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Investigating the organisational culture of CrossFit

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Given the growth of CrossFit, it is beneficial to explore and better understand its culture. Using Schein's conceptual framework, this study investigated the organisational culture of CrossFit. Focus groups were conducted with five new members, six veteran members, four coaches, and the two owners ($N=17$) from a CrossFit gym in northern Ontario. Participant accounts revealed that the artefacts of the organisational culture included the rugged, industrial appearance of the gym (visual structures and processes) and the social nature of members' interactions prior to/following each workout (observable behaviour). Espoused beliefs and values identified included pride in the gym and their workouts, inclusivity, and a strong sense of community that extended beyond the gym. A shared underlying assumption was the common goal of improving their health and well-being. Highlighting CrossFit's organisational culture provides insight into some of the factors that have made it a successful organisation.

Keywords: organisational culture; CrossFit; exercise groups

Since its inception in 2000, CrossFit has rapidly grown into a billion-dollar international fitness business. In 2013, CrossFit's affiliate gym system netted approximately 1.5–2 billion dollars (Helm, 2013). Today there are over 13,000 affiliate gyms worldwide and that number is growing.¹ CrossFit's training methodology incorporates 5 of the top 10 American College of Sports Medicine's (2015) fitness trends, including body weight training, high-intensity interval training, strength training, functional fitness, and group personal training. A hallmark of CrossFit workouts is a focus on functional movements that incorporate wide range of functional activities and movements (e.g. Olympic weightlifting and rowing). CrossFit workouts are typically structured, varied on a daily basis, and often performed in a group setting. In addition, a core aspect of CrossFit is establishing metrics of performance: "Using whiteboards as scoreboards, keeping accurate scores and records, running a clock, and precisely defining the rules and standards for performance, we not only motivate unprecedented output but derive both relative and absolute metrics at every workout" (www.crossfit.com, 2017). CrossFit's training methodology developed by Greg Glassman, a former gymnast, focuses on a broad and inclusive definition of fitness.

Despite CrossFit's successful business model, research critically examining the inner workings of the organisational culture is limited. Researchers have investigated the use of a CrossFit-based high-intensity power-training model to improve aerobic fitness and body composition (Smith, Sommer, Starkoff, & Devor, 2013) and the consequences associated with motivational climate perceived by CrossFit members (Partridge, Knapp, & Massengale, 2014). In addition, several strength coaches who reviewed the CrossFit methodology noted that they

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were hesitant to recommend CrossFit as a sport-specific training option for their athletes (Petersen, Pinske, & Greener, 2014). As perhaps an exception to the aforementioned lack of research on the organisational culture of CrossFit, Dawson (2015) argued that CrossFit exemplifies a “reinventive institution” where people seek to improve not only their physical bodies, but also their personal identities. Dawson posited that, in some ways, CrossFit also exemplifies elements of a “greedy institution” in that CrossFit requires a great deal of commitment – physically and mentally, and has a way of permeating into many aspects of members’ everyday lives. Interestingly, although testimonials espouse the CrossFit culture as being the driver behind its success, there has been relatively little effort to examine its organisational culture through a critical lens and unpack what this culture entails from the perspective of actual members.

Organisational culture is defined as

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 2010, p. 18)

In other words, these are principles that a company deemed to be cornerstones for running a specific business and are therefore often described to new employees/members as something to the effect of “the way we do things here”. Research has demonstrated links between organisational culture and financial performance by determining aspects of culture that play a crucial role in determining behaviour within organisations, which in turn influences financial performance indirectly through market performance (e.g. Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). Financial performance is also superior in firms that demonstrate a higher culture consensus than those characterised by lower consensus (Chatman, Caldwell, O’Reilly, & Doerr, 2014). Corrupt organisations were described as holding taken-for-granted assumptions that negatively affected their organisational culture (e.g. Campbell & Göritz, 2014). Organisational culture also influences voluntary employee turnover (e.g. Kessler, 2014) and group member attitudes (e.g. Gregory, Harris, Armenakis, & Shook, 2009).

In contrast to the considerable body of research in traditional organisation contexts and within sport (Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015), exploration of organisational culture within the fitness industry is much more limited (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2008). This is somewhat surprising given that the fitness industry is not only sizeable in terms of its profitability (McNeil, 2006), but also considering the notion that successful fitness organisations are in an ideal position to promote higher levels of physical activity on a large scale, which is associated with a host of psychosocial and health benefits. Nonetheless, the extant literature offers some insight into the role of organisational culture in the fitness industry. For example, Wallace and Weese (1995) found that YMCA organisations led by highly transformational leaders tended to report an organisational culture characterised by achieving goals, coordinated teamwork, and a customer-centric focus. More recently, MacIntosh and Doherty (2008) examined private fitness club members’ perceptions of organisational culture and found that private fitness club members’ satisfaction with the facility and intentions to leave were significantly associated with corporate values. Specifically, across both profit and nonprofit organisations within the fitness industry, organisational cultures that emphasised sales positively predicted intention to leave, whereas connectedness was inversely associated with intention to leave in the nonprofit sector only (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2008). As the extant literature clearly shows, an organisation’s culture plays an integral role in member retention and thus it is important for fitness organisations to understand the culture that is portrayed to their members.

The purpose of the current research was to investigate the organisational culture of CrossFit using Schein's (2010) conceptual framework. We draw from Schein's theory of organisational culture because it offers a powerful lens for documenting the explicit and implied beliefs that permeate a given organisation. Indeed, a recent review of organisational culture in sport highlighted that 18 out of 33 studies used Schein's framework as a basis for studying organisational culture (Maitland et al., 2015). Schein proposed that there are three levels of organisational culture, moving from superficial to deeper levels: (1) artefacts, (2) espoused beliefs and values, and (3) basic underlying assumptions. Artefacts include the visible aspects of an organisation, the internal and external environment, language that may be unique to the organisation, style, published lists of values, and observable rituals (Schein, 2010). Within the fitness industry, an example of an artefact would be the appearance of the facility. Espoused beliefs and values consist of ideals and values that have been tested in real world situations and deemed by members to be effective (Schein, 2010). An example would be the core value of pride with the New Zealand Rugby organisation, pride in selection, pride in the uniform, and pride in winning (Johnson, Martin, Palmer, Watson, & Ramsey, 2013). Lastly, basic underlying assumptions – the deepest level of Schein's model – are tacit beliefs and values. The original beliefs and values of a founder or leader may ultimately become the taken-for-granted beliefs and values of an organisation. A key point to emphasise is that Schein's conceptual framework does not assume certain features already exist within a given organisation. Rather, his framework provides a guide for exploring the multiple layers that characterise an organisational culture (Baumgartner, 2009; Hogan & Coote, 2014; Johnson et al., 2013; Macintosh & Doherty, 2007). This is further evidenced by the fact that researchers who have used Schein's framework to study organisational culture in sport have varied in both their paradigmatic approaches (i.e. integration, fragmentation, and differentiation perspectives) and their research interests (i.e. technical, practical, and emancipatory) (Maitland et al., 2015). Overall, this model is well suited to acquiring a detailed understanding of how group members perceive the organisational culture of CrossFit.

Consistent with the assumptions underlying Schein's (2010) framework, our qualitative investigation was underpinned by a critical realist approach (Bhaskar, 1998). Critical realists acknowledge that although knowledge is acquired through subjective frames of reference, knowledge claims should be challenged and continually revised through scientific efforts (Bhaskar, 1978). Critical realism operates from the perspective that reality consists of "events, states, affairs, experiences, impression, and discourse, but also underlying structures, powers, and tendencies that exist, whether or not detected or known through experience and/or discourse" (Patomäki & Wight, 2000, p. 223). As such, we initiated a qualitative investigation to garner descriptive accounts of the structures, norms, and tendencies that characterise the organisational culture of CrossFit facilities.

Methods

Participants

Consistent with a critical realist approach, it should be emphasised that the artefacts, espoused beliefs, values, and basic underlying assumptions of an organisation cannot be understood from a single perspective. As such, we sought perspectives from multiple individuals who occupy distinct roles in a CrossFit gym. Seventeen (10 = male, 7 = female) participants with a mean age of 33.7 (SD=9.92) years old were invited to share their experiences as CrossFit members in a focus group setting. After participants expressed willingness to participate, they were separated into four distinct focus groups based on the participant's role and amount of time with the organisation (owner, $n=2$; coach, $n=4$; veteran member, $n=6$; and new

member, $n = 5$). Veteran members were with the organisation for more than six months and new members were with the organisation for less than six months. Participants reported a variety of sporting and fitness backgrounds before they had joined the organisation, spanning experiences that ranged from varsity athletics to almost no previous sporting experience. Previous athletic experience of members included the national ballet school, intercollegiate hockey, and intercollegiate volleyball.

Procedures

Upon approval from the institutional research ethics board and a local CrossFit gym, researchers recruited participants from a CrossFit gym in Northeastern, Ontario, over a period of two weeks. Approximately 20 separate CrossFit classes were approached over the two-week period – some members received the presentation more than once. Researchers explained the details of the study at the beginning or end of a one-hour CrossFit class. A prepared package of information and informed consent was given to members who received the presentation. Interested members returned the informed consent and were asked if they could attend a focus group at a pre-determined time. To understand whether there were distinct subcultures within the organisation (Schein, 2010), participants were separated into four distinct focus groups by their role within the gym (i.e. owner, coach, veteran, and new member). We initially targeted five participants for each focus group. Due to a scheduling conflict, only four out of the five recruited coaches participated. Moreover, six veteran members indicated a willingness to participate and thus were included in a focus group. Five new members were recruited and all participated. Both owners of the gym made themselves available to participate. We distinguished between newcomers and veterans because transitioning into an unfamiliar social environment places unique demands on newcomers, and they may have a more superficial understanding of what constitutes their gym's organisational culture (Van Mannen & Schein, 1979). A similar logic applied to distinguishing between organisationally defined roles. That is, owners and coaches occupy unique roles within the organisational hierarchy because they are responsible for instructing and leading others throughout workouts and are compensated for their efforts. Selecting participants for focus groups based on hierarchical role as well as length of tenure with the organisation provided an opportunity to garner potentially unique perspectives on the CrossFit gym's organisational culture. The first author conducted each focus group at the local CrossFit gym. Participants were given unique codes for identification during the transcription process. The identification code begins with a "P" and the letter that follows designates their role within the gym (owners = O, coaches = C, veteran member = V, and new member = N). A number was then assigned based on their position during the interview (e.g. PC3). Interviews were audio recorded and lasted approximately 30–60 minutes.

A semi-structured focus group interview guide drawing on Schein's (2010) conceptual model of organisational culture included questions regarding artefacts (e.g. can you describe the aesthetics of a CrossFit gym?), values (e.g. what do you believe are the core values of CrossFit?), and underlying assumptions (e.g. Do you feel a strong bond or sense of connection with other members of the gym?). Follow-up questions were worded in a way to gain a deeper understanding of the actual experiences of each participant. For example, when participants commented on how they felt about a certain aspect of their gym, the researcher would then follow-up to inquire about the specific events that shaped this perception. In addition, in an attempt to better understand the degree of consensus on an issue, as well as alternative perspectives, other focus group participants were encouraged to share their perspectives. A copy of the interview guide is available upon request from the first author.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and identifying information was removed and replaced with a code regarding role and participant number. To understand the organisational culture of this particular CrossFit organisation, as described by members, interviews were thematically analysed following the procedures prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial phase involved familiarising oneself with the transcripts and field notes, which meant reading and re-reading data while searching for meanings and patterns simultaneously (i.e. the process of immersion). Next, initial codes were generated by parsing out sections of text into individually meaningful segments through an open-coding process. That is, sections of text were demarcated according to their topical content. The codes generated in the previous phase were then organised into themes, which required going back through the transcripts to ensure context-dependent meanings were not lost during the coding process. In addition, the creation of themes from the initial codes relied on abductive inference, which entailed moving back and forth between the insights generated by participants and existing theory to achieve a more complex understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bergene, 2007). This is consistent with our critical realist stance, which advocates that “reality is more complex than any belief or theory can fully capture; multiple valid understandings of any phenomenon are possible, and all beliefs and assumptions are tentative and subject to revision” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 657). In this case, Schein’s (2010) description of the various levels of organisational culture served as a valued guiding theory. Finally, the research team re-assessed the themes to ensure they were sufficiently different from one another and were each held together by a common thread. Issues with the initial coding scheme were resolved through discussion. However, no systematic issues were identified in the thematic analysis.

In the context of a critical realistic approach, several aspects of the study are worth noting in terms of judging its methodological rigour and quality. A key issue in studying organisational culture is *researcher positionality*, which is clarifying how a researcher’s personal assumptions and relationship with the entities (e.g. people, places, and culture) under investigation might influence the type of information one is able to garner, and also one’s interpretation of such findings (Misener & Doherty, 2009). Given our interest in detailing the inner workings of a CrossFit gym’s organisational culture, the first author immersed himself in CrossFit’s culture through a two-year membership at the local CrossFit and by travelling to multiple CrossFit gyms throughout Canada and United States. As Van Maanen and Schein (1979) noted, prolonged immersion in a particular environment allows for a researcher to shed the *outsider* label and gain insight into the inner workings of a particular organisational culture. In spending time in the CrossFit community, however, it should also be noted that the first author’s positive experiences might have predisposed him to a more positive view of its culture. As such, the other two members of the research team acted in a peer-debriefing role throughout the research process. Garnering insights from members who held distinct roles in the organisation (i.e. owner, coach, veteran, and new member) was critical to understanding how, if at all, perceptions of organisational culture differed among group members. Further, field notes and the verbatim transcription notes from each of the focus groups were compared to facilitate the thematic analysis process. Finally, participants were shown a summary of the themes that emerged from their focus group to ensure that their views of organisational culture had not been misinterpreted and were accurately represented.

Results

Consistent with Schein’s (2010) framework, 13 distinct themes were organised across the 3 levels of organisational culture. These levels of organisational culture are described as (a) artefacts, (b) espoused beliefs and values, and (c) underlying assumptions. It should be noted that participants’

descriptions of the CrossFit gym's culture did not substantively differ as a function of their position in the organisation (i.e. owner, veteran member, and new member). As a result, the themes representing the four participant groups are presented together. In addition to the subsequent sections providing insight into why perceptions of organisational culture were relatively uniform across the sample, concrete examples of these similarities are highlighted in a supplementary analysis at the end of the results.

Artefacts

Visual structures and processes

Within visual structures and processes, two themes were identified: (a) *the gym* and (b) *CrossFit style*. Participants described the appearance of the gym inside and outside, equipment that was in the gym and the members of the gym (i.e. clothes, physical physique, etc.). “Yeah it’s not like fancy, it’s not about the looks, it’s not about, like if you look at most boxes [gyms] it seems bare and not fancy, and another thing is there are no mirrors” (PC2). Although participants said that it was easy to visually distinguish between newcomers and existing group members, people tended to quickly embrace the distinctive style of their group:

So, I would say first time people come in you can tell who they are because they look nervous, look a little bit out of there comfort zone but once people start coming a lot, You pull your socks up to your knees. (PV1)

Notably, participants described a distinct style that included Reebok shirts and shorts with the CrossFit emblem, high socks, and headbands: “... and there is a CrossFit style too. Like the big head bands and high socks, you know the high level CrossFitter you can pick them out like that” (PN3).

Observable behaviours

The category of observable behaviours has two distinct themes: (a) *socialising* and (b) *workout styles*. Socialising was defined as the communication between members both at and away from the gym. Participants described other members as “Usually pretty outgoing. Pretty outgoing people, energetic, very friendly” (PO1). A norm of being social and introducing oneself was a recurring theme in the focus groups:

“You definitely socialize for a second when you get in there and then you grab a dowel (PVC pipe) and start to stretch” (PV5). Every one-hour workout session follows the same structure. “There is always a warm-up, most of the time there is a skill or a strength session, there is always a WOD (Workout Of the Day) and then there is mobility if there is time” (PN2).

Workout styles was defined as the specific style of workout that is performed at CrossFit gyms, these vary from Olympic weightlifting movements to body weight training. All aspects of the one-hour class are always written down on the board for everyone to see. These visual and observable aspects of culture are aspects of the beliefs and values of the organisation, which is the second level of culture.

Espoused beliefs and values

Ideal, goals, values, and aspirations

Within the ideals, goals, values, and aspirations category, three distinct themes emerged: (a) *leave your ego at the door*, (b) *communal pride*, and (c) *work hard, have fun*. The theme “leave your ego

at the door” refers to the preferred mindset of everyone at the gym. “You have to leave your ego at the door; there is always someone stronger than you” (PN2). The ideal is not to admire yourself, but to acknowledge and have pride in your accomplishments at the gym and in the gym itself. This theme is displayed in a quote from the owner’s focus group: “There is pride, a huge sense of pride, just like we say in the rules, the (work) we do is really hard. So there is a big sense of pride with what we are accomplishing” (PO1). The third theme from this category was hard work, have fun. Members of the gym were expected to work hard during the one-hour session but the exercise programme was also meant to be enjoyable. A new member described her time at the gym as, “... it is just fun coming here to the gym, everyone is in a good mood there are no egos, you know everybody knows everybody, if you don’t know someone then you go and introduce yourself” (PN5).

Ideologies

The second category within espoused beliefs and values is ideologies, which are ideas that guide the group/organisation. The themes that emerged were (a) *inclusive, team atmosphere* and (b) *structured programme*. The first theme describes the dynamic between members and coaches in the gym. The members develop a team-like relationship, as described by this member: “yeah you are pretty much a team; everybody helps everybody out and encourages each other, so it is good that way” (PN5). Participants also explained that this team atmosphere stretches across all CrossFit gyms and just not their own: “Inclusiveness and diversity, at the same time you can cross the world and you still have the same thing in common. The class doesn’t even have to be run in the same language and you’ll know what you’re doing.” (PC2). The second theme emerged when participants described workouts performed during a one-hour session. From the experience of the first author and descriptions from participants it can be deduced that every part of the workout is structured. The warm-up, skill training, and workout all have a designated time limit and repetition scheme. Each exercise has progressions to move through to get to the full movement. Not all members can complete a muscle up (dead hang to support position on rings or a bar), so a coach will give members alternatives to practice until members can move to the next stage of the progression. This will continue until the member eventually completes the movement. Certain movements can take months or years to master and thus require many progressions.

Rationalisations

The last category within espoused beliefs and values is rationalisations, which are the explanations for the actions of an organisation: (a) *community* and (b) *challenge* were the two distinct themes that emerged. Community is what arises when members complete these difficult workouts together in a group. Community also describes the larger group of people that do this type of workout programme in different gyms across the world. One member described the CrossFit community as; “it is kind of like an unspoken family no matter where you go” (PN1). One of the owners explained the universal aspect of the programme that is a large part of the community:

Yeah, because it’s so universal, the exercises are so universal, you can go to any [Cross Fit] gym and you know they say we are doing Fran (CrossFit workout), or we are doing a thruster, every gym around the world know exactly what that it is. (PO1)

Members rationalised completing the difficult workouts because they endured it together and built relationships. Coaches and owners particularly emphasised this aspect of community. One coach

described the community feel within the CrossFit gym by contrasting his experiences at other facilities:

(You) go to a class at (another) gym and you are just waiting in the class and you hope no one notices you and do your thing and you leave. I'm like "what do you mean a community" but now I get it. It's different. (PC2)

In the view of these participants, the sense of community is a large part of what separates the culture of CrossFit from other commercial fitness facilities, along with the challenge that the workouts present. The challenge that CrossFit workouts present was a theme on its own. The workouts were described as having a unique blend of modalities (i.e. weightlifting, body weight training, and group fitness training) and offer a different and challenging alternative to other commercial fitness facilities. Participants stated that the challenge CrossFit presents was a key aspect in adherence to the programme. However, some participants noted that they exercised beyond a point that they may normally stop if they were on their own. When describing a first experience in CrossFit, one participant said: "I hurt my back and I nearly barfed on (a coach's) feet [laughs] because I wasn't thinking and I thought I could do more than I should be doing" (PV5). Overall, this highlights that members' views toward physical challenges are partly shaped by the strong sense of community.

Basic underlying assumptions

Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values

The espoused beliefs and values of the organisation are borne from the basic underlying assumptions, which is the final level of Schein's model of organisational culture. The themes that emerged within the unconscious beliefs and values category were (a) *common goal of health and fitness* and (b) *shared experience*. The first theme of a common goal is what helps bond members of the gym together, along with the second theme of the shared experience of working out together. These two themes are the underlying assumptions that the rest of the organisational culture is built upon. One coach described the common goals of coaches and members, "... yeah we are like minded because we want to be healthier, be fitter, learn something new whatever your reason might be" (PC2). A new gym member describes the bond between members as:

... just like everyone is sharing in the same struggle, so we all do a terrible WOD (Workout Of the Day) and we have that bond with someone, whereas at Good Life you have your sheet of paper, your legs that day, you're doing arms, I mean that's not something I would do but, you know what I mean, you are on totally different routines. Whereas we are sharing in a workout and in our struggle, and at the end of it your like "you and me" we like pain bond almost. (PN3)

The bond was described similarly by each of the focus groups, which would indicate that your status at the gym has little effect on the bond you form with other members.

Supplementary analysis

In reviewing the findings as a whole, a striking feature that emerged from the separate focus groups was the similarity among participants' perceptions of CrossFit's organisational culture, regardless of whether they were new members, veteran members, coaches, or owners. For example, when participants were asked about the core values of CrossFit. PO1 described the core values as "hardwork, community ...", PN2 simply said "Community", and a veteran member described a core value as "the team part of it" (PV3). Another example pertains to when participants were queried about the emotions associated with being a part of the CrossFit

gym. One new member described their emotions as “I’m very proud to say I go to CrossFit” (PN2). Both owners (e.g. “emotions ... there is pride a huge sense of pride” [PO1]) and veteran members (e.g. “pride” [PV1], “proud” [PV3 and PV5]) echoed similar sentiments. These are only two examples of multiple instances where participants in separate focus groups gave the same or similar answers to the interviewer’s questions.

Discussion

Past research within the fitness industry has examined how employees perceive organisational culture (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005) and how organisational culture impacts job satisfaction and intention to leave the organisation (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2008). Based on the perceptions garnered from members, coaches (employees), and owners of a particular CrossFit gym, the findings provide insight into the nature of CrossFit organisational culture through the lens of Schein’s (2010) conceptual framework. Although support for the three levels of this cultural framework has been found in other areas, to our knowledge, this is the first direct application of the model to assess organisational culture in the fitness industry. At the most superficial level, this particular CrossFit gym’s organisational culture was characterised by a rugged, stripped-down workout environment, distinctive gym outfits, and a friendly atmosphere. The visual structure of this gym and other CrossFit gyms stand in contrast to other fitness organisations. At a deeper level of analysis, it was apparent that these visual structures and observable behaviours were an expression of the organisation’s espoused beliefs and values. In the CrossFit facility we investigated, the espoused beliefs and values reflected a commitment to promoting inclusivity with a high degree of structure, which was held together by communal values, personal enjoyment, and constantly challenging oneself. However, ultimately, these espoused beliefs and values were borne from the underlying assumptions of the organisational culture. To this end, creating a sense of unity through shared experiences and a common goal (i.e. health and fitness) appeared to signify the core values of the organisation. The following sections describe how these insights inform the broader literature related to organisational culture and the fitness industry.

As it pertains to theory related to organisational culture, a notable finding was that each group of participants (i.e. new members, veteran members, coaches, and owners) described a similar culture as it pertained to its artefacts, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions. These results suggest the absence of subcultures within the organisation, at least with active members. Participants’ views of artefacts, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions did not appear to vary as a function of the hierarchical position they held at the gym. This is noteworthy when considering that previous research within the fitness industry has shown variation in organisational culture perceptions as a function of group member position. In a study by MacIntosh and Doherty (2005), there was a significant gap between the perceptions of employees and the intention of leaders within the organisation investigated by MacIntosh and Doherty (2005). Lower-level employees can sometimes view the culture of an organisation differently than executives (leaders), and the presence of this “culture gap” suggests that employees do not have a consistent understanding of how things are, or are supposed to be, in the organisation.

The absence of a “culture gap” between owners/coaches (leaders) and members suggests that there is a consistent understanding of how things are, and are supposed to be, in the organisation. The similarities within this organisation, particularly between the new members and the other categories could be partially explained by the nature of the organisationally defined role boundaries. Van Mannen and Schein (1979) proposed that, over the course of organisational membership, group members navigate various socially constructed boundaries related to their role responsibilities. Notably, functional boundaries outline how task responsibilities are differentiated among

group members, hierarchical boundaries refer to the status distinctions within the group, and inclusionary boundaries delineate the social circles that exist within an organisation (Van Mannen & Schein, 1979). Participant descriptions revealed that these inclusionary boundaries are relatively easy to cross, and acceptance into the inner circles of the organisation is gained quickly. The overt status distinctions created by the hierarchical structures, which characterise many corporate settings, appear to be muted in this CrossFit gym. The lack of boundaries and rapid acceptance into the organisation perhaps explains why members held similar perceptions of their CrossFit gym's organisational culture.

Communal pride was another key theme that emerged from the focus groups. Pride in your abilities, in yourself, and in the gym was identified by participants as the emotion they most associate with being a part of the gym. Although organisational culture may contribute to the success of particular organisations, it is also important to recognise that organisations that sustain success over time are likely to have a strong culture (Ledford, Mohrman, Mohrman, & Lawler, 1989). When investigating intercollegiate athletics, Scott (1997) determined that the two aspects critical to long-range success are sharing a common belief system and working toward a unified goal (Scott, 1997). These are what we determined to be the basic underlying assumptions of this CrossFit gym. Participants all believed that the training was beneficial and that they all worked hard every time they were at the gym. Individual goals of each member varied greatly but the common goal was to improve their overall fitness and well-being through CrossFit.

Participants' descriptions pertaining to common beliefs and unified goals indicate that there was a strong psychological sense of community among the CrossFit members we interviewed. As noted by McMillan and Chavis (1986), a psychological sense of community is characterised by feelings of membership, a sense that one can influence as well as be influenced by the group, a fulfilment of psychological needs, and shared emotional connection. Notably, these four aspects outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986) all appeared within the findings of the study. A strong sense of membership was observed through members' descriptions of participating in structured classes and the gym's distinctive social identity. Opportunities for members to influence one another were seen through discussions about helping and encouraging fellow group members, which is perhaps fostered by the lack of power and status differences between members. In terms of need fulfilment, members experienced competence through the variation of skills, autonomy through their belief in their abilities, and relatedness to other members through the social aspect of the gym – all of which are core needs captured by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Finally, the shared emotional connection emerged as a theme from our data (i.e. shared experiences) as an underlying assumption held by the members of the CrossFit gym under investigation. A benefit of establishing a strong psychological sense of community is its potential positive implications for member retention (McCarthy, 2004). Using this model may help to understand how the community aspect of CrossFit fits into the larger organisational culture.

Notwithstanding the ostensive benefits of developing a sense of community in a fitness context, it is also important to recognise the potential downsides to such a tightly knit social environment. For example, Dawson (2015) suggested that this community is kept strong by “weeding out dissident voices”, and goes on to note that

CrossFit is not for everybody, and those who are repelled by the idea of being cheered on by peers or by the demanding workout will simply not sign up for CrossFit or may choose not to return to the box. Those who stay rarely complain about CrossFit's practices. (p. 11)

This could very well be true the participants within our study all spoke positively regarding the experience with CrossFit. To assess the “dissident voices” one would have to investigate previous members who have discontinued their participation in CrossFit.

Another point worth noting is that the sense of community, combined with the emphasis of overcoming personal barriers through intense physical challenges, may push some individuals past their normal limits of physical exertion. Notably, a strong sense belonging to a group/organisation is associated with increased social pressure, and individuals often engage in deliberate attempts to gain social approval by conforming to perceived norms (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). As highlighted in the results section, members may embrace intense physical challenges to gain the approval of others, and thus it is important that coaches and owners recognise this aspect of community to keep the health of their members as their top priority. Overall, it should be noted that opinions on CrossFit tend to be polarising. These opinions can stretch across a number of domains including fitness methodology (Petersen et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013) and culture (Dawson, 2015).

Although the study had a number of strengths including the use of a guiding theoretical framework and the inclusion of multiple perspectives from a CrossFit gym, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. We made a deliberate decision to pursue depth of understanding in a particular context, rather than breadth of understanding across multiple contexts. As a consequence, participants' descriptions are derived from a single CrossFit gym in Northeastern Ontario. At the time of the study, the gym had a membership of approximately 150 members, within a small city, which may have been a contributing factor that shaped participants' perception of culture. It is possible that a gym with a larger membership or one with a more elite/competitive focus would display different aspects of culture. To say the findings are applicable to all CrossFit gyms would not be appropriate. Another relevant limitation is that focus groups were conducted at one time point. There are points during the year where CrossFit members may become more competitive. For example, the CrossFit Open is a five-week period where all CrossFit members are welcomed to sign up and compete against one another in a worldwide competition. Scores are entered online and there is a leader board where you can see your placement. If the focus groups had taken place during this time, it is possible that the culture may have been perceived differently. This question awaits further research to explore whether perceptions of organisation culture change over time. Moreover, our investigation relied on the experiences of current members of a CrossFit gym, and they generally provided a positive assessment of its organisational culture. Garnering insights from former members may provide insight into whether there are certain aspects of organisational culture that are less appealing to individuals. Indeed, our research cannot rule out the possibility that certain individuals gravitate toward CrossFit gyms and thus are predisposed to view its organisational culture favourably. Nevertheless, individuals from a range of backgrounds participated in the focus groups.

From our investigation of organisational culture in CrossFit, several possible directions of study may be undertaken. It could be beneficial to investigate if elite CrossFit athletes' perceptions of organisational culture bear similarities to less competitive CrossFit gym members. Within the membership of a CrossFit gym it is possible to have elite CrossFit athletes and more recreational CrossFit athletes participating in the same workout class. Understanding athletes' perceptions on either end of the performance spectrum could be beneficial to gym owners and managers. Recognising differences in perceptions may provide managers with the information needed to address any negative cultural perceptions and promote the organisational culture that they envision. This research would also be beneficial to extend previous research that investigated members' perception of organisational culture and its effect on intention to leave or stay with an organisation (Macintosh & Doherty, 2007), future work could examine these links across different CrossFit gyms and examine potential mechanisms (i.e. mediators) and conditional boundaries (i.e. moderators) related to the organisational culture and intention to stay. As an example, previous research has indicated social identity as a potential mediator in this relationship (Cole & Bruch, 2006).

A final recommendation for future work relates to understanding the processes that drive and sustain the organisational culture of CrossFit. According to organisational socialisation theory, the ways in which newcomers are socialised is likely a key antecedent to establishing and/or maintaining a distinct organisational culture (Van Mannen & Schein, 1979). As such, similar to recent research that described the newcomer integration processes that occur in team sport settings (Benson, Evans, & Eys, 2016), examining the strategies used to socialise new members may provide valuable insight into how CrossFit's organisational culture is maintained. This could potentially offer insight into levels of adherence and why the CrossFit community has grown so rapidly.

Conclusion

In summary, this study examined the organisational culture of CrossFit, using Edgar Schein's (2010) model of organisational culture as a guide for our research. Our results describe an organisational culture at all three levels of Schein's model (artefacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions). The organisational culture, which is rooted in shared experiences and a strong sense of community, is believed to be the driving force behind the rapid growth and success of the CrossFit organisation.

Note

1. The CrossFit affiliate system is one of multiple revenue streams including entry fees for the CrossFit Open, ticket sales to the CrossFit games, royalties from its clothing and footwear partnership with Reebok, and the certification program of their coaches. It should be noted that gyms can become a CrossFit affiliate and utilise their training methodology if the application process is successful, an annual fee is paid, and CrossFit-certified coaches are instructing the clients.

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Appendix: Focus group guides

Note. The questions below were used as a general guide, and are not necessarily a verbatim portrayal of the wording used by the focus group facilitator. In addition, the sequence of the questions depended on the general flow of each focus group.

Member version

- 1) Could you describe a typical CrossFit Gym?
- 2) Describe a typical CrossFitter.
 - How do they dress?
 - How do they behave?
 - Describe their attitude and beliefs?
- 3) Describe the routine you go through when at the gym.
 - Structure of workout?
- 4) What are terms that only a CrossFit gym member would know?
- 5) What are the core values of CrossFit?
- 6) What are the rules of the gym?
 - Do you agree with all of the rules
 - Do you feel there are any rules that should be changed/removed/added?
 - Are there any unwritten rules that are not posted?
- 7) Do you feel the rules of the gym correspond to the core values of CrossFit?
- 8) Describe the CrossFit community?
 - Do you have an example of how community is fostered with the members at CrossFit?
 - And extends beyond the gym?
- 9) Describe your first experience CrossFit Experience
 - Thoughts/emotions
 - How has that experience changed/not changed when you compare it to today?
- 10) Describe the role CrossFit has played in your life?
- 11) How has your experience in CrossFit differed from other physical activity experiences
 - Organised sports and other gyms
- 12) Can you identify any aspects of your experience with CrossFit that have influenced you to continue to be a member?
- 13) Do you feel you have a lot in common with other members of the gym?
- 14) Do you feel a strong bond or sense of connection with your gym mates?
 - Probe for a yes response: Describe this connection with your gym mates?
 - Probe for a no response: Why do you think this is?
- 15) How important is being part of the gym to how you view yourself as a person
 - Probe: Does being part of the gym influence your self-image?
- 16) In general, describe the feelings and emotions that you associate with being a member of the gym?

Coach version

- 1) Could you describe a typical CrossFit Gym?
- 2) Describe a typical CrossFitter.
 - How do they dress?
 - How do they behave?
 - Describe their attitude and beliefs?
- 3) Describe the routine you go through when at the gym.
 - Structure of workout?
- 4) What are terms that only a CrossFit gym member would know?
- 5) What are the core values of CrossFit?
- 6) What are the rules of the gym?
 - Do you feel there are any rules that should be changed/removed/added?
 - Are there any unwritten rules that are not posted?
- 7) Describe the CrossFit community?
 - Do you have an example of how community is fostered with the members at CrossFit?
 - And extends beyond the gym?

- 8) Describe your first experience CrossFit Experience
 - Thoughts/emotions
 - How has that experience changed/not changed when you compare it to today?
- 9) Describe the role CrossFit has played in your life?
- 10) How has your experience in CrossFit differed from other physical activity experiences
 - Organised sports and other gyms
- 11) Can you identify any aspects of your experience with CrossFit that have influenced you to continue to be a member?
- 12) Do you feel you have a lot in common with other members of the gym?
- 13) Do you feel a strong bond or sense of connection with your gym mates?
 - Probe for a yes response: Describe this connection with your gym mates?
 - Probe for a no response: why do you think this is?
- 14) How important is being part of the gym to how you view yourself as a person
 - Does being part of the gym influence your self-image?
- 15) In general, describe the feelings and emotions that you associate with being a member of the gym?