CrossFit Community, Information Community: Needs and Behaviors

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Abstract

The CrossFit community is a fast-growing one and has achieved an almost cult-like following. CrossFit is a fitness program, a community, and personal growth, and as such, the information needs are vast. "According to the CrossFit creed, they can and should also be prepared to fell trees, tame bulls and carry families of four on their backs." There is a gap in research on the information needs or information-seeking behaviors of this community. This paper aims to identify the information needs of the CrossFit community, detail the information-seeking behavior of CrossFit members, and discuss why libraries do not reach this community. Further, just like in many communities now, there is a strong lean towards using online and mobile resources for information gathering among CrossFit members. An analysis of the resources that are available and commonly used will follow. Finally, suggestions will be made on what libraries can do to reach out to this community.

Introduction

Constantly varied functional movements performed at relatively high intensity. Boxes, WODs, and flat on your back, gasping for air. The Sport of Fitness. Community. All of these things are just the tip of the iceberg when talking about CrossFit. With more than 11,000 affiliated gyms worldwide (www.crossfit.com), CrossFit has developed a somewhat cult-like following, and it continues to grow in popularity.

CrossFit is more than a fitness program; it is a community, both in the physical world and virtually. Talk to almost anyone involved in CrossFit and they will tell you about camaraderie, intense support, and the family they gained when they joined a box. An exponentially larger CrossFit community exists online. A simple Google search of "CrossFit" yields over 52 million results. Among those results are links to the main CrossFit website (www.crossfit.com), affiliate pages, blogs, articles, videos, discussion boards, and so on. CrossFit related pages exist all over Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Social media plays a huge role in information seeking and sharing in the CrossFit world. There is no shortage of CrossFit information for those who seek it. As such, the information needs of CrossFitters covers a wide range, and there is a multitude of sources to provide the answers. These sources include coaches and fellow athletes, books, journal and magazine articles, websites, blogs, social media, and mobile apps. There seems to be a leaning towards online resources as the preferred method of obtaining information.

The CrossFit community as an information community is the focus of this paper. Fisher and Durrance (2003) present five characteristics of information communities. The CrossFit community fits into those five characteristics in the following ways:

Information communities exploit the information sharing qualities of technology and yield multiplier effects for stakeholders.

CrossFit's larger community is centered around the official website (www.crossfit.com) where anyone can log on and find a wealth of information that answers virtually any question a CrossFitter may have, ranging from 'What **is** CrossFit?' to 'Where is the closest box to me?' to 'What is a snatch and how do I do it?' Moving beyond CrossFit's official website, information can also be found and shared everywhere from blog posts to discussion boards, Facebook to YouTube. The internet makes it incredibly easy for CrossFitters from all over the world to connect; they are all part of this community, regardless of geographical location. Boxes are springing up all over the world. This is an excellent example of the multiplier effect. Within the larger CrossFit community, which exists online, there are many smaller communities that exist and allow for members who are located near each other geographically to meet and form physical communities.

Information communities emphasize collaboration among diverse groups that provide information and may share joint responsibility and resources.

CrossFitters are members of the military and law enforcement, professional athletes, fitness and nutrition experts. CrossFitters are also postal workers and schoolteachers, stay-at-home mothers and grandparents, and everyone in between. Everyone, regardless of profession or

skill level, works side-by-side completing the same prescribed workout of the day (WOD), scaled to individual ability. Each class allows for members to push themselves and support others. Information is often shared informally as members discuss different techniques or methods for improving. CrossFit community members connect through Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, blogs, and message boards, where videos, articles, tips, techniques, and support are abundantly shared. Coaches are an important source of information, as they lead and guide members by sharing their knowledge and expertise to help athletes learn and grow as individuals and as a community.

Information communities anticipate and often form around people's needs to access and use information in ways that people perceive as helpful.

Blogs, discussion forums, YouTube videos, and Facebook pages are just a few examples of ways that information is shared in the CrossFit world. Social media plays a huge role in information seeking and sharing. Offline, some ways that CrossFit coaches share information include hosting seminars and special training sessions for their members. Some boxes may hold extra classes in addition to their normal WODs that cover strength work and technique, mobility workouts, yoga, or nutrition information.

Information communities remove barriers to information about acquiring needed services and participating in civic life.

The CrossFit community has a heavy, growing online presence. This allows members of the community access information anytime they want and does not require that an individual be a member of a box to gain access to that information. A potential barrier could be seen as the cost

of joining a CrossFit affiliate. Memberships typically start at $150.00 per month, with many

being well over $200.00 per month, which is not a luxury that everyone can afford. This is

where the internet comes in. Individuals who can't afford to join a box can still be part of the

community by following the main CrossFit site that posts WODs every day and offers

information and discussion boards for members to connect and support each other. There are

also myriads of CrossFit sites that offer home WODs and other essential information.

Information communities foster social connectedness within the larger community.

As mentioned above, smaller communities form within the larger CrossFit community by

way of boxes, blogs, and other social networking platforms. Most people will find that members

of CrossFit boxes are very welcoming and supportive to one another, especially to the newest

members. Joining CrossFit is often kind of like gaining a family. The members often connect on

a whole other level beyond fitness; they share in life.

Research on CrossFit is fairly limited. Research on the information needs and

information-seeking behaviors as they relate to CrossFit does not exist. I've broadened the scope

to look at the research that has been done on information-seeking behavior or needs as it relates

to exercise or physical fitness. Since there seems to be a strong lean towards online resources as

the preferred method of obtaining information in the CrossFit community, this paper will be a

synthesis of research on information-seeking behaviors in the digital environment and

information-seeking behaviors as it relates to health and fitness.

Literature Review

Heinström (2005) identified three patterns of information-seeking behavior: fast surfing, broad scanning, and deep diving. Fast surfing is just as it sounds: finding information that is available quickly and uses the least amount of effort to obtain. This type of information-seeking just skims the surface and provides the very basic answers to the information needs. Broad scanning involves spending some time searching across various resources and gradually refining the search parameters. Information encountering is common in this type of information-seeking behavior. Since the user is spending time sifting through many sources, he is more likely to come across information that is related to what he was originally looking for. This is where the gradual refinement of search parameters can occur. The third pattern of information-seeking behavior is deep diving. This pattern involves an increased effort focused towards finding quality information. In this case the quality of the information is preferred over quantity. As such, individuals who search in this way are likely to skip over sources that may not appear to be written by a reputable person or organization.

Regardless of the information-seeking behavior or pattern, more and more people are turning to the internet to find their answers. Leung (2008) conducted a study to look at how much the internet is embedded in our lives. It has become such an integral part of life that oftentimes we don't even notice how reliant we are on being connected. We use the internet as a means to find information and liv our daily lives. Indeed, "Web 2.0 applications such as weblogs, microblogs, wikis, and the virtual communities formed by these technologies exert extensive and important influences on human society" (Yan & Davison, 2013). It has become a social norm to gather information from blogs and social media about anything from nutrition and health to politics and finances. Information seekers also turn towards online discussion boards to

find the answers to their questions. When it comes to health information in particular, it was

found that the anonymity of the internet and online groups provides a good platform for

individuals to find information that they may otherwise be too embarrassed or self-conscious to

look for (Hasler, Ruthven, & Buchanan, 2013). This is in line with Chatman's theory of

information poverty (Chatman, 1996 *as cited in* Hasler, Ruthven, & Buchanan, 2013). The

information found in online discussion boards is user-asked, user-answered. Users who seek

information from online communities often begin solely as knowledge seeking. Over time and

continued use, they may also become knowledge contributors (Yan & Davison, 2013). It appears

that people become knowledge contributors because of an intrinsic motivation, or altruism.

People want to help people, especially those who are in similar situations or having similar

experiences (Oh, 2011; Yan & Davison, 2013). People do not receive some extrinsic reward for

answering questions on internet discussion boards. The reward is intrinsic: knowing they were

able to help someone else in some way, however big or small it may have been. People connect

over shared experiences. We are social creatures and perhaps it is in our nature to form

communities around shared interests, passions, or experiences.

Ploderer, Howard, and Thomas (2008) utilized a bodybuilding web community to answer

"how people appropriate online and offline resources to support passion-centric activities where

offline ties are absent." This is an example where people want to help people who share

common experiences, passions, or needs. In this case, that shared passion is bodybuilding.

Users of this online community, and any passion-centric community utilize the site for three

main reasons: to increase their knowledge, to promote and share their accomplishments, and to

form new friendships and bonds with other users (Ploderer, Howard, & Thomas, 2008). This is

an excellent parallel to the CrossFit community. Many CrossFitters join online communities,

Facebook groups, etc. to look for support and encouragement with fellow CrossFitters; to share

in their journey, the milestones and setbacks; and to just meet people who are as passionate about

CrossFit as they are. These types of social networks carry into offline life where users become

members of existing boxes and groups, or form their own groups. "The connectivity of the

digital environment extends far beyond the electronic networking into the creation of

communities on and offline. The social nature of information seeking that is occurring can be

explained by the connectivity that permeates the digital environment" (Dresang, 2005).

Little research has been done on information-seeking behaviors for physical fitness.

Kilgore and Rippetoe (2007) define physical fitness as "possession of adequate levels of

strength, endurance, and mobility to provide for successful participation in occupational effort,

recreational pursuits, familial obligation, and that is consistent with a functional phenotypic

expression of the human genotype." This definition coincides well with how fitness is defined in

CrossFit. CrossFit is functional fitness; the specialty is not specializing. It prepares the

individual to be prepared not only for the unknown, but also the unknowable

(www.crossfit.com). In fact, "according to the CrossFit creed, they can and should also be

prepared to fell trees, tame bulls and carry families of four on their backs" (Heffernan, 2008). As

CrossFitters become more immersed in the fitness program, they tend to seek out more

information; the longer a person is involved in an activity, the more information needs he or she

may identify. Hirvonen, Huotari, Niemelä, and Korpelainen (2012) found that the more an

individual exercises, the more active they are in searching for information. As individuals

proceed through different stages of change for physical activity, they are better able to recognize

information needs and take a more active role in searching for information (Hirvonen et al., 2012). They may go from browsing and merely encountering information to a broad scanning or deep diving approach.

Methodology

Scholarly research that relates specifically to CrossFit is fairly limited. Research on the CrossFit community, their information needs, and their information-seeking behavior does not exist. The question, then, was how do I write about this topic? How do I look at the information needs of CrossFitters, and how they go about finding that information? After speaking with some members within the CrossFit community, it was obvious where to look: the internet. While coaches and fellow athletes, books, and magazines all offer valuable information, the majority of information, it seems, is found on websites, blogs, social media, and mobile apps. The way that the athletes seek, provide, and share information indicates the very social nature of CrossFit. While resources exist that are based on research and science (though not necessarily scholarly, peer-reviewed), there are also many that are created by community members, for community members. With this in mind, I took to the great and all-powerful Google to begin researching CrossFit.

Research-based information sources for CrossFitters can be found in the CrossFit Journal, as well as other websites like Lift Big, Eat Big, Mobility WOD, BoxLife Magazine, and the Weightlifting Academy. These, and other similar sources provides information on programming, training, nutrition, recovery, and much more. Sources like the CrossFit Journal and BoxLife Magazine are specific to CrossFit. Other sources like Lift Big, Eat Big and the Weightlifting

Academy are not specific to CrossFit but provide excellent supplemental information that CrossFitters can use to increase strength and mobility, and apply to their CrossFit WODs.

Community-based information sources for CrossFitters are plentiful. Discussion boards exist on the official CrossFit website, as well as all over the internet. Blogs that discuss members' journeys through CrossFit, recommended nutrition for athletes, the Paleo diet (very common in the CrossFit world), etc. are popping up more and more. From these types of sources, CrossFitters can gather information from people just like them that are experiencing similar feelings, struggles, triumphs. This is valuable for CrossFitters.

To round everything out, I utilized the Library Literature & Information Science Full Text and SPORTDiscus with Full Text databases, accessed through the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library webpage. Between these two databases, I was able to locate scholarly articles that discussed information-seeking behaviors and needs, information-seeking and behaviors in an online environment, and information needs in health and fitness.

Discussion

There is a heavy lean towards using online sources for information on CrossFit. Some books and magazines are available but are heavily outweighed by virtual resources. The research-based sources provide a lot more technical instruction and science-driven information. These are the sources that athletes will look to when they want to improve their snatch technique, finally conquer double unders, or get their first muscle up. Resources like the CrossFit Journal, Lift Big Eat Big, and MobilityWOD are reviewed for accuracy and are trusted sources.

The CrossFit Journal is an online resource that includes articles, videos, and radio episodes that contain information related to CrossFit. The journal covers everything from the very basics of getting started in CrossFit to nutrition, preparing for competition, and living the CrossFit lifestyle. The information found here is written by top trainers, coaches, and professionals in the fitness world. As athletes progress in their CrossFit journey, they are more likely to want to seek out more information as they identify new information needs. Kuhlthau (1991) explains:

> An information search begins with the user's problem. The gap between the user's knowledge about the problem or topic and what the user needs to know to solve the problem is the information need. The user's state of knowledge is dynamic rather than static, changing as he or she proceeds in the process. Belkin describes a scale of levels in the ability to specify information need as beginning with a new problem in a new situation in which connections can be made with existing knowledge, and as ending with a defined problem in a well understood situation with an identifiable gap in knowledge. The user's ability to articulate requests to the information system can be expected to change according to his or her level of understanding of the problem.

Beginning athletes just want to know how to make it through a WOD without dying. More experienced athletes want to know how to improve their times, how to increase their strength, how to master handstand pushups and muscle ups. As the athletes grow, so does their information needs. Many CrossFit athletes develop an interest in Olympic and power weightlifting, and in increasing their overall strength. These athletes will begin to look outside

of CrossFit, but still within the CrossFit-related realm. Resources like Lift Big Eat Big and the

Weightlifting Academy offer strength programs that athletes can incorporate into their CrossFit

routine. Additionally, a hot topic in the CrossFit world is mobility. More important than killing

a WOD is taking proper care of the body so that the athlete can continue to be a WOD killer.

This means that information on how to increase flexibility and movement, resolve pain, and

prevent injury is gold. Resources like MobilityWOD and "Becoming a Supple Leopard" by

Kelly Starrett are frequently used by CrossFit athletes. MobilityWOD is used as a recovery tool

by athletes which ultimately aids in performance. The information provided here includes how

to stretch properly, use foam rollers, mobility exercises to improve movement and range of

motion.

Community-based information sources focus a lot more on personal opinion and

experience, sharing successes and failures, encouragement and support, healthy eating tips and

tricks. Aside from the CrossFit discussion board, communities form on blogs and social

networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. In these groups that form, members

share with each other stories, images, and videos. This maintains the community aspect of

CrossFit and helps people remain connected. Community-based sources also provide some more

entertainment value. CrossFitters love to talk about CrossFit. How do you know someone does

CrossFit? They won't shut up about it. In addition to information about fitness and nutrition,

members also look for things like CrossFit humor, easily found in community-based sources.

CrossFit basically permeates every area of the athlete's life.

Community-based resources, while not necessarily the best place to look for technical advice, are an excellent avenue for support, sharing tips, and connecting with like-minded athletes. A motto of CrossFit is *Forging Elite Fitness*. Another one, and perhaps a more important one, is *Forging Elite Community*. Cindy Muya (2012), coach and co-founder of CrossFit Kindred in San Jose, California writes:

> At Kindred, we talk a lot about wanting to create a community of people who support each other, who lift each other up, who help and inspire each other to stay on course, and reach their goals. And we are humbled to see this vision come alive in all of you, who've chosen to become a part of this community.

These sentiments are echoed in affiliates across the country. Jennie Yundt (2011), coach at CrossFit Fire in McHenry, Illinois writes on the affiliate's blog:

> At the Fort, the community of people that you will find yourself surrounded by is second to none. We as gym owners have purposely and intentionally put a great amount of effort into making the Fort a fun place to be, because it's important to us. Not just a little important either. It's huge. We organize group outings, cookouts, softball teams, flag football teams, breakfasts and travel to local competitions together because that's the way to get closer together.

Both research-based and community-based information sources are valuable to CrossFit athletes. Many of these resources are easily accessible and often free. A lot of CrossFit athletes develop an interest in Olympic weightlifting and strength training. While some sources like Lift Big Eat Big and the Weightlifting Academy aren't specific to CrossFit, they do offer excellent

supplemental material and programming to athletes who look to branch out. Having these resources available makes it easier to customize the fitness lifestyle each athlete wants to follow.

Conclusion

It is incredible how many people still think that libraries are just books and being told to be quiet. There are still entire subsets of people who do not realize all of the services that are offered to them by their local libraries. The CrossFit community, and perhaps fitness communities in general appears to be one of them. When I spoke to members of the CrossFit community about where they look for CrossFit-related information, libraries were not mentioned at all. The majority of responses focused on web-based sources such as blogs, journals, websites, and social media. As a member of the CrossFit community myself, and having worked in libraries for almost a decade, when I first began CrossFit it felt natural for me to look for information about CrossFit at my local library. I found that since CrossFit is still relatively new, there are very few resources that the library could offer me that are CrossFit specific. I often had to broaden my search to include information on strength training, bodyweight exercises, anatomy of stretching and strength training, nutrition, etc. I had to pull information from sources about the different elements that make up CrossFit then synthesize them together to get the answers I was looking for. Admittedly, though, had I not worked in a library, I would not have thought to look to my local library as a resource for information on fitness.

Conversations with other members of the CrossFit community and observing how information is discussed and shared online indicate that acquiring more information and building knowledge is something that is important to this community. Members will take to social media

to discover new information, to connect, and to share, instead of heading to the local library.

Posts on social media by CrossFit and CrossFit members are incredibly popular, garner a lot of

attention from community members, and are interactive. Even these posts promote the sense of

community. In a blog post "10 Fitness Brands Winning Social Media Right Now" (2014) by

Lucy Hitz of simplymeasured.com CrossFit secured a spot in the top ten because "CrossFit gains

audience engagement by inspiring and building community on social media." What makes these

social media postings so successful appears to be motivating quotes on Twitter, "commenting on

hard, terrifying, and awe-inspiring WOD's along with fellow CrossFit community members" on

Facebook, and "motivating (and sometimes tear-jerking) video and photo content."

Libraries can offer programs that are focused on health and fitness, incorporate gaming

and other activities into the library environment for their patrons. Many libraries loan out video

games. Adding a gaming system to the library that patrons can use on-site is also a fantastic

idea. Studies have been conducted on the use of Wii Fit in college campus common areas and

found that the introduction of the Wii Fit improved physical activity, and promoted fitness and

community (Underdown & Gray, 2010). Libraries could benefit from this by attracting

populations that may underutilize the library, such as teens and perhaps members of fitness

communities. Seeing Wii Fit offerings, or perhaps yoga classes and the like, a few things could

happen. The targeted group may be more inclined to visit the library for these services and to

participate in them with their friends. This generates interest and awareness of everything

libraries have to offer. It also promotes physical activity and healthy habits: "by pointing out the

advantages of introducing gaming into libraries and other less traditional hosting institutions,

participants will gain not only health benefits of toned muscles and flexibility, but also become active builders in these newly minted Community Centers" (Underdown & Gray, 2010).

Libraries are using social media to promote their services, programs, and events. This is also an excellent way to reach out to members of communities that don't necessarily use the library, or think to use the library for their information needs. An athlete is working on his clean and jerk, why would he need to visit a library for help with that? What he may not realize is that the library may offer books on Olympic weightlifting, strength training, and fitness, or databases where he can access reliable information from credible sources. Using social media to promote services and collections (Olympic weightlifting, radio broadcasting, or ceramics) can increase awareness that these resources are available, and perhaps the most valuable resource of all in the library: the librarian.

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