The Community of CrossFit: An Ethnographic Inquiry

by

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Department of Exercise Sciences
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Abstract

CrossFit has only recently emerged in the sporting landscape and has already developed a massive following. The program is part sport, part exercise system, and is known for its unconventional approach to fitness which combines high intensity exercises with functional fitness, all performed in a group setting. Creating a community is one of the largest claims of the organization and is accredited with much of the positive experiences that keep members coming back. This thesis uses ethnographic data (participant observation and ethnographic) interviews to explore the dynamic of community in one CrossFit box. Findings suggest that CrossFit is best theorized as a community of practice and that studying physical cultures through the framework of community is an effective method to study physical culture by accounting for multiple variables including; personal relationships, autonomy, conflict, and more, amongst members of the group.
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.................................................................................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents.................................................................................................................................................... iv

List of Appendices .................................................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter 1 *An Introduction to Community* ........................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 2 *An Introduction to CrossFit* ............................................................................................................. 16
  
  Background ......................................................................................................................................................... 16
  
  Critiques .............................................................................................................................................................. 25
  
  Religion .............................................................................................................................................................. 26
  
  Health Choices ................................................................................................................................................... 30
  
  Gender ................................................................................................................................................................. 31
    
    Masculinity ....................................................................................................................................................... 32
    
    Femininity .......................................................................................................................................................... 33
  
  Community .......................................................................................................................................................... 37

Chapter 3 *Community and Theories* .................................................................................................................. 39

  Neoliberalism ....................................................................................................................................................... 39
  
  Excitement and Freedom ................................................................................................................................... 45
  
  Subculture ............................................................................................................................................................ 52

Chapter 4 *Methodology* ......................................................................................................................................... 57

Chapter 5 *Building the CrossFit Community* .................................................................................................... 65

  Domain ................................................................................................................................................................. 67
  
  Community .......................................................................................................................................................... 67
  
  Practice ................................................................................................................................................................. 69

Chapter 6 *Performing the CrossFit Community* ................................................................................................. 74

  Primary group relationships ................................................................................................................................ 74
  
  Autonomy .............................................................................................................................................................. 76
Viability ................................................................. 79
Power Distribution ......................................................... 81
Participation ................................................................ 81
Degree of Commitment ..................................................... 82
Degree of Heterogeneity ....................................................... 84
Extent of Neighborhood Control ........................................ 84
Extent of Conflict ............................................................... 85

Chapter 7 Conclusion ............................................................. 88

References ........................................................................ 93

Appendices .................................................................... 102
List of Appendices

1. Recruitment Poster
2. Consent Scripts
3. Information Letter
4. Informed Consent
5. Interview Guide
Chapter 1
An Introduction to Community

Discourse surrounding building community is a pervasive topic. People speak of building a community in everyday contexts such as social groups, clubs, sports teams, and even the supporters and fans of professional teams. With respect to defining or studying community, the large colloquial understanding of the word allows the idea to resonate with many people. However, the breadth of these ideas also provides some confusion when trying to reconcile these different conceptions. In order to begin an analysis with respect to community we attempt to define and trace the lineage of the academic study of community.

Before delving into this background, I attempt to outline a rough, albeit necessary overview that aims to serve as a reference for the discussions to come. One way to conceptualize how community has been experienced and theorized is by organizing into three eras; premodern, modern, and post-modern (Delanty, 2003). The dates of these timeframes are subjective and contextual, and therefore requires a description of the period in time I refer to. For these purposes, the premodern era includes all the time until the American industrial revolution of the 19th century, and even includes as far back as classical Greek and Roman civilizations of which there is a significant amount of literature. This time period is characterized by a way of life largely governed by church and religion as the governing body or state (Delanty, 2003). In the latter premodern era, we see this via the power of the Catholic church in western Europe and North America. The other two epochs, modernity and post-modernity, are not as succinct. Thinking of these categories as fluid, we are currently in the modern era, transitioning to the post-modern era. Modernity is characterized by the rise and growth of North American industrialism in the 20th century, which has coincided with growing capitalism and consumerism. This reflects an increasing rationalism and transition from focus on religion and the church, to the individual and subsequent individual rights (Delanty, 2003). This line of thinking then flows into post-modernism which features much of the same capitalism, but the growth of industrialization has peaked, and the world is transitioning to an increasingly knowledge based and services-based economy in the Western world. Reflecting on this, the rise of the internet and power of computing has radically changed the world, and this can be
considered the defining characteristic of the postmodern era. At this point in time, digital technology is rapidly becoming a part of almost every aspect of life. The way I have organized these distinctions in era is based on Delanty’s (2003) summary analysis of the multiple conceptions of community, with more emphasis on economic organization and occupation because attaining means of subsistence are universal to all peoples, it contributes a great deal to personal identity development, and can characterize how the ways in which we live has changed with time.

As the figurations in which people live has changed as a function of time, Durkheim’s (1893) conception of the division of labour has become increasingly relevant as will be expanded upon later. Ultimately, the current social state contributes to increasingly individualistic sentiments, and thus feelings of anomie, which is the result of an incongruence and disconnection of values and norms of the members throughout the collective society. Meanwhile, the work of citizens and means of subsistence have narrowed to become more specific, which demands that people are increasingly dependent on each other economically, despite the ideological differences that may occur. With this groundwork laid, I can now begin to trace the path that has been taken with respect to sociological thinking on society and community.

Some of the earliest writings about community by Aristotle refer to community in a manner much different than current discourses (Delanty, 2003). The ‘community’ was typically an all-encompassing term that referred to society as a whole, and both words (community and society) were largely interchangeable. This naturally lends itself to the idealised Greek polis city structure at the time where direct democracy had an emphasis in society and was a major institution that served as a site for political, economic, civic, and social interaction (Delanty, 2003). This integration of multiple components of life is seldom experience in today’s society to the same extent, as each component (politics, civics, social life) is largely disarticulated. Generally, it is frowned upon to talk about politics in most social settings, and the work sphere is kept separate from the social sphere. This parity of community and society is one of the hallmarks of premodern society. With the transition to a more industrial economy in North America in the late 19th century there has been a bifurcation of society and community or the local community versus universal community (Delanty, 2003). Contributing to this may have been the emerging organization of increasingly larger cities which focused on manual labour and production resulting in densely populated cities. It necessitated large groups of people came to live together
without the prerequisite of sharing the same religion, political views, or way of life. As a result, members of any given metropolitan city may experience a unique bond in which people are reliant on the goods and services of other around them despite not having social relationships with these people, creating a type of organic solidarity. People are functionally interconnected and dependent on each other by virtue of economics or civility, but lack social bonding and shared values (Durkheim, 1893). This description is based upon an often-idealized form of social organization of self-sufficiency in small neighborhoods where all members share a bond, compared to complex webs of interdependence and unfamiliarity in larger, densely populated, urban figurations. Naturally, these present two polarizing perspectives when the reality is that social organization exists on a spectrum with vast variation and is not as neatly organized. Yet still, individuals within this group have different experiences and degree of integration into the assumed solidarity of the collective. The power dynamics of wealth inequality, racism, sexism, and other forms of structural discrimination leaves some individuals outside of the conceptions of any type of social collection, bet it rural or urban. Relationships of the premodern era were often characterized as having mechanical solidarity, referring to a dynamic by which the majority of citizens in a neighborhood community shared a similar lifestyle and worldviews (Ritzer, 2010). The growth of large cities was necessary to match the growing production demands for goods in a consumerist economy, but not without consequences. Resultantly, the national or large-scale relationship shared between individuals became largely focused purely on civic and economic bonds. The political and social sphere was then relegated to other small communities where personal bonding could occur. This marks the beginning of modernity and a reoccurring discourse surrounding the divergence between society as a universal entity and community as the local group, meanwhile describing community as having been lost to modernity (Delanty, 2003). This is a popular opinion and has gone beyond academic circles to appearing in mainstream sentiments. One such example of this is Putnam’s (2001) book Bowling Alone which encapsulates the thinking of many writings which consider community to be declining in North America. Now, transitioning to a post-modernity relationship have been frame as “a discourse of loss and recovery” (Delanty, 2003). Robert Nisbet (1962) has been very influential in this line of thinking. He notes that during the 19th century popular sentiments began to trend towards a society increasingly concerned with individualism and rationalism. When looking at the growth and development of social relationships through time this temporal organization, having a pervasive cultural emphasis on individualism and rationalism has contributed to finding value in
liberating individual rights and freedoms from the structure of large groups including village communities, class, or castes systems (Nisbet, 1962). Simultaneously, this trend of premodern to modern that is characterized by a decrease in commonalities between citizens and neighbours is paralleled by other forces of economic growth, neoliberalism, and capitalism, in addition to individualism (Nisbet, 1962).

As the discussion of the term ‘community’ has evolved, it has come to a general consensus in contemporary society to reference a connection amongst individuals predicated on personal socialization as opposed to alternate forms of interaction including civic duties or economic ties (Delanty, 2003). Furthermore, by virtue of the anthropological tradition, community has also come to reference groups that share strong cultural identity (Delanty, 2003). These ideas reflect the colloquial use of the term community as ‘natural’ and ‘comfortable’ collective of a small, well connected entity that stands removed, distinct, or separate from society at large which is conceived as a generally uncomfortable state (Delanty, 2003).

In consolidating these many lines of thinking, community is often viewed as a reaction or oppositional force to society at large, similar to how Victor Turner (1995) theorises the belonging and social communication of communitas to be in a battle with structure itself. Turner uses the term communitas in reference to social relationships and networks as opposed to simply ‘community’ which is sometimes used in reference to peoples living within a geographic area despite having little social contact. As I stated earlier, Turner acknowledges the lack of an all-encompassing definition of communitas but draws from the earlier works of Martin Buber to best define it as “being no longer side by side (and one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou. Community is where community happens” (Turner, 1995, p. 126). This quote is excellent in capturing the elusiveness of truly defining the term community, and accurately describing the intimacy and unity that it creates. Society and its structure on the other hand, present the other side of the equation, that which communitas is to oppose, and provides balance to the world in which people live. The structures people interact with frequently presents itself economically and politically in the work place where interact is formalized with labels or overt rules. For instance, consider a strength and conditioning coach a football team. The coach’s job is to train the athletes strength, speed, and endurance Within the institution that is the entire football
organization, the coach’s role is clearly flushed out and likely to be outlined by a written contract. Training athletes as outlined in the title of their position and described within the terms of the employee contract is the extent of their power – they are not allowed or expected to draft plays for the team or be in marketing meetings with the owner. Conversely, titles in the social realm of communitas (or conventionally, simply ‘community’) are less formal and more fluid as one may be a friend, and/or mentor, and/or family member and/or acquaintance, and/or teammate. Instead of the rules that one would commonly see within the structural environment of the workplace, communitas must make do with governing itself with respect to what is acceptable behaviour and conduct by communicating social norms, using reinforcement, praise, and shame, as tools (Turner, 1995). The result is a more elaborate, complex, and nuanced form of communication that can often become intimate in its development. This may be the case hypothetically for two women who have been best friends since childhood. The scope of the topics they speak about can be broad ranging from work life, how their parents are doing, and even faith and religion. Knowing each other personally means that one of the women may understanding the nuanced and implicit forms of communication implying that her friend may be feeling anxious or sad. In my own relationship with my sister, I know her well enough to understand when she’s upset with her telling me, and we can have conversations pertaining to this that her coworkers could not broach comfortably.

Despite the previous efforts to draw distinctions between community and society, the two are not mutually exclusive. There are instances where the two spheres regularly overlap, and religion is one such distinct site that regularly draws from both realms. In the case of Christianity for example, community and brotherhood are regularly cited in the doctrine, and followers are considered to be pilgrims which implies a state of wander and uncertainty (Turner, 1995). The current state of religion however is much more organized with clear titles with respect to the authority figures in the church, organized meeting times, and ultimately a more robust and structured institution. This example illustrates how structure and antistructure can be so intimately related and is one way to illustrate Turner’s (1995) ultimate argument in this book which is to detail and describe liminality; the threshold in between two states, or the ambiguous position one occupies when existing between states of structure and communitas. He uses anthropological examples of rites of passages in different cultures to emphasize that people may be constantly flowing between experiences with varying levels of communitas and structure,
often caught somewhere between the two. Throughout the transition from premodernity to postmodernity, religion has served as a regular site which has (despite being a structural institution) been at odds with individualism and promotes a worldview that seeks to preserve the characteristics of comradery that is regularly associated with small rural settlements. By and large, this view has been overly romanticized and references an idealistic view of the epoch which likely never existed in the way it is conceptualized now (Delanty, 2003). It was a ‘simpler time’ to the extent that there was less ethnoracial and religious diversity (which is not an ideal), and a less complex political and economic system, and the society had problems (Delanty, 2003). The lack of ethnoracial diversity in a society that is deemed ‘ideal’ is one reason that idealizing these types of configurations can be highly problematic. Findings also suggest that even within these small rural communities, many of the same problems in more modern society exists; low cohesion of community members, classist social division, class exploitation, and self-interest (Delanty, 2003). All three of the Abrahamic religions seek to foster community and are based on rhetoric that encourages believers to act altruistically and be considerate of their ‘neighbours’ – discourse that lends itself to thinking of being in a small local community with all members of society. Despite society at-large becoming more secular, religious institutions are one of the primary cites in which we still see community-like social interaction on a large ‘society’ scale (Lipka, 2015). This explains why social gatherings that feature a lot of social interaction or community building are often deemed church-like or cultish. This has been said of CrossFit (CF) and sport more broadly (Dawson, 2017; Stein, 1977).

Another form of thinking regarding community pits the historical social traditions versus modernity, raising questions as to if community is simply a reference to tradition and practice of premodern times, and is therefore incompatible with modernity. Durkheim’s (1893) initial analysis of mechanical solidarity and traditional solidarity is predicated on this idea to some extent, as it defines community through the explanation of collective conscience and is frequently portrayed through examples of small towns or villages. Largely due to romanticism regarding this rural period in time, a lot of the sentiments about this style of community have become embedded and viewed as inseparable; that in order to have community people must live in the same configurations of old. However, thinking broadly it must be recognized that there is an inevitable change in lifestyle and acknowledge that characterizing community in this singular fashion fails to recognize the multitude of social relationships and cultural connections that exists
today which can constitute a community. In recognizing that the way of life, economic, and social organization has and will continue to change, it is important to explore and embrace the ways in which community may have changed as well. René König shares this idea that community is not simply a construct of the past only possible in rural small neighborhoods, but that the concept is broadened when community is perceived to be a “consciousness of the mutual connection between people” which incorporates interaction, knowledge, resources, and experiences that are shared between members (Delanty, 2003). In other words, community has not ceased to exist, but is has grown, changed, and exists in different forms today.

In stepping away from an understanding of community that is predicated upon premodern lifestyles and embracing current modes of living, urban sociology has emerged as way to understand more contemporary living configurations in larger and denser metropolitan areas that more people have come to call home. It is not to be simply considered as a narrowing of the field but meant to provide a more nuanced and contextual understanding of community by acknowledging and exploring topics of urbanization, capitalism, social inequality, racial inequality, gender, sexuality, and globalization (Lin & Mele, 2012). The strength in this approach is being able to acknowledge and dismantle “the false dualism of society [versus] community and tradition [versus] modernity” (Delanty, 2003). Instead it is valuable to discuss community while acknowledging the change in contextualizing factors of the urban environment that is a result of the shift of society from a rural one. There are significant differences between the two forms of society. One notable result is that communities in the urban context tend to be more purposeful as opposed to those of rural communities which are more passive, meaning that the closeness and similarities amongst rural peoples required less active engagement to build communal relations (Delanty, 2003). Examples of this include communities that were formed by virtue of neighborhoods that were often based on geography, with overlapping demographics of class, race or religion. In urban environments people of varying classes, races, or religious backgrounds can live within a fairly small geographic boundary thereby limiting the homogeneity that may contribute to these traditionally passive communities. As a result, communities have to be more intentional, voluntary, and are often planned and coordinated.

Regardless of living in urban or traditional spaces, perhaps the most significant way in which countless lives have changed has been through technology. Nearing the end of the industrial revolution and shortly after, there were rapid technological advancement such as improvements
to the steam engine, large machines began to emerge in workplaces, and communication advancements such as the telephone became more commonplace (Mokyr, 2018). These were all impressive feats at their inception, but they were not often used in the home or everyday life but were reserved for the economic and civic utility for the purposes of manufacturing and production (Mokyr, 2018). These revolutionary technologies originally found in more industrial environments, are now commonplace in many homes. Similarly, air travel became more affordable and commercial. Since the industrial revolution, arguably the largest technological innovation in recent history has been the internet. The internet has grown to become a ubiquitous tool, present in all aspects of business but also in personal life. It is used to store and distribute information, communicate for economic purposes, and simply socialize. The internet as well as the strength in computing power reflects what many consider the thriving of soft technology versus that of hard technology. Soft technology refers to the advancements we experience which are often intangible when compared to the physical, raw production of hard goods (Delanty, 2003). Many modern lives are now surrounded by the computing power and communication that is allowed through the internet. Cars use GPS as people drive to work, people use social network sites to communicate, academic researchers access articles online, and there are countless other examples. The most obvious case is the modern cellphone which is capable of completing tasks that required multiple different machines at one point in time; calculators, flashlights, telephone communication, internet, cameras, video cameras, written notes, play and record music, and a multitude of other tasks. If an individual does not have a social media profile of any kind they likely pay bills online or use some type of computer at work to access files or data. It is presently estimated that 77% of Americans own a smart phone, and 95% own some type of a cell phone (“Fact Sheet”, 2017). This means that many single adults use a cell phone, and it has been argued that they are often an extension of the individual through self-expression of owning and customizing cell phones, and the act of using the device is integral to their lives as evidenced by agreeing to survey statements such as “I would feel lost without using my mobile phone” (Walsh & White, 2007, p. 2415). Perhaps partial justification of the connection between self-identity and phone goes beyond self-expression and allows persons to communicate with others and be a part of social groups through calls, messages, and various social media platforms (Wilska, 2003). Also, a more functional approach to the connection between people’s memories and ideas are often stored on the phone, which have almost become an extension of the mind’s memory despite being external to the brain (Barr, Pennycook, Stolz, & Fugelsang, 2015). The distinction
between the brain and mind here implies that the brain is the physical object, but the mind is how individuals go about thinking, planning, and retrieving information. As a result, using cell phones and the ease of access to the internet that they allow, deem these devices as simply a highly effective component of the mind to recall memories and assist with analytical thinking (Barr, et al., 2015). Subsequently, online identities are an increasingly inseparable part of who people are in society. Turkle (2008) describes this notion as the ‘tethered self’ wherein individuals are perpetually connected to technology and internet through cellphones. Technology is no longer something that is actively interacting with in distinct manner, such as turning on a computer and connecting to the internet through dialup. Instead, most smartphone users are perpetually connected to the internet and can be contacted by others at all times (Turkle, 2008).

As technology has evolved, so have opinions regarding communities formed through the internet as a medium. When the internet first emerged in the 1980s, access was rather exclusive and as a result it was viewed as a way in which people withdrew from society as opposed to coming together (Delanty, 2003). As the internet grew so did the discussion surrounding online communities, and Rheingold (1993) moved this view along, now considering the internet to not be a reclusive club, but as a life alternate to reality (Delanty, 2003). This progress reflected how the internet was used at that time, because it meant that community could exist virtually but that it tended to be removed from people’s physical lives. Naturally this has grown and changed to an avenue by which people promote or embrace their online persona. There is a free-flowing interaction between the two as the internet supplements people’s physical lives, such as a group of friends planning an event over Facebook. At the same time however, it means that a group of people scattered around the world with a particular interest in rugby for example, now have a space to communicate and interact unrestricted by their scattered geography. This is often the case amongst alternative sports or niche sports that do not garner mainstream media attention through the traditional method of television (Vann, Woodford, & Bruns, 2015). Social media platforms are easily accessible by many people and is relatively inexpensive. In this way, technology can be used to bolster community or be a site for community in and of itself. There is a cost for this reward however. Although it enables dispersed groups of people to come together, these communities have the potential to be more fragile as members may be complete strangers with a level of accountability far below that of the typical community (Delanty, 2003). It is a fascinating relationship to trace over time and has drastic implications for different generations. Millennials and subsequent generations have lived most of their lives with access to high speed
wireless internet and advanced smartphones, and therefore have a more intimate relationship with technology. It therefore stands to reason that online identity has a greater role in their construction of self and community than generations past. Therefore, investigating community moving forward this must be addressed as it is an integral part of personal identity, group identity, and communication as a whole.

Reflecting upon the many conceptions of community (or communitas), there is some consensus that community is something that groups of people actively try to maintain, often described as a natural bonding relationship between a group of people predicated on communication, belonging, learning, shared experiences, and cultural connection. In the many ways that community is theorized, it is described as an entity that is virtually always under threat by the structure of society, especially because as society changes over time, it alters collective conceptions of community. It is at odds with society at large, or large group formations primarily understood as networks that are necessary to exists for the sake of economics and civics but lacks the interpersonal and social aspect we crave as humans insofar as social networks, social relationships and the social support it enables is associated with decreased mental illness (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Insofar as capitalism contributes to this society it is also conceived as a threat. In all of the conceptions explored, at its very core, it may be easiest to define community as an alternative to the many going-ons of the world. Considering society can be extremely complex with individuals lacking power and the ability to grasp the scope of the systems around them (including macroeconomics and globalization), many value relationships in which things are easily understood, familiar, and comparatively palpable. In this sense community may be thought of as a ‘natural state’, reflecting the networking and socialization that has been integral to human evolution and social development. Community is whatever people do as they try to surround themselves with the familiar, and it is a resistance to that which is beyond individual control in the world at large.

The connection between sport and the development of community is not a new idea. It is a consistent rhetoric that has existed throughout colonial British rule and was further popularized by National campaigns after the American Civil War which linked athleticism and sport with citizenry and the national identity to create an outlet for the energy of citizens and contribute to a feeling of wholeness (Dyreson, 2001). The prevailing rhetoric at the time implied that ‘fair play’ and a ‘spirit of community’ were inherent components of sports which allegorized the values that
would contribute to increased civic engagement and collaboration in the political system (Dyreson, 2001). The idea was that sport would unify people of varying ethnoracial backgrounds (Dyreson, 2001). This was a rather simplistic view of sport which ultimately portrayed sport as a pure and uncompromised site of interaction by which to promote the universal values of unity and comradery. Unfortunately, the idea that sport creates a community to serve as a societal panacea is a fallacy contemporary physical cultural studies (PCS) investigations have revealed that sport often mirrors the structure of racism, sexism, and other inequalities around us.

Nonetheless, popular sentiments regarding sport as a powerful vehicle to elicit social change and can be evidenced by popular examples such as Nelson Mandela’s speech at the Laureus World Sport Awards in 2000 in which he said the famous words; “Sport has the power to change the world”. Many political and economic organizations have bolstered this opinion, suggesting mega events such as the Pan American Games (which were hosted in Toronto in 2015) can foster community building (“Canadian Olympic”, 2015). In academic settings, these claims of community development specifically have been explored extensively. The field PCS in particular, uses a variety of lenses and concepts to explore sport in society, of which community is one valuable framework. However, other lenses have been featured more prominently, including hegemonic studies, resistance, feminism, neoliberalism and others. The strength in using community is that it captures solidarity, and communitas that can be difficult to conceptualize using other theories that are not immediately predicated on the intimate social relationships and bonds of group interaction (Giulianotti, 2015). The number of studies using community as a framework are relatively low and this may be because communities can be insular, making it difficult for others (especially researchers) to gain access and trust (Giulianotti, 2015). Instead, it is more common for PCS research to reference community in their work as opposed to addressing community directly as the entry point of inquiry. For example, research on community and sport or exercise yields numerous results of community-based interventions or studies within a specific community organization instead of studying what that community actually is. The reality is that the concept of community is embedded within many studies of PCS, but it is not regularly the topic of investigation itself, despite the valuable insight it can provide in understanding a multitude of other components including social capital, community development, and how culture is performed.
As a result, I used community as an organizing principle to study CrossFit. From this vantage point I seek to understand how feelings of belongingness and social interaction are developed, sustained, and performed on a regular basis. The phenomenon of CrossFit is used as a site to perform a case study because it represents a new and relatively unique experience which has not been extensively explored, but most notably, CrossFit cites much of its popularity to building community. Studying CrossFit will further enable an understanding of communities as a whole, and specifically fitness communities which I define as groups of people, connected socially and interdependently upon each other, where exercise, sport, and/or health is the central component of said interaction.

I was initially drawn to CrossFit in an attempt to experience sport and exercise in a radically different style than I had in the past. Throughout my life, I have enjoyed engaging in physical activity recreationally and competitively. As a child, the children in my neighborhood and I routinely participated in various forms of play including basketball, road hockey, bike races, tag, and more. As I got older, more organized recreational sports became a part of my life where I focused on basketball and football in high school. Even in university I was always active in intramural basketball, football, rugby, Frisbee, and a variety of other games. While I was becoming more active in university, I tried to implement training in a gym as well, engaging in strength training at the strength and conditioning facilities on campuses. This was never an easy transition for me and always felt like a chore instead of a pleasurable form of PA done just for fun. I would frequent the gym for a few months, then have a falling out where I would find myself taking to the basketball court instead of adhering to a strength training program.

As CrossFit became more popular – I cannot recall what my first exposure was – but I was drawn to the dynamic which appeared to be more like a recreational team environment where athletes were communicating with each other, and activities were dynamic as exercises changed daily. I was introduced to totally novel experiences and new exercises that I would never do on my own because they were too intimidating. And, combined with all this was that I did not have to design my own programming. Even as a kinesiology student, I knew I had the tools and background to design and execute a fitness program, but it was never something that I found joy in doing. All these factors combined to ultimately making training easier by making exercise on my own feel more ‘sport-like’ which was a familiar and pleasurable landscape for myself.
It was a personal journey for me because it involved stepping out of my comfort zone with respect to physical activity. Many people find the movements in CrossFit intimidating and I was no different, never having done gymnastics nor Olympic weightlifting. In this regard, it was personally challenging for me to overcome these fears, such as being upside down to complete a handstand or lifting weight overhead. Another personal endeavor was pushing through pain and discomfort. Anyone who is experienced in CrossFit can attest to giving maximal effort and reaching total exhaustion. As I will elaborate on later, CrossFit played a larger role in my life as I began to spend a sustained amount of time at the CrossFit gym every week. Even when I was away from the gym, it motivated me to go to physiotherapy appointments, to stretch at home, and to practice movements at home, all to improve my performances in the gym. Coaches in the gym also pushed me to take part in nutrition tracking. For much of my life, I have engaged in sports for the fun of it, but my motivation in going to the gym was to become more confident and comfortable in my own body. Through exercise and dieting, I started to see these changes in my body which made me more confident and empowered because I finally had control over how I looked. It also spurred on some personal self-reflection around my gaze upon the body. I learned to have more of a focus around what people were doing, how they moved, and people’s choices to be physically active rather than just thinking about ‘sculpting’ the body in a body-building fashion. When I would work out on my own before CrossFit, I would regularly find myself focusing my attention on working out the chest and shoulders more than my legs and or back simply because I thought it was more aesthetic. With an emphasis on hypertrophy and explicit body-building motivations I was always focused on getting bigger/muscule and resultantly looking ‘better’. The way I viewed myself and the manner in which I chose to exercise was very much in line with the Wiegers’ (1998) findings of viewing the body as a project that reinforces and displays ideas of masculine self-identity. Underpinning this notion of what is meant by being masculine, is physical size, physical strength, and muscle leanness that are the product of body building so that the individual stands elevated in contrast to other persons (Smith & Stewart, 2012). Other traditional notions of masculinity such as tolerating discomfort and pain with a committed ‘at all costs’ attitude are associated with being able to achieve bodybuilding goals (Smith & Stewart, 2012). While this hegemonic masculine way of viewing the body has not magically vanished, I grew to put more stock in the function of what people can do, and how people move. Although this may be getting into minutiae, now when I see another male with large shoulders for example, I do not simply think ‘that looks cool and manly’, but I associate it
with the hard work that they must have put into training, and what their body now allows them to do, via the process of training over time. All things considered, my personal experience in the field has been largely positive and CrossFit continues to be a part of my life. I took part in CrossFit before this study and still continue to train at my local CrossFit gym.

In this thesis I wanted to study the cultural environment of CrossFit using a focus on community as the functional tool of inquiry. In doing so, I provide a description of what CrossFit is, as it is not a very well understood environment at this moment. This process of providing a description of how the culture is performed is almost a by-product of the other focus of this study which is to explore how communities are developed, that is – an environment that contributes to feelings of camaraderie and belongingness in sport. By employing a methodical inquiry that deconstructs components of community I can begin to understand what the community is. In order to do this, my study employs realist ethnography, a methodology that involves an intense immersion into the culture in question. Throughout this study, I have not been studying CrossFit at an arm’s length distance but have been immersed in the CrossFit lifestyle. I did not just watch athletes but engaged in the same movements, the same language, and the same atmosphere as other participants. As a researcher, I engaged in participant observation, self-reflective observations, and three participant interviews in addressing the aforementioned dynamic of community belongingness in CrossFit. The findings of this research reveal that in the development of this type of community belongingness, there are varying degrees to which individuals experience primary group relationships, autonomy, viability, distribution of power, participation, commitment, and conflict. These dynamics underline every type of community, be it a family unit, or a sports club. Interesting findings include discovering that the structure of CrossFit does not seek to maximize the autonomy of participants or empower athletes to be active participants in decision making such as planning exercises or WODs, and instead dictates this to the participants in an authoritarian manner. Furthermore, there is a wide range spectrum as to how intimate the relationships between athletes are. Some attendees participate in CrossFit very casually by exercising an not developing a large amount of close relationships. On the other hand, some athletes become very invested within the relationships developed at the box and go on to create close bonds that grow beyond the gym. These characteristics are unique to CrossFit and could be very different in other social groups, implying that each community is comprised of varying characteristics. When thinking about health and wellness, there is often a focus on
individual responsibility whereas CrossFit addresses these same concerns by stripping away some individualistic notions in order to bring emphasis to the group’s training, prescribed workouts and less decision making by the athletes. This dynamic works for CrossFit but in order to have a successful community in other circumstances, this may necessitate varying degrees of the aforementioned factors. For example, on a football team, there may be a high degree of primary group relationships amongst the defensive unit, and offensive unit respectively, with weaker relationships across the offensive and defensive units. Furthermore, when looking at the specific role of the quarterback on the team, this is a position that necessitates a lot more decision making as they are the leader of the offense and must also have the authority to make changes on the fly, in the form of audible play clays where they tell the entire offensive unit to change their play and formation with just a moments notice. For a group of friends that are part of a musical band (which can be a type of community) there may be a higher degree of primary group relationships and more involvement by each member in decision making processes. By all accounts, when discussing ‘community building’ or a describing belonging, it is important to parse out and detail this concept to truly understand the dynamic of the social group. All communities are not equal and are an amalgam of various factors which may or may not contribute to the success of the community’s goals and the positive experiences of the community’s members.

In Chapter Two will attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of exactly what CrossFit is by detailing the types of exercise that takes place and explaining the day-to-day interaction that CrossFitters engage in, both inside and outside of the gym space. This chapter also explores what recent academic discourse has analysed about this relatively new fitness industry. In Chapter Three, I take a step back from focusing on CrossFit alone, and contextualize it within the greater sociopolitical landscape in North America. Paramount of these contextualizing factors is neoliberalism and individualism in which this style of sport largely reflects. Following this, in Chapter Four, I will outline my ethnographic methodology that I used to study CrossFit as a community. In Chapters Five and Six, I detail what community is in CrossFit – that is, how the type of community that CrossFit fosters can be categorized and study the components that comprise this community.
Chapter 2
An Introduction to CrossFit

Background

Developing an understanding of CrossFit begins with looking into the history of its CEO and co-founder, Greg Glassman. Glassman’s athletic background began at a young age, competing in gymnastics throughout high school. He was interested in pursuing a professional career in gymnastics, enrolling at UCLA briefly, then attending a series of colleges in California until he was forced to stop competing after suffering a traumatic leg injury which ended his pursuit of a professional career (Herz, 2014). Sidelined by this injury, Greg went on to work in coaching gymnasts, and as an athletic trainer. This line of work was not new to Glassman as he would regularly supplement his gymnastic training with strength training. While in high school, his father had helped him convert the garage into a gym, and he had begun to experiment with a novel training methodology that combined high-intensity interval training (HIIT) with barbells and body weight exercises. One of the earliest workouts he created (which is now referred to as Fran) consisted of twenty-one thrusters (a combination of front squats and push press) and pullups, followed by 15 reps of the each of the movements, and then 9 of the same movements. This training style of random functional movements served him and his clients well, and Greg realized that he had created a unique and special movement. Eventually, he would acquire his largest client, the Santa Cruz Police Department, in 1995 and could further exemplify the success of his program, and essentially serve as a proof of concept for his exercise program that would explode in popularity shortly thereafter (Herz, 2014). The methodology he had developed over the years incorporated functional fitness movements at its core – exercises that translate well in other sports, professions, and in the context of everyday life. This included a heavy emphasis on squats, pullups, and metabolic conditioning to serve as a balance to the static sedentary behaviors many people engage in at work. As a result, CF incorporates, Olympic lifting (cleans, jerks, and snatches) which are all complex movements that recruit muscles all over the body and require mental coordination. His gymnastic background was present in the programming through the emphasis on relative strength using pullups, ring deps, hand stands, and muscle ups. In addition to this was rowing, skipping, and running for cardiovascular training and metabolic conditioning. Eventually, Glassman would come to consolidate these different movements and training style under the label of CrossFit in 2000, effectively naming and formalizing the paradigm as a
commercial brand. Formally, Greg Glassman would come to classify the methodology as “constantly varied functional movements performed at a high intensity” (“What is CrossFit?”, n.d.). This also sparked the proliferation of crossfit.com and the CrossFit affiliate program in 2003 which unifies CrossFit gym (boxes) around the world. The brand featured modest growth at first, counting 13 gyms in 2005, and has exploded to now include over 12,000 locations worldwide (Herz, 2014). Another notable event was the creation of the CrossFit Games (commonly referred to as simply ‘The Games’) in 2007, which is the annual event that features competing CrossFit athletes in a variety of workouts to earn a cash prize and be dubbed the “The Fittest Person on Earth”. As the affiliate program has grown, so has this contest which is now a televised mega-event sponsored by CrossFit’s official apparel partner, Reebok.

In Toronto alone, there are roughly 27 CrossFit gyms, and 73 in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). CrossFit is much more expensive that other gym memberships as it is an instructor lead program. In Toronto, most members can expect to pay for a box membership ranging from $120 to $200. As it is an open market where each gym has control over its pricing, rates do vary. The types of plans differ as well with many gyms offering options that include; unlimited access, biweekly, triweekly, class bundle packages, and others. When you sign up for CrossFit you typically have to complete training sessions or an orientation program to teach you the basic components before participating in a regular Workout of the Day (WOD) with the class. In these sessions, the coach will assess your current level of proficiency and begin to teach some of the more complicated movements, such as Olympic lifts if the athlete is ready. The everyday experience of participating in a WOD begins before you even enter the box. Most boxes use an app or website to reserve a spot in the scheduled CrossFit class you plan to attend. Sessions are typically one-hour long and are led by a coach who has been certified through CrossFit Inc. – they are responsible for overseeing athletes and coordinating the class which can range up to roughly 15 people. The usual format involves starting with a warmup routine; some gyms employ a documented routine warmup regimen while some lead a warmup that is tailored specifically to the rest of the classes workouts, and some boxes do a combination of both. A typical warm-up routine may include exercises like; air squats, lunges, double unders, shoulder dislocates, leg swings, pushups, pullups, and others. From here, the next step is start the strength or skill component of the class. This component does not always include HIIT style workout but can includes resistance training program or practicing a specific skill. After this, the main event
is the WOD. The WOD is the primary workout of the class which features the high intensity component that is central to CrossFit’s methodology. Some examples of WODs are:

- (Murph) 1-mile run, 100 pullups 200 pushups, 300 air squats, 1-mile run.
- 60 pushups, 50 dips, 40 handstand pushups, 30 bench presses (155 lb.), 20 jerks (155 lb.), 10 push presses (155 lb.)
- 5 rounds of: 15 dumbbell thrusters, 50 double unders, 3 rope climbs
- 12 minutes of: 25 pullups, 50 calorie row, 100 overhead squats (45 lb. barbell), 50 box jumps (24” box for men and 20” box for women, 25 pullups)

Although the exercises are prescribed with accompanying weights, coaches apply scaling for movements and weights to accommodate the different performance levels of each athlete. As a result, athletes of every skill level are accommodated which contributes to CrossFit’s inclusivity (Knapp, 2015). For example, if an athlete is not proficient in handstand pushups, the coach may have them do shoulder presses as an alternative that recruits similar muscle groups. In some cases, the athlete may be able to do the movement, but they recommended scaling the 155 lbs. push press down to 120 lbs. Whatever the case, the goal is to have all athletes perform a workout that is challenging for them, and the universal scalability is central to facilitating this. After the WOD, the scores of the workout are recorded on the gym board – depending on the type of workout, this may be how fast the workout was completed or how many repetitions the athlete achieved. When all is complete, people clear the space of whatever equipment is used, and it is common to have some athletes linger behind to cool down, stretch, or just socialize.

Throughout the workout, there is a lot more communication than you would find in a traditional gym in order for CrossFit to operate logistically. At the beginning of the class, the coach greets the athletes and they may recommend some warm-up activities, explain the WOD and then suggest different weights and movements necessary to scale the workout. Furthermore, the athletes themselves interact regularly, with typical social banter between friends and motivating each other through the workout. They must also negotiate space, and sometimes share equipment while setting up for the WOD. Throughout the WOD, especially near the end it is not uncommon to have athletes cheer each other on with words of encouragement or by clapping. This is all
juxtaposed against the experience of traditional commercial gyms where there is little to no social interaction between the athletes. Many individuals come to the space wearing headphones and interact with each other only when necessary. This supportive team approach in CrossFit is what many athletes would communicate to me as contributing to the ‘family’ like atmosphere.

Each box is unique with its own quirks but there are some threads that run through most CrossFit gyms. Similar to the inception of Glassman’s first WOD in his family garage, many boxes are created from converted garages or other industrial spaces. Two of the CrossFit boxes I have attended in the downtown core were in fact salvaged from old car repair garages. Outside of Toronto, the two other boxes I have attended were in warehouse spaces which aligns with the industrial and minimal aesthetic of CrossFit. Spaces like these are likely popular because of they are cheaper than spaces that have been renovated for retail or living. However, this raw aesthetic and particular décor also reflects the ideological ruggedness of the athletes themselves and their functional approach to fitness, which is minimal due to the lack of equipment and services in a box. In typical large-chain franchise gyms you can expect to see dozens of resistance training machines, a dedicated area to cardio including treadmills and stationary bikes, and a section for free-weights. Some of these gyms may also offer towel services, swimming pools, and spa-like services which will not be found at a CrossFit gym. The basics of a CrossFit box include: barbells, dumbbells, racks, pullup bars, wooden boxes, medicine balls, skipping ropes, gymnastic rings, and lifting platforms or rubberized floors. Mirrors are also notably absent from boxes which serves to show that the space more concerned with functionalism than aesthetics, because mirrors are disproportionately used for admiring their own body, or is simply a distraction (Crockett & Butryn, 2017; Dawson, 2017). The result of having less equipment is creating more multi-purpose open space that can accommodate a variety of movements within small buildings. One feature that is ubiquitous to every single box is some type of large board that serves the vital function of detailing the WOD and recording the results of each participant. Most gyms use a chalkboard or a whiteboard (dry-erase board), but some may use a computer monitor/ television. This is integral to the CrossFit gym in a functional sense because of its practical implications in communicating information about the class to the athletes, but socially it also allows athletes to communicate with each other through their performances. WODs and scores are posted on this board, and athletes who regularly attend classes at different times of the day may have infrequent personal interaction, but by looking at the board everyone can see if their peers have been
attending class, what tasks they took part in, and how well they performed. It has the potential to
be a source of motivation and accountability.

The ‘traditional gym’ is a term that will be used regularly throughout this thesis to describe the
settings of commercial gyms that many people use to train in North America. This does not
reference a gymnasium, but instead it refers to franchised gym chains, often located in large
buildings that are filled with many machines typically organized by muscle group for resistance
training, accompanied by a large area for aerobic exercise featuring bikes or treadmill. In
Toronto, this is the type of experience one would expect to receive when joining a GoodLife
Fitness for example, which is the largest fitness chain in Canada, and the fourth largest fitness
chain in the world (Daly, 2017). It is also important to note that gyms like these have prices that
are often fraction of the price of CrossFit gyms. The differences in the social atmosphere is also
quite different as most people rarely interact with other members of the gym because “clientele
are able to create virtual boundaries between themselves and others by listening to music
[through headphones], reading or watching television while working out on a piece of
equipment” (Dawson, 2017, p. 4). Not only are they able to dissociate from those around them,
but it is the cultural norm while in the space.

Another point which requires clarification is how the names of some popular WODs came to be.
By and large, most WODs do not feature a specific name but are simply a description of the
movements to be completed. However, there are two groups of named WODs, the first being
checkpoints and the other being Hero WODs. These checkpoint or benchmark WODs are used as
core workouts to measure progress and many been given women’s names. For this reason, they
are sometimes referred to as ‘The Girls’ or ‘The Nasty Girls’ (Lanier, n.d.). Some of these WOD
names are; Helen, Fran, Karen, Angie, Cindy, and Annie. Greg Glassman was asked to explain
the reason behind this naming scheme and he cited the convenience of having a name to quickly
communicate the movements of a WOD, and that female names were used because “anything
that left you flat on your back looking up at the sky asking, ‘What the fuck happened to me?’
deserved a female’s name… If hurricanes that wreak havoc on a town can be given a name, so
can a workout” (Herz, 2014; Murphy, 2012). Glassman specifically referenced the hurricane and
tropical storm naming convention which ultimately ceased in 1979 due to the overt sexist
implications. Naming conventions that use female names have also occurred with naming ships
and cars, that problematically denotes possession of women in patriarchal societies. With respect
to storm naming, this method came to be based on the suggestion that storms featured feminine traits due to the unpredictable temperament of weather, and women alike (Macomber, Mallinson, & Seale, 2011).

The other special case of named WODs are the hero WODs which is a list that continues to grow. These workouts are named after military personnel, fire fighters, and police officers who lost their life in the line of duty. It serves as a way of to honor these service workers. One of the most famous hero WODs is Murph, named after Navy Lieutenant, Murphy Patchogue from Patchogue, New York who was killed in Afghanistan on June 28, 2005 (Madliger, 2015). This workout calls for a one-mile run, 100 pullups, 200 pushups, 300 squats, and then another one mile run. It is also recommended that athletes wear a 20-lb. vest or body armor if possible (“CrossFit FAQ”, n.d.). Paying tribute to military officers is the most common way in which CrossFitters come in contact with over militaristic sentiments, but militaristic practices are rooted in many of CrossFit’s principles such as the team approach, the prescription of workouts, and the similarity in tasks that both groups demand. CrossFit and militaries both use boot camp style workouts that call for a lot of bodyweight exercises, and varied programming to be prepared for unexpected demands. Unsurprisingly, this has resulted in an intimate relationship between the two communities, with CrossFit being used as a training method for the US Army at one point, and a general popularity of CrossFit amongst military employees. This relationship was further defined in 2016 when The CrossFit Open included a service member (referred to as The Service Open in 2017) category for athletes employed in the military, law enforcement, firefighting, and emergency medical services. Despite extensively describing the historical and cultural connections between CrossFit and militarism, it is important to simultaneously acknowledge the ideological flexibility of each specific box. While militarism is ever-present in the style of programming, overt acts of militarism including imagery are not present in all spaces. The magnitude and intensity of the relationship between the two communities is largely dependent on each specific box’s location and demographics. CrossFit is an extremely large brand with athletes that subscribe to a wide array of ideals and interests. With CrossFit becoming more mainstream, this intense, extreme persona has been largely neutralized so that it appeals to more people. Misconceptions often arise due to conflating militaristic machismo and the super-competitive arm of The CrossFit Games, to CrossFit culture as a whole. The large spectacle that is the CrossFit Games consistently displays patriotism and militarism in a way that is much more
intentional and compares to other spectator sports such as American football or NASCAR, but
this is not always the experience of the typical CrossFit athlete (Newman, 2007).

The aforementioned justification of naming ‘The Nasty Girls’ reflects Glassman’s outspoken,
polarizing, and sometimes notorious persona. Another instance of his outspoken nature is
evidenced in an interview at the Harvard Divinity University where he publically critiqued the
practices of the American Beverage Association (ABA) saying “We’ve become the anti-soda
people, and we’re leading the anti-soda movement” and “We’re in a holy war with Big Soda, it’s
killing this country’s health.” (Wallack, 2016, para. 2). Most people have little problem with
statements like this, but he has also said, “We have therapy for injuries at CrossFit, it’s called
STFU [shut the fuck up]” (Helm, 2013). Another example was when he was asked to comment
on the safety of the sport amidst a flurry of critiques in which he responded, “If you find the
notion of falling off the rings and breaking your neck so foreign to you, then we don't want you
in our ranks,” effectively embracing a culture of danger and risk (Cooperman, 2005, para 26).
Another point of contention with Glassman and CrossFit HQ was when the winner of The
Games in 2016 received a handgun as a prize, in addition to the customary prize mone.
This
was a decision that garnered a lot of backlash from athletes and fans alike and is one of many
threads that connects CrossFit to militaristic culture. Nonetheless, due to his comments and
behavior, Glassman is a polarizing figure who is sometimes praised for his candid and bluntness
or dismissed as crazy and brash by others. Being an outspoken CEO means that Greg’s opinions
are often the face of the organization, therefore implying that his opinions are reflective of boxes
around the world. However, this is not an accurate assumption to make as most participants share
a bond with their particular gym and not the CEO of the company. Similarly, in my role as a
graduate student, my views and opinions do not necessarily reflect that of the dean of my faculty,
despite this person is the leader of the faculty that I am enrolled in.

While Glassman may be the face of CrossFit to some people, many people’s introduction to
CrossFit stems from exposure to The CrossFit Games. The CrossFit Games is a yearly
competition between CrossFit athletes all around the world to earn the title of fittest man or
woman on earth. All athletes who qualify come together once a year to compete in a series of
televised events hosted in stadiums. In these circles, you see the most elite athletes, some of
whom train full time and devote their lives to the sport. The amount of media attention that The
Games receives, and the sheer grandeur of the spectacle often misleads people into thinking that
The Games reflects most athletes’ training experience at any given box, but this could not be further from the truth. In the CrossFit Games documentary entitled Fittest on Earth: A Decade of Fitness (Cannon, Motassian, Moore, Oldroyd, Sawyers, Wittenber, & Cannon, Moore, Sawyers Wittenber, 2017), Rory McKernan a former CrossFit Games Athlete and Games host explains the difference between the two paradigms. McKernan says “The CrossFit Games are fun to watch, and they are frickin’ cool. The misconception is that the CrossFit Games are a CrossFit. It’s not the case. In a typical affiliate, you walk in and you’re gonna’ see people just like you in a local community. You’re gonna’ see your soccer mom, high-powered CEOs working out next to janitors, people from all walks of life, all trying to pursue a better version of who they can be.” Pat Sherwood, a CrossFit Games Commentator then adds “Regular folks, that have a job, have a family, have other things going on. We’re not trying to be the fittest person in the world. We just want to be in great shape and have a high quality of life and avoid all the metabolic diseases hitting the world. You can go to the gym, hit one workout, hit it super hard, stretch a little bit, go home, eat clean.” While The Games are a valuable part of CrossFit culture, it is not the primary focus of this study as it does not represent the experience most people engaged in CrossFit will experience (“About Affiliation”, n.d.). If I was conducting a study on a recreational basketball league, I would acknowledge the National Basketball Association (NBA) insofar as it is a part of the sport’s culture, but it does not represent the cultural practices and experiences of a recreational group. This distinction is significant because CrossFit Inc. does not have a set of rules or standardized code of operations that each box must adhere to. The result is immense flexibility within each gym with respect to their hours of operation, types of classes, the WODs administered, equipment on site, and more (Murphy, 2012). All things considered, the opinions of founder and CEO, Greg Glassman receive a lot of publicity, and he is unquestionable influential in CrossFit as a brand, but it does not guarantee that the same views are held by box owners and coaches. In fact, coaches and box owners that I have interacted have critiqued some of the views of Glassman and The CrossFit Games which are often the public face of the brand, despite the extensive grassroots membership CrossFit has created.

To those who still have trouble grasping the nature of CrossFit, looking to other fitness environments may provide a better understanding based on their similarities. CrossFit can be compared to the likes of rugged community initiatives such as Tough Mudder and Spartan Race, and other class-based fitness programs like Zumba, yoga, and boot camps (Crockett & Butryn,
In environments like these, there is a dynamic of social interaction between participants and a break from physical activity that is routine, or void of excitement. Obstacle course races such as Tough Mudder, Spartan Race, and Warrior Dash, rose to popularity circa 2006-2010, paralleling the rise of CrossFit’s popularity using dynamic and exciting activity (Young, Keiper, Fried, Seidler, & Eickhoff-Shemek, 2014). These races use elements like muddy fields, wall climbs, monkey bars, fire jumps, belly crawls, electrical wire, and more, in order to create a gritty atmosphere that most participants have never experienced before. This mirrors some military readiness training in the unconventional style of training and social comradery present when people participate (Heywood, 2016; Mullins, 2012). CrossFit and these obstacle course races represent a form of “general physical preparedness” workout programs, meant to prepare athletes for everyday life and a variety of fitness demands. Tough Mudder, one of the most popular of these ‘mud runs’, varies in length from ten to twelve miles and now has 35 locations worldwide with 700,000 participants, with a focus on simply completing the task by and using teamwork and comradery along the way (Ebner, 2017; Lamb & Hillman, 2015; Weedon, 2015). Similarly, CrossFit advocates increased participation and assisting fellow athletes. Yoga and boot camps act as comparisons as well due to the structure of have instructor led fitness classes. This provides a scenario through which members have instruction and can ask for assistance that they would not have if attending the gym alone, yet they are free from the scrutiny of a personal trainer. In this sense, it may serve as a happy medium between two popular alternatives.

As a whole, CrossFit is a fairly new fitness methodology that is identified as a gritty, practical, and communal approach to exercise, which provides an alternative to traditional gyms. Although social interaction and communication during physical activity is not new, the development of community is one of the greatest claims by the CrossFit corporation and its participants. The level of commitment and engagement often goes beyond the box, as other components of life change to accommodate CrossFit training. “Before you even begin CrossFit, you must choose to take a different path than the majority of your peers. You must choose to change your perspective on fitness, diet, and work” (Heywood, 2016, p. 121). Many have jumped on board with the program, but it is not without its detractors.
Critiques

Colloquial discourse of CrossFit tends to receive more negative media attention than other fitness cultures. One rarely sees press that critiques individuals who choose to train for a marathon, join a recreational sports league or train at a traditional gym. On the contrary, we regularly promote this type of behavior. However, countless articles have questioned the safety of CrossFit’s exercises. In an article for the Huffington Post, Matthew Baso (2013) questions the theory behind the training methodology which calls for a lack of specialization in classes and he states that CrossFit is dangerous – “when you do CrossFit you get good at CrossFit or you get injured”. Another example is in a Forbes article, which states that in an interview of Greg Glassman by 60 Minutes, he may have overlooked the amount and intensity of injuries that occur through CrossFit (Diamond, 2015). In my personal experiences, my peers in the field of kinesiology often questioned my judgement in choosing to participate in CF, and cautioned me to be careful as I was likely to injure myself. All these concerns and criticism are not completely unfounded as this training method can sometimes fail to emphasize the quality of movement as performance is measured using an outcome-based method – at the end of a WOD you write down how much weight you lifted or how fast your time was, not the quality of movement. However, the overemphasis on traumatic injuries seems to be exaggerated in the media as academic studies have found that the injury rate in CrossFit is comparable to or even less than that of Olympic weightlifting, powerlifting, gymnastics, running, rugby, track and field, football, and hockey, with most injuries occurring in the shoulders, lower back, and knees (Hak, Hodzovic, & Hickey, 2013; Klimek, Ashbeck, Brook, & Durall, 2017; Weisenthal, Beck, Maloney, DeHaven, & Giordano, 2014). Coaching supervision and previous injury are found to be significant variables in the incidence of injury and these are issues present in CrossFit, traditional gyms, and all sports alike (Chachula, Cameron, & Svoboda, 2016). These findings are interesting in and of themselves and also shed light on the emphasis of the biophysical components of CF, and the overarching biomedical framework in health sectors, and wellness primarily through a lens in which the body is viewed as a machine. This mode of thinking is based upon the notion that the mind or mental health is separate from the physical body (Barry & Yuill, 2011). As such, an ill body is a machine that no longer functions properly and must be fixed or cured using intervention of which pharmacology and surgery are the regular tools (Barry & Yuill, 2011).
Another common critique comes from people exercising so intensely that they induce vomiting, which can sometimes be an unfortunate side-effect. One article states that “WODs aren't easy, and it's not uncommon for "CrossFitters" to vomit after a particularly difficult workout” (Feline & Manning, 2013, para. 4). Occurrences of people throwing up due to maximal exertion has led to the creation of “Pukie the Clown”. “Pukie the Clown” is a fictional character that was commonly cited in early critiques of CrossFit and signaled the embodiment and personification of athletes vomiting during WODs. It has raised concerns about self-inflicted pain and self-injurious behavior, although it has conversely been described by CrossFit athletes themselves as “a light-hearted approach to the discomforts of training with intensity” (Allen, 2005, p. 2; Kuhn, 2013). Regardless, the actual presence of this ‘character’ has long since dissipated but the associated sentiments still linger amongst the uninitiated, despite radical change. As CrossFit gyms have become more popular and diverse, mainstream tropes like “Pukie the Clown” have no place in most gyms. The proliferation of the sport has smoothed out the sports metaphorical rough edges. WODs are not extreme feats meant to destroy athletes but instead they provide scalable programming that athletes from different backgrounds and levels of experience can participate in. In the infancy of CrossFit, the demographics appeared to be few people ‘crazy’ enough to participate the sport. However, most CrossFit gyms today feature a wide diversity of people including students, teachers, business professionals, parents, and more. To many of these people, CF is one of many components of life, and therefore, the commitment and dedication to the craft is not so extreme that athletes are willing to put themselves in unnecessary dangerous and unpleasant situations. If an athlete is reaching the point of exertion where they may become ill, a coach is most likely going to instruct them to rest and recover.

Religion

Much of the journalistic writing around CrossFit addresses the allusions between CrossFit and religion and cultism. This rhetoric stems from, and has been popularized, by a report entitled How We Gather by Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile (2015), two graduate students from the Harvard Divinity School. This document provides new insights from the perspective of millennials and a younger generation who have grown up in a world increasingly integrated within technology at a time where secularism is also on the rise. The authors also hosted an event at the Harvard Divinity School featuring Greg Glassman as a guest speaker to discuss the findings. This study suggests that more young people do not identify with a particular religion
and that the remaining number of people are more likely to be just spiritual – without a deep connection to a formal religious institution (Thurston & ter Kuile, 2015). In the absence of connections to these institutions, new types of communities provide a socializing atmosphere, such as, The Dinner Party, Soul Cycle, and of course, CrossFit (Thurston & ter Kuile, 2015). Indeed, the characteristics that are often associated with church – community, faith, and personal growth – can all be found and fostered in settings outside of churches as one does not necessarily need a God or deity to develop social bonds and share intimate experiences. To some people, the social interaction and community membership of religious groups is often just as, if not more, important than the actual belief in a ‘higher power’, as evidenced by current discourses surrounding individuals who consider themselves ‘cultural Christians’. This title refers to individuals who may associate with a religious institution historically or culturally but are indifferent with respect to believing in a ‘higher power’. These people may have grown up in a religious household, but their current faith is not connected to the church despite identifying with the cultural traditions and communal practices (Knapton, 2014). Recent Pew Research has found that more Americans are unaffiliated with a religion, and those that are, are less engaged when comparing the amount of time spent attending worship or praying (Lipka, 2015). As many aspects of the world are becoming increasingly secular, physical activity serves as a popular site for the socialization, bonding, and purpose-finding, that was once readily available in religious contexts.

Considering sport does not exist in a vacuum, it is no surprise that sport and religion have a relationship, given that both spheres are large components of society at large (Elias & Dunning, 1986). The connection between sport and religion comprises is complex and far reaching, but much of the intersection in North America that has been predicated on Anglo-American and Christianity over the past 150 can be understood through the theorizing of ‘muscular Christianity’ (Watson, Weir, & Friend, 2005). These sentiments are not always inclusive because it others racialized persons, and other religious backgrounds but there is some value in tracing this lineage because it explores the foundation of whiteness which has underpinned the establishment of institutions such as professional sports leagues and exercise facilities in North America. The term muscular Christianity was popularized in the 1850s in reference to a mentality that suggested sport participation not only enabled physical fitness, but that it facilitated good ‘manly’ character building and Christian morality (Watson et al., 2005). While
the religious sentiments may no longer be as explicit, and even dissipated as religiosity has declined, the significance and value of health and fitness in society still persists, now primarily through rhetoric on being ‘a good, responsible citizen’ (Lipka, 2015; Twells, Gregory, Reddigan, & Midodzi, 2014). Currently, individuals are shamed for the obesity and inactivity ‘epidemics’, often being labelled as an economic burden on the healthcare system (Twells et al., 2014; Withrow & Alter, 2011). One’s visual appearance has also been linked to their character and value, with many making the assumption that people who are overweight are lazy, stupid, undisciplined, and irresponsible (Paul & Townsend, 1995; Wang, Brownell, & Wadden, 2004).

When there is a focus on the organization of these institutions like churches comparisons can be made to CrossFit because it has been found to contain some characteristics that would make it a total institution (TI). Erving Goffman (1961) coined the term total institution to describe the isolated and secluded lifestyle of prisoners in which all of their decisions, choices, and activities are heavily influenced, if not dictated by the ruling institution. It features an environment where members live, sleep, work, and play, in the same space, and with the same people, all the while having minimal interaction with society outside of these relationships and geographic context (Davies, 1989; Goffman, 1961). Some of these characteristics can be connected to CrossFit in an abstract sense. The ultimate goal is to achieve health and fitness, and this results in affecting other components of life, namely diet, sleep, and scheduling the workouts themselves. Not only do athletes exercise in the space but socializing also takes place. WODs are tightly scheduled, and athletes train with a similar group of people every time. The training environment of boxes also creates a panoptic effect, as everyone can observe each other during exercises – and if they are not watching, everyone’s results are posted on the board for others to see (Crockett & Butryn, 2017). The notion of the panopticon is a form of surveillance described by Jeremy Bentham as a circular prison where prisoners can never know if they are being observed or not (Rail & Harvey, 1995). This uncertainty leads individual to the rational choice of behaving under the assumption that they are constantly being watched, at which point it is self-regulation as opposed to external regulation that is taking place (Wood, 2002). The behaviour of people under this self-monitoring creates and reinforces normalized social behaviour to be exhibited at all times (Crawford, 2004). Foucault’s conceptions of panopticism and surveillance uses the examples of prisons, asylums, schools, factories, and I would argue this applies to gyms like CrossFit boxes because the ultimate goal of optimize performance functioning is present in all these sites. Goffman (1961)
too studied CrossFit, but his theories require some extrapolation largely because one is a voluntary group, while the other is not. In order to account for this discrepancy, recent works explore the connection that can be found within Goffman’s principles and more diverse contexts. Susie Scott (2010) accomplishes this task through the concept of the reinventive institution (RI). The author defines this as “places to which people retreat for periods of intense self-reflection, education, enrichment and reform, but under their own volition, in the pursuit of ‘self-improvement’” (Scott, 2010, p. 218). The considerable difference between TI and RI is ultimately the agency and power bestowed upon the individual, with Scott’s (2010) conception taking into account the willingness for individuals to seek out environments in which they can act passively and succumb to external pressures – however the primary agentic decision solidifies their individuality. There is a duality by which members of the institutions feel controlled by the structure, but the organization does not have the absolute domination and tyrannical perception that is expected from Goffman’s exploration of prison life. Ultimately, athletes can quit and leave at any time, and this does happen. Emphasis is also placed on the idea that becoming a part of an RI is meant to be a means to an end, usually as a goal to better one’s health and wellness or become more active in the case of CrossFit. Other examples of this include rehabilitation centres or a spiritual retreat (Scott, 2010). In all cases, the individual invests their time, commitment, and faith in the institution, views the leaders in high regard, and subscribes to the schedules and demands of the organization because they trust that it is in their best interest (Scott, 2010). Choosing to become a part of an RI relinquishes some of the stress that can accompany making choices because the institution demands and facilitates a particular type of behavior. This may be appealing as a reaction towards the increasing individualism of modernity, and fear of being labelled or shamed for inactivity. Joining a CrossFit box reduces the isolation of one’s physical activity by virtue of having fellow athletes and coaches.

Building on Scott’s (2010) theorizing of the reinventive institution, Dawson (2017) contextualizes these findings and assesses the extent to which CrossFit can be considered a cult. This ‘cult’ sentiment is often found in conjunction with religious comparisons and is evidenced by popular articles such as; Inside the Cult of CrossFit in The Daily Beast, The Church of CrossFit in the Atlantic, The Cult of CrossFit: How the workout can bring out the best (and worst) of faith in The Washington Post, and When Some Turn to Church, Other Go to CrossFit in The New York Times. Superficially, CrossFit is often labelled as a cult because of the “mutual
connection and identification derived from shared (sometimes grueling) experience, as well as being motivated by guilt and piety, are recurrent themes in CrossFit, religion, and the military” (Dawson, 2017, p. 6). Dawson (2017) also coins the term ‘exercise-military-religion (EMR) nexus’ to categorize the aforementioned characteristics, which are often found in these three institutions. Further examples of these cultish traits include an increased separation from the rest of society, praise of leaders (coaches) within the CrossFit community, and the desire to recruit other members into the community (Dawson, 2017). Ultimately, Dawson’s (2017) analysis finds that CrossFit is better theorized using Scott’s (2010) aforementioned conception of the reinventive institution largely because the cult label is inappropriately used. There are some characteristics of cults that can be found in CrossFit but one of the most significant components of a cult is the inability to leave of your own volition (Dawson, 2017). Members come and go as they please, as in my own case. I was a member of a box for six months in my first go-around with CrossFit, and then returned to the sport several months later. Despite some other similarities this is an inextricably component of what a cult truly is. Moreover, it is not secretive or deceptive regarding its conduct or governance. In fact, CrossFit actually operates contrarily to this, advertising its culture and practices in efforts to expand the brand. All things considered, it is easy to comprehend why the allusions to cult are frequent but the reality is that the reinventive institution is a better way to conceptualize this particular formation of social interaction.

Health Choices

Other recent academic insights into CrossFit culture have explored the intertwining relationships of CrossFit and other health choices, especially diet and nutrition (Rosenbloom, 2014). Beyond the general recommendations to make healthier food choices, CrossFit promotes the Paleolithic diet as one specific way to achieve this goal of healthy eating (Pastore, Brooks, & Carbone, 2015). The Paleolithic (paleo) diet is predicated on the idea that our Paleolithic ancestors or ‘cavemen’ were better athletes than present day people due to the types of food they would have eaten at the time. As a result, CrossFit suggests people should mimic this diet and choose to “Eat meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar”, and avoid of processed or refined foods (Glassman, 2015; Hicks, 2016). The validity of the term Paleolithic in reference to this style of eating is questionable because the historical diets of humans would have varied vastly based on flora and fauna in their geographic location, but nonetheless, the sentiments remain. Herz (2014) speaks to the romanticizing of humans in the Paleolithic era as a
time in which health by way of nutrition and athleticism dictated life or death. This rugged, ancestral machismo is coupled with ideals of eating simple, organic foods – the ‘natural way’. This is expressed through CrossFit athletes, who have vouched for this method of dieting (Kuhn, 2013; Smith, Sommer, Starkoff, & Devor, 2013). This nutritional trend differs greatly from traditionally advertised eating habits in elite sport culture which does promote meat consumption but pays less attention to processed food. Interestingly, these approaches to diet also reflect the minimalist, no frills, approach to exercise that CrossFit is predicated on. Going beyond food, Kuhn (2013) also explores how CrossFit represents a form of resistance to the sets of principles and beliefs of conventional health and fitness wisdom. From the inception of CrossFit, there were numerous critiques regarding the large workload and high intensity that participants engage in. However, overtime many of these training methodologies that were once considered unorthodox are now more common. HIIT has seen a rise in popularity, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of Olympic weight lifting, and a focus on functional movement patterns has received more attention (Thompson, 2013). CrossFit is also a product of, and has further promoted, group fitness/ boot camp style of exercise which is becoming ever more common. In Toronto, and beyond, many gyms are adopting instructor led fitness classes employing HIIT methodologies, and group training (Thompson, 2016). What was once considered a fringe activity in CrossFit, now increasingly has similarities to other training styles and methodologies that are on the rise

Gender

Another entry point into understanding the dynamic that sport plays in our society is to explore how sport and exercise interacts with our socially constructed views of gender. Historically, sport has been used as a way to differentiate men from women, and as a tool to highlight the athletic ability and physicality of males (Dufur, 2006). Other scholars view sport as a tool to propagate traditional patriarchal sentiments of heteronormativity present in multiple places of society (Goldstein, 2012; Vertinsky, 1994). The lasting effects are that women are less likely to participate in sport, and those that do, are less likely to report positive experiences than men (Canada Fitness, 2016). Promoting sport and exercise as a regular component of people’s lives is extremely important due to the positive impacts it has on physical and mental health, having the potential to contribute to reduced depression, reduced anxiety, reduced stress, increased fitness, increased self-esteem, decreased osteoporosis, and decreased risk of complications during birth
(Dufur, 2006; Koivula, 1999). As a result, organizations need to create spaces in which a wide diversity of persons across the gender spectrum can have positive athletic experiences by minimizing the patriarchal and hyper masculine environments that are often embedded within sports.

**Masculinity**

A culture of hyper-masculinity has dominated sport historically. Masculinity refers to socially constructed rules and values based in patriarchal sentiments which serve to govern how people should behave (Dufur, 2006). These characteristics seek vilify the stereotypically effeminate as much as possible and include such characteristics as, but are not limited to; aggression, violence, competitiveness, lack of emotion, risk taking, self-sacrifice, homophobia, and accepting pain and injury (Dufur, 2006; Knapp, 2015). These are values that are traditionally attributed to men, but the process is indiscriminate of gender as any gender can experience these values despite being historically and stereotypically attributed to males. The confusion and problematic nature of the characteristics arises with equating masculinity strictly to men, as aggression for example can be displayed by anyone (Paechter, 2006). Women are increasingly participating in sport as a whole as well as contact sports and engaging in behaviour deemed stereotypically masculine (Young & White, 1995). These consequences can often be manifested by using the body to inflict violence on other athletes, enduring pain, and experiencing injury as risky behaviours are less inhibited and athletes push themselves further while competing in any sport (Young & White, 1995). This risky behaviour is true of both men and women but perhaps men are more likely to uptake this behaviour at a higher rate and/or a higher intensity which may explain findings that male athletes are more likely to experience injury than their female counterparts (Knapp, 2015). Moreover, when injuries occur, they can be serve as a point of pride, acting as visual markers and symbols of athlete’s masculinity (Dufur, 2006). This behavior is fairly common in the Cross Fit space, as athletes in the CrossFit gym regularly discuss their injury history. The practical reason for this is that an athlete’s injury history may influence their exercise programming, but it also serves as a signal of the magnitude of their athletic journey. The prototypical example of this is CrossFitters talking about pain from calluses forming on the palm. After being a part of CrossFit for a reasonable amount of time almost everyone experiences this pain, and it is often earlier in one’s CrossFit exposure as hands begin to harden. People share their painful experiences with pride, and athletes trade tips on how to remedy the matter by building up the calluses. For example,
during my participation, I had athletes recommend that I use a pumice stone to remove dead skin, and others said that I should use razor to cut the calluses off. Masculinity also implies more than just social or psychological behavior but influences ideological differences. Men in hyper-masculine and patriarchal settings often associated with team sports have been found to have more traditional views towards women and female gender roles, as well as a lack of intimacy with their partners (Dufur, 2006). All of these experiences are heightened through the process of public rituals – spectatorship becomes a part of the culture therefore multiplying the impact of masculinity because the sentiments are shared and celebrated on a large scale (Dufur, 2006). Celebrating these values heightens the cultural underpinnings of masculinity through visibility and reverence of the associated behavior. This sentiment is evident through violent sports like American football. The sheer magnitude of spectatorship that consumes the sport serves as one of the greatest examples in which masculine attributes, especially violence, is displayed, validated, and celebrated. Besides combat sports, football is one of the most violent and glorified sports. Football, like many men’s sports, also regularly makes allusions to war; it is a territorial game and language used sometimes refers to intense games as “All out war” for example (Trujillo, 1995, p. 411). Moreover, when sports related-violence take place on the field, the images are repeated using slow-motion replays so that fans can enjoy these mimetic displays of violence and aggression (Trujillo, 1995). A more grounded form of this exists in CrossFit on a regular basis in every WOD. As athletes trudge through a WOD, the open physical environment ensures that spectatorship exists between athletes and coaches, and individuals are motivated to push through pain which can be considered as its own form of self-violence

Femininity

CrossFit is considered by some to be a progressive site for women in physical activity, as evidenced by participation rates of females in CrossFit that far exceed that of the national average. CrossFit’s participation rate is roughly half women and half men, compared to the national trend in which men are more likely to participate in sport – 57% of men to 22% of women (Canada Fitness, 2016; Heritage, 2013; Knapp, 2015; “Latest CrossFit Market Research Data,” 2014). This may suggest that CrossFit provides a more welcoming or safe space for women to train. The precise reason why CrossFit is so popular amongst women is not thoroughly understood but it may be because the inclusivity of programming holds men and women to the same standard. Katrín Daviðsdóttir (2016, para. 3), the 2015 and 2016 CrossFit Games
Champion echoes this sentiment in saying “In CrossFit, there’s no such thing as a male or female workout—we all do the same exercises. There is no fear of women becoming “too strong.” Men and women compete in the same arena (literally), all as part of the same competition: the Reebok CrossFit Games. ESPN gives men and women the exact same amount of airtime, and both genders receive equal recognition and compensation… While the weights might occasionally differ in competition, the movements we do are the same. When I’m putting out my maximum effort, I know a guy like Ben Smith—the man who won the 2015 Reebok CrossFit Games alongside me—is putting out his maximum effort and striving to achieve his best, too”. This quotation from Davíðsdóttir also speaks to the dynamic of gender equity at the professional level of CrossFit where clear parity in remuneration and exposure has been achieved. The author also says that the fear of women becoming too is largely removed because instead of being perceived as a negative, it is a goal that athletes strive for as it enables them to perform desirable physical activities. At my experience in the box, women would compliment each other on having large muscles and it was largely revered, not shamed. The cultural impact of these practices may result in popularity that attracts female athletes to the sport and influences local boxes to behave in an equitable manner.

In addition to the experiences of, these women are still subject to the aforementioned characteristics of masculinity. Masculinity and femininity are present simultaneously, in a way that creates a unique female experience in which both masculinity and femininity are navigated. The very act of engaging in sport can be perceived as masculine behavior and women regularly use symbols that signal (often heterosexual) femininity that may be an act of taking ownership of their sexuality or as an interaction within culturally and systemically heteronormative and heterosexual patriarchal dominance. Examples of this include female boxers who wear pink shorts, or trunks with skirts sewn to the back (Dufur, 2006). It is also not uncommon to see women compete while wearing makeup, hair ribbons, or jewelry (Dufur, 2006). These visual symbols signal to viewers that although they are athletes, they are still women in the same ways society expects them to behave. In CrossFit, a similar mechanism takes place through the clothing that athletes wear. There is a common style that women dress in, or informal ‘uniform’ that has become popular. Men typically wear loose fitting shorts with a t-shirt or tank top, and women are more likely to wear tights/leggings or tight shorts with a t-shirt or tank top. Mirroring this trend, Reebok, the official brand sponsor of CrossFit only sells women’s shorts that measure
up to four inches long, and are referred to as booty shorts, shorty shorts, or ass to ankle shorts (Casey, 2016; Washington & Economides, 2016). The types of clothing that women wear also speak to the constant sexualization of women in sporting contexts. This popularized ‘uniform’ is by no means mandatory or formalized in typical boxes in the same way that the uniforms of female athletes in, for example, Olympic beach volleyball, but the effects are similar. Both male and female athletes are sexualized, but this process is further exacerbated by clothing that attempts to bring even more attention to sexually significant body areas (Sailors, Teetzel, & Weaving, 2012). The events of The CrossFit Games display this tendency – women wear tight bottoms while men wear loose bottoms. This trend in apparel effectively sexualizes female athletes in heterosexual and heternomative ways by contributing to the objectification of women present in other media and society as a whole (Kolnes, 1995). Men are sexualized and objectified in similar ways to women that celebrate thinness and preoccupation with youth, thinness, and attractiveness (Rohlinger, 2002). Thinness and muscularity interact to create the ideal muscular lean body. This dynamic is reinforced by the common trend of men who participate in WODs shirtless, which was common in the summer months at this box. I experienced this in my ethnographic research, and it is also reflected in CrossFit Media including The Games. With respect to the female experience in physical activity and sport, the body is a key component of the socially constructed gender identity (Shea, 2001). Shea’s (2001) work surrounding bodybuilding highlights how the body can be a site of resistance to cultural norms which associate the female body as weak and unfit for sports. Intertwined within this view of the female body however, are also standards and norms of beauty. Females with more muscular physiques are often deemed less beautiful by societal beauty standards because it is highly associated with masculinity and the male sporting body (Shea, 2001). In CrossFit and some sports, images of the muscular female body are more frequent which challenges the status quo pertaining to the dichotomy of ‘masculine bodies’ versus ‘feminine bodies’ (Shea, 2001). This transition in ideal standards of beauty is in part due to the power of media to establish new ideals (Shea, 2001). Through increased visibility and celebrating different body types societal sentiments of patriarchy and sexualization can shift. This is further enabled by the proliferation of the internet which has allowed people to share images and narratives of the body beyond those conventionally seen in magazine and on TV, which have historically feature thinner women (Knapp, 2015). Images of CrossFit are consumed on Instagram, in blog posts, and online articles, in addition to more formal media. In CrossFit media, one is more likely to find more muscular
representations of women, and it encourages muscularity amongst female participants (Dawson, 2017). This is significant considering rhetoric pertaining to women and fitness is regularly predicated around “being toned” and not “getting too big” in all but a few athletic cultures such as CrossFit and bodybuilding (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Even in the realm of sports, challenging thinness and accepting muscularity has met with a lot of resistance. An example of this includes critiques of Serena Williams’ body as being overly muscular, with one reporter commenting that women on the circuit have said, “I can’t even watch them play anymore. I find it disgusting. I find both of those, what do you want to call them—they’re just too muscular. They’re boys”, (in reference to Serena, and her sister Vanessa Williams) (Schultz, 2005, p. 346). This critique of Serena Williams is based on her body shape, which does not fit the mold of the conventional thin athlete (Schultz, 2005). During one session at the gym, a member told the athletes that were present about an experience she had earlier in the week when she was at a coffee shop. Another customer commented on how surprised he was to see a woman with muscular shoulders and asked if she was possibly a body builder. The member appeared annoyed in retelling this story and conveyed that the comment about her body was unwarranted and inappropriate. Others in the gym echoed their support and suggested that the uninvited comment from the man was inappropriate and that a muscular woman should not be such a novel sight that he deemed it necessary to approach her and say the things he said. Someone else in the gym simply said something to the effect that ‘It shouldn’t be a big deal’. The opinions of the athletes that day were aligned with those of recent academic findings that suggest that in the field of CF, the ideal body has shifted to that of a more muscular body, and some believe that it may have even broadened the overall ‘acceptable’ female body, creating a more inclusive environment (Knapp, 2015; Washington & Economides, 2016). Despite these changes, CrossFit is still subject to the hegemonic masculinity and the sexualization of women. In Dawson’s (2017) media analysis of The CrossFit Journal (an online journal/blog created by members of the CrossFit community), she found it has pushed the boundaries of masculinity and femininity although there were still examples of female sexualization. One such example was an image in the journal depicting a woman lifting weights in a dress. These realities of persisting sexism are tempered to some degree by CrossFit’s mandate of achieving functional fitness as opposed to purely aesthetic beauty by affecting the manner and degree to which female bodies are subject to the male gaze. In other words, working out for the purpose of performance goals, and not to sculpt a specific type of body may decrease objectification by drawing attention away from the body, and instead
focusing on what the body can do. Washington & Economides (2016) believe that the overall goal is still one of aesthetics, but motivation is multifaceted, and components of functionality as well as community involvement may play larger roles than in other fitness environments. By most accounts, there are progressive steps towards equity in the culture and competition of CrossFit, that other professional sports have yet to adopt. For these reasons, an analytical critique of CrossFit using a feminist perspective does recognize some improvements in the sporting landscape. However, a lack of discussion surrounding racialization in the field of CrossFit has failed to address the possible intersectionalities that may be operating as well. The voices of women in the sport are overwhelming those of white persons, leaving persons of color to be excluded in the quest for more equitable spaces.

Community

Exploring the aspect of community in CrossFit involvement is one way that may reconcile all of the aforementioned components of CrossFit, because the way individuals communicate and interact is the means by which values can be established concerning religions, diet, gender, masculinity, femininity, and other components. The claims of the official CrossFit website, which attributes much of the program’s success “spontaneously arises when people do these workouts together is a key component of why CrossFit is so effective… Harnessing the natural camaraderie, competition and fun of sport or game yields an intensity that cannot be matched by other means.” (“What is CrossFit?”, n.d.), can also assessed and validated. Feeling connected to a broader sense of community is an important part of feeling welcome in a space, as well as having the ability to develop relationships (Delanty, 2003). Early findings suggest that CrossFit does have higher levels of feelings of community membership, which implies that despite using training methods that can be incorporated into any other gym, there is something novel within the cultural experience of CrossFit (Whiteman-Sandland, Hawkins, & Clayton, 2016). Findings from Pickett, Goldsmith, Damon, & Walker, (2016) state that individuals in other group fitness programs (that are not CrossFit) do not experience a sense of community similar to that of CrossFit. In fact, feelings of community in these regular group fitness classes were statistically insignificant to that of individuals attending a traditional gym on their own (Pickett et al., 2016). The community approach is the lynchpin to understanding CrossFit and I employ it as a tool to
understand all the broader processes at work in CrossFit. One way to think of sports culture is a way in which it seeks to solve problems at a societal level. Perhaps CrossFit’s popularity is part of a process to remedy a lack of excitement in life, resist increasing individualism, less personal relationships, increasing rates of obesity, and the social capital associated with aesthetic health and fitness. However, CrossFit or any other cultural practice are not true panaceas to societal shortcomings of community and belongingness. Creating new physical cultures does not guarantee to fix anything, and it may create other problems. For example, in collisions sports such as football, aggression, violence, and physical dominance, are necessary components to be successful, and these values have thus become engrained in that sports culture. Having an increased tendency towards aggression in the sport is not a self-contained phenomenon, and this violence is often manifested off the field and it affects everyday interactions. Furthermore, this violence, which reproduces misogynistic practices, also contributes to rape culture (Welch, 1997). For example, the NFL has recently been forced to attempt to confront off-field violence and commissioner Roger Goodell has attempted to administer harsher punishments to NFL players found to violate personal conduct policy, which includes behavior such as assault, battery, domestic violence, and sexual abuse (Pilon, 2017). The aggression which is deemed a necessary variable of success in the sport, and its corollary misogyny, which is associated with violent masculinity, has violent consequences for many women and men outside of sanctioned sporting contests (Welch, 1997). CrossFit shares some similarities with this in that aggression is a component of the performance, but it is does not involve imparting this aggression and violence on another person like collision sports. Instead this attitude is used toward maximal exertion and possible self-violence.
Neoliberalism

Before delving into an analysis of the CrossFit community, one must not only explain the components of the fitness program but contextualize the social world in which it has emerged. In this case, this means developing a greater understanding of North American society, particularly in metropolitan areas, for the focus of this study. Neoliberalism, as more than an economic system is one of the most dominant and overarching paradigms in society today, characterized by individualism, competitive free markets, self-sufficiency, and a prioritization of the civics of society over social relationships (Carroll & Sapinski, 2017; Heywood, 2016). As an economic principle, neoliberal thinking lends itself to beliefs that the government should have a minimal role in society, therefore allowing for free open markets to reign, in which capitalism is allowed to thrive. These economic policies have grown alongside increases in national wealth, fostered increasing globalization, and contributed to the rise of densely populated cities (Carroll & Sapinski, 2017). The ramifications however are not strictly economic, as politics and even cultural ideologies are embedded within this type of thinking (Darnell, 2014). The effects of free markets, unencumbered by government regulation allowed the growth of multinational corporations, enormous individual wealth, and the possibility for massive income inequality to exist. With this wealth has come influential power, which the wealthy can then use as leverage when lobbying their interests in political arenas (Carroll & Sapinski, 2017; Miller, 2015). On the cultural level, less governmental oversight leads to privatization in the economic sphere and less social programs and safety nets for the public. In the social sphere and at the individual level, this thinking emphasizes the responsibility of each person to behave as an isolated actor (Heywood, 2016). In other words, neoliberalism is closely related to, and contributes to what is extreme and radical individualization. Individuals increasingly believe and behave in a manner that suggests each person is solely responsible for their economic state in life, regardless of the other conditions they are subject to. These implications reach into people’s social lives including, education, views on criminality. In health and wellness, those are not fit are shamed, which is predicated on the universal agreement that the individual, not the collective, is responsible to maintain their health regardless of social and contextualizing factors. There is constant promotion of fast food directed to children, food droughts in neighborhoods restrict access to
fresh healthy food options, and the built physical environment often leaves no space for outdoor recreational play, but neoliberal thinking still emphasizes that it is ultimately the responsibility of the individual to make the right choices, regardless of the circumstances.

On a broad socioeconomic scale, neoliberalism gained popularity in the post WWII era. Directly after the war ended, western economies saw tremendous growth which was to be expected after ending prolonged wartime spending. After some time however, the economy began to slow, and several intellectuals came together to theorize the best way to improve the economy, and they eventually proposed that an economic model predicated on free markets with less government involvement would be a better system to facilitate trade and services (Carroll & Sapinski, 2017). This neoliberal thinking would then gain popularity as a solution to the lack of economic growth and rise to become the dominant form of thinking in the Americas in the 1980s (Labonté & Stuckler, 2016). Common sentiments shifted from one in which government involvement was expected to one that deemed it intrusive, impeding the power of the average citizen or business owner at the expense of economic prosperity. Overall, independence was now promoted and reduced the ability for the government to provide regulation in the market and support individuals in economic hardship (Springer, 2016). These sentiments of people asserting their individuality exists today and is evidenced by the ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ rhetoric regarding reaching economic prosperity through hard work alone.

This paradigm has tangible effects on how social life is performed on multiple levels from public institutions to personal life (Wrenn, 2014). Institutions such as CrossFit exist in a society where the productive and mature citizen is defined as one who is in control of their economic stability, social status, their health, and their appearance of health. Keeping within capitalist sensibilities, many industries stand to benefit from these worldviews by virtue of privatization. This includes CrossFit as an organization but more aptly applies to large chain gyms like Planet Fitness in the United States. The economic model of these large chains is predicated on having only a fraction of their registered users to actual attend the facilities (Swanson, 2016). If all members of these gyms were to use their gym’s resources the infrastructure would not be able to sustain the number of customers. Conversely CrossFit has a steep price, but it does not make money through a rather dubious business model. In a traditional gym, the culture of individualization and an emphasis on personal responsibility means that those who fail to use their gym membership and
satisfy the social expectations of maintaining their health are sometimes perceived as a burden by society, because failing to be fit is equated to failing your duties as a citizen (Elliott, 2007).

It has been commonly acknowledged that neoliberalism is the overarching paradigm of the modern era, having influences in government, politics, and how sport is performed (Springer, 2016; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). The best example of this is by deconstructing professional sport and revealing it as an economic product, first and foremost, or what Newman & Giardina (2011) refers to as the ‘archetypal corporate sport’. The authors explain how the economic model derives revenue through television broadcasting rights, corporate sponsorship deals (such as athletic apparel branding), ticket sales to events, and merchandise (Newman & Giardina, 2011). Professional leagues like the NBA regularly buy, sell, and trade players on what is a specialized microcosm of the free market. There are even attempts to increase deregulation in the NBA by removing restrictions on salary caps and remove the minimum age an athlete can enroll in the NBA draft. In other leagues such as Major League Baseball (MLB), there is no salary cap, resulting in some of the world’s highest paid professional athletes.

Furthermore, Sport is frequently a site for engagement in both politics and economics, by virtue of the grand spectacle that it is. The protests of Colin Kaepernick and other NFL football players to bring attention to police brutality and injustices against black and other racialized communities in the USA is just the latest example of sport engaging in the political sphere. Carl Thomas and Mohammad Ali have been example of this in the past, and this political activism will likely continue in future sports. Professional sports also constitute a giant economic industry, with estimates predicting that the professional sports market will be worth $73.5 billion in 2019 (Heitner, 2015). Research has done well to document the presence of neoliberalism in people’s lives but does not often address the effects it has on daily interactions and behaviors (Eagleman, 2013). Part of the reason for this can be attributed to the neoliberal values themselves. Neoliberalism is predicated on rationalism which values the more quantifiable and objective hard sciences as opposed to social studies (Andrews, 2008). As a result, the only justifiable way to study sport and health are through initiatives that have tangible health outcomes or economic implications (Silk, Francombe, & Andrews, 2014). In other words, there is an attempted “‘safeguarding [of] science’ and medicine at the expense of arts, humanities and the social sciences” (Silk et al., 2014, p. 1271). In what could be considered a hegemonic fashion, the rise of neoliberal values creates a negative feedback loop by suppressing the types of
inquiry that would explore the different forms in which neoliberalism is inter-linked in sport and everyday life.

The institution of CrossFit adheres to the trend of privation and deregulation through its organizational make-up which avoids being overbearing and government-like in structuring how gyms must operate. Glassman is keen to dispel any interpretation that CrossFit functions as a traditional franchise and clarifies that the affiliate model it uses functions with minimal overarching corporate control, allowing the free market to reign. In the affiliate model, gym owners pay a fee to CrossFit Inc. allowing them to use the company’s name in advertising and marketing. In this model, CrossFit Inc. derives its revenue from having box owners pay an annual fee to use the company brand and trainers must become certified through the CrossFit training courses (Bailey, Benson, & Bruner, 2017). Beyond this, there is no other influence of the CrossFit company in each box. Box owners are afforded the freedom to operate their establishment however they like and make choices pertaining to hours of operation, equipment, music, and more (Gomillion, 2017). This is a conscious belief on the part of CrossFit staff with Greg Glassman describing himself as a “rabid libertarian”, and CrossFit spokesperson Russ Greene has said “It’s the libertarian idea of free market, you don’t need centralized control” (Feline & Manning, 2013; Mak, 2013, para. 12). They consciously engage in a hands-off approach which directly mirrors the influence government has in neoliberal societies.

With respect to the effects of neoliberal thinking on people at the level of physical practice, Heywood (2016) explores this topic by investigating the coach/athlete relationship in CF. The author notes that the constant demand for more effort while preforming a WOD is reflective of the perpetual labor people must endure to be successful in a capitalistic market. This is furthered by the unpredictability of WODs, and the expectation that it is to be a fun and enjoyable process, all of which is facilitated and modeled by the coach (Heywood, 2016). More interestingly however is the manner by which, despite the aspect of social interaction, the exercise is still a very personal act, completed in presence of other athletes, and facilitated by the coach (Heywood, 2016). This is best described by a quotation by Russell Berger, a member of CrossFit’s HQ says “you must choose to take a different path than the majority of your peers. You must choose to change your perspective on fitness, diet, and work. You must put in the effort as an individual to improve your ability. You must acknowledge your own responsibility to do the exercises correctly and safely. When you fail, it is no one’s fault but your own. When
your diet starts to slip, it is no one’s fault but your own. You rely on yourself for your effort, your results, and your initiative” (Heywood, 2016, p. 121). Even within the context of group training it is still described as a drastically personal endeavor.

The influence of neoliberalism ushered in a new era of economic growth, and this growth was accompanied with increased specialization with respect to careers, resulting in the division of labor to ensue (Clarke, 2005). Many of the characteristics of a neoliberal society are helpful tools in understanding how our current configuration of society has become more isolating for individuals, as it shifted from one of mechanic solidarity to organ solidarity. Organic solidarity refers to groups with shared collective meaning and values or collective consciences (Durkheim, 1893). Conversely, groups with high mechanical solidarity lack intimate personal collective based on shared belief but are dependent on each other through networks of goods and services (Durkheim, 1893). Calhoun (2002) further contextualizes organic solidarity as a means-to-an-end relationship that is seen in trade and free markets of institutions which rely on each other while maintaining individualism and differentiation from others. Historically, these mechanical types of relationships are experienced by small rural communities whereas the current state in large metropolitan cities like Toronto features more organic solidarity, characterized by civic cooperation while maintain a personal individualism (Delanty, 2003). Toronto is a great location to explore this topic because increasing specialization with careers combined with the population density means that a vast array of worldviews, lived experiences, and distinct values exist in a small geographic area. Many people do not know their own neighbors or people in the residential community, nor do they feel compelled to develop these relationships. Multiple factors contribute to what can be considered the perfect storm of components that contribute to anomie – an incongruence between an individual’s norms and that of society as a whole (Durkheim, 1893). This can also be understood as establishing relationships beyond the self to share norms and values with a social group (McCloskey, 1976).

By emphasizing that a person is an individual rather than part of a collective, specializing careers within increasingly differentiated occupations, and living amongst people were there is no sharing of social capital, the ensuing social climate may foster circumstances more conducive to anomie (Durkheim, 1893; Tolman, 1981). Historically, religion or the institution of church has been one of the few sites to provide balance to increasing individualism, and now other social groups including CrossFit have served to challenge this. Like churches, boxes require dedication
and intimate interactions members have on a regular basis (Dawson, 2017). The desired effects of neoliberalism have ultimately transformed many societies in often unfortunate ways. Passas (2000) explains; “The main argument is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, neoliberalism and globalization contribute to processes leading to global anomie, dysnomie, and, ultimately, economic misconduct… means-ends disjunctions are systematically created as neoliberal policies foster needs and desires that are all too often left unfulfilled. Promises of more freedom, prosperity, and happiness for a larger number of people have turned out to be chimerical. Economic and power inequalities have widened within and across countries in the last two decades” (p. 17).

CrossFit and similar exercise programs are a product of the neoliberal way in which health and wellness is performed in contemporary communities. Exercise is largely considered to be a process that is done for a tangible, rational goal. The quintessential example of this is a weight loss or muscle growth program done for aesthetic purposes. In this endeavor, a specific goal is set, and efficiency is valued in being able to achieve these goals quickly. The natural transition for this thinking is to develop facilities, and in turn, exercise programs, that mirror this process of rationalization present in business organizations. This is the thinking in which traditional gyms emerged, which draws much inspiration from the assembly line model in which a large and complex system is broken down into its components that are worked on independently. CrossFit too experiences this rationalism and quantification of the body’s physical performances albeit in a different structure that is less Fordian in the breakdown of training body parts, but still neoliberal. By this I mean there is more variety in the actual exercises and day to day exercise programs.

Differences emerge when looking at the members of traditional gyms, who need minimal interaction as they navigate the space without perspective of those around them and this is one of the largest distinction CrossFit makes, and emphasizes this as the basis of community – because it is a contrarian to the individualism in the act of exercises. There is a small step away from the individualization because the act of exercising is still a personal duty, but there are others to socialize and collaborate with throughout the process (Berger, 2008).
Excitement and Freedom

The sociologist Norbert Elias took particular interest in sport as it related to what he termed the civilizing process. This process is key to understanding where CrossFit is situated with respect to other fitness cultures as well as how its popularity has become so grand. Broadly put, Norbert Elias’ (1939) conception of the civilizing process refers to the process over time by which the behavior of individuals and collective personalities becomes increasingly reliant upon self-restraint as a social norm, as society has developed. This process is known as sociogenesis, and in part enables changes in the division of labor, urbanization, and the grown of the financial economy (Dépelteau & Landini, 2013). These norms of emotional restrictions act as a form of social control, manipulating, and having power over the way people conduct themselves. Elias (1939) posits that in order for densely populated, industrial, complex societies to function, the individuals have adopted less emotional expression, less violence, and spontaneity is limited.

Since the middle ages, emotional restraint has become increasingly strict and this sentiment has persisted in a top-down fashion from the behavior of elites; monarchs, aristocrats and in the ruling courts to eventually include all the members of industrial and modern society (Elias & Dunning, 1986). As a result, not only has society come to practice restraint on a large scale, but the behavior of individuals has shifted so that more people reflect this trend in avoiding overt emotional conduct. Moreover, violence and aggression which are part of human emotionality have increasingly been pushed out of the mainstream to become something that is increasingly only behind the scenes (Atkinson, 2008; Elias, 1939) or in sports. This is not to claim that violent and aggressive acts no longer exist, but they are no longer as overt. For example, head trauma are still a significant part of hockey and football, but rhetoric around concussion is less accepting of this as a part of the respective sports (Adler & Herring, 2011). At one point, the peak of sporting entertainment in in Roman and Greek societies were gladiatorial spectacles which were hyper-violent displays often leading to the death of participating athletes, animals and slaves. The most relevant current iteration of this sport would be mixed-martial arts and various combat sports. However, they do feature a strict code of conduct, and ultimately do not permit violence to the extent seen historically. Within these combat sports, including pugilism or the UFC, there has been a clear trend of development to minimize violence with the implementation of weight classes, gloves, technical knockouts, ring doctors, and other rules. As North American society has become more industrial, these brutal displays have been increasingly hidden or regulated.
Violence, injustice, and abuse, are still rampant, but in forms that are not as visible because they are embedded in formal structures and institutions such as policing and various forms of inequality. Over time, the ‘threshold of repugnance’ or degree to which audiences are accepting of bloodshed is shifted thereby minimizing the presence of violence or moving it away from the field of view of spectators (Maguire, 1992). The result of this is a lifestyle that many would consider safe, but boring due to the lack of excitement derived from danger, risk, chance, or outward expression. Due to the division of labor and self-restraint is posited as an ideal characteristic of individuals in theory although it is not always manifested in actuality. These changes are considered to be both culturally desirable and crucial for the continued function of society (Elias, 1939). A large metropolitan city such as Toronto would not be able to flourish without a steady and regular labor force which is predicated upon safety and predictability. If you are driving to work and another motorist cuts you off, it is not socially ideal to fully express your feelings of anger by following the person, stepping out of your car and starting a fight. Most individuals would agree that this is culturally unacceptable behavior, building social value into restraint. Instead, you ignore this person, avoiding any possible physical altercation. It also ensures that everyone remains safe, traffic flows smoothly, and everyone gets to work on time, thereby allowing for a predictable and mundane morning commute. More excitement on the part of the citizens in a community ultimately limits the predictability and routine of societal functioning and can even affect the ability to maintain law and order, because there is not a collective culture in place that contributes to a certain outcome (Goodger & Goodger, 1989). Elias & Dunning (1986) state that this stability is of paramount concern in a network in which all individuals are dependent on each other. In order to maintain this stability, self-restraint must be practiced by all persons. This includes both physical violence, as well as emotional outbursts. In reaction to this, sport and leisure provide exciting significance, as release to an otherwise boring society free of emotionality, danger, and risk (Elias & Dunning, 1986). Juxtaposed against the daily routine of work life, sport is an increasingly valuable aspect of mainstream society, and can be central to the identity of individuals, even motivating some comparison to religions because physical activity can become an individual’s raison d’être. In other words, some societies have come quite far along the process of the ‘civilizing process’ hereby affect control is administered strictly through the suppression of emotional sentiments (Goodger & Goodger, 1989). There are not many environments where it is not only acceptable but encouraged to engage in emotional or violent behavior, increased risk injury, and be able to be fully express feelings of pain, fear,
anger and more. Some of the more physical sports such as rugby or American football are even extrapolated from war and battle (Maguire, 1992). Other sports that do not feature as much of a violent or combative experience still feature this excitement through the motility of the human body and the ‘us vs them’ or ‘me vs you’ illusion that is created (Maguire, 1992). Athletes can experience the thrill of exhilaration associated with physical exertion and competition in any sport. Even in a sport such as volleyball which is not overtly violent and void of physical contact between teams, there is a component of aggression and emotionality intrinsic to the competition. Sport overall, represents a popular site where individuals can experience these overt acts of emotion and excitement in a public setting is expected and celebrated as a “controlled decontrolling of emotions” (Dunning & Rojek, 2016). In most sporting contexts, it is socially acceptable to vocalize celebration in success, scream in frustration, and even cry in defeat. This means that the athletes are liberated and allowed to experience excitement, but in settings that minimize danger through the rules of the sport (Matthews & Channon, 2016). A great example of this is seen in the NHL and other hockey leagues around the world. Hockey is one of the last few non-combat sports that feature fights as a regular component of its competition (fights are penalized through timed penalties but continue to be expected in the sport). Basketball, football, or baseball on the other hand, punish fighting with expensive fines, and/or game suspensions. This hockey example illustrates the demarcation of the same behavior in two different contexts. Outside of this specific sporting context, fighting would be punished legally whereas the culture of fighting in hockey has long been celebrated. There have also historically been NHL players known as ‘enforcers’ or ‘goons’ which is not an official position but is colloquially understood as an individual whose role on the team is to protect star players through violence (Thornton, 2009; Tjønndal, 2016). This is not only a functional role but contributes a large degree to the popularity of the sport among fans (Tjønndal, 2016). In 2005, there was even a televised sporting event known as The Battle of the Enforcers which was a fighting tournament that took place in British Columbia, featuring athletes dressed in full hockey attire, fighting on ice, effectively isolating the violent component of the sport (Armstrong, 2017). This case is definitely unique in that it represents the extreme figuration with respect to the overall culture for fighting violence in hockey, but it does exemplify that violence and the associated excitement are primary components to sport that are desired by the fans/public.
Another aspect of sport or training is the association with suffering, which comprises a form of exciting significance. In a ways, sport, and training for sport more specifically features suffering as an intrinsic aspect of the performance. Any professional athlete who trains for sport or the average person attending the gym to lose weight experience some kind of self-inflicted suffering which, by definition, involves pain and discomfort in order to achieve physical adaptation and performance improvements. This reality means that people who achieve success in their sports ultimately come to accept this suffering which is a learned behavior (Atkinson, 2008). There is an understanding of what it means to suffer by exploring endurance sports such as triathlons, ultramarathons, cycling, and other; and CrossFit is no different. I liken the experience to riding a roller coaster. The act can be terrifying for the individual who screams as they travel along the track and by some objective measures it should be an unpleasant experience—increased heart rate, nausea, sweating, muscle tightening. Nonetheless, once the ordeal is over the individual has come to enjoy the spike in adrenaline as well as the feelings of accomplishment and are looking to get right back on the ride. The aching of muscles, inability to catch your breath, and severe lethargy are inseparable from what it means to train and perform. In some respect, people may even consider the suffering within CrossFit slightly harder than other training because the variation of WODs each day means that athletes are unable to acclimatize to the familiarity of a specific training routine but must embrace the unpredictability of workouts. Members of the fitness culture, be it CrossFit or triathlons learn that pain and suffering are necessary for success and are thus positive experiences, and emotional experiences of such intensity are ascribed meaning and significance amongst the community (Atkinson, 2008). A lot of the conversations I had about CrossFit were actually with people outside of the community because people are curious to find out more about it. I got on the topic of physical activity with a friend of mine who was interested in my CrossFit participation because she had recently started to be physically active, working out with a personal trainer. She explained to me how uncomfortable it was to fight through exhaustion during workouts, and to experience muscle soreness and tightness after exercising. I was quite shocked by this as I had come to expect this soreness, and even welcome it as a sign of hard work and challenging my body to adapt. Also, at the CrossFit gym, we would regularly talk about how sore a particular WOD made us and bonded over the shared experience. However, not everyone makes these associations with discomfort and instead, my friend thought of my CrossFit participation as extreme, and even maniacal. Not only is pain experienced, but sports may feature a number of tension-balances which is “The fear and shame associated with
failing, the aggression and hostility stimulated through competition, the exhilaration of conquest and the collective anxiety produced when bodies are taxed to their limits combine to create an aura of exciting significance around sports fields” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 167). It relates to the degree to which athletes are able to step away from their regular life and fully integrate and embed themselves in the singular sporting context at hand. It speaks to the ability to behave in a manner free of regulating behavior and urges enables people to accommodate the “need to experience the kind of spontaneous, elementary, unreflective yet pleasurable excitement” (Dunning & Rojek, 2016, p. 104).

This theorizing of the ‘civilizing process’ and even the term of ‘civility’ has many biased implications that must be addressed. Elias’s perspective come about from a Eurocentric view that focuses on white persons, without much regard for other racialized bodies. When considering the central tenant of violence in society, minorities are subject to danger far greater than their white counterparts (Collins, 2005). Moreover, this violence is often done to them by law enforcement which is alleged to be an institution that contributions to a more ‘civilized’ society (Collins, 2005). Instead it formalizes biases and discriminatory sentiments. Studies have addressed the inequitable policing practices that African Canadians face including the practice of carding, disproportionate incarceration rates, and police brutality (Mullings, Morgan, & Quelleng, 2016). Similarly, persons who identify as genders other than male are increasingly the victims of intimate partner violence, economic inequality, and multiple forms of discrimination (Ard & Makadon, 2011; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Implicit to the ‘civilizing process’ is a huge normalization of who’s experiences are being accounted for, that skews towards and intersectionality of affluence, whiteness, heterosexual persons, and men. It is by these measures of privilege that exciting significance plays an important role as these persons may experience a relative safe lifestyle that is ultimately dull. Some people face challenges and danger on a daily basis, and thus have no need to seek excitement and thrilling experiences. As a result, assumptions underlying the civilizing process only apply to a subsection of the population at large, effectively excluding marginalized peoples. It is important to acknowledge that the term ‘civilized’ and associated ‘civilizing process’ is value laden with assumption of class, and race that celebrates whiteness and demonized racialized persons. As such I used the theory in acknowledgement that the theories do not apply to all individuals and is wrought with classism, but it does trace some of the changes in sentiment of the structure in North America over time.
The types of people that this Eliasian theorizing applies to are largely the same demographics of CrossFit participants and so there is congruency in the matter. Looking beyond simply engaging in physical activity, the mimetic nature of watching sports can act as a form of catharsis to experience these emotions in an even more controlled manner, void of any risk, danger or injury (Birrell, 1981). The act of mimesis is a process by which a “make-believe setting which allows emotions to flow more easily, and which elicits excitement of some kind imitating that produced by real-life situations, yet without its real dangers or risks is created. ’Mimetic’ activities thus allow within certain limits for socially permitted self-centredness. Excitement is elicited by the creation of tensions: this can involve imaginary or controlled ’real’ danger, mimetic fear and/or pleasure, sadness and/or joy” (Maguire, 1992, p. 28). The ways in which this lack of excitement is resolved are not only through participation, but also include fandom and spectatorship. Similar to the way in which sport in general breaks the cycle of routine and provides a form of regulated excitement, the act of mimesis allows individuals to place themselves in different scenarios through their imagination and by transplanting themselves into the experiences of others (Atkinson, 2002; Maguire, 1992). This mimetic function allows for this excitement in even more regulated and safe ways, as the risk of harm associated with actually participating in a sport is eliminated. This imitative action, or vicarious experience is what is referred to as the mimetic experience of sport and the associated excitement (Goodger & Goodger, 1989). This is why fans of a particular sport or team consider themselves part of the team itself. It is also part of the reason why fans of a sport can mourn a loss or boisterously celebrate a victory. In any other context, this would be ridiculous, but sport is a form of entertainment that that is is universally understood. Of these mimetic acts, there is a spectrum in which some sports are more extreme and thus achieve the goal of excitement at varying degrees. CrossFit and similar phenomena such as the ultimate marathons Spartan Race and Tough Mudder, are examples of this; forms of extreme physical activity that transcends mimesis to performing actual events. However, despite the dangerous perception in popular culture, CrossFit is relatively safe when comparing injury rates of other weightlifting sports, running, and track and field (Hak et al., 2013; Weisenthal et al., 2014). CrossFit is successful in straddling the middle ground between sports that are relatively mainstream and those that are genuinely dangerous despite many testimonials regarding injuries caused by CrossFit. Alternatively, sports like climbing, cliff diving, or wingsuit diving are genuinely dangerous and
risky which is why membership rates in these activities cannot compare to CrossFit. Elias’
interpretation of how sport relates to overall societal structure presents an effective method to
understand the popularity of CrossFit as well as the cultural significance it has amongst
individuals. Contributing to the allure of CrossFit is the excitement and pleasure that is relatively
uncommon in daily life, and the absence of an unreasonable amount of risk of injury does not
scare people away from participating (Jary & Horne, 1987).

Another component that may influence the uptake of CrossFit is the regimented, almost
militaristic approach to prescribing exercises, which limits the amount of choices athletes have.
Functionally, this means that having a WOD dictates what activities the athletes will be
performing when they enter the gym. The work of Eric Fromm (1942) explores this dynamic
through commentary pertaining to freedom in making choices versus having less power in
decision making. Fromm (1942) posits that the increase in freedom and choices associated with
contemporary society sometimes have undesirable consequences. The paradox of choice
highlights this, using the example of shoppers in a retail store, having a lot of choice was
associated with increased anxiety, and requires more effort by the individual (Schwartz, 2006).
To contextualize this to exercise, imagine stepping into a traditional gym, seeing all of the
workout machines and having to decide what exercises to do or which equipment to use. For
many individuals, especially those that do not have a background in physical activity, this can be
particularly intimidating and overwhelming. This necessitates a view that individuals have to
actively make positive decisions for their benefit. This level of agency and personal
responsibility is often desirable but can be overbearing. Moreover, if the individual fails to meet
their goals they are solely responsible for the outcome. The current social and economic state of
Western civilization features increased uncertainty with respect to relationships, occupations,
education, and more. Questioning one’s decisions and having doubts or regrets now emerges,
and this can lead to uncertainty and anxiety (Fromm, 1942). Alternatively, in societies with more
freedom, in which there is a supposed meritocracy and more choice, the infinite possibilities may
be taxing and stressful. Or may not be available at all to certain people. The transition to more
control means that people must assume more sole responsibility for the way their lives are, and
this presents a burden for some middle and upper-class CrossFit participants. With respect to
fitness, there is little difference. Firstly, people already lack a rooted sense of self as a result of
the fluidity their life path can take via their decisions. Then, individuals who seek to make
choices to improve their health via diet and exercise can experience blame or shame if they fail to succeed – because your position is no one’s fault but your own. Some people choose to defer power and choice in the matter by hiring a trainer, coach, or something of the like. This coach-athlete dynamic of CrossFit dips into this desire to restrict the choices and provide security in self that is only available to some peoples.

Some cultures have devised solutions to this desire for order and comfort through organized religion and the institution of science more recently. Religion has historically been a unifying institution because the majority of people regardless of background shared this commonality. However, as society becomes more secular a reverence for science and rationality has become a more prevalent way of shaping the word and ideologies (Lipka, 2015). Dr. Angie Thurston considers institutions like CrossFit to be non-faith-based religions and says that especially amongst young people they are “participating in communities and they are in communities that are some ways mirroring the function that religious communities have served” (Layman, 2015, para. 12). According to Fromm (1942), without this order in people’s lives, anxiety ensues. CrossFit is unique and popular because it satisfies the desire to have freedom, and at the same time limits the burden of too much choice. Warren (1970) suggests that it is important to consider the type of autonomy and the power distribution within a community. In CrossFit, participants have the power to make the primary agentic decision to join the box, and then they can forego other choices from then on (Scott, 2010). After becoming a member, the resulting decisions are less agentic, and it becomes easier to ‘do the right thing’ in exercising because you are being influenced by factors around you. The distribution of power across members, the nature of prescribed exercises, and accountability between members ultimately diffuses the power between the athletes and coaches. CrossFit’s appeal is largely attributable to the duality of this relationship with choice and freedom. Athletes get the best of both worlds; having choice without feeling burdened or overwhelmed and engaging in emotional expression in controlled circumstances (Atkinson & Young, 2005; Elias & Dunning, 1986).

Subculture

At roughly just twenty-three years of age, CrossFit Inc. is still a relatively new phenomenon in the area of PCS, with a culture that is distinct from others, so it is often referenced as a subculture by some scholars often without thoroughly flushing out what this means (Crockett &
Colloquially, the term subculture is used in reference to groups of people who have cultural characteristics that may vary from our own, or from society as a whole. In academia, the anthropological and sociological establishment has struggled to agree upon a definition as well (Yinger, 1960). It is not thoroughly understood what the comprising characteristics of a subculture are, nor is there a consensus regarding what groups constitute a subculture (Donnelly, 1993). One of the two larger ways in which it is commonly referenced are; subculture as a “normative systems of groups smaller than society” such as groups who speak a different language or observe a different religion (Yinger, 1960, p. 626). The other type of usage is in reference to groups who develop their own norms or values in reaction to a tension or conflict with the group and society at large (Yinger, 1960). This latter definition is commonly conflated to delinquency and adolescence, which are areas of extensive subculture research in their own right, which I will not delve into.

In the area of sport sociology, the same inconsistency in definitions exists, as the word is often used in a laissez-faire manner. However, it is important to study subculture in the physical culture sphere as sport and recreation are increasingly become the sites in which people define themselves and derive meaning in life (Donnelly, 1993). Donnelly (1993) provides a foundational definition of subcultures that provides a clear structure to build on the theorizing of subculture. The components are as listed:

“1) an identifiable group within a culture or across cultures, 2) composed of smaller groups and individuals, 3) whose members are similar in values, norms, beliefs, dress, attitudes, language, etc., they are somewhat different from the cultures in which they exist, 4) and which dominate their life style and allocation of resources, 5) Subcultures are formed around activities that have scope and potential, 6) and are actively created and maintained by their members as long as they meet the needs of their members, by 7) face-to-face interaction and other forms of communication”

By this broad definition, CrossFit can be considered a subculture as the group achieves each of these requirements. A more intimate investigation into subculture also explores the ways by which identities are constructed and transmitted amongst the group (Donnelly & Young, 1988). The authors provide a model which describes four steps by which an individual develops their identity within a subculture; presocialization, selection and recruitment, socialization, and
acceptance/ostracism (Donnelly & Young, 1988). With the case of CrossFit, the media highlighting Greg Glassman and the spectacle of The CrossFit Games acts as the first exposure, or presocialization. Athletes can then do research through online forums or speaking to people within the culture. Selection or recruitment is the next step when the individual shows adequate interest in the field, is motivated, and has the opportunity to participate by which point they join a box (Donnelly & Young, 1988). Next is socialization, where individuals’ values systems begin to align with that of the group which is the pivotal point in which identity has been influenced by the subculture (Donnelly & Young, 1988). And lastly, the person is accepted when they have attained adequate skills, identity (Donnelly & Young, 1988). In CrossFit, this can quite literally refer to the physical skills that an athlete has, but more likely it is an amalgam of the combination of skills, values, and time spent in the space. Some newer members to the box were stronger and more skilled than current members but were still not fully enmeshed within the fabric of the community. Another interesting component of this final stage is when the world outside of the culture is no longer a valued audience in which people care to perform for (Donnelly & Young, 1988). Being able to display athletic prowess outside of the box is no longer as important and a member of CrossFit may be less likely to attempt to validate their form of exercise with people outside of the field.

CrossFit is a subculture by many definitions of the word, including the descriptions provided above. However, the inconsistency in the word’s meaning still often leads to confusion as it is a blanket statement that can apply language groups, ethnoracial groups, fashion groups and other figurations of social relationships. As a result, it is imperative that the term is defined when using it. It must also be considered that labelling a group as a subculture can lead some to believe that there is a clear line between the subculture and mainstream society despite the fact that the mainstream is ever present and influences all subcultures (Wheaton, 2007). No matter how CrossFit is conceived in relation with the rest of society, the reality is that it still ascribes to capitalistic, neoliberal, and consumerist principles of society at large. With CrossFit in particular, it is also to denote that it does have some contraculture elements, as termed by Yinger (1960) or more recent works referring to countercultures, because it is a type of subculture that is define in opposition to other cultural norms. Contracultural groups define themselves by juxtaposing its values with that of the society (Yinger, 1960). To thoroughly understand what CrossFit is, why its values and norms are significant, the relationship it has to the broader fitness culture must be
investigated (Yinger, 1960). While there are definitely differences between CrossFit and traditional gyms, the box is actively a product trying to resist the ways fitness is already performed by removing almost all the machines found in traditional gyms, opposes static routine workout methodologies, and pushes for group interaction and communication while exercising. Rhetoric about CrossFit, including this paper, constantly draws comparisons to traditional gyms as the ‘mainstream’ way people choose to exercise. Even pertaining to the type of eating CrossFit advocates, Glassman himself says that, “Our recommendations for nutrition are very contrarian and go against official government recommendation, and mainstream popular knowledge as well” (Mak, 2013, para. 7).

There also exists a dynamic relationship between the contraculture/counterculture and culture at large through the ‘sportization process’ which was termed by Elias & Dunning (1986) and is described by Atkinson (2009, p. 173) as “the process by which subaltern or alternative forms of sport, leisure, and play are co-opted and incorporated into mainstream sports cultures”. This process is typically thought of as one by which characteristics of the subculture become popular beyond just the members of the in-group and begin to spread to society on an increased scale. While these characteristics are often resisted at first, it is sometimes followed by a period of ‘recuperation’ which is “the process whereby the deviance of subcultural signs is neutralized by a process of media explanation and attention” (Evans, 1997, p. 108). In this line of thinking whereby people fear or resist what they do not understand, as the knowledge of the cultural practice is explained and becomes more familiar people can become more receptive to it. In CF however, which is a centralized, commodified, and monetized culture, Greg Glassman has enabled and even promoted its cultural uptake from mainstream society by presenting it as a solution to problems with mainstream health and fitness regimens. This is a rather novel case that is afforded by virtue of being a culture and business simultaneously. Also, all that is necessary to become involved is to pay for a gym membership. Research about the rise of skateboarding subculture in the 1990s reveals that there was no regulated competition, no scheduled training sessions, and no accredited teachers (Wheaton, 2007). Conversely, there is a slight separation between CrossFit and the mainstream that requires some digging to uncover the values or norms, but it is not attempting to keep its way of life a secret. The culture is a boisterous one which openly praises and shares the fun and wellness to be had.
The group of people who label themselves as CrossFitters have a lot in common with neoliberal sentiments that many other people do. However, there is still a distinction in the form that this group goes about exercising. A distinction that includes its own language, fashion and combination of movements. Each component alone would may not signify a subculture but the formation of all these interacting factors does. Bodybuilding culture features, but not the implicit social factor of CrossFit (Wiegers, 1998). Sports team have social interaction but doesn’t engage in the wide variety of physical skills that CrossFit does. Bootcamps incorporate a group training model but does not unify a collective of people around the world via one modality. This specific combination of characteristics and an explicit desire to be different from other gyms is what makes CrossFit a subculture and counterculture. It is not alien to society at large but it is distinct.
Chapter 4
Methodology

When I initially decided to study CrossFit, I did so because it was a relatively new form of physical activity without much literature that had been written. To myself, it was novel which was interesting, and the rapid growth in popularity spurned my interest. At this point, community was not the primary approach in which I planned to use but I was aware that it was a part of the culture. The word ‘community’ was commonly used when I began to research exactly what CrossFit was, so I knew it was something that I would need to address. Instead, I thought that I would explore dynamic of agency in this sporting context. Later, I came to understand the extent to which risk, excitement, and neoliberalism were a part of CrossFit, and I realized that simply studying agency was not enough. My ultimate goal was to provide a broad picture of what CrossFit culture entailed and this would not suffice. In order to reconcile all of these ideas I then went back to the notion of community that was present all along. It constituted an umbrella term that focused on a form of togetherness but in doing so, acknowledges and addresses the multitude of other social factors taking place.

In order to approach this study of the CrossFit community I used an ethnographic model, and more specifically a realist ethnography approach. Ethnography is broadly considered a method in which the researcher places themselves as close as possible to the persons or topic being studied (Donnelly & Atkinson, 2015). It necessitates prolonged direct contact with the people in question while documenting the experience using text, recordings, and other mediums (Willis & Trondman, 2000). The history of ethnography has traditionally been a staple tool in the field of anthropology where scholars would attempt to study a community by simply moving to that location and living amongst the people. The duration of this fieldwork usually lasts over a year, but with increased use of this tool in anthropology and more recently in social sciences, this is no longer always the case (Baines & Cunningham, 2013). With an increasing number of ethnographies being shorter in time, a relatively new style referred to as the rapid ethnography (RE) has emerged as a common tool. The rapid ethnography is a type of ethnography wherein the researcher collects a wide array of data over a shorter period of time which includes, interviews, participant observation, documentation, surveys, and focus groups (Baines & Cunningham, 2013). In doing so, the researcher can explore the social structure, ideologies, and day-to-day experiences of the group members. The breadth in ways that knowledge is collected
attempts to mitigate the shortcomings of not being able to spend an extended amount of time with the group being studied. Before participating in this study, I already had a considerable amount of experiential knowledge of CrossFit because I had been a participant in the past. Furthermore, before I began this study I inundated myself with as much CrossFit information as possible. This is not a linear process, but a complex network where information is drawn from a variety of places. I began with visiting the obvious sources such as the www.crossfit.com website where the post a variety of workouts, detail how to do some CrossFit movements, and also sell merchandise. There is also the CrossFit Journal which features writing from CrossFit athletes themselves. This led to following CrossFit, CrossFit athletes, and CrossFit gyms on various social media sites, primarily Instagram. Through the pictures and videos I viewed online, I began to develop a cultural understanding of who participates, what exercises people are doing, what people are buying, and a wide range of tacit information. I watched a variety of YouTube videos where athletes perform workouts and teach how to do certain movements. I also watched documentaries like Fittest on Earth: A Decade of Fitness which chronicles elite athletes as they train and compete for the CrossFit Games. All of these minor interactions and consumption of media synergistically acted to create an understanding of CrossFit cultures through the sharing of media and resources that many other participants are engaging with. The description of this sounds similar to any other content analysis but the style of content is much different. Instead of referencing mostly academic literature, a lot of the literature was from magazines or news articles, or social media posts produced by CrossFitters and meant for other CrossFitters. In other words, “From a research perspective it is no longer sufficient to look at interaction and information seeking through the narrow prism of individual or local small group activity on relatively small websites; it is time to understand the behavior of millions of users as they browse, search, collaborate and communicate in the vast and dynamic networks of information and social tools” (Rotman, Preece, He, & Druin, 2012, p. 1). Indeed, being able to draw from a variety of sources, written historical accounts, interpersonal interactions, and acknowledging contextualizing variables including race, class, gender, and sexual orientation amongst others contributes to the strength in understanding any community and consuming the same media as the people I am studying is the best way to understand this (Chafetz, 2006). Naturally, attempting to accurately understand and reflect culture is a difficult feat and it has been recognized that ethnography may sometimes fall short of accurately describing the culture, but instead create its own perception of the community (Willis & Trondman, 2000). Realist ethnography attempts to
remedy this shortcoming by going beyond conventional forms of ethnography to develop insight that is only possible by becoming member of the group (Atkinson, 2012). In CrossFit, this meant not only observing people in the box, but also attending WODs, socializing with other members, buying CrossFit products, participating in popular nutrition programs, and watching The CrossFit Games. Engagement with this community was not simply for the purposes of research but there was an authentic connection, having participated in a CrossFit gym before, making friends in this new space, and continuing to participate in CrossFit since the study has ended. I reflect on stories and experiences that occurred through everyday interactions inside and outside of the gym, and weave interview data in an attempt to create a rich tapestry to better understand my participation and culture in a box. It is hoped that my findings will aid future research by providing a foundational understanding of CrossFit culture and ultimately contribute to literature surrounding the creation of community and belongingness in exercise. As a whole, my ethnographic style attempts to draw from tropes relevant in the time restrictions of a rapid ethnography with the intense immersion of a realist ethnography or an extension of what Baines & Cunningham (2013) refers to as becoming naturalized into the everyday events of the community.

All things considered, becoming embedded within a community is still a very difficult feat to complete. One common problem is that certain communities can be very insular and private with how they conduct themselves. For example, Baines & Cunningham (2013) studied religious social services agencies where the communities were quite standoffish to researchers. This was quite different from my experience in CrossFit where the culture is very forthcoming and eager to welcome people and have them join their ranks. However, one problem that I was not immune from was that I was limited to studying only one ethnographic site. While there are similarities that every CrossFit gym and participant shares with others, the context of each gym can be radically contextual. As I explained earlier the lack of regulation and standardization across boxes only furthers this reality by allowing an immense amount of flexibility.

Before and after collecting data for this study, I have attended three other gyms which each feature different approaches to CrossFit and could offer different lessons but there are similarities across these spaces. However, time restraints and the complexities of engaging in ethical protocols at each of these locations precluded me from conducting this kind of research.
However, these experiences have informed my personal opinion, worldview, and overall understanding of the sport, which has indirectly contributed to the content of this thesis.

To begin the study, I contacted the owner of a local CrossFit gym and explained to them that I would like to become a member of their box to conduct an ethnographic study which would involve participant observation, taking notes on these observations, and posting signage to advertise and recruit members for interviews with those at that particular box. The owner and I met at a local coffee shop to go over the details of the study and we spoke for over an hour about our experiences in CrossFit and our personal athletic histories. At the end of this meeting, he agreed to let me conduct the study at this location and I moved forward to attending classes.

Shortly thereafter, I signed up for a triweekly membership and joined the box. I participated in WODs with my peers for four months, during which I had informal ethnographic conversations with members of the box, coaches, and discussed CrossFit with non-members as well. The gym owners were aware of this study, as well as other gym staff. Gym members were also informed in a less formal manner when the topic arose as to how or why I began to do CrossFit. I explained to them that I was both a member of their CrossFit community as well as a researcher. In describing my role in the box space, I informed my fellow participants using the script outlined in Appendix B. Shortly after each WOD I would take notes in a journal pertaining to any interesting communications I observed or was a part of. After four months of participation, I then placed a poster (Appendix A) near the entrance of the box, calling for athletes who were interested in being interviewed for this study.

Three athletes responded to the call for participants and all three were interviewed, as there were no exclusionary criteria. I explained the purposes of the study using the information letter outlined in Appendix C, and then obtained informed consent using Appendix D. I conducted semi-unstructured interviews with each of the participants, allowing them to discuss personal experiences, motivation, perceptions, and attitudes surrounding CrossFit and physical activity more broadly. I used the questions outlined in Appendix E to guide questioning, but the direction of the interview was intentionally open ended. One on one interviews were conducted as opposed to focus groups to allow participants to reveal information they may otherwise be uncomfortable to share in a group format. One of the interviews was conducted in the box after-hours, and two of the interviews were conducted at different coffee shops. The interviews lasted
between twenty minutes to over an hour. They were recorded and later transcribed using pseudonyms for all participants to prevent their identification. Each interview began with asking the participant to describe the process by which they began to do CrossFit. This ultimately provided a lot of background information with respect to their history in sport and physical activity, as well as their experiences. I then asked questions that served to tease out what the term ‘community’ meant to them. Along on the way, I allowed conversation to flow freely enough that they could share whatever stories about CrossFit and experiences arose.

After transcribing the interview data and referencing my field notes, I analyzed my findings using Roland L. Warren’s (1970) framework for studying communities. I sorted the conversations and stories using Warren’s model for studying community as a framework. For example, I grouped stories about creating new friends, or seeing friends come to the gym together under the category of primary group relationships. Within each of these classifications I then searched for themes that were common to all experiences or observations. This methodology identifies multiple components which comprise community and belongingness, and by investigating these refined characteristics we can develop an understanding of the complex network that is a community (Warren, 1970, p. 15-21). These components are briefly outlined below:

1. Primary group relationships

   “the extent to which people may or should really know each other in the community, and should interact with each other on a personal basis”

2. Autonomy

   “It is often said that a community should, insofar as possible, be "master of its own fate.” Decisions as to what goes on in the community should be made by local people.”

3. Viability
“the capacity of local people to confront their problems effectively through some type of concerted action. Much of the community development movement, much of voluntary community work and professional community organization has been devoted to this goal of helping communities to assess their problems and take action with respect to them.”

4. Power Distribution

“how power should be distributed in the good community, beyond the simple and unexamined admonition: "More broadly than now." Should all people have equal power? Can they? And if they can, at what price in terms of other desirable values?”

5. Participation

“Most people who concern themselves with the community believe that it would be better if more people participated in community affairs… But how widespread should participation be? Should all community people actively pursue all the important decisions that are made in the community?”

6. Degree of Commitment

“How important should my local community be to me? Should it be an overriding preoccupation, or is it purely secondary?

7. Degree of Heterogeneity

“How much difference would you have among people in your good community—and how much likeness?”
8. Extent of Neighborhood Control

“How much shall we invest in the neighborhood, as an important social unit, as distinguished from investing in the community as a whole.”

9. Extent of Conflict

“How much conflict will there be in your good community?”

Notably absent from each component, is what the ‘good’ or ‘ideal’ formation is. This is an intentional omission because Warren’s (1970) methodology is not to provide a lens by which we can engineer the perfect community, in recognition of the fact that different contexts call for different ways of organization and characteristics in their own cultural ways. Defining what is ‘good’ varies based on the goals of the organization and there are countless contextualizing circumstances.

However, this framework is not without problems and limitation. The 1950s in which this community discourse emerged was a rapid time of growth in America. After WWII the figurations of cities and towns underwent a massive shift with the growth of suburbs (Cohen, 1996). Between 1947 and 1953, the population of suburbs grew by 43% (as compared to the 11% general population increased), facilitated by increased car ownership, and new highways providing an alternative to congested central areas (Cohen, 1996). This shift in lifestyle over a short period of time altered the established notions of community neighborhoods, for a new conception to emerge (Cohen, 1996). However, this was not simply a matter of redistribution, but very much a racial topic of racial segregation (Cohen, 1996). As more black citizens entered central white neighborhoods, white families would stop moving into that community, and then the white families already there would also leave, effectively segregating neighborhoods by created white suburbs and black cities (Galster, 1990; Wurdock, 1981). This is the context around the community inquiry that Warren was engaging – predominantly white, middle class, suburban neighborhoods.

The nature of this is important when considering Warren’s (1965) nine principles are a tool with a history. Acknowledging this history is the first step in reversing the racism problematic legacy
it is a part of. Yet still, because Warren’s writing on the topic is not necessarily a guide on how to design a particular type of community, nor does it explicitly define what community should be, it still provides a useful framework in which to explore community groups and come to new conclusions and suggestions.
Chapter 5
Building the CrossFit Community

For all the discussion regarding the type of subculture CrossFit may be defined as, so too can we unpack what type of community CrossFit is. The best interpretation to accurately reflect the type of network or community of CrossFit is, is through Lave & Wenger’s (1991) theorizing of the community of practice (CoP). The original concept of the CoP is applied to settings that differ from the contemporary and colloquial use of simply the word community. As I explained earlier, there is a relative consensus that community represents the social networks and formation that frequently act in opposition to broader civic and economic society. The concept of CoP however, was applied in economic and business settings. The concept is predicated on findings in the field of learning which suggest that people learn by engaging in a community on a regular basis, thereby having constant or frequent informal interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This was exemplified using apprenticeship communities where the culture itself is said to provide a “living curriculum” whereby learning is a social process (Wenger, 1998). Since this theory gained popularity it is synonymous with business institutions that have seen it is a useful way to create, manage, and share knowledge within a company. For example, some of the earliest studies assessing the process of a CoP in the professional fields looked at Xerox technicians, engineers of the Chrysler Corporation and the online community of Caterpillar Inc. (Li et al., 2009). In these instances, the focus was one way in which professional knowledge, tips, and advice was shared within the corporation and other professionals. Wenger (1998) outlines the places where CoPs might be expected; business organizations; government; education (between teachers or between students), professional occupations (such as accredited professions with a regulatory body), civic spheres (such as non-profit organizations or international development), and internet forums. None of these spheres truly captures or describes CrossFit, or any other recreation/leisure organization. Perhaps the reason for this is that we typically think of a leisure activity as a pastime – something we do in the interim which remains undemanding or unobtrusive to the rest of life. CrossFit is quite different from this, often referred to as a greedy institution in reference to how demanding it can be on other aspects of life (Dawson, 2017). The level of commitment is so much so that some may refer to box as a third space. Oldenburg & Brissett (1982) coined this term in reference to social groups that occur outside of home and work. They further describe the third space as a place primarily for the joy
of socializing and conversing, free from any other goals. This does not include social occasions where a businessperson may be socializing for the purposes of networking in an informal setting such as a bar, but this is meant as a break from the rest of economic and occupational life (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Historically, people have conceived this to be bars, dinner restaurants or a café (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). In the densely populated megacities people live in, or even the commuting lifestyle of the urban suburbs, regularly frequenting a local establishment for these strictly social purposes is less common. While CrossFit is a place of socializing and joy, it does stray from the traditional definition of the third place because the site is not meant to be a mundane place of routine insignificance to its patrons or outsiders – something that they do without questioning. With CrossFit, the act is conscious and intentional, it is not discrete or blasé, as the culture is very popular and advertised to others not within the group. More significantly, there is an intentionality of achieving physical fitness as the primary goal when you enter a box – it is not just a social gathering. Reflecting neoliberal thinking, the many CrossFit members participate not only for social engagement but to achieve physical, tangible goals, thereby reflecting the neoliberalist sentiment of perpetual productivity and rationalism in decision making.

All things considered, the best way to conceptualize CF is as a CoP, because of the constant communication and shared participation amongst members, coaches, and various boxes all around the world, for the purpose of sharing knowledge. This knowledge can be in the forms of developing technique or skills specifically to WODs or branch out to the other topics of health that are discussed in and around the box. In CrossFit, the physical nature of the activities performed means that most knowledge is tacit, in that it is best communicated socially and in particular contexts – in this case within the gym space (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling, & Stuedemann, 2006). It is hard to communicate over a computer or by reading a book how to perform a clean and jerk. This is best done in person, and when athletes consume information on the internet, the coach can then act as a guide to supplement this knowledge. CoPs can encompass a wide range of groups, but sport and exercise has not been commonly used framework in address community and belongingness in sport or exercise (Roberts, 2006). Ironically, the CoP model may be better suited for this context, as compared to the business environment it stems from because business culture is often more individualistic, production
orientated, and less socially collaborative than this leisure setting (Roberts, 2006). As a result, fostering comradery and dialogue in an office space is usually more difficult than in a CF box. To further unpack how a CoP is established, Etienne Wenger (1998, p. 1-2) flushes out the particular components necessary to qualify as a; domain, community, and practice, detailed below:

The domain:
A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

The community:
In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other… students in American high schools may have much in common, yet unless they interact and learn together, they do not form a community of practice.

The practice:
A community of practice is not merely a community of interest--people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

Domain
As a domain people come together frequently for the shared purpose of further developing their fitness in the field of CrossFit. It is a distinct form of identification that differentiates CrossFitters from the general public, often in a light that makes them appear more adventurous and rugged because of the intensity of the exercise protocol. Members are committed as evidenced by their attendance. While conducting this study I came to notice the dedication and effort people apply to the gym. I regularly noticed people rushing over for a WOD straight from work or coming to the earliest classes at 6 am because it is the only time that accommodates their schedule. Athletes also settle into a rhythm and pattern of class attendance whereby they typically workout with the same group of people. Most of the WODs I attended were in the evening between 17:00 and 22:00 and I became a member of the ‘evening crew’ as referred to by members of the box.

Community
Collaboration in knowledge sharing and helping each other learn builds upon the principle of domain by adding a layer of active and thoughtful engagement when time is spent together. By and large, CrossFit is a liminal experience for most of the members of this box and CrossFit
participation for broadly. When describing communitas, Victor Turner (1995) explores the concept of liminality which he describes as the middle ground or transitional place by which members are caught in-between two states of being and are thus, not represented in either being. Turner explores this state of being through anthropological studies of rites of passage in various communities by which individuals can be considered ‘threshold’ people as they transition from one classification to another by way of ceremony (Turner, 1995). Going through a ceremony or simply joining a box denotes the participant with the title of neophyte – a novice of sorts who is still actively in the process of learning a skill such as a culinary chef taking cooking classes (Turner, 1995). The constantly changing nature of CrossFit means that most athletes who are non-competitive never truly master the sport, but are perpetually forced to change, adapt, and never be truly an expert. One of the persons I interviewed, was a coach named Sally who had been participating in CrossFit for roughly one year. Sally is 27 and comes from a physical activity background. She studied kinesiology as an undergraduate degree and went worked as a personal trainer, ran marathon, and lead boot camps and spin classes. Even with such an eclectic physical activity background she echoed the sentiments of perpetual change in the CrossFit’s methodology, saying:

“You always find something and you’re like crap at I, but then you’re like I’m gonna work really hard at this one thing and then you nail it. And you’re like, ‘k I’m successful at this”. Sally also expands on this by speaking to the communal aspect that arises by saying “Failure is looked at in many other environments especially in the work place like ‘We don’t wanna fail’. You’re always trying to avoid it but in here it’s different, it’s like failure promotes growth, failure promotes learning so based on that, that already brings everybody down a level. So, it’s like everybody’s already on the same playing field. And everyone is treated equally.”

This describes the effect of liminality to bring people closer together by virtue of everyone being peers with respect to their level of expertise, or lack thereof. (Turner, 1995). In the other structures of life there are constant divisions and separations of hierarchy, be it class, income, or occupation. In the box, however, everyone is an apprentice in the process of learning and this comradery further facilitates learning in a collaborative format.
Practice

Lastly, the component of actively engaging shared resources occurs in the box and online formats. At the gym, coaches teach and instruct athletes, athletes share information with other athletes, and even share video or tips online. At my first session, the coach asked one of the veteran members to teach me the warmup that everyone does and near the end of my stint at this box, I recorded in my field notes that the coach asked me to orient a new athlete to the warm up routine. Although this may be a trivial act, it exemplifies how the knowledge and resources of completing these movements are passed along to different athletes over time.

Taking a step back and looking at the CoP of CrossFit with a broader field of view, it is clear that there is a phenomenon in which CoPs layer on top of each other in a hierarchical fashion. While community and social intimacy are a key component for CrossFit athletes and the marketing of the brand, the reality is that the social relationships that an athlete such as myself has with someone who trains in a box across the world in Australia, for example is much different than that of the other members in my box. Instead, CrossFit is comprised of a collection of smaller CoPs, each with their own respective boundaries (Roberts, 2006). At the smallest levels this can be conceived as my specific box at the micro-level, the boxes of Toronto at the meso-level, boxes across Canada at the macro-level, and CrossFit worldwide representing the mega-level. The differences in levels does not indicate that any level is better than the other but that each level has components that are specific to that region. Typically, the smaller the level the more intimate the direct social bonds between members and the more things they have in common because of their proximity. Roberts (2006) also conceptualizes this using the imagery of a multitude of constellations which is better at communicating the interweaving networks between the various CoPs of CrossFit and how some practices, such as fashion, can travel across multiple groups can connect different gyms or cities (Roberts, 2006). The boundaries between these communities are dynamic, relative, and grow over time (Roberts, 2006). In the first few years of CrossFit’s inception in 1995, it only grew to 13 affiliates in the first 10 years, thus keeping the constellation local (Denni, 2013). This culture was sustained, then repeated and expanded to create more boxes, and the constant repeating of this pattern explains how these linked boxes have grown in an exponential fashion so that CF now features nearly 13,000 gyms across roughly 120 countries (Denni, 2013; Roberts, 2006; Wang, 2016; Zimmerman, 2015). The integration of the internet and technology has increased the degree of interactions and
interconnectedness of the constellations. My box had its own Facebook and Instagram page through which they share content and updates. Social media platforms such as Instagram use algorithms to propagate ads related to CrossFit, and the ‘explore feed’ feature of Instagram is populated with other pages and images of interest, which is often other CrossFit gyms in the area or physical activity cultures nearby. Social media can also connect people across the country and world using similar principles. A prime example of this connectivity is displayed during The CrossFit Open. The CrossFit Open is a tool used for qualification for The Games whereby CrossFit HQ shares a specific workout through their site, and members across the world complete the same WOD. Working in conjunction with the physical environment, the virtual community can be a great supplementary tool for connecting with otherwise disconnected populations (Roberts, 2006). In this sense, there is truly no isolated CrossFit box and when visiting a different box while travelling for example, there is a familiarity with the environment and a pre-established grasp of the knowledge between members that otherwise do not know each other.

Other factors to consider in the CoP framework are power and trust. Power is defined by Roberts (2006) as “the ability to achieve something, whether by influence, force, or control” (p. 626) and varies depending on an individual’s expertise, experience, personal CrossFit proficiency, title, and length of participation. This can also be understood as the social status and a popularity that some possess. Generally, the organizational structure is meant to denote the certified coaches as the only authority in the space, but this is not always the case as some athletes are more proficient than others and will help their peers. Some athletes are more comfortable giving advice and recommendations to their peers by virtue of their level of performance or length of participation. From my own observation, this also manifested when athletes would socialize with a high number of members in the gym or have a closer relationship with the coach than other members. One common trend I noticed was those with more power were more likely to take up more physical space for the workouts or be louder. In my interview with Walter he reported one particular experience at an open gym class while he was still relatively new. One interviewee, Walter spoke about other athletes in the gym saying:

“Sometimes they’re so loud, it’s overwhelming... This one time I went to an open gym, so basically it was all the regulars except for me, it was like my first month there, and I was doing deadlifts and I was just not feeling it at all.”
Walter is 23 and joined the CrossFit gym at relatively the same time as myself, having been a member for roughly 5 months at the time of this interview. He is currently a graduate student in university and has participating in track and field competitively and recreationally since middle school. Still acclimating to the new environment, he did not feel enmeshed within the boxes social circles as compared to some of the veteran members, some of which had been members for years. Not only was their presence loud but it had an effect on other people in the space. This power is synonymous with a high social status in the gym, and ultimately these leaders provide more input as to how meaning is created and transmitting amongst the gym space (Roberts, 2006). In CrossFit, these relative types of meaning that are constantly being negotiated may include; if an athlete’s goal is to lift the most weight, or look the most aesthetically pleasing, or to engaged in social gatherings with gym members. These values can be reflected explicitly through stories, sharing experiences, or through our actions. Ultimately, the coaches in boxes have the most power and at the highest level, some may consider Greg Glassman to be another authority of power, although I would argue that members of this gym would have more reverence towards the coaches they interact with regularly, than the CEO with whom they share no personal or intimate connection.

Similarly, the trust that members have between each other and the organization is extremely important because it contributes to a culture of openness and increases in communication can better facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills (Roberts, 2006). Obviously, trust is intertwined with power insofar that those in power have the trust of others so long as they do not abuse their power. There were multiple minor interactions on a daily basis predicated upon the trust members had built between each other. For example, the box would routinely have time to work on a skill of the athlete’s choice to improve a weaker aspect of their abilities. This could be practicing the technique for double unders (skipping when the rope goes under the legs twice each jump), handstand push ups, or kipping pullups. Athletes typically consult the coach and think collaboratively as to which skills need to be developed. In the same vein, the coach would likely provide tips or recommended progression – if I was having troubles learning to do kipping pullups, the coach would recommend I start off with doing beat swings (a gymnastics movement that involves swinging back and forth while fully extending when swinging forward and flexing the abdomen when swinging backwards). Between athletes, these negotiations take place all the time by commenting another member’s technique or recommending products for others to buy.
We shared and discussed which types of shoes would be best for squatting, or through the nutrition program offered at the gym I had conversations with athletes regarding which types of nutrition supplements they would recommend.

My final comments in this section pertain to the integration of CoPs in virtual or online communities – instances where members of the community may never meet in the physical world, or they use the internet to supplement their real life social interactions. The internet has obviously played a huge role in everyone’s lifestyle, and communities are no different. Some research exemplifies how the internet has allowed people to form bonds based on shared experiences in careers that are otherwise disconnected through space and time. Bette Gray (2004) explored how an online community of coordinators of Alberta Community Adult Learning Councils use a website, public forum and private forum amongst other technologies to effectively foster informal learning by sharing day-to-day experiences. This study and others like it have found that communication with other members in an online community had tangible effects including reducing feelings of loneliness they experienced in their careers (Gray, 2004). Seeing the strength of a CoP acting on its own, it is reasonable to assume that a digital sphere can further the intimacy and strength of relationship fostered in face-to-face interactions by providing another way to transmit knowledge and broaden the range of people that can be involved in the community.

This study was not designed to be a traditional internet ethnography or cyber ethnography that focuses on relationships in the virtual format, but I did participate in online formats to the extent that any CrossFitter uses it – as a fundamental part of the CrossFit experience. Formally, the only task that required athletes use the internet was for the organizational purpose of reserving a spot in the classes they planned to attend. This could be done through the gym website or a cellphone application. Most of the gym members also follow the gym’s Instagram page and are a part of the box’s Facebook page where staff post general notices about the gym and also post pictures of the chalk board so people can track WODs and their performances online. Beyond this, it also incorporated consuming online media such as instructional videos to help develop skills or purely as entertainment. During The 2017 CrossFit Games I watched the competitions on the www.crossfit.com website and spoke about the events with members in the gym in the same fashion that some sport fans talk about the Sunday night football game, at work on Monday. Another popular piece of media that athletes spoke about was the documentary *Fittest on Earth*: 
A Decade of Fitness which documents the history of the sport and the 2016 CrossFit Games. The internet helped my transition into CrossFit by facilitating easy access to knowledge whenever I needed information on how to do an exercise, which products were popular, what other athletes are doing in Toronto, and other queries. Given the access to information on the internet, it is no surprise that people can engage in CoPs in this medium to supplement or physical interactions.
Primary group relationships

As discussed earlier, primary group relations refer to how well members within the group know each other on an personal level. During my stay at the gym, it became evident that there was the potential for very close friendships to form. I use to the term ‘potential’ because there is still quite a large variance in the level of intimacy members share. Some members simply use the gym space, are friendly with others and go about their business while other have built upon these relationships and are even friends outside of the gym as well. It is also common that some people join the gym as a couple, or were friends prior, so these relationships are also very tight. The length of time at the gym is also a huge contextual factor as these relationships become more intimate over time. I definitely experienced this: my early notes documented largely mundane and superficial conversations with people talking about the weather or specific exercises. As time progressed however, I became friends with some members that I still remain in contact with today. As this began to happen, I had more frequent and meaningful conversations including discussions about family life, and even politics. The reality is that different people have different desires and different lifestyles which can accommodate these relationships. Walter who was only at the gym for a short time when I interviewed him, did not feel as integrated with the community:

“I don’t feel like it’s my area yet. Like, oh this is my space to just be me, that’s not me yet. And I don’t expect it to be my space. I feel comfortable in some sense, I don’t have to talk to people, I don’t have to do uncomfortable things… I think it really takes time to be part of that ecosystem.”

Walter expands on how this is likely attributed to how new he is to the box, by commenting on a close group of friends within in the gym in saying:

“That’s their clique, they have a little crew. And I’m not stupid I recognize that. They’ve been there for a while. My friend said it too. She said, these CrossFit people, they have cliques, and I’m like you know what, your right.”
There is a range of how deep the connections can become and how many people you connect with. While some are not as engaged, it seems like the culture does allow for this comradery to grow if the athlete seeks it. The second coach I interviewed, Laurel, was spoke about this. She is 25 and began doing CrossFit two years ago before becoming a coach in the past year. Like the other coach, she too comes from a physical activity background having completed her bachelor’s degree in kinesiology and is currently working towards her masters. On the topic of relationships amongst gym members, Laurel said:

“People that end up at those places [CrossFit gyms] tend to be on one level or another like-minded in some capacity so you end up making friends and I’ve seen a lot of friendships grow and people have moved away and those friendships have stayed and that community has stayed and then it turns into this more macro thing where, ‘Oh, my friend moved to London and we met at CrossFit. When I go there I wanna go visit her and meet her box’.”

Another way in which athletes develop a form of bonding capital is through the self-inflicted suffering that takes place while exercising. The experience of choosing to embrace suffering as a pastime is a unique characteristic which is valued in the form of social capital and becomes a key component of the group’s collective identity (Atkinson, 2011). It is a universal way that CrossFit members can relate to one another that transcends communicating verbally or being friends. Sally also describes this phenomenon in saying “Everybody’s dying together during the workout. There’s something liberating about that… Everyone is literally at the same point regardless of their ability”.

Beyond this bonding that is generated by virtue of suffering, the simple fact that individuals share the same interests and interact on a regular basis provides further reasons as to why bonding is developed. The conception is that CrossFit is a giant cult and results in everyone being super close is ultimately a myth. Everyone in the space is cordial, polite, and friendly, but not everyone is looking to create the strong relationships people perceive. Some experiences are like the one that Walter described, and others are like Laurel’s.

Close, intimate relationships exist to the extent that every member chooses to engage in such dynamics. There are core members of the gym who attend regularly, more often, and know each other very well. This is evidenced by seeing athletes coming into the gym together, socializing
while exercising, and even planning activities outside of the gym space. Multiple times I was invited to events outside of the gym which was a reflection of the friendships that I had developed. Once coaches had organized a casual pub night for all the members of the box, and on another occasion a member invited several others and myself to attend an archery dodgeball event. The ability to develop a close relationship and friendship with a coach is a great because it provides another layer of support. In casual conversation after one WOD, I was talking to an athlete and they told me how they had taken some time away from the gym for a while because they were ill and that one of the coaches called her to see how she was doing because it was unusual for her to be away from the box so long. This not a trivial thing because social support is ultimately one of the most important things in mental wellbeing and having relationships like this in the gym can make a huge difference for an athlete’s adherence to the exercise program (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). The flexibility in the nature of these relationship is ultimately beneficial in CrossFit contexts because athletes engage to the extent that they are comfortable, allowing everyone to feel welcome. Although CrossFit introduces more social interaction in the gym spaces, it is not completely removed from values of individualism that are in traditional gyms and society at large. People can still stay to themselves, just not to the extent of that in a traditional gym.

**Autonomy**

The degree of autonomy in the CrossFit gym is one of the most defining characteristics of the community. The reasons for this is because of the nature of programming in which exercises are prescribed to members, thereby leaving them with little power or agency with respect to what exercises they will be doing when they enter the gym. When one walks into a class the WOD is posted and this is often the first place people look before getting settled in. Having the WOD already posted effectively takes the choice out of the athlete’s hands as if the box were operating in a paternalistic manner. The implication is that the gym will make the right decision for the member. Laurel even told me that coaches at this particular box made the conscious decision to stop posting WODs ahead of class time because “people cherry pick”, meaning that they may choose to skip a WOD if they see that it is difficult or do not like the exercises. This dynamic is oppositional to contemporary ideologies surrounding health in which emphasis is placed on the individual to make decisions for themselves. On the surface, this could potentially pose difficulties, but athletes I spoke to at the gym communicated that when it comes to making
positive decisions surrounding health, it can be very difficult. For people increasingly busy with work, school or other aspects of life, it is a large burden to then design exercise programming, and simply motivate yourself. Instead of being forced to make these decisions every single day, the bureaucratic organization that is CrossFit takes care of all the work-out decisions so that members can just show up. Laurel describes her motivation woes saying “[I] could not be bothered to work out by myself. We have a Schwinn Air Dyne at home, ask me how many times I’ve used it. The answer is once and I hated it because I was alone, and then I stopped.” This implies that working out in groups affects the motivation to exercise as well as the enjoyment of the social experiences.

Gyms usually have some method of signing up to schedule classes which acts as a form of regulation and commitment, the class is directed by a coach, and everyone in the box motivates each other. The most difficult agentic decision that the individual has to complete is the initial choice to become a member of CrossFit and then the rest becomes easier. In a strange way, this is why people discuss not enjoying the tasks at times but feel that they have no choice but to complete it. For example, Walter and I talked about coming into the gym to do a difficult WOD, he replied “I don’t wanna do it but… I don’t wanna do the things that they give me. [The Coach] will be like ‘pick your poison’. I’m like I don’t like any of this. She’s like that’s why it’s poison.” It’s common to just hang out after a WOD and complain about a certain movement. For myself, wall balls or thrusters were that activity. However, despite this attitude me and my fellow athletes felt that it was in our best interest to do it, and we had already committed without knowing what the task was.

There is also pressure to perform as well as possible when in the gym because everyone is conducting the same WOD, the coach is watching, all of the athletes are also aware of each other, and because CrossFit can be competitive, it leads people to push themselves to outperform one another, but more importantly not to give up. Walter said, “You don’t wanna be the only one just taking a rest for two minutes while everyone is getting their reps in”, which reiterates this idea that everyone is very much aware of their self-image amongst the other athletes. The culture is rooted in having people push as hard as they can. On top of this, scores are recorded after the workouts as a form of accountability and comparison which affects the drive of the individual. Once, after a WOD that called for 150 double unders, the coach was recording our results on the board and one participant said that they completed 300 single skips instead 450. (For individuals
who cannot complete double unders, the movement is scaled to triple the amount in single unders). There was not a huge conflict, but the coach instructed the athlete that next time they should complete the WOD as prescribed. This made it obvious to me that while CF is a fairly laid-back environment, following instructions and not giving up are crucial principles.

Ultimately people reported positive effects with respect to the amount of agency they possessed, or lack thereof such as Laurel saying “I hated working out by myself and to be quite frank I can’t push myself for the life of me in workout. I tried to do AMRAP style training, I could not for the life of me do it by myself. Because it’s so hard to find people whose schedules align with yours”. This quote explains one athlete’s motivation to begin CrossFit as their primary training method. She continues, “you’re paying for the coaching, you’re paying for the programming.” While it is generally considered a positive, maximizing agency so that athletes have to make decisions in every aspect of exercise of life is not always ideal and this is evidenced by the success and testimonials of CrossFit participants themselves. So long as athletes are able to approach the sport and make that initial decision with full agency, they welcome that the burden of creating workouts is lifted. There are limits to this, in that coaches will not force athletes to complete exercises they are not comfortable with and athletes have the ultimate right of refusal, but they definitely encourage athletes to challenge themselves and adhere to WOD.

Another way to think about the autonomy is not just who makes absolute decisions about what the workout will be. Agency or autonomy exists on a spectrum which can change depending on the dynamic of power between individuals. The reality is that there are forms of coercion at play when coaches or members of the gym expect athletes to do something. Motivation in the gym plays out in a similar albeit more positive light. During one class, we all had time to work on a skill of our choosing and one of the athletes was working on doing their first box jump (jumping onto a 20” wooden box). The coaches and other athletes around were pushing the athlete saying things like ‘It’s all in your head, you can do it’ and ‘You know you can do this’. Ultimately, despite apprehension and some nervousness, the athlete attempted the jump and was successful. The athletes in the gym started clapping and the athlete received a bunch of high fives. Ultimately, the coach pushed the athlete because they believed that the athlete was capable of doing it despite their fear and nervousness. Without any external pressure and support, the athlete likely would have not tried to do this but was swayed because of the people around her.
I recorded another similar experience of this motivation early on in my field notes. I wrote that during one WOD I had that I was pushing myself during the workout to keep up with another athlete’s pace. After we were done, I let him know and we both laughed because he too said that he was competing to stay ahead of me. At the end of the workout we all put our scores on the board so in a sense, we are always competing with each other, but this is an afterthought compared to having an athlete right beside you doing the same workout.

Viability

The viability of the community refers to the ability of the community to be successful in the goals it has set out to achieve. In the case of CrossFit this goal is to “forge a broad, general and inclusive fitness supported by measurable, observable and repeatable results. The program prepares trainees for any physical contingency—not only for the unknown but for the unknowable, too. Our specialty is not specializing.” (“What is CrossFit”, n.d., para. 4). The economic success of the brand and sheer number of people who choose this sport as their preferred form of exercise indicates that they have succeeded at this. Most of the people I encountered felt that their needs were being met so getting testimony saying otherwise would likely have to involve athletes who have dropped out. Not only is success measured in the physical output of the athlete but feeling welcomed and visibly represented is important as well. Laurel speaks to the positive reception of athletes and success of providing a welcoming space:

“Have you seen the Netflix documentary, Road to the Games or whatever. I think that they’re inspirational to some capacity because a lot of females, we’ve always been told how to look blah blah blah and I think that CrossFit is very much bashing those barriers down, and saying women can do pullups, women can lift heavy… A lot of women that have started at our gym have told me like one on one as a coach ‘I hated my body before I started here’ and when I saw how inclusive CrossFit can be for women I decided to try it and I have never been more content with where I’m at. I think that in terms of gender they are very welcoming to females. The only downfall is that a lot of the people that have that mindset of ‘Oh, I only wanna get toned’. They’re very superficial, they wanna work out but I don’t know what they’re looking for. Those people, it’s not gonna be inviting for you whether or not you’re a male or a female and you think that.”
For Sally, the experience has also been positive saying that “CrossFit has taught me to know what my limits are… When you have a challenge outside of the gym, sometimes I look at things, I’m like, if I can do all this stuff here you can do anything.” A more general example into this viability and the extent by which CrossFit affects other health choices is the nutrition program that this gym offered. A few times, before and after WODs, I noticed that some members were interacting with the coach beyond the typical CrossFit session. Specifically, I saw one of the coaches taking notes while the athlete was standing on a bioelectrical impedance scale. These scales use electrical impulses to calculate not only the subjects weight, but weight and fat-free mass. Put simply, they are able to discern how much of a person’s weight is muscle or fat and is a much more sophisticated approach to understanding health than the rudimentarily used body-mass index value. The coach was recording values from the scale into his phone and discussing with the athlete how their diet was going, if they were adhering to the nutrition program and other details. This was something that I had never experienced in the box and I had never adhered to an organized meal program, so I was immediately interested. I also thought it worthwhile to participate in the program as it was another part of the CrossFit experience, that not everyone, but some people would engage in. I spoke to the coach about getting involved in the program and shortly after we began. I, along with one other member of the gym, met with the coach at a local pub and began to discuss what the program would entail. First, we discussed our goals which for both of us was to decrease our body fat percentage. The coach gave us a basic overview of tracking macronutrients, what macronutrients are, how the energy is stored in the body, and explained how the nutrition program would supplement our exercise to reach our goals. With my background in kinesiology, much of this information was familiar, but for my peer the information was not as intuitive. We explained our meal restrictions and preferences and in the coming week, he presented each of us with our own meal program which outlined the foods we would eat, detailing the number of calories and weight in grams of the foods we were to consume. Every week at the same time we would weigh ourselves to track progress and adjust the program as necessary – this is what I had observed in the gym which led me to start the program myself. Over the twelve-week program, I lost over ten pounds and five percent in body fat. CrossFit itself is a training methodology but its connection with healthy eating and embedding this value within the culture is something that is not as explicit at any traditional gym or sports team I have ever been a part of. In this manner, the viability is so effective that it has the ability to go beyond just exercising.
One of CrossFit’s goals is obviously to improve in the exercise program itself, but also to produce a more functional and well-rounded approach to health. This macronutrient centred program is present at many other gyms and serves to educate members in health decisions they may otherwise never learn. Not only does this contribute to the viability of success but it creates a social space and dialogue around food. I would regularly speak to the athletes about tips they use in workouts, and now we would talk about what foods we loved that were low in fat and added sugars.

Power Distribution

Much like perspectives on autonomy, it is often implicitly assumed that ideally, organizations would distribute power evenly amongst its members. This is in part due to the ‘democratic bias’ in most of society which believes power should be shared as much as possible (Warren, 1970). The idea of an even distribution of power may be appealing in trying to foster more ethical decisions. In this context of CrossFit, where members are paying for a service, the relationship is fundamentally different. Coaches have the power to dictate what goes on, but members have the power to leave and spend their money elsewhere.

In the box I attended as part of this study, and others that I have attended of my own accord, the power distribution is relatively constant because it is built into the organization of the business. The coaches are the only ones in charge of programming and prescribing exercises, with this authority granted to them by way of CrossFit’s coaching certification process, and challenging this authority is generally not embraced by the culture. There are grey areas however, in that more experienced regulars sometime contribute tips to other members, and they sometimes step in to help another athlete if the coach is busy. All this said, the significant point of note is that structurally, all of the athletes are equal in lacking the power or ability to explicit command dictate what exercises will take place, or shape the environment of the gym space. Naturally some athletes are better than other or more knowledgeable than others, but all take direction from the coaches and do the same tasks.

Participation

The degree to which members choose to participate or engage in important decisions surrounding the gym varies. As reviewed earlier, participants are fairly limited to the extent that they may contribute to CrossFit as an institution outside of providing suggestions to their local
box. Depending on the reception of the gym, they may alter classes and services to fit the desire of their demographics. For example, this gym location offers a nutrition mentorship program and, in the past, gyms I have attended have implemented CrossFit Light/ metabolic conditioning (classes that feature less barbell work than traditional CrossFit classes), and Olympic weight lifting classes. As a business, this is to be expected because they need to meet the expectations of their customers.

With respect to the matter of attendance and usage, my observation has deduced that the gym has a few ‘core’ or ‘stable’ – members that are very committed and spend a lot of time in the gym outside of just completing WODs. One might find these members working individually on technique, mobilization and stretching, completing a strength-based workout, or even just socializing. These also tend to be athletes that have been training for a longer period of time and are proficient enough that they can lead their own supplementary programming. The other end of the spectrum features peripheral members who may attend classes regularly, but typically take part in the WOD and then leave.

There are obvious benefits to having more input from different people – more voices are heard and the possibility to include more perspectives is increased, but this is not without its consequences. Too many voices can lead to confusion, and the CrossFit coaches would rather be the ones to make decisions about how classes run in order to maximize efficiency. In regards to advising movements and exercises, these coaches would also prefer to be the primary point of contact because they are trained to maintain safety and are the most knowledgeable people in the space. Ultimately, members are paying for a service from professionals based on the premise that these coaches know what is best. Having coaches who design programming and still choosing to take matters into one’s own hands would be counterintuitive.

Degree of Commitment

The importance of the community also varies between members, as outlined in the section referring to participation. What you find is members taking different levels of importance from the community to satisfy their desires. For some members, this may be simply body and health improvements, and for others this includes building lasting relationships, inside and outside of the gym. Having the possibility for both cases to be present is a feature that has a positive impact on the community because people with different temperaments to feel welcome.
The nature of scheduling WODs adds a degree of commitment that most gym goers are not accustomed to. Athletes have to sign up for classes ahead of time, using an app to guarantee their spot in the class sometimes a day or two in advance. Although this is not a huge commitment, it is now solidified in your schedule, and it provides a degree of accountability because coaches are aware if you do not show up. On top of this, the sheer intensity of CrossFit necessitates a commitment that many may not be accustomed to. Many conversations around the gym are centered around other health decisions such as nutrition and sleep because people want to ensure they can perform optimally when at the box. I remember having conversations with other athletes about tips we had to use in order to perform successfully in the box. An example of this is talking about stretching every morning to increase mobility. In another instance, an athlete explained to me that they would usually eat a banana right after performing a high-volume leg workout, to replenish their glycogen stores and electrolyte levels.

Even when athletes could not participate in the WOD they would often attend the class, regardless. All of the workouts are scaled when necessary but on one occasion, I noticed an athlete could not participate at all and instead they did a few exercises on their own in a corner of the gym. Even when not doing the WOD he was allowed to be a part of the collective, socialize with other members, and continue to be active in whatever way possible while his shoulder recovered. Also, if an athlete were to come in and they had difficulty jumping because of a knee injury, the coach would have them row instead. I found this interesting because sometimes (in my opinion) athletes would be justified in taking the day off, but they would still come and do exercises in the presence of other people that they could have done on their own. Obviously, this had to do with having equipment and other factors, but it signals to other members how dedicated that person is.

In what is probably the most bizarre experience that I witnessed, I was biking to the gym one day when I came across another member of the box who had been hit by a car while also biking to the gym. Paramedics were on the scene when I arrived, but he was not seriously injured and only had a few scrapes and bruises. I offered to stay with him while he was being assessed by the paramedics, but he insisted that I continue on my way to the gym. I agreed, and to my surprise, shortly after I arrived at the box, he showed up as well. I was utterly shocked by this, and so were the other members. Not only did he show up, but he also completed the WOD that day. This may be a reflection of the individual’s temperament, as I do not believe most other athletes
would do this, but it is a glaring, albeit rare example of commitment to the sport. After the workout, he joked about being the first person to ever complete WOD after being hit by a car. This comment was also reflective not only his commitment but the pride in ruggedness of CrossFit athletes.

**Degree of Heterogeneity**

Without complete demographic data, I can only make anecdotal inferences, but CrossFit is a fairly homogenous institution with respect to race, and social class. The little data we do have from business and marketing note 42% of participants are between the ages of 25 and 34, over half of athletes have an annual income over $150,000, 40% have post graduate degrees, and 86% are white (“The Business of CrossFit”, 2017). It is likely that the high membership rates serve as a barrier to access, resulting in the high income and highly educated population. The box was also predominantly white which was more obvious to me, as I was frequently only one of few racialized persons in the gym. CrossFit media also reflects this disparity by featuring more white bodies on their Instagram account and promotional materials.

Walker commented on this as well, saying “Whoever’s privileged is able to afford it and it’s usually, you know who’s the most privileged people. It’s these Anglo-Saxons, these hipsters (laughs)” adding “I don’t think I’ve seen a lot of Caribbean’s or Africans, one Asian.” Ultimately, this narrow demographic means that many of the athletes have class and whiteness in common, making it easier to relate, and contributing to social cohesion. I had conversations in passing with other athletes about attending graduate school, and overheard athletes have money banter while discussing their careers. The similarities between this fairly ethnoracial and financially homogenous population likely contributes to the degree to which primary group relationship are fostered easily based in similarities between members.

**Extent of Neighborhood Control**

The degree to which CrossFit impacts the community is largely out of the scope of my study as well because I am focused on the goings-on within CrossFit. However, one interview participant was able to briefly speak to this. Walker not only lives in the neighborhood that this gym is located, but he grew up there as well. He said that “this has been a gentrified area. I’ve been here since I was a baby. So, I noticed this massive gentrification and CrossFit is actually a part of that gentrification. And I don’t think they’re actually helping the local community”. 
The comment of gentrification is a complex one, especially within the context of an overpopulated and expanding Toronto core (Hulchanski, 2010; Murdie & Teixeira, 2011). Claims of CrossFit’s role in gentrification have not been thoroughly explored but there is evidence to suggest that there is a relationship. In comparing the map of CrossFit affiliate gyms in Toronto, with maps showing the greatest amounts of gentrification in the downtown core, there is some overlap (King, 2016). Gentrification has long been a part of Toronto’s history and it would appear that CrossFit is not the cause of this, but it is a part of the process by virtue of providing a service that only a gentrified population can afford. Moreover, the practices of CrossFit are aligned with that of gentrification as it attempts to retain the rustic industrial aesthetic of times past while increasing the price of the spaces, thereby restricting access. The reclaimed urban and industrial garage-type spaces that CrossFit typically uses is also a hallmark of these new, trendy neighbourhoods that are in the process of gentrification (Bridge, 2007). Because of this, it is important for CrossFit to recognize that the neighborhoods they occupy are affected by the space it consumes while creating a community within their own walls. This is not necessarily an issue particular to this gym but to CrossFit boxes as a whole. It is also more relevant to boxes located in Toronto and densely populated cities as opposed to rural locations.

Extent of Conflict

The amount of conflict I have noticed in CrossFit is relatively minimal. Perhaps this is because CrossFit has been so severely critiqued by other fitness industries that it has been forced to stick together. Another factor could be the similarities between members as described earlier. The little conflict that I did notice was that of coaches being critical of the conduct of other CrossFit gyms, or CrossFit HQ. Laurel says that:

“There have been times when like I’ve done drop ins at other gyms, I’ve done competitions and like I get it competition is different, but this is recreational, we’re not winning anything. So, it’s like sometimes I see certain things where I’m like I really fundamentally disagree with it”.

She was referring to the level of intensity that some coaches promoted in pushing athletes to extremes that could be unsafe. This was not always done in a degrading tone, but in a critical sense that always had the health of the athlete in mind. This is an important act, as CrossFit has
received a lot of negative press around the intensity of their workouts and risk of injury, so coaches and owners are always questioning practices to ensure safety and wellness.

Often times, breaking the rules or social norms in a space can be very informative to tease out exactly what is expected of community members. This happened to me during one of my training sessions where I put in headphones briefly while performing a deadlift. I was trying to set a new personal record (PR) and the music that was playing over the box’s sound system was too relaxing, so I put in my own headphones for a brief moment. Shortly after this I received a few joking/teasing comments from two gym members. To paraphrase, one said something to the effect of ‘is the music not good enough for you’ and the other said ‘what, you don’t want to talk to us?’ While these comments may seem trivial, I think it was indicative of the overall culture that values social interaction while in the gym. The joking manner was also reflective of the non-confrontational, passive demeanor that athletes use.

The last example of a conflict in the gym was recounted by Laurel (a coach) pertaining to conversation she had with a member of the gym. She said:

“I’ve had to have that conversation with one person where [they] were saying some really sideways comments about how because [they] were part of the original crew that started at [Gym’s Name] when it opened that [they] got privileges… I had to be like ‘you have something coming if you think you have privileges’ Everyone here is kinda on the same level and whatever. But then later when I spoke to her about it, I was like listen, you’ve been kind of a shitty community member. You keep saying things like ‘oh you’re privileged and you get this and you get to do that and you come in and wanna do a different WOD and it’s not programmed for you… there’s no reason for you to come in and request to do a different WOD just because you feel like doing it… They were like thanks for letting me know, I didn’t wanna do that. [They] apologized to people that [they] may have offended… The community does kinda help keep people in check when they’re reminded of it.”

The ability for effective conversations like this to occur between athlete and coach, are functionally important and valuable in the CF community because it ensures that all conduct is in accord with what the coach deems acceptable for the space. In speaking to this member, Laurel had to directly address the person to handle the conflict, whereas the conflict that I experienced
was communicated in a less direct, more amiable fashion. The different ways in which conflicts arise are interesting and collectively it reveals that while CrossFit may look like ‘one happy family’ there are tensions that exists within the box, and the constellation of CrossFit locations that contribute to the culture.

All of these examples show that any deviation from the general norm of CrossFit's principles that are expected in the space are not welcome. These instances illustrate that community and belongingness is a dynamic thing, and maintaining this is an active process which requires a type of grooming whereby athletes or coaches address and attempt to curtail undesirable behavior; be it unsafe conduct, isolationist behavior, or pompous attitudes. The amount of conflict is a valuable and effective component of the culture by enabling dialogue and communication in a variety of ways.

This methodology in which I used Warren’s principles as a scaffolding for describing community and the culture of CrossFit enables a wide breadth of data and insight to be organized. As explained earlier, I had multiple ideas of how CrossFit could be studying, all of which have value in their own right. Using community framework meant that I could explore multiple components and begin to see how they interact with each other. For example, how the similarities in homogeneity of the population may affect the likelihood of athletes creating friendships and relationships. It also paints a larger picture to understand and describe the neoliberal process that are going on such as the inequality of few actors in the community holding power (coaches) which relates to the distribution of current North American neopolitical economics. Notions of agency being restricted were also at play here and interacts with surveillance between athletes that does influence how people behaved in the gym. Overall, it provided a web or lattice of ideas and stories that can be interconnected.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

Much of this ethnographic inquiry into CrossFit has been a personal journey while exploring the perception of the sport from within the culture. Becoming an active participant in the CrossFit community allowed me to grow personally with respect to the ways that I looked at my body, exercise as a whole, and enabled me to push myself to levels I did not know I was capable of. After some WODs I would be nauseous and could do nothing but lie on the floor while panting for oxygen. In all my experiences playing recreational sports or training at the gym I had never come close to any experience like this. In the few occasions that I have trained outside of a CrossFit gym since this study I can push myself even harder knowing that my body is capable of so much more than I previously thought. Surprisingly, much of my motivation had nothing to do with recording my score on the board, but simply just knowing that I had no choice but to keep moving. It was an expectation of myself, the coaches, and the people exercising around me. Furthermore, I began to enjoy the thrill of blindly committing to what would likely be a grueling task, and even enjoying the process of suffering through exercise. After each workout there is a wonderful feeling of accomplishment knowing that most people will never do the workout you just did, and there is the physical sensation of exertion and depleted energy that is a type of relaxation and contentment I have seldom experienced in other environments.

This totally immersive experience necessary for this ethnographic inquiry made these feelings possible but also presented some difficulties as I constantly had to resituate myself as not just a participant but a researcher as well. In the middle of a WOD, when my muscles were aching, and I was breathing heavily, the last thing on my mind was conducting participant observation but I had to reflexively remind myself to stay alert about the things going on around me and not to normalize the social interactions that I was observing and was a part of. Since the termination of this study, I have continued to attend CrossFit at a different location and the experience is very much the same, albeit slightly relaxing with the absence of being constantly alert. Looking past the initial perceptions of criticism pertaining to risk, injury, and a cult-like status, there is something relatively novel to explore in this popular community that continues to grow. The organizational structure of the CrossFit corporation is particularly interesting because the libertarian affiliate model facilitates gym owners to exercise a vast degree of freedom and choice in styling their gym and ultimately influencing the microcosm-level of the CrossFit culture.
are common threads that run through CrossFit as a whole, and each specific box will be reflective of the demographics, values, and priorities of the communities they reside in. Because of this, ethnographic studies, especially those about CrossFit, must be understood to be radically contextual when trying to extrapolate findings across a wide range of people. It is essential to supplement these experiential findings with information that can be applied more broadly such as websites, media, and blogs, that can be consumed worldwide through the online medium. Data analyses that seek to collect these various forms of media could be a study in its own right. However, for the purposes of this study I found it impossible to separate the online information from the physical practice of CrossFit in the gym. The online engagement provided me with background information and contextual information that arose in the gym in conversation all the time such as talking about professional CrossFit athletes, or watching instructional videos.

Historically and contextually, the term ‘community’ can mean be a number of things. This study uncovers the complexities embedded with understanding how a community is performed and thus implies that the term should be used more responsibly. It is not sufficient to use ‘community’ as a label, but the dynamic of relationships, commitments, homogeneity, etcetera that are embedded within this concept must be examined. To understand what a community is, is to describe these characteristics – because every ‘community’ is not the same. Understanding this will also show that community analysis is a useful tool that can be used to study fitness phenomena.

CrossFit is increasingly become a large part of the physical activity cultural landscape but the amount of academic literature on the topic is sparse, relative to the number of participants and cultural impact. I hope that I have provided a necessary description of how CrossFit is performed from my perspective having joined a box and become a participant and active member of the community. The general public, public health officials, and academics alike all recognize the important of advocating for increased physical activity and could learn from what has made CrossFit as successful as it is. Some of these tactics to build community such use group training have already become more common, but there may be value in putting less effort in attempting to educate and motivate the individual, and instead develop a culture where sport and physical activity connect people beyond their local settings (Thompson, 2016). CrossFit achieves this through a type of standardization in which all athletes in boxes around complete similar tasks. Also, recording and posting workout score in a public format adds an element of accountability
that is integral to CrossFit culture. This mandatory documentation of performances on a daily basis, in a public sphere, is not experience in any other physical culture that I am aware of. This may be furthering the oppressive practices of neoliberalism on individual and bodies and must be negotiated with the concepts of agency and power athletes interact with in joining CrossFit ad attending classes.

CrossFit has come to develop an interesting relationship with the world outside its community as its foundation has been predicated upon being an entity that is somewhat oppositional to traditional gyms, and the largely neoliberalist sentiments embedded within in. Working out in groups, having more interaction with other members, and building relationships challenges the way many people go about exercising today but it still maintains the other neoliberal characteristics of self-improvement as an individual goal, albeit performed in a group atmosphere. It is essentially an amalgamation of elements that are by no means novel (powerlifting, Olympic lifting, and boot camps), but are organized in a unique configuration. The shallow counterculture narrative does not stray too far for mainstream neoliberalist practices, therefore providing an atmosphere that is not too foreign for its members. In addition to the individual responsibility of achieving health, the analytical tracking of scores and results, and the ability to simply pay for a membership and become a part of the culture represents the usual ways in which culture can be commodified and purchased in neoliberal societies. In this way, CrossFit does reproduce some forms of neoliberalism but rejects others, primarily the act of completing workouts with others and sharing an experience amongst a wide range of people.

The tools used here reveal how community and belongings exists in the forms of physical activity, and exhibit one in way in which research centred around community as a methodology can serve as an effective tool in understanding physical cultures. Thinking of community as intimate social relationships provides a broad understanding of how the culture is performed by members on the ground, as well as the relationships these people have with the structure and larger figurations they interact with.

With respect to CrossFit, the popularity and insight from participants at this box indicated that there is a clear desire to be physically active as a form of recreation, health, friendship, or an amalgam of multiple factors. Via interviews and ethnographic conversations over the four months, I became aware that members also realize that the unification of shared interest, pooling
of resources, and culture of accountability allow them to succeed in achieving their goals, thereby transforming a typically individual task into a more collectivist one.

It is important to continue physical culture research that looks beyond the conventional formats of high-performance sport, and for that matter, beyond traditional sports or exercise (Atkinson, 2011). For this reason, inquiries into CrossFit and cultures like it continue to be increasingly valuable as so many people experience physical activity ways ‘non-traditional’ ways that may receive less attention. Simultaneously, it is necessary to not become enamored with ethnographic studies focused on specific communities and also look at those on the fringes or outside of our areas of inquiry (Donnelly, 2006). Speaking to people that are considering joining communities, like CrossFit, or even those who have dropped out may provide more insight into the experiences that constitute introduction to a community, and how or why communities can fail some participants. This may also be the starting point for a line of inquiry exploring how to recruit individuals into sport or promote physical activity to people. As it stands, the current approach that is employed to promote more physical activity amongst Canadian citizens incorporates educating people about the physical health benefits of exercise (Public Health, 2011). This model of recruiting more participation is largely predicated on individual responsibility and agency in positive decision making. Where CrossFit is different is that because it is a business, it is marketing itself in a new alluring manner that does not rely so heavily on the individual agency after members have paid for them membership and attend a class. Because CrossFit it is a business, it does not altruistically advocate for all persons to be healthier, as it is advertising to customers.

The appeal of being part of a collective in CrossFit, as well as the appearance of risk and danger are central components that appeal to the predominantly white and affluent population who are able to access these services. The population I interacted with throughout this ethnographic supports this statement and the conversations I had with them often centred around the notion of doing movements that other physical activity cultures did. There was an heir of pride to the notion that few other groups of people were ‘extreme’ enough to do tire flips, or do handstand pushups, or other exercises. At the foundation of CrossFit’s methodology is highly militaristic and confounded on patriotism, physical suffering, and classism, all of which are features of an increasingly neoliberalism societal configuration. Due to these reasons, there is some danger that normalizing self-violence and militarism can be dangerous by promoting self-injurous while
exercising and aggression or violence outside out of the gym. This militarism was not overt or explicit during this ethnographic study, but it unquestionably lays at the foundation of how workouts are programmed.

The notion of community can be considered and almost universal principle in that almost any group figuration is sometimes referred to as a community. The nature of CrossFit being group training in an environment where athletes come to shared countless intense experiences contributes to the vast conversation and focus on community as being integral to CrossFit.

community amongst themselves and with coaches. In many regards, CrossFit is just another form of collective group suffering. However, there are some characteristics that could deem CrossFit more progressive that other fitness cultures; namely a high participation rate amongst women, equitable exercise prescription, and an increased emphasis on functional fitness in additional to stereotypical body policing.

Taking a step away from sport and physical activity exclusively as personal duty or responsibility and a shift to one that includes a more structured and collaborative environment will yield more participation and experiences. The dangers of competitiveness, masculinity, violence, and suffering in many sports continue to exist here, albeit in an environment that is not as isolating. The potential benefit to this is that it creates cultures of normalized physical activity and provides opportunity to creates networks of social support (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). However, it simultaneously creates an environment in which these negative cultures can be shared and reinforced. These are all process imbued within the neoliberal influences within CrossFit. Warren’s framework is one way to explore and assess the communities to see who is included, who is excluded, what people are doing, and if the desires of the community members are in accord with their experiences.


Gomillion, S. (2017). The Success of CrossFit and Its Implications for Businesses of All Types.


Smith, A. C., & Stewart, B. (2012). Body perceptions and health behaviors in an online bodybuilding community. *Qualitative Health Research, 22*(7), 971-985.


Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

Looking for participants in a study about CrossFit culture

I am a Master’s student at the University of Toronto and my thesis is about how community is formed through exercise programs like CrossFit.

Subjects who choose to be a part of this study will be asked to participate in one interview for approximately one hour, in which we will discuss your participation and experiences as a member of the CrossFit community.

If you choose to participate or you have any questions, you can reach me at:
Appendix B: Consent Scripts

NB: This script is a guide and will not necessarily be read verbatim. All relevant content will be reviewed with the participant. The first section is for all potential participants for observation. The second section is for potential interview participants. Participants who agree to participate will still be required to read and sign the consent document before the interview is conducted.

Participant Observation Script
Hi, my name is Kwame Sarpong and I am studying for a Master’s degree in Exercise Sciences at the University of Toronto. I am researching CrossFit culture to see how communities can be developed through exercise.

I would like to observe the culture inside CrossFit Leviathan as a participant in classes, roughly three times a week. I will be doing workouts just like you, observing social interaction and trends, and I may engage with you in casual conversations.

The data/information I collect from this will contribute to my Master’s thesis. Pseudonyms will be used for all participant’s names in all publication to maintain anonymity. I will not collect any information that will allow others to identify you personally. I invite you to ask me more about the subject and will share my work with you at your request.

Please let me know if you are comfortable with this or not.
Appendix C: Interview Recruitment Script

Hi, my name is Kwame Sarpong and I am studying for a Master’s degree in Exercise Sciences at the University of Toronto. You are already aware that I am researching CrossFit culture, to find out more about what it means to be a member of a fitness community and I would like to interview you to learn more about this subject.

The interview will have three general parts, but I also hope to hear any additional information or experiences you would like to share. Firstly, we will go over your history and participation in CrossFit. Secondly, we will talk about CrossFit Leviathan and what you enjoy about this space. Lastly, we’ll talk about the CrossFit community, including topics like what attracted you to CrossFit and what your relationships are like with other members.

I hope that you will feel comfortable to discuss these topics with me, and I invite you to share any other relevant information about your CrossFit experience. The data/information I collect from this will contribute to my Master’s thesis. Pseudonyms will be used for participant’s names in all publication. I will not collect any information that will allow other to identify you personally. I invite you to ask me more about the subject and will share my work with you at your request.
Appendix D: Letter of Consent for Participants

Acceptance of the Conditions of the Research Process and Consent

By signing this form, I acknowledge that:

I. The researcher has given me the opportunity to ask questions about the study and its procedures and that these questions must be answered to my satisfaction.

II. At any time during the study, I may request further clarification from the researcher. I can do this by contacting the researcher.

III. My participation in the research is voluntary and I am under no obligation to participate in the study. In addition, I acknowledge that I am free to withdraw from the study any time before April 30th, 2017, without explanation.

IV. I have been told that my information will be kept confidential, except where release of information is required by law. The only exception to this is the supervisor of the interviewer with whom data might need to be discussed in the analysis process. Where sharing data with the supervisor is necessary, for example to gain his assistance with analysis, the interviewer will ensure that he will not have access to personal identifying information.

V. No information that would identify me will be released or printed.

VI. The possible risks and benefits (if any) of this study have been explained to me, and in no way does signing this consent form waive my legal rights nor does it relieve the researchers or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

VII. If I have any questions about my rights as a participant, I can contact the University of Toronto Ethics Review Office.

VIII. I will be provided with a copy of this consent form and appended letter, for my records.

I, ______________________ (print name) agree to participate in the study.

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Contact Information:
Telephone: 
E-mail: 

I, the undersigned, have, to the best of my ability, fully explained the nature of this study to the participant. I believe that the person whose signature appears above understands the implications and voluntary nature of their involvement in the research procedures.

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Appendix E: Interview Guide

NB: This is a rough guide to the interview. Semi-structured interviews may lead to unexpected avenues of discussion beyond the questions listened. This is a normal event in qualitative in-depth interview research. Herein I provide an overview of topics that I intend to explore in interviews and some examples of questions drafted prior to the document analysis.

1. Relationship to CrossFit
   a. Why did you start CrossFit? Has it been successful in achieving your goal?
   b. Do you have a history in any other sports/training programs?
   c. How long have you been a CrossFit participant?
   d. What do you like about CrossFit?
   e. How long do you anticipate participating in CrossFit?

2. CrossFit Leviathan
   a. What is the environment in CrossFit Leviathan like?
   b. How does this compare to other CrossFit gyms you’ve attended? Why this one?
   c. Do you feel like a member or family at CrossFit Leviathan?
   d. What/who motivates you during workouts?
   e. Who are the leaders in the gym? What do they do?

3. CrossFit Community
   a. Do you feel like a member of a larger CrossFit community?
   b. Do you interact with CrossFit outside of the gym, online, other clubs, or social groups?
   c. Has CrossFit changed any of your views or values?