook fitness ideal. Not every person can do every pose correctly through hard work, mindfulness, and pushing; not everyone is not made to sprint, jump, and squat heavy weights until the onset of nausea. The fact that bodies are different and people are individual, then, is the utmost limit of branded fitness in practice, and as such underscores some of the inherent problems with brandedness in general. Just as all people do not have the same physical capabilities – and that by doing a certain pose or lift, all bodies will not look the same – so too do these branded forms of fitness fall down on their ability to be wholly replicable. In fitness as elsewhere, independent, individualized experiences of branding often fail to stack up to company-sanctioned ideals.

Given that our body is one of the ways in which people showcase that they are living their lives well, it is problematic when their bodies do not conform to the ideals they see in the gym or studio, on celebrity brand ambassadors, and in the ever-growing social media presence of these brands. In addition, participants may become disillusioned or even derogatory toward the brand as the result of injury, bad experiences, or boredom. Countless social media posts and articles have been devoted to explaining how Bikram and CrossFit are harmful and why others should avoid them. Proponents push back against naysayers by explaining that bodies are not born but made and that the people who do not make it are just not trying hard enough. But if even fitness programs cannot guarantee the idealized selves we long for, the limits of branding fitness are thrown into stark relief.

A cultural moment in which branding infuses so much of the everyday is challenged by the inability for branded fitness to provide a surefire path to a fitter, healthier, more able, “better” self it promises. On the one hand, this yet again confirms the hollow promises of consumerism – that the happiness or betterment that goods often promise is not quite so easily obtained. On the other hand, though, the failures of branded fitness cut deeper. The inability for even the most successful fitness brands to control their product, that is, human bodies, suggests that it is impossible to successfully brand every aspect of human experience. In addition, it should remind us to question the idea that brands are intrinsically consistent, efficient forms of consumer communication – instead acknowledging the variances and diversity that inevitably complicate how brands exist in the world.

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## Notes

1. Retail price of Bowflex weights on Amazon.com at the time this article was written.
2. Olympic athletes being a notable exception, they are still paid indirectly through endorsements.
3. It is worth noting the incredible explosion in remuneration of athletes as well as that professional yoga practitioners and CrossFit athletes are now beginning to be able to make money from these activities.
4. Bikram has taken competitors to court and has attempted to copyright sequences, but to date, no one has successfully been able to copyright a pose (Rosen, 2011).
5. This is simply because Bikram does not like the color.

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