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Sport Generated by New Media in the COVID-19 Crisis: An Analysis of Female Fitness Enthusiasts

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Abstract

The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the integration of physical activity, through the Web, into everyday life, giving rise to new concepts of identity and unprecedented forms of sociality. The aim of the present investigation was to understand and interpret the experiences of a group of Web users, namely their multi-faceted digital identity, social interactions, and the emerging relationship between their offline and online lives. We were thus able to verify the hypothesis that the online and offline worlds can become integrated generating an augmented reality both in terms of identity and relationships. Specifically, we investigated a Facebook group of female fitness enthusiasts, who were obliged to alter their approach to sport and physical activity following the adoption of government measures to contain the spread of the virus: lockdown (phase 1) and post-lockdown (phase 2). The research was conducted using both qualitative methodology, consisting of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, and the quantitative tool of the questionnaire. Our results show that the physical world and digital world brought together digital communication strategies and real physical bodies moving towards a connected integrated model of sports and physical activity.

Keywords: COVID-19, sport, social media.

1. Introduction

The period we are living through as a consequence of the spread of COVID-19 has been defined as “extraordinary” (Evans et al, 2020). The

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extraordinary nature of this moment in history stems not only from the health emergency itself, but also the enormous level of coverage and discussion of the crisis caused by the pandemic in traditional communication formats and on social media (Stevens, Prins, 2020). Indeed, Depoux et al. note that “a peculiarity of this crisis is the overlapping of virology and virality: not only did the virus spread very quickly, but so did information on the epidemic [...]” (Depoux et al, 2020: 1). Experts and professionals from all sectors fill our screens and continue to provide information and comments on the pandemic, resulting in a huge volume of COVID-19 related contents that saturate the printed and electronic pages of our existence. However, any discussion of the use of communication in this period cannot stop at the level of information and must delve deeply into all the means deployed to face and manage this crisis, including the intelligent application of the media and social digital platforms (Depoux et al, 2020: 2).

The constructive role that digital platforms have played in the COVID-19 crisis is widely recognized (Thornon, 2020; Depoux et al, 2020). Digital media have safeguarded long-distance relationships and social contacts that would otherwise have collapsed, given the impossibility of maintaining in-person relationships. At the same time, the ways in which digital media have been used and managed, including the field of sports, have come under sharp criticism. In particular, critics point to the use of digital media to spread panic during the pandemic (Depoux et al, 2020; The Lancet editorial, 2020; Radwan, Radwan, 2020); disseminate incorrect information and fake news (Depoux et al, 2020)¹; generate and propose models of incorrect behaviour (Leng, Phua, 2020) (the case of Rudy Gobert, the NBA zero patient); stimulate hatred and racism and spread negative social stereotypes (Kim, 2020).

This article examines aspects related to digital participation and identity formation processes in sport. In particular, it focuses on the relational and socializing dynamics that form identities and that are currently such an important part of the communication processes of social networks thanks to the possibilities offered by the Web (Castells, 1996; 2001). Social networks represent a communication arena that not only structures relationships in a different way but also provides new languages and interpretations that help us to make sense of the social world in which we live. The addition of the online dimension in the development of social relationality gives rise to two levels of communicative interactions, one related to the online world and the other to

¹ In this regard, the WHO has created a web page on circulating false beliefs to address and correct disinformation on the COVID-19 epidemic. It is available at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters> (Accessed on 20 January 2021).

the offline world. Here we ask ourselves what sort of relationship has been established between the semantic horizons of the online and offline dimensions, whether they are experienced as two distinct realities or complement one another, and how much the online sphere influences the offline sphere in constructing the world of the those who use both of these communicative universes.

Likewise, in the field of sports and physical activity, during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical and digital worlds have merged to provide an experience that brings together the power of digital media in the creation and dissemination of contents and practices online, and the individual possibility of physically occupying space with flesh-and-blood bodies (Hammami et al, 2020; Leng, Phua, 2020; Parnell et al, 2020) in the real world. The guiding assumption of this research is that the pervasive diffusion of the online dimension means that it is no longer possible to draw a distinction between the two communication levels: digital life insinuates itself into the dynamics of daily social interaction integrating with the semantics of in-person relationships and influencing them profoundly. The online realm becomes part of the experience of digital users, informing their questions and answers about the world, generating new social practices and habits, revealing unprecedented relational situations and thus influencing the construction of identity.

In the sociological tradition, identity is formed through processes of primary and secondary socialization (Mead, 1934; Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Dubar, 1998). However, in late modern society, which lacks certain and easily acquired points of reference and is subject to liquefaction (Bauman, 2005) and a logic of deconstruction (Giddens, 1991; Appadurai, 1996; Beck, 1992; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), the authority and function of the socialization agencies that supported the individual's path towards the acquisition of an identity profile have failed (Berger, Berger, Kellner, 1974). The individual is thus faced with the task of constructing himself in a process of autopoiesis (Luhmann, 1980; 1990). Indeed, social systems and psychic systems are increasingly inclined to observe individuality as a synonym of autonomy and self-rooting: a rooting of the self in the individual being.

Several authors have reflected on the role played by communication technologies in the construction of modern identity, emphasizing their tendency to foster globalization (McLuhan, 1964), cultural massification and homogenization (Marcuse, 1964), as well as consolidation and assimilation in the logic of the social system (Parsons, 1951). The new media have sometimes been depicted as an alternative to the closure and reductionism too often associated with the partial and passive use of traditional media. Interactivity and horizontality can promote forms of sociality that overturn the pyramid

structure of modernity, fostering a sort of “re-enchantment of the world” fuelled by technology. Individualism, social fragmentation, the weakening of cultural ties and the fixed nature of the styles of inter-relationships that characterized the formation of personal identity in the shadow of traditional media, now appear to have been altered by the Web.

In her first famous work dedicated to identity on the screen, Sherry Turkle (1996) defines the ideal type of identity on the Net as being characterized by multiplicity and fluidity since the Internet provides the possibility for users to manifest any aspect of their character. Self facets take shape through the publication of ideas, opinions and ways of seeing and feeling that are complex in terms of their diversity and in terms of the personalities that express them. Indeed, technology generates changes not only in what we do, but in our way of thinking and being (Gerbner, 1967; Bonazzi, 2014). However, Sherry Turkle, in concluding the trilogy dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between cyberspace and identity with the volume *Alone together*, which examines the digital habits of young and adult subjects, sums up her findings with the following statement regarding our lives “*We expect more from technology and less from each other*” (Turkle, 2012). Turkle’s investigations reveal that the relationship between technology and humans has changed over time. The hopes and the restrained but ever-present optimism of fifteen years before seem to have evaporated, replaced by a present and looming future world that is no longer populated by lucky, happy multitudes who have realized their identity “through the screen”, but rather by machines who take care of a fundamentally antisocial and solitary human race.

The reflections of Turkle, who previously stood out for being in favour of the use of digital technology (Turkle, 1984; 1996), prompted the scientific community to question the conclusions of the volume in which the author denounces a world of sad and stressed people locked in a dystopian relationship with their machines. Nicholas Carr investigates the effects of the Internet on our capacity to reflect, think and act intelligently, asserting that surfing the Net broadens our knowledge, but hinders the in-depth analysis of phenomena, undermines our ability to focus and floods our memory. “*Browsing the web requires a particularly intense form of mental multitasking. In addition to flooding our working memory with information, juggling imposes what brain scientists call “switching costs” on our cognition. Every time we shift our attention, our brain has to reorient itself, further taxing our mental resources*” (Carr, 2010: 112). According to Carr, the Internet is the most powerful mind-altering technology to come along since the book because it allows the repetition of actions that are always the same or similar at great speed in response to promptings from a screen. «*The distractions in our lives have proliferated for a long time, but it has never been a means that, like the Net, has been programmed to disperse our attention so widely and do it*

persistently» (Carr, 2010: 97). «[...] *the Net may be the most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use*» (Carr, 2010: 99). This alteration is viewed by Carr as a dysfunction that could lead to a potentially split personality, compulsive in his or her choices, superficial in his or her analysis, a person who only with great effort and difficulty can free himself or herself from the “Internet addiction”.

Works such as Turkle’s *Together But Alone* and Carr’s *The Shallows. What the Internet is doing to our Brain* are depicted as sharing the same hypothesis of the split between real and digital life, accompanied by the denunciation of the dangers the digital dimension can pose to our real everyday lives (Jurgenson, 2011b). Indeed, according to the perspective of digital dualism, two identity realities are constructed, one of which, the digital identity reality, can lead to the alienation of the individual, who no longer recognizes himself or herself in the plurality of self-representations. By contrast, according to the perspective of augmented reality, the relational universe lives and operates in a broader context that includes the real and digital as co-factors of a constitutive dynamic of the self.

In response to Turkle’s conclusions, Nathan Jurgenson takes the view that the theoretical assumptions of the sociologist’s reflections are fallacious because they are based on “*digital dualism*”, the idea that digital life and real life constitute two separate entities: “*Digital dualists believe that the digital world is “virtual” and the physical world “real”*” (Jurgenson, 2011b). At the basis of Jurgenson’s critique of scholars who have embraced “digital dualism”, there is the awareness, rooted in the guiding assumption of this investigation, that the offline (real life) and online (digital life) are two components of our existence, which are increasingly connected and interconnected, so much so that their union generates an “augmented reality”. “*By ‘augmented’, I am referring to a larger conceptual perspective that views our reality as the byproduct of the enmeshing of the on and offline. This is opposed to the view shared by both conceptual positions outlined above that views the digital and physical as separate spheres - what I have called ‘digital dualism’*” (Jurgenson 2012: 84). Jurgenson’s critique of digital dualism also brings into play the anthropologist Amber Case’s concept of “*second self*” taken from Turkle’s conceptual imagery, which postulates a self halved between a “first self”, constructed in the daily practice of offline communication and a “second self” generated by online life and relegated to cyberspace (Jurgenson, 2011a).

Jurgenson proposes a different perspective in which individuals do not live in two separate realities but rather, in a single reality, defined as “augmented”, where the offline and online are completely integrated: “*I am proposing an alternative view that states that our reality is both technological and organic, both digital and physical, all at once. We are not crossing in and out of separate digital and*

physical realities, ala The Matrix, but instead live in one reality, one that is augmented by atoms and bits. And our selves are not separated across these two spheres as some dualistic “first” and “second” self, but is instead an augmented self” (Jurgenson, 2011b). At the same time, Jurgenson also notes that research has shown that individuals use social media not as a substitute or alternative to the real world but to augment their offline relationships. *“Our Facebook profiles reflect who we know and what we do offline, and our offline lives are impacted by what happens on Facebook. [...] Most importantly, research demonstrates what social media users already know: we are not trading one reality for another at all, but, instead, using sites like Facebook and others actually increase offline interaction”* (Hampton, 2011; Jurgenson, 2011c).

Online sports, to be understood objectively as a set of protocols and training programs, and subjectively as an experience and a narrative, grew more popular during the lockdown and post-lockdown phases², emerging as a protagonist in the digital environment, where our senses and experience of reality are extensive (McLuhan, 1964; De Kerckhove, 1997), and where our ability to experience relationships appears collectively enriched (Lévy, 1997; Jenkins, 2006). In this situation, communication platforms, which have generated images and outlined contents, giving rise to communities and a sort of enhanced reality, have at the same time normalized a model of sport that finds us “#distantimauniti” (#*distantbutunited*) (Italian Ministry for Youth Policies and Sport, 2020) in facing this unprecedented crisis that we have been coping with since March. The Web has freed sport from the constraints of its traditional paradigm (where it appears confined within physicality, defined by a rigorous separation of mind and body), allowing it to act as a sort of connective tissue to express our identity and our social presence (Potts, McKenna, 2020). Moreover, the Web has helped to elevate sport from the purely playful ephemeral sphere, allowing individuals who engage in sports to put into play a “second self” (Case, 2010), rooted in the ‘seriousness’ of concrete reality and the force of daily life insofar as it is connected to the issue of health and our striving for well-being.

The present investigation is based on the recognition that sport is not a simple activity done mechanically to enhance physical performance through

² We recall that phase 2 consisted in a progressive reduction of the containment measures enacted in phase 1 (the epidemic phase) (from 9 March to 3 May), which in Italy consisted in national lockdown measures (i.e., total closure). The transition from the epidemic phase to phase 2 implied that institutions were able to diagnose, treat and isolate cases of COVID-19 and their contacts (from 4 May 4 to 14 June). In phase 2, public activities and businesses could restart, but only under specific conditions, and most aspects of normal life could gradually resume, taking the necessary precautions.

training sessions developed only for instrumental and functional purposes. In sport, personal identity and social relationships come into play; hence, it was important to first verify whether and how digital sports present on social media represent a communicative arena capable of generating languages, and secondly to provide keys to understanding that are able to enrich the meaning of the daily lives of those who engage in online physical activity. We thus set out to investigate what relationships were established between the two respective levels of communicative interactions and the two semantic horizons of the online and offline worlds during the lockdown and the post-lockdown periods. We wondered whether the two worlds were experienced as two distinct realities or as an integrated whole, and to what extent the online dimension influenced actions as well as relationships with others and with one's own body in the offline world.

Our aim was to analyze various aspects of identity and the interactions of users involved in online sports in the critical phases of the COVID-19 emergency to gain insights into the effects of this online activity in terms of reality generation. Particular attention was focused on the processes of signification, appropriation and incorporation of digital sports in the daily lives of users, considering the influence of social and cultural factors on habits and practices. In addition, we analyzed how the *#iorestoacasa* (*I'm staying home*) slogan was interpreted and applied in sports and fitness. The results of the investigation can serve as a starting point for promoting individual well-being through sport, and encouraging physical activity in everyday life as a lifestyle choice and a way of thinking. Indeed, the emergency we are currently experiencing may offer a unique opportunity born of necessity for change. As many have suggested, we can draw on our experience in the crisis to create an innovative, integrated and flexible model for sports and physical activity to be applied in all future normalized situations. Indeed, participation in the digital dimension can be experienced both as an unending opportunity to share personal opinions, performances and images of oneself, or as a threat of social control, in this case, in the name of social and health safety. Somewhere, between these two extremes, one can find unprecedented possibilities of the self.

2. Materials and methods

We attempted to understand and interpret the experiences of a specific group of web users, namely their digital identity and its many facets, their social interactions, and the emerging relationship between their offline and online lives. To identify the connections between the two worlds, we took

advantage of the opportunity offered by the spread of digital infrastructure for the practice of sports and physical activity in the health emergency caused by COVID-19. Moreover, to evaluate the social significance of this change in daily life, we chose to focus our research on subjects who directly experienced the impact of the emergency on their approach to physical activity. We identified a group of female fitness enthusiasts who belonged to a gym in a region in Central Italy. The subjects had engaged in sports and physical activity in-person at the gym during the pre-lockdown phase, and subsequently, during the lockdown, they participated in online physical exercise activities by joining a social group set up by the gym, continuing with those activities in the post-lockdown phase. Due to their characteristics, the subjects were suitable to help us shed light on possible similarities, differences and interplay between the online and offline dimensions. Female subjects were chosen for the study because few males were present at the fitness centre.

The research was based on two qualitative measures, namely participant observation and a semi-structured interview, and one quantitative measure, namely a questionnaire. Participant observation was employed for the entire month of July 2020 in the Facebook group that had been set up by the gym to reach users during the lockdown phase. The researcher's first had to switch from the role of the observed to the role of observer, specifically, from the role of a group member, who was simply using the group as a communication tool, to that of an active researcher interpreting online life as a field of investigation and direct observation. As participating observers, the researchers collected information based on the observation and recording of what occurred in the online community which they interacted with and belonged to in order to study its symbolic systems, meanings, etc. The techniques used in this type of research were the collection and analysis of narratives and descriptions developed by the members of the community.

A data sheet was used to record the indications that emerged from the participant observation: from the ways in which the social group was used to the time dedicated to this experience, from the type of topics addressed and shared to the online conversations (posts, links, photos...), from forms of self representation (user profiles and other information posted by the user) to different ways of socializing (contacts and friendships). Participant observation of the ways in which the social medium was used and the online behaviours of the users allowed us to identify the issues to be examined in the analysis. The aim of the analysis in turn was to collect both the peculiarities of the interrelationships that were generated through online activities, which evolved in the relationship between the online and offline worlds, and their influence on the identification and socialization processes. These issues constituted the semantic areas used to frame the interview. A sample of eight

users was then selected for the interviews. They represented important subjects on the basis of the liveliness of their participation and their considerable online activity.

To respond to the fundamental question of whether online sport involves the affirmation of a digital dualism or the realization of an augmented reality, we analyzed the experiential process related to sport and physical activity within the Facebook communicative fabric, seeking answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1- How do the athletes represent their self in the digital world and what relationship does the digital representation have with their real self?
- RQ2- What interactions occur in the digital experience of sports and what are their links to and impacts on offline life?
- RQ3- How are digital life and real life intertwined in the experience and practice of sport during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ4- What is the meaning and perceived value of online sports, and, above all, can the experience of sport practiced in the lockdown and post-lockdown phases be considered “augmented reality”?

Participant observation allowed us to note the behaviours of the subjects who were active in the social media group, both in terms of constructing their own identity and self image, and in terms of developing relationships and interactions, and participating in the events and opportunities afforded by their membership in the group.

The semantic areas identified through participant observation provided us with guidelines to formulate interview questions that were helpful for collecting offline information. Various topics were covered with a series of questions that could be expanded on in order to address the topics under investigation. The basic interview outline included ten questions posed to eight subjects who were selected on the basis of the intensity of their participation in the online page and Facebook group of the gym.

Finally, the semantic areas identified through participant observation and further explored during the interviews, helped us to develop the main sections of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 68 users, selected randomly from a list of female members of the gym. All the subjects were already familiar with the sports activities practiced in person at the gym, and participated in the sports and online exercise activities offered by the Facebook group of the fitness centre.

The descriptive section of the questionnaire (A) aimed to collect information on the users’ characteristics and the time they spent participating in the sports activities at the gym and on the Facebook platform. The second section of the questionnaire (B) focused on the underlying reasons why the

subject joined the digital platform and Facebook page to engage in physical activity during the lockdown. The goal of this question was to bring to light the real reasons for the subject's decision to participate in the online experience. To this end, the questionnaire investigated the times and modalities of participation, and whether the subjects participated exclusively in the online activities organized by the gym or also took part in other online activities.

The third section of the questionnaire (C) corresponds to the first semantic area that was identified and to the first research question (RQ1). This area focuses on choices regarding the participant's profile published on the Facebook platform of the fitness centre group. The images and contents of the profile provided information on the user's representation of self. The questions in this section of the questionnaire helped to determine to what extent the practice of digital sports contributed to the development of the digital self, while also exploring to what extent the digital self corresponded to perceived real identity.

The fourth section of the questionnaire (D) corresponds to the second semantic area and the second research question (RQ2). Shared links, images, etc., comments, and group conversations allowed us to observe the daily interactions that occurred on the social platform. The social dimension of online sports was analyzed through the survey to evaluate its characteristics and links to the social life that characterizes the world of offline sports.

The third semantic area developed in the fifth section of the questionnaire (E) emerged from our observation of comments, publications of posts, photos and videos, and corresponds to the third research question (RQ3) related to the perception of the online experience of physical activity and sports. Our analysis of the relationship between online sporting events engaged in during the lockdown and those that were part of the daily routine in the post-lockdown phase allowed us to gain insights into the interplay between the real and virtual worlds, and to identify points of convergence or divergence between the two spheres. This in turn laid the groundwork for an investigation into how online remarks were experienced and their impact on real life. In addition, the perceived changes in sport practices in the lockdown and post-lockdown phases were analyzed to verify their meaning, integration into experience, and whether or not they were continued.

The last section of the questionnaire (F) answered the fourth research question (RQ4), and assessed to what extent the experience of online sports was viewed as an imposition and a necessity due to government measures implemented to safeguard public health, or if the online experience turned out to be an opportunity to enjoy greater freedom of expression.

3. Results

Participant observation identified active users ready to use the Facebook platform. This was confirmed in the interviews, where it emerged that the participants joined the Facebook page of the gym when they signed up for an exercise class at the gym. They also joined the Facebook group as soon as it was created to cope with the lockdown at the beginning of March 2020, and often logged on to the platform during the week mainly in the late evening. Production regarding the digital self is rich and varied, which becomes apparent if we analyze the profiles and the timelines of the Facebook group. From the interviews it emerged that the female users felt that they could represent themselves authentically in the online group: *“Yes, I am completely myself on Facebook”*; they replied that the profile reflects their personality *“I like to describe myself honestly without hiding anything, and I feel that I can do that in this group”*. They also stated that the profile photo shows them at an important moment in their lives: *“I chose this photo for my Facebook profile because it represents me and my boyfriend in an important moment. We were on vacation together”*. The photos in the online group profiles seemed to make the members more recognizable and to reflect their personalities, while, at the same time, revealing something about their emotional experiences and passions: *“In the photo I am doing spinning at the gym: it’s the physical activity I love the most!”*. In short, participation in the social medium performs the function of self-introduction and making friends and the general public aware of what is important to gym members through certain images that those members choose to communicate something about themselves.

After evaluating the joining of the gym’s Facebook page and online exercise group, and the creation of a profile as moments of self introduction and communication, we moved onto the analysis of the social network of contacts, online friendships and the continuation of these social experiences in real life. When taking part in the online group, the participants did not have many opportunities to make new friends; however, the user’s digital social life appeared quite extensive and intense. On the platform users posted various thoughts, images and videos featuring the themes of sports and working out. These postings became an opportunity for open communication with all contacts, friends and people featured in the posts. The group members stated that they gave likes to published videos related to fitness events organized by the group (*“yoga on the beach”*, *“a bodypump lesson”*).

Most of those who participated in online sports during the lockdown did so out of the need to do physical activity in this phase, and the experience appeared to be positive. Moreover, although it was used less for working out in the post-lockdown phase because some of the subjects went back to

training at the gym, participation in digital life did not cease: *“I still look at the updates, I see the videos they publish”*. Most of the gym members continued to share the proposed lessons and workouts *“I find it very useful that I can choose to do sports when I feel like it, for example, in the evening before going to bed or during my lunch break. These are the times when I am free from work and I feel the need to do exercise”*.

The digital sports experience has changed the participants' way of thinking about and doing sports: *“I'm now more flexible with my workouts, in the sense that, even when I can't go to the gym, I can still watch some videos of exercise classes published on the group page and do them at home, whereas before I wouldn't have done that”*. Most of the study participants believe that online sports and offline sports can be integrated even though there is still a tendency to see them as two distinct things: *“They can be integrated, but I still think of them as two separate things, in the sense that I feel that when I'm working out at home, perhaps because of the lack of equipment, it is never quite the same as when I'm working out in the gym”*. The recognized advantages of online sports included financial savings, the elimination of the need for transport, and the flexibility of schedules.

Doing sports activities online is seen as a positive enriching experience that can make you feel freer and less limited or constrained; however, for some gym members it does not seem to be as effective or as capable of producing social coordination: *“When I do an online fitness class, I am not always able to follow the rhythm and get in sync with the instructor and the other people in the class”*. In general, online sport does not appear to be an alternative that completely replaces sports activities practiced at the gym, nor does it stand in opposition to in-person forms of physical activity. Indeed, digital sport seems capable of boosting the potential of real sport through personalized formulas that are represented and shared at the same time. Drawing a comparison, online sport appears to be generally more flexible and adaptable, while in-person sport appears to be generally more effective and more capable of fostering social bonds.

3.1 Participants' characteristics and motivations

Turning our attention to the analysis of the questionnaire results, it was found that most of the respondents fall in the 31 to 40 year age range, others were between the age of 25 and 30 years, and few were over 50. Most of the respondents were salaried employees or students, and most have been going to the gym for several years and have also been registered on the Facebook page for a number of years. The vast majority joined the gym's Facebook group as soon as it was established (Table 1).

The most common reason for participating in digital sports activities is interest, followed by curiosity and necessity. Most of the participants were interested in the digital experience because of their interest in sports, and the need for a digital alternative with the imposition of more stringent measures regarding social distancing and the subsequent closure of the gym. Most of those who took part in the gym's digital sports group did so assiduously, with the daily option being the most common, mainly in the afternoon or in the evening. Most of the respondents only participated in this group, while a limited percentage belonged to other online groups (Table 2).

TABLE 1. Participants' characteristics (n=68). Values %.

Facet	%	Facet	%
<i>A1- Gender</i>		<i>A4- Gym membership</i>	
Male	0.0	For several months	8.8
Female	100.0	For about one year	11.8
<i>A2- Age</i>		For more than one year	14.7
19-24	11.8	For several years	64.7
25-30	29.4	<i>A5- Facebook group membership</i>	
31-40	32.3	From the beginning	76.5
41-50	11.8	For three months	20.6
Over50	14.7	For two months	0.0
<i>A3- Employment</i>		For one month	2.9
Student	20.7	<i>A6- Facebook page membership</i>	
Self-employed professional	8.8	For several months	23.5
Salaried employee	44.3	For about one year	0.0
Unemployed	8.8	For more than one year	26.5
Housewife	2.9	For several years	50.0
Retired	0.0		
Other	14.5		

TABLE 2. Participation in online sports during the lockdown (n=68). Values %.

Facet	%	Facet	%
<i>1- Reasons for participating</i>		<i>B3- Period</i>	
Need	11.8	Morning	14.7
Curiosity	29.4	Afternoon	41.1
Interest	32.3	Evening	32.4
Hobby	11.8	Various hours	11.8
Fun	14.7	For two months	14.7
Other		<i>B4- membership in other online groups</i>	
<i>B2- Weekly participation</i>		Yes	29.5
1 once	11.8	No	70.5
2 twice	14.7		
3 times	14.7		
4 times	5.9		
5 times	8.8		
6/7 times	44.1		

3.2 The digital self and digital relationships

In this section dedicated to the digital self, we found a high percentage of subjects who seem to recognize digital sports as an opportunity for growth in terms of personal enrichment, although a significant percentage declared neither limiting nor enriching effects. Likewise, a high percentage of respondents observed changes in the way sports are done in the pre-lockdown and lockdown phases, while others did not notice any changes. A positive/cautious assessment prevailed. The majority of respondents did not note any sense of detachment or disinterest during their participation in online sports (Table 3).

TABLE 3. *The digital self and online sports (n=68). Values %.*

<i>Facet</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>C1- Changes in the way sports are done in the pre-lockdown and lockdown phases</i>	
Yes, a lot	5.8
Yes, moderately	53.0
Not at all	41.2
<i>C2- Personal effects</i>	
Enrichment	50.1
Limitation	8.8
Neither enrichment nor limitation	41.1
<i>C3- Detachment and disinterest</i>	
Yes	32.3
No	67.7

TABLE 4. *Social relationships in online sports (n=68). Values %.*

<i>Facet</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>D1- Knowing other members</i>	
Yes	58.8
No	41.1
<i>D2- Quantifying friends</i>	
Most	20.5
Enough	47.2
A few	32.3
<i>D3- New friendships online</i>	
Yes	20.5
No	79.5
<i>D4- Assessment of friendships online</i>	
Positive	82.4
Negative	0.0
Neither positive nor negative	17.6
<i>D5- Impact on offline events</i>	
Yes	29.5
No	70.5

Regarding social relationships, respondents report knowing other group members fairly well. The digital world did not seem capable of fostering new friendships for most of the respondents. Here we must consider the short duration of the experience, which only lasted for a few months. However, these new online friendships continued in the offline world. In addition, the evaluation of the experience of online friendships is positive for the vast majority of participants (Table 4).

3.3 Digital sport and real sport

Drawing a comparison between the two worlds of real and virtual sports, in the post-lockdown phase, most respondents reported a change in the use of the platform. Indeed, the results show that a majority of subjects (79.5%) stopped using the platform; however, among those who continued to use it, a high percentage (44.1%) used it in combination with offline sports. For most of the subjects, the online experience had consequences and repercussions in the offline world, especially with regard to working out, and sometimes with regard to offline sporting events, and sharing social contacts (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Digital sports and real sports in the post-lockdown phase(n=68). Values %.

<i>Facet</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>E1- Change in use of the platform</i>	
Yes	79.5
No	20.5
<i>E2- Use of digital sports</i>	
Reduced used	25.8
Increased use	3.2
Integrated use	23.6
Cessation of use	48.4
<i>E3- Impact on offline events</i>	
Yes, frequently	17.6
Yes, sometimes	26.5
No, never	55.9
<i>E4- Sharing of social contacts</i>	
Yes, frequently	8.8
Yes, sometimes	35.3
No, never	44.1
<i>E5 – Repercussions for offline workouts</i>	
Yes	70.5
No	29.5
<i>E6- Dissimilarity of the experience</i>	
Yes	64.7
No	35.3
<i>E7- Modes of use</i>	
Use for all sports practiced	2.9
Use integrated with offline sport	44.1
No use	53.0

Despite limitations related to the brevity of the experience and the conditions of necessity that introduced it, the final assessment of online sports, based on the answers to the questionnaire, defined it in substantially positive terms, both with regard to the definition of self and the acquisition of social contacts and friendships, and with regard to the possibility of social participation and the sharing of sporting events. Most of the respondents recognized the dissimilarity between the online and offline sport experiences; nonetheless, they stated that an integration of the two modalities is feasible and desirable. Moreover, they noted several advantages of online sports activities, such as savings and the reduction of the need for transport, but also the enhancement of workouts and the expansion of social participation. Online sports and offline sports are viewed as two different realities, but the interviewees also stated that they can be integrated. Indeed, on the basis of its numerous acknowledged advantages, the long term use of online sports activities rooted in the habits of sports enthusiasts was seen as likely (Table 6).

TABLE 6. Final assessment of online sports (n=68). Values %.

Facet	%
<i>F1- The integration of online and offline worlds</i>	
Yes	73.5
No	8.8
I don't know	17.6
<i>F2- The separation of online and offline worlds</i>	
Yes	5.8
No	64.7
I don't know	29.5
<i>F3- Advantages of online sports</i>	
Financial savings	32.4
Time saving	14.7
Workout enhancement	11.7
Reduction in travel	29.5
Expansion of participation	8.8
None of these	0.0
All of these	2.9
Other	0.0

3.4 Statistical analysis

At this point in the analysis, we proceeded to seek confirmation of the hypotheses developed at the outset by verifying potentially significant relationships between the categories taken into consideration through a statistical analysis. All of the relationships investigated were deduced from bivariate analyses of all the other variables involved under the hypothesis of “*ceteris paribus*”. In light of their purely descriptive use, and regardless of the

metric characteristics of the variables, only Chi-square was used for the association measures. Here the small sample number made the analysis rather difficult, while the significance of the relationships was found in a limited number of cases.

The relationship between new online friendships and their impact on offline meetings appears to be highly significant (D3/D5) (Chi-square=13.5, g.l.=1, $p < 0.001$). The relationship between age (age groups) and the use of online sports in the post-lockdown phase (A2/E7) also appears to be significant (Chi-square=16.1, g.l.=8, $p = 0.041$). Hence, we can conclude that the opportunities to make new friends in the digital environment provided by online sports activities during the lockdown, had a positive spill over effect on offline social life, confirming the social value of sport, which appeared to be enhanced by the social platform. Regarding the second significant relationship, we found that some of the women who took part in online sports activities during the lockdown did not continue in the post-lockdown phase; however, a significant percentage continued doing online sports in combination with offline sport. Subjects in the 31-40 age range were the most likely to continue doing online sports, while younger subjects in the 25-30 age range were less likely to continue. In short, while younger subjects dropped out of the online sports activities in the post-lockdown phase, older subjects persevered.

The relationship between real self and digital self (C1/C2) (Chi-square=9.2, g.l.=4, $p = 0.056$), between digital self and the use of online sports activities in the post-lockdown phase (C2/E7) (Chi-square=8.9, g.l.=4, $p = 0.064$), and between the frequency of use of digital sports activities during the lockdown and the assessment of the online social experience (B2/D4) (Chi-square=29.2, g.l.=19, $p = 0.063$) appears close to significance. The first relationship allowed us to identify a connection between the self presented in the online world and the self in the real world: the former is described as an experience that changes the real self, extending and enriching it. The second relationship suggests that a rich and varied digital self in the lockdown led to engagement in digital sports activities in combination with offline sport in the post-lockdown phase. Finally, those who took part in online sports activities more frequently tended to give a positive evaluation of the experiences related to the formation of new friendships.

4. Conclusions

This study examines sports and physical activity practiced in the lockdown and post-lockdown phases from March to June 2020 during the COVID-19 health emergency. The investigation, which focused on the

members of a fitness centre in a region in Central Italy, showed that the world of online sports was effective and tended to be integrated with the world of offline sports. Regarding the self, the data collected through participant observation of the online timeline and profile, interviews and a questionnaire, showed that in most cases, the digital self validates, enriches and extends the real self. With regard to relationships – despite limitations stemming from the brevity of the exclusive participation in online sports activities and the generally constricting nature of the situation – there was an increase in interactions and new friendships developed online during the lockdown, which spilled over into the offline world and continued in post-lockdown offline meetings. Here, sporting events exhibit a hybrid nature because they often resulted from online-generated opportunities that had real-world consequences, leading in turn to sharing and online conversations. The brief experience of engaging exclusively in digital sports activities during the lockdown continued in the post-lockdown phase for some adult subjects, while most of the subjects stated that they hoped that the two ways of doing sport could be integrated.

The small sample size and exceptional nature of the situation under investigation do not allow absolute extensibility of the study results. However, this investigation makes a contribution to the analysis of the phenomenon of digital sports activities, which are rapidly expanding in our society in the face of emerging social needs and new personal interests. The study shows that the online presence and activity of the members of the fitness centre's Facebook group and Facebook page had an impact on the real life of the subjects, as confirmed by the statistical survey. The subjects that 'populated' the social space represented by the online sports Facebook group developed online personal networks which could translate into real encounters. The networks themselves tended to stimulate and regenerate such encounters from within. The continuous interaction between online and offline presence typical of the sports community tends to produce a new kind of value. This value is no longer just instrumental or based on the sharing of information and services, as occurred with the first communication channels and sometimes occurs on social network sites, rather it is linked to the production of immaterial human social capital based on participation and the development of relationships and abilities.

In the experience of the online sports group, a connection between physical space and virtual space was established, in some cases generating a new enhanced networked reality that offered something more than the simple reality of one or the other dimension taken separately or added together. This new kind of reality differs from the traditional sociological community by virtue of its Web component, while it differs from virtual communities thanks

to its continuous interaction with the body and physicality. In today's society, where the line between online and offline is blurring and there are numerous opportunities to overcome dualism and to establish a vital synergy between the real and the virtual, digital sports represent an exciting opportunity.

It seems that we can now finally answer the fundamental research question as to whether online sport entails the affirmation of a digital dualism or the realization of an augmented reality. The experiential process related to sport and physical activity investigated within the Facebook communicative fabric highlighted how the increase in relational possibilities and introduction of the self through the technological medium does not lead to a digital dualism, but rather to an augmented reality in which the online and offline enhance each other. The subjects that were interviewed experienced an augmented reality where the input from cyberspace and the input from in person face-to-face relationships intertwine and integrate in the corporeality of daily practice. To the female fitness enthusiasts, Facebook appears as a place that fosters socialization not alienating personality: through the computer screen they have the opportunity to introduce themselves, to verify their thoughts, to share their moods within a vast communicative territory, which nevertheless is viewed as the product of a choice and an expression of freedom.

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