

Playbook Five

Executive Summary



Project Overview

Playbook Five, a company focused on creating virtual reality playbooks for athletic teams, sought to better understand and gain insight into how athletes think about community, belonging, and engagement.

This research was conducted during HF780: Field Methods. The project was created, conducted, and reported on individually.

Research Questions & Rationale

- What makes a person feel like they belong to a team/community?
- How do athletes engage with one another?
- What does 'being part of a community' mean to a person?
- How does engagement with other teammates [community members] impact an athlete's performance?

These questions center on the lived realities and aspirations of actual people. The above questions ask about the person in the context of a community, whether that means the group as a whole or their relationship to individual community members. These questions stem from key ideas in the discovery phase, such as "what is a community?", which asks generally about "people" and tries to define the abstract concept of "community." This study focuses the concept of those questions on the individual, allowing participants to talk broadly about their experiences in those contexts.

Approach

- This study utilized in-depth interviews to approach answering the research questions.
- Participants were recruited through a social media blast that was sent via Facebook to the group page of a local running club (of which the researcher is also a member).
- The interviews were conducted one-on-one in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the formative and current experiences that each participant has with community, engagement, and belonging.
- The interviews took place in a quiet location outside the context of exercise. Due to time and location constraints, the interviews were a mix of online (video chat) and in-person conversations.

General Findings

- The results of the in-depth interviews produced two distinct personas, each of whom engage in fitness and socialization in different ways:
 - Generally, people who are more competitive athletically tend to engage with exercise communities for the purposes of camaraderie through shared effort and improving their performance.
 - People who are primarily interested in fitness maintenance and who consider themselves to be more casual athletes often choose to engage in exercise communities as a means of socializing with like-minded individuals, listening to and sharing personal stories, and providing motivation to continue exercising at a certain level of effort.
- Universally, however, participants expressed an affinity for a group brought together through shared interests, compatible goals, and mutual support amongst community members.

Study Design

Ideal Sample

	SAMPLE	SELECTION
BEHAVIORS	Looking for people who engage in physical fitness regularly	Work out for more than an hour at a time at least four days a week OR play on a sports team
	Looking for people who engage with others in the fitness community	Show evidence of online or in-person engagement with other people who work out in the same way
ABILITIES	Able to be physically active	Able to physically exercise in some way
	Able to have access to some sort of community	Participates in a sport or fitness activity that has a community either in-person or online
DEMOGRAPHICS	Adults of mixed gender	To the extent possible, balanced male, female, and “will not disclose”
	Live in the US	Based in or near New England
PSYCHOGRAPHICS	Looking for people who believe that they are athletic	Shows evidence of athleticism and/or athletic habits
	Looking for people who believe that fitness is collaborative	Show evidence of belonging to a fitness-related group, including social media, gyms, or athletic clubs

Interview Setup

CONTEXT

The context for this research study was a combination of online and in-person interviews. At least four interviewees belong to the same South Boston-based running club, but they live in disparate parts of the state.

Interviewing out of the context of fitness communities will allow participants to focus exclusively on the questions and not on an outside task such as exercise. Additionally, asking questions outside the community setting might make interviewees discuss other communities to which they belong, and may make them more open with their feelings about those communities.

TIME PERIOD

The topics of belonging and engagement are relatively abstract, and the aim of the study is to glean information on the formative and current motivations and feelings that athletes have about the communities to which they belong. As such, this study conducted in-depth interviews in one-hour-long segments. This allowed the researcher adequate time to ask in-depth scripted and follow-up questions without inconveniencing the participants.

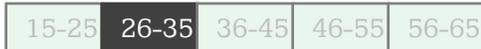
DYNAMIC

Interviews were conducted one-on-one between the researcher and individual participants. Though the researcher acknowledged that membership in the same club might impact participants' responses, the goal of conducting the interviews one-on-one was to ensure participant comfort in sharing thoughts, opinions, aspirations, and challenges. This dynamic also allowed the researcher to target participants' individual experiences, rather than focusing on the experiences shared by the group as a whole.

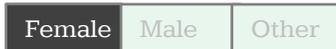
Personas

Persona 1 - The Serious Non-Competitor

AGE RANGE

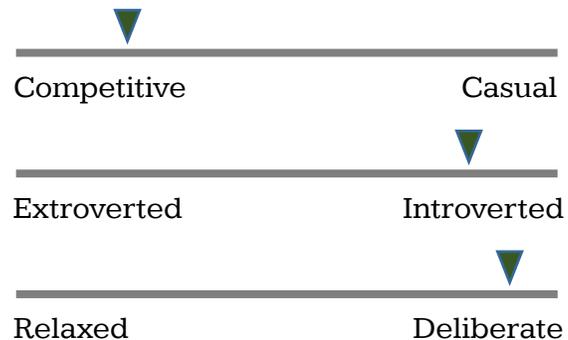


GENDER



“I feel the need to exercise every day, and I feel tired or antsy if I don’t make it to the gym or out for a run. I always push myself to run faster and longer, but I try to avoid comparing myself to others. I kind of like when people tell me my pace or the conditions I run in are ‘crazy’.”

EXERCISE ATTITUDES



BEHAVIORS

- Prefers extreme forms of preferred exercise
- Grew up playing sports competitively
- Exercises most days of the week
- Likes to start the day with exercise
- Has an awareness of how athletic performance compares to others
- Socializes in small groups; has a small, close-knit group of friends
- Professionally high-achieving
- Does not use social media often
- Values the destination over the journey
- Mostly prefers to exercise alone
- Enters 1-2 fitness events per year

TENSIONS/BARRIERS

- Not enough hours in the day to always get an adequate workout in
- Can experience emotional and physical burn out
- Dislikes competitive environments
- Quiet or shy around new people
- Does not like to deviate from routine
- Close friends live far away
- Struggles to find a balance between recreation and competition
- Nervous about the possibility of exercise-halting injury

Persona 1 - The Casual Evangelist

AGE RANGE

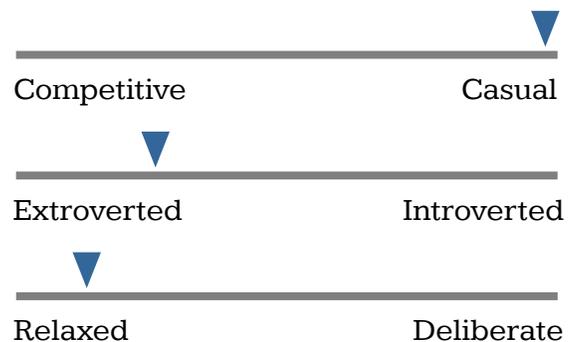


GENDER



“I love working out because it makes me feel good. I use exercise as an opportunity to connect with people—both those I know and those I don’t. I view each workout as a chance to have a new experience and enjoy the journey.”

EXERCISE ATTITUDES



BEHAVIORS

- Would refer to self as athletic, but not necessarily an athlete
- Did not play sports or exercise until adulthood
- Has one preferred sport, but supplements with multiple other athletic activities
- Prefers to exercise with others
- Actively seeks opportunities to connect with other people
- Listens to music or a podcast when exercising alone
- Enters multiple athletic events each year
- Wants to be liked by or connect with everyone she meets
- Values the journey over the destination
- Uses social media frequently

TENSIONS/BARRIERS

- Does not like to exercise with people who push out of comfort zone
- Sometimes struggles with weight and body image concerns
- Sometimes needs to take time off from exercise due to injury
- Less inclined to exercise without specific goals in mind
- Can be intimidated by more competitive athletes

Core Themes

Shared Experience

Level of appreciation for and affinity with an exercise community is universally tied to perception of shared experience.

- Both Serious Non-Competitors (SNCs) and Casual Evangelists (CEs) cite the process of sharing an experience with others, specifically in the context of exercise, as an integral means of forging a connection with those people.
- SNCs specifically make note of shared experience with regard to people who exercise at their same level; in the context of the running community, this means people who run at their pace and ability. They do not tend to focus on the broader context of the running club or workout class as being a shared experience that ties them together.
- SNCs often discussed team sport experiences when talking about shared experiences in their current exercise communities. They talked about how the shared experience of competing, succeeding, or failing together created a unique kind of friendship that was deeper and completely separate from other areas of friendship.
- CEs are broader in their perception of shared experience. They see the experience of getting through a run or a workout as a common bond, regardless of whether they are actually running with the other people in the community or at a completely different pace and ability level.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What makes a person feel like they belong to a team/community?
2. How do athletes engage with one another?
3. What does 'being part of a community' mean to a person?
4. How does engagement with other teammates [community members] impact an athlete's performance?

Mutual Support

A significant benefit of identifying and exercising with a group (of any number) is the feeling of mutual support between group members.

- Both the SNC and the CE value the perceived qualities of mutual support that they find in their various athletic-related communities.
- Both SNCs and CEs noted the welcoming nature of their running community specifically; both groups mentioned that members often check in on each other, even if there is not much familiarity.
- SNCs appreciated that their running communities were uniquely welcoming, but found the greatest sense of mutual support in the provision of emotional support when they suffered an activity-altering injury (like a stress fracture while training). They noted that members of their running community were uniquely capable of providing effecting empathy and understanding during a difficult time. One SNC recalled her running friends intentionally thinking of ways to distract her from focusing on not being able to run, taking her out to bars and to healing exercise classes.
- CEs found that mutual support was one of their reasons for continuing to take part in athletic communities; they cited a lack of stigma or critique regardless of ability, as well as shared enthusiasm for spectating races in which other members are running.

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Comfort with Others

The ability to feel fully comfortable, to the extent that conversation flows easily and reaches beyond superficial small talk, is related to the perceived sense of membership in that setting.

- Both SNCs and CEs offered specific examples of intimate personal information shared while exercising with community members. Both expressed that these kinds of exchanges were typical within the exercise community, but not necessarily typical in any other social situation.
- SNCs are generally introverted and do not expect to connect easily with others, but were surprised by the speed with which they were able to converse on a deep level with others in their exercise communities. They often felt most comfortable with community members closely matched their own fitness abilities.
- CEs are generally extroverted, and specifically joined exercise communities to forge connections with new people. They enjoy feeling comfortable immediately, which allows them to meet new people regardless of ability.
- While both SNCs and CEs find that they are able to be comfortable within their exercise communities, both identified a small number of people (as few as one and as many as five) with whom they are most comfortable. When they have a choice, they choose to exercise with this identified group.

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Peer Finding

Athletes are drawn to connect most deeply and form the most enduring relationships with people who exercise at their own ability level.

- Both SNCs and CEs identified a process through which they identified their closest relationships in their exercise communities.
- SNCs generally preferred to run with one other person or a small group of people, while CEs are comfortable in a group of any size.
- SNCs identified a small number of specific people with whom they routinely run, while CEs mentioned a variety of people they may or may not run with at varying times.
- SNCs want to run with people who run at or just above their own pace threshold. They find these people by heading out at a pace that works for them and then, over the course of several runs, making an effort to talk to those people. Once that connection is made, SNCs will look to run with those people in the future.
- CEs exercise in part to connect with other people. They will speak to anyone who spends a few minutes or more around them. However, they tend to spend the most time with people who run at or below their pace threshold, and after one experience running with those people will look for them in subsequent outings.

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Motivation

Regardless of ability level or specific goals, athletes seek sources of motivation to continue or strengthen their exercise routines.

- Both SNCs and CEs identify specific points of motivation in their exercise practices.
- Both SNCs and CEs sometimes choose to run with others to increase their motivation. However, they differ in their rationale: SNCs run with others to improve their performance and endurance, while CEs run with others to create accountability and ensure that they “show up.”
- SNCs primarily operate on internal motivation. As lifelong competitive athletes, they are compelled to exercise, and feel tired, antsy, or anxious if they cannot meet their exercise goals on a given day.
- CEs typically seek external motivation. They began exercising later in life, often in response to a health concern. They feel a sense of accountability and commitment when exercising with others, both of which motivate them to continue.
- CEs also experience genuine enjoyment from exercising with and meeting other runners, and this also provides a separate form of motivation. They want to go for a run because it gives them the opportunity to connect with others in a unique way.

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Next Steps

This study was exploratory in nature, which means that it moved beyond definitions of “community”, “engagement”, and “belonging” to focus on how those concepts play out in the lived experience of athletes. The findings show that athletes of varying levels do engage with fitness communities, and that those communities are integral to their understanding and practice of their sport and to their personal goals and aspirations.

As a next step, Playbook Five should consider the differences in how the two personas identify, interact with, and maintain their membership in their exercise communities. While the actual engagement varies by persona, their priorities are aligned on many levels. Ideating should remain firmly rooted in the lived experiences and stories of athletes and their exercise communities.