

Improving Health and Well-being through Online Dance Fitness Classes during the Global COVID-19 Pandemic

Wellness and fitness programs provide coping resources for employees experiencing challenging stressors, such as those brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hargrove, Becker, & Hargrove, 2015). Stressors are incitements that strain people and are considered hindrances of progress (Lepine, Podsakoff, & Lepine, 2005). For many people, elevated anxiety levels during the pandemic produced uncomfortable feelings that spurred those seeking relief to experiment with unconventional learning and activities to maintain their health (Hay & Blenkinsopp, 2019; Snell, 2020).

Participation in group fitness classes has been linked to decreased perceived stress; and increased physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Yorks, Frothingham, & Schuenke, 2017). Dance fitness is one of the more popular group fitness formats. For example Zumba Fitness® (2020) reports their dance fitness classes are offered in 180 countries to 15 million participants in 200,000 locations. Though many dance fitness exercisers begin attending classes to gain strength, improve their endurance, and manage their weight; these exercisers persist in group fitness classes because they feel like part of a community, it revitalizes them, they enjoy it, they perceive that it helps them manage stress, and it improves their mood (Hellem & Ferguson, 2018; Kimbrough, Rosselli, & Crutcher, 2017). Participation in dance fitness classes improves physical, psychological, and social well-being among women of all ages (Barranco-Ruiz, Paz-Viteri, & Villa-Gonzalez, 2020; O'Brien, 2016). In addition to benefits for individuals, organizations also benefit when their employees participate in wellness activities, such as dance fitness and other exercise. These benefits include reduced employee absenteeism, increased employee productivity, improved employee morale, reduced employee turnover, and decreased medical costs (Madsen, 2003; Rocco, Bowman, & Bryant, 2014).

Research Problem

With the state-mandated closures of gyms and exercise facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, program directors were motivated to use online/virtual options to continue offering services and maintain their customer base by supporting physical and psychological well-being during the shutdown. When all dance fitness classes were abruptly halted by stay-at-home orders, stakeholders quickly identified online tools and mobile apps as alternatives that could mitigate the economic, physical, psychological, and social losses that appeared imminent from the cancelling of exercise classes. Dance fitness instructors were motivated to continue teaching to earn income and maintain their own physical and psychological well-being while continuing social interactions with their participants. Participants desired a sense of normalcy in the midst of swift external changes to re-establish a sense of routine and familiarity while maintaining their physical, psychological, and social well-being. Moving dance fitness classes online mirrored the shift to online interactions in other industries, including academia. However, the challenges were unique and warrant targeted research to guide future implementations and assess the efficacy of the online fitness format.

Conceptual Framework

Sirgy, Uysal, and Kruger (2017) proposed a Benefits Theory of Leisure Well-Being. Within this framework, the researchers argued that leisure activities contribute to satisfaction in leisure life and subjective well-being by satisfying basic needs and growth needs. They surmised, “the more a leisure activity delivers benefits related to basic needs and growth needs the greater the likelihood that such an activity would contribute significantly to satisfaction in leisure life

and subjective well-being” (Sirgy, Uysal & Kruger, 2017, p. 208) Among the identified basic needs are safety benefits, health benefits, economic benefits, sensory benefits, escape benefits, and sensation-making benefits. Additionally, there are six growth needs benefits: symbolic, aesthetic, moral, mastery, relatedness, and distinctiveness.

The purpose of our research was to use the lens of the Benefits Theory of Leisure Well-being to explore how online dance fitness classes helped improve health and well-being among participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we aimed to identify which basic and growth needs could be met through online dance fitness classes, how fitness instructors could help meet these needs, and how health and well-being were impacted among online dance fitness class participants. Accordingly, we aimed to answer the following:

- Research Question One: Which needs could online dance fitness classes meet for participants during the global COVID-19 pandemic?
- Research Question Two: Which adjustments were made by dance fitness instructors to effectively move their services online during the global COVID-19 pandemic?
- Research Question Three: Which health and well-being outcomes of online dance fitness classes were experienced by participants during the global COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

Our research team consisted of a dance fitness instructor in Texas who taught her classes online during mandated gym closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and a dance fitness participant who attended online dance fitness class during mandated gym closures. We conducted a pilot study and utilized an autoethnographical approach to explore the research questions. Our pilot study was conducted between March 19, 2020, when Governor Abbott of Texas closed gyms by Executive Order and May 18, 2020 when gyms opened up to 25% capacity. During this time frame, the online dance fitness classes were taught every Monday and Thursday morning. The classes averaged about 37 minutes.

In total, the average number of participants during this time was 15 participants with a maximum of 25 and a min of 9 people participating utilizing Zoom. Zoom is a tool that facilitates collaboration using web-based audiovisual technology that allows people in different locations to communicate in a fairly simple manner and the limited version is free to the user (LaFollette, 2018). In this paper, both researchers offered personal narratives that supplied data to explore the changes and outcomes that occurred as a result of altering dance fitness classes delivery to accommodate the COVID-19 social distancing guidelines.

Autoethnography was an appropriate methodology that we used to connect our personal experiences to the broader questions related to leisure activity, health, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted by Grenier (2015, p. 338), “autoethnographers use methodological tools and existing scholarship to analyze the experience as a whole, while at the same time using personal experience to illustrate facets of his own existence in order to make characteristics of the culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. This requires the researcher to purposefully reflect on, record, and observe her own behaviors, while actively engaged in the research setting during participant observation.” Furthermore, autoethnography allowed us to explore the applicability of the Benefits Theory of Leisure Well-being to the case of online dance fitness classes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grenier, 2015). This research is presented as a co-constructed autoethnography because it “involves two or more researchers/participants sharing their personal version of a shared experience, and then collaborating to integrate those into a co-constructed narrative” (Grenier & Collins, 2016, p. 363).

Findings

The dance fitness instructor presented a personal narrative highlighting experiences and lessons learned related to four critical components of online dance fitness classes: effective technology usage, reduction of uncertainty, enhanced personal connections, and compensation. Through analysis of written communication with her online class participations, she recounted conversations that helped to shape the online experience for her participants and confirmed that participation in the classes contributed to improving their health and well-being during the shutdown initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, after the workout on April 2, one participant wrote in a text message: *“Thank you for doing this, I need a routine...I need something to do that’s friendly and familiar.”* On May 4, another participant wrote: *“Thank you for the workout! I haven’t been to Zumba in about 2 month due to the shutdown. I have been dealing with a lot mentally and haven’t been myself. Well, today got me one step closer. That workout felt good! You don’t know how much this helped”*. These quotes are a sample of those that illustrate how online dance fitness classes met basic needs and growth needs to contribute to the participants’ well-being during the shutdown.

Furthermore, the dance fitness class participant who also authored this research study provided her perspective of participating in online fitness classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, confirming the impacts on her health and well-being. For example, she felt the virtual classes kept her moving and got her days started in a healthy way, both physically and mentally. Her situation with Zumba was particularly impactful as she had not previously consistently participated in Zumba classes and this situation revived Zumba in her life and reminded her of the many benefits.

Together these narratives described how online dance fitness classes met basic needs and growth needs of fitness instructors and participants, leading to greater health and well-being during the socially-isolating shutdown (Sirgy, Uysal, & Kruger, 2017). Further, this pilot study provided the support and evidence needed to utilize this effort as a springboard for a more expansive research project. We are planning for future data collection to include mixed methods comprised of autoethnography and survey implementation.

Implications

This co-constructed autoethnography illustrated how fitness instructors, wellness organizations, and fitness participants responded to the COVID-19 pandemic; and the effects of this crisis on people who participate and work in the wellness and fitness industry. The narrative described how online dance fitness classes helped participants meet their goals for physical and mental health during the stay-at-home orders that, otherwise, isolated many adults from their regular social networks. We also contributed to literature on how stress and burnout can be managed by participating in leisure activities in the face of uncertainty and change, as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our focus on health and well-being renders this research relevant to a wide range of employers and employees. As the pandemic continues to affect everyday life across the globe, online fitness classes will likely proliferate to keep the industry alive and provide needed services to participants. Implications of this research can inform future practices for implementing online fitness programs and offering solutions to sustain and improve health and well-being.

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