

Why Has the Fitness Industry Become Elitist?

When people say, “*I need to work my way up to the gym*” it saddens me. Have we really created a fitness environment where people feel like they’re not ready to get into shape?

The fitness landscape has become fragmented and polarizing. This is making for an elitist divide not just between the converted and the unconverted, but between different factions of the converted.

Physical activity has given me confidence and purpose. I’ve dedicated my life to improving the quality of fitness instruction. But there are a number of reasons why people aren’t comfortable in our gyms, and the first step is recognizing that there is a problem.

First, I’ll talk about how the internet’s made things worse.

Next, why the gym has become elitist.

And I’ll end with a few things we can all do to make the gym a more welcoming place.

Why fitness cults exist

The seminal observational study of cognitive dissonance from 1956, [*When Prophecy Fails*](#), starts by saying,

“a man with conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.”

I’ll use “*paleo*” as an example of how this manifests in the present day because, while there’s nothing wrong with eating the way that many paleo pundits advise, the entire premise behind it is absurd.

The narrative is enticing – our ancestors ate a certain way and therefore we should eat a certain way.

Unfortunately, the narrative has been proven to be [untrue](#).

You’d think that if a concept was proven to be untrue then interest in it would dwindle, but, in this case, the opposite has happened. So why do people who identify themselves as “*paleo*” continue to become more numerous and their desire to spread a false narrative growing?

When Prophecy Fails provides some insight into the five conditions that lead to the observed “increased fervor following the disconfirmation of belief”. They are:

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1. **A belief must be held with deep conviction** and it must have some relevance to action, that is, to what the believer does or how he behaves.
2. The person holding the belief must have committed himself to it; that is, for the sake of his belief, **he must have taken some important action that is difficult to undo.**
3. The belief must be sufficiently specific and sufficiently concerned with the real world so that events may unequivocally refute the belief.
4. Such undeniable dis-confirmatory evidence must occur and must be recognized by the individual holding the belief.
5. **The believer must have social support.**

It's not just paleo. Basically every fitness cult works this way. CrossFit, biohacking, the entire functional training movement, whatever.

Cognitive dissonance refers to the differing of two beliefs that do not fit together. It results in discomfort, anxiety, and pain.

The common response when faced with dissonance is to search for consonance to override the painful experience. One of the most common ways to do so is to look for social support, which the modern-day internet provides in spades.

It is too easy to only see people who confirm what you already believe to be true

Eli Pariser is credited with popularizing the term “*filter bubble*” to describe the burgeoning personalized web. Every click, like, share, or comment that you make online is tracked and fed into a giant information bucket, sorted, and sold.

Your digital profile continues to evolve in the eyes of advertisers. Search has become reverse search. Google, Facebook, ChatGPT, and thousands of other sites know who you are and what you like and show you information that is agreeable to you.

What it comes down to is this:

“if you’re not the consumer than you are the product.”

Conspiracy theorists may be wearing tin hats, but I argue that the main problem is not that Big Brother is watching. The problem is that our ability to experience and think for ourselves has been squashed.

Think of your brain as a giant tree.

Your brain isn't able to make sense of net new information. All it can do is connect it to something it already knows. Everything you know is a branch. How you make sense of information is in reference to something that you already know to exist. The more biased your

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knowledge become, the more bunched together those branches get, and the more you begin to analyze everything through a narrow point of view.

[Eli Pariser](#) sums up the problem when he said,

“Just as the factory farming system that produces and delivers our food shapes what we eat, the dynamics of our media shape what information we consume.

Now we’re quickly shifting toward a regiment chock-full of personally relevant information. And while that can be helpful, too much of a good thing can also cause real problems.

Left to their own devices, personalization filters serve up a kind of invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, amplifying our desire for things that are familiar and leaving us oblivious to the dangers lurking in the dark territory of the unknown.”

Whether you know it or not, you’ve been building a bubble around yourself.

Increasingly dissonant information is being hidden from you and your resulting consonance is growing. These bubbles act to filter out any dissonant information before it arrives and, when it does arrive, ample support is already there to support pre-existing notions.

For society at large it means that factions exist. And these factions are just as exclusive as they are inclusive.

Why the gym has become elitist

Now that I’ve briefly discussed the problem of arranging into groups, I’d like to cover some other topics that lead to an elitist fitness divide between the converted and unconverted.

1. Everyday boasting masked as motivation

Motivational sayings (often referred to as fitspo) superimposed over a half-naked photoshopped body have been around for years.

What’s new is that sites like Facebook and Instagram have brought them into everybody’s homes.

While these photos are nice to look at I’d argue they aren’t helping anybody. Instead they’re acting as a way for the already in-shape to show off.

While the person sharing the quote might be doing it under the guise of motivation, it’s not motivational to those who really need it. It’s a new method of boasting—an odd attempt at clout. What they don’t realize, of course, is this truth from my book, [The Obvious Choice](#):

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It's easier and faster to build a bigger and more engaged audience by doing things like sexualizing your image, jumping on trends, eliciting anger, or being purposefully divisive. Sales and engagement, however, aren't the same thing.

If the way you've built an audience is inconsistent with the product or service you want to sell, you'll end up rich with likes but poor with dollars.

The most common reason why people share material on the Internet is a concept called [selective self-representation](#).

In essence, sharing is a way to show off or receive perceived social support on stuff that a person is unconfident about. Not only that, but people who rank lower on scales of emotional stability [share more often](#).

The motivational quote that is being shared isn't altruistic. It's being done because the sharer feels like it will make him or her appear a certain way to people who he or she wants to impress.

Think about it – who do you know on IG that shares motivational material? Is it the people who don't exercise or really ripped workout nuts? One of the largest reasons that people share material on the Internet is to show off what they already do. I talk about this a ton in my book [Viralnomics](#). It's fascinating, and probably key to you building a big following if that's what you're into.)

Richard Dawkins, in the Selfish Gene, was the first to coin the term “meme” when he said,

“Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain, via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”

When people think of memes they usually think of cat pictures and superimposed text on images of celebrities.

I'd like to coin a new phrase: “the selfish meme”, as an evolution of Dawkins' original idea because I don't believe that altruism exists online.

Memes are released with the creator's best intentions in mind and they spread purposely through networks by people who have something to gain from passing them along whether we're willing to admit it or not.

Large companies know this and are taking advantage of it.

Instead of spending lots of money on TV and print ads, smart companies are superimposing a motivational phrase on a picture of an attractive, and usually photoshopped, person or hiring micro-influencers. The result is that the picture spreads and the company gets free advertising. This behaviour is perpetuating an elitist gym environment and an unrealistic ideal.

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People who don't exercise aren't stupid. They know they should be in the gym and already feel bad about not doing it. They don't need a picture of a beautiful person with an oft-repeated slogan to remind them to "just do it".

2. Over-information

Dogma's are created and broken every day. There isn't a next best thing. Exercise is beautiful in its simplicity. The next best thing may be slightly better or slightly worse than the last best thing. It does however confuse the hell out of anybody reading it.

Improvement and consistency doesn't sell.

Innovation is what sells. Something new sells: a new mechanism, a unique "discovery", the promise of a shortcut is what sells.

Somebody new to the gym has no idea who or what to listen to. The reality is that if they picked one source and followed it they'd succeed. This is irrelevant of how profound the information is.

I get the need to continually innovate and am a proponent of the scientific method. However the nature of building a brand around one way of doing things forces the creator into the opposite of the scientific method – that is, if proven wrong, be willing to change.

The minute that a business revolves around a singular idea it becomes near impossible for the purveyor of that idea to change if proven wrong. If you've built a business around the paleo narrative, for example, and the narrative is proven false, you have no choice but to cling to it. This is wrong.

As Upton Sinclair wrote in 1935,

“It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.”

Another issue is that it's also a lot easier to sell the newest method of fat loss than it is to get somebody excited about the tried and tested method. The contrarian method of gaining exposure is also adding to the problem and its use is growing.

For somebody new to exercise, the task is daunting with the first steps being the hardest. Not knowing what program is “best” adds to the struggle. What bothers me is the “best” program probably isn't even the best. Unless you've got at least a year of serious strength training under your belt, stop looking for “the best”. Choose a program and start today.

The problem compounds upon itself when conflicting theories are written as fact.

Somebody who has never exercised before will benefit from steady-state cardio, as an example. It's not as evil as it's cracked up to be. It may not be the most efficient way to exercise or lose fat but it's stood as an entry point for a lot of people to get their bearings in the gym. Sit on a bike

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for a couple weeks until you feel comfortable. Then start throwing weights around. Or, don't. If I were to start a gym it'd be called "Just Move Any Way You Want Because it All Works."

Breaking down the barriers

The problems are real and they're growing. In order to reverse the trend I see three solutions.

First, if you're already comfortable in the gym, work to make it a more comfortable place for others. When you see somebody unfit that's new in your club, smile and introduce yourself.

When the person is leaving try to find something pertaining to his or her workout to complement. Say that you're looking forward to seeing him or her in the gym again. In the coming days and weeks attempt to introduce that person to others in your gym. If he or she becomes a member of the community odds are they your new friend won't fall off the workout wagon again.

Next, understand the power of social modelling.

Motivational posters don't motivate people unless they're already exercising. Self-efficacy (the belief that one can achieve) is at its highest when the person feels that the model is the same as them. For it to be effective the demographic, background, injuries etc. must all be taken into consideration.

If you really want to motivate others in an altruistic sense you'd be passing around success stories of all types of people from all different backgrounds. I'm not talking about passing around sensationalistic stories about massive weight losses. I'm talking about real people, real struggles, and real successes.

And finally, leave your insular community and stop confusing people.

Recognize that you've created a filter bubble around yourself. If you ascribe to one particular way of exercising or eating that fine, but it's not for everybody. What you see in your searches and feeds was chosen for you because of actions that you've previously taken. I urge you not only to read opposing opinions, but also to introduce others to them.

The fitness world is becoming elitist. Filter bubbles reinforce our preconceived notions, reinforce our consonance and downplay any cognitive dissonance, and provide us ample support from others for ideas that might have already been proven wrong.

Think before you share a sweaty photoshopped image about whom you're really trying to motivate and what you're really getting out of it. Consider the "next best thing" that you're peppering your friends, family members, or blog readers with and think hard about the effect it's really having.

Thank you for reading,

-Jon

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