

Chapter 25

Mixed Methods and Off/ On-Line Research: A Case Study – Fitness, Smartphone and Devices, and Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The chapter proposes a methodological consideration on the use of mixed methods and the social opportunities of digital technologies in sports and wellness practices. The research carried out tries to answer the following question: What are the social repercussions and body care practices allowed by digital technologies in the field of sports and physical activities for well-being? The contribution investigates the relationship that is established between practitioners of individual fitness and wellness sports activities, mainly in gyms, and the changes attributable to HTI (human technology interactions) with digital devices (apps and participation in online groups). Through a qualitative-quantitative methodology approach, the multifunctionality of the aforementioned digital tools (on a mediatic, playful, and technological level) were observed in order to verify whether the convergence between digital and sports social worlds is an instrument of only subjective well-being or may indeed prove as a new collective way of sharing, participating in, and adopting healthy practices.

INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL SOCIETY AND SPORTING BODY

The debate on the status of bodies on the web is very heated today: in the face of the complexity and quality of information, it appears intimidated by the speed, precision and power of new technologies. The most current visual features of the body are the result of the objective transformation that biomedical technologies have introduced in the last decades, accompanied more and more often by bioethics,

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as well as by the much more consolidated and widespread practices of bodybuilding, fitness, body art and cosmetic surgery.

However, according to the most recent research developments in this field, the training and exercise of the body are still the subject of radical experiments in performance as well as a setting for observing innovative experiences through the use of personal digital devices (smartphones, specific apps or wearable device) in the health sector (Maturo, 2012) and in sports.

In both cases, the idea that is reinforced is that of the body as an object, resulting from choices and options (Giddens, 1991: 8) towards an ideal image of well-being, which considers sport and physical activity to be the privileged tools for a healthier life – both from a psychophysical point of view, and from a relationship with others and with the environment.

The construction of one's body today is considered as a reflective project, a real task on oneself, argues Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 1999: 127-149) who, in the triumph of everyday life, sees in this personal project an absolute concern, as well as the most important pastime of the “post”-modern individual. The extraordinary diffusion of services for body care (cosmetics, surgery, dietary regimes, gym activities) is the most evident confirmation of this, so much so that nowadays it is the exercised, athletic body that is configured as a universal canon of beauty and harmony. The image of the sports body has become the subject of dreams that come true, of projects that translate into activities and exercises that give physical shape to the ideal. But also, as a place of transformation of these same ideals.

The “fit” body therefore appears as a universal ideal and allows for a double glance. From within the sport field, it is useful for reading the transformations made in physical activity practices; from the outside, it identifies – among the various emerging practices – those that characterize the web society (Cipolla, 2015) expressing both a generalized attention to the concept of wellness culture (Russo, 2018) and the growing diffusion of a model of social behavior which refers to the contemporary ideal of sporty man (Bausinger, 2008).

The social implications related to the use of digital devices and social media networks in the world of individual sports practices of body building, fitness and wellness are therefore the subject of these reflections.

In the context of the digital society in its offline and online multi-life dimensions (Boccia Artieri, 2012) we have tried to understand the cultural artefacts' nature of digital technologies in the field of sporting health practices (Lupton, 2014). The aim was to observe the many effects that these tools have not only in terms of body discipline and “behavior changing techniques” (Yang, Maher, & Conroy, 2015) of the single individual, but also in terms of virtual social spaces and the forms of relationality that they explore.

The role of digital media has been observed in various aspects in the evolution of fitness culture, trying to realize how technologies contribute to developing the social, cultural and economic contexts in which they operate. As Manuel Castells (Castells, 2002) argued, from the 1990s onwards, the computers and the use of the Internet have created a real techno-cultural revolution of communication. As a virtual place, social space and cultural artefact, it is in fact able to model the production and sharing of contents of “produser” individuals, that is users-producers (Bruns, 2008) for the activity of contemporary and shared participation both to the same communication rule and in the production and validation of personal content. This is what characterizes apps and wearable devices. As Deborah Lupton affirms, they are “digital objects produced by human decision-making wills, supported by tacit hypotheses, norms and discourses already circulating in the social and cultural contexts in which they are generated, marketed and used for specific purposes” (Lupton, 2014: 606).

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