Building on Community through the Use of a Sporting event: The Case of the CrossFit Open.

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Marketing Thursday, June 2, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-039 11:40 AM (Legacy South 2)

CrossFit is a fitness brand that promotes a style of exercise that incorporates high intensity interval training with complex weight lifting techniques, such as Olympic lifts. Similar to other storied brands CrossFit started in a garage (in this case the garage of founder Greg Glassman) and has expanded exponentially to become a globally recognized brand. In just over a decade, CrossFit has grown to include over 11,000 affiliated licensee boxes (the terminology for a CrossFit gym) in countries all over the globe (CrossFit, 2015). In addition to licensing boxes, CrossFit provides certification programs for instructors and coaches boasting 100,000 accredited CrossFit Level 1 trainers (CrossFit, 2015). Today, CrossFit is a privately held company reportedly worth over $40 million (Fainaru-Wada, 2014). However, CrossFit is not just an exercise regime – it is also a sport that had over 209,000 people, up from 26,000 in 2011, from around the world compete in the 2014 CrossFit Open (Achauer, 2014; Toledano, 2013). The CrossFit Open takes place over a five-week period each year during January and March. Based on their performance, participants can move to regional competitions and, if successful, compete in the annual Reebok CrossFit Games. Over 25,000 spectators attend the Reebok CrossFit Games (Achauer, 2014; CrossFit Games, n.d.) and numerous others view live coverage on ESPN. Thus what started as an exercise philosophy has expanded into a recognized sport with an ESPN media contract, major sponsors, and athletes competing for over $2 million in prize money (Bric, 2015). Despite this entry into the sports world, CrossFit has received scant empirical inquiry from sport management scholars.

What little research that has been conducted on CrossFit has focused on the effectiveness of this mode of training (Smith, Sommer, Starkoff, & Devor, 2013) and descriptive accounts of injury rates (Weisenthal, BeckMaloney, DeHaven, & Giordano 2014). Moreover, concerns over injury have tended to attract negative attention that paints CrossFit in an unflattering light and in response the parent company of CrossFit has acted in fierce defense of its product (Greeley, 2014; Helm, 2013). What appears anecdotally is that CrossFit is not just a strong brand, but one that has the luxury of loyal supporters and consumers. Such features of a sport and exercise activity would be considered important for continual participation and consumption, particularly when adherence to exercise has historically been low (Dishman, 1988).

Adherence to sport and having a sporting lifestyle has become attractive ways for people to spend their leisure time. Adults often begin taking part in sport due to associated health goals (Stamm & Lamprecht, 2011), but then many continue the sport because of the challenge and enjoyment of it (Rauter, 2014). As participation becomes more habitual other motives, such as personal improvement, conquering challenges, and establishing friendships may surface (Rauter, 2014). Green and Jones (2005) suggest that people are attracted to group activities because of the social connections, collective identity, group motivation, and feeling of belonging. For devotees of certain sporting groups, collective identity is a critical component to the group culture and is manifested in the group demonstrating a different attitude from mainstream culture (Green & Jones, 2005), commonalities in dress or preferred brands (Shipway & Jones, 2007), and even putting great importance on having the most recent and trendy sports equipment (Bridel, 2010).

A sporting event, such as the CrossFit Open and Reebok CrossFit Games provide opportunities to not only participate in sport, but also serve to celebrate the brand and connect with likeminded others so that these desirable social connections can flourish. In other context, sporting events have been used to promote participation in exercise and a sense of community among participants (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien 2008, 2009; Woolf, Heere, & Walker, 2013). However, these events are frequently linked to charitable causes, whereas the CrossFit Open is arguable a celebration of the brand and mode of exercise in and of itself. Thus it is unknown to what extent sporting events in this context could serve to build community and participants sporting identity. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine one CrossFit ‘Box’ and the impact of participation in the CrossFit Open on these aforementioned aspects.
A convergent mixed-method approach was utilized that incorporated a pre-post event quasi-experimental design (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). In this case the event (the CrossFit Open) represented the manipulation and data was collected one week prior to and one week after the 5-week event. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using two online questionnaires administered before and after the event. In a convergent design quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then combined to facilitate interpretation of the data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Participants (n = 34) completed both questionnaires and their answers were matched. The repeated measures design of this study provided greater power to detect any effects as unsystematic variability is reduced, thus the sample size was adequate for this study. The mixed methods design also enabled for qualitative and quantitative data to be compared to provide deeper insights and explanations for observed phenomenon.

For the quantitative portion of the questionnaire, participants were asked a series of demographic questions, including age (M = 31.35, SD = 7.78) and gender (62% female, 38% male) along with their experience with CrossFit and their training habits. For the pre-post aspect of the study, participants were asked a series of items to assess organizational identification, social interaction (a measure of friendship with other members), and athletic identification. Repeated measures ANCOVAs were used to assess pre and post differences on these measures. The covariates included age and experience training in CrossFit. The qualitative portion of the pre-event questionnaire included open-ended questions to obtain participants’ motives for entering the CrossFit Open, their expectancy of the event, and their apprehension towards the event. The post-event questionnaire asked participants to describe separately the best and worst aspects of their experience in the CrossFit Open. A content analysis was performed on qualitative data to item themes for each question posed.

The results showed that social interaction was significantly higher after the CrossFit Open, (F(1, 29) = 13.40, p = 0.001), where as other variables were not significantly different. Organizational identification pre-event was high (M = 6.31 on 7-point Likert-type scale), which suggests that a strong community was already present. The increase in social interaction is of note because participants were longtime member of the gym (M = 25.52 months, SD = 12.12) and frequent exercisers at the Box (M = 4.49 days per week, SD = 0.79). Thus the event served to provide new opportunities for members to meet others and make friends. Moreover, qualitative data revealed that this was an unsought, but valued benefit of participation. Members competed for the challenge of the event and the opportunity to celebrate the community. Furthermore, the competition tended to be internalized, such that personal improvement was the focus. This may explain the non-significant result for athletic identity as competitors focus on being their best and not the best.

This study demonstrates that the use of sporting events among exercise participants provides an opportunity to celebrate the community and the brand. Moreover, the personal improvement component rather than direct competition facilitates an environment where participants cheer on and are cheered on by their fellow members. Opportunities are created wherein people make new friends, an outcome that is remarkable because it builds on an already established community among heavy consumers of the brand. The use of sporting events therefore provides a means to build social capital even within an established community. Such an outcome is important for sport managers in the fitness industry who wish to grow and maintain participation at their gym.