DOING THE HEAVY LIFTING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND (DIS)IDENTIFICATION IN CROSSFIT

BY

SHANA MAKOS

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Charee M. Thompson, Chair
Associate Professor William C. Barley
Associate Professor Cabral Bigman-Galimore
Professor Michèle Koven

ABSTRACT

Community is a concept that has long been researched by scholars in a variety of disciplines. However, when turning to interpersonal communication literature as a guide for better understanding community-related issues, it is evident that the field lacks theory about what community is and how interpersonal communication processes impact community experiences. Moreover, despite decades of literature articulating how social situations influence personal identity, scant research specifically addresses the role of identity and (dis)identification in community experiences. To address these gaps in literature, this study explored experiences of community in CrossFit, a divisive group exercise regimen that identifies "community" and "inclusion" as central parts of the experience. Through 50 one-on-one interviews with current and former CrossFit athletes and more than 100 hours of fieldwork in two CrossFit gyms in the United States, this study explores (a) how athletes experience (or not) community in CrossFit, (b) the interpersonal processes that facilitate (dis)identification with community in CrossFit, and (c) how athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit. The findings forward a model of community in CrossFit that situates community as a relational process constituted in communication along practical, personal, interpersonal, political, and spatial dimensions. In addition, the findings underscore that interpersonal communication is the vehicle through which community is initiated, sustained, and terminated. This investigation highlights the importance of intentionally cultivating community experiences; in the absence of intentional facilitation, individuals are left on their own to seek out and provide affirming interactions with others. This study challenges current conceptualizations of community which largely ignore the role of interpersonal

communication in community interactions. Finally, this study underscores the ways in which CrossFit communities can, at times, be inhospitable for affirming experiences of community, especially for people with marginalized identities. The study provides both theoretical and practical contributions about experiences of community in a group exercise context.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Chloie Jönsson's transgender identity, something she had concealed from the general public since her transition more than 15 years prior, was thrust into national news headlines. Her one goal was to competitively compete in the CrossFit Games, but she was barred by the organization from competing in the female division because, they argued, she was biologically male (Park, 2014). Jönsson filed a lawsuit against CrossFit in response, but ultimately was never permitted to compete at the Games level. Jönsson's transgender identity overshadowed her talent as an athlete and tainted her identification with the CrossFit community.

Sporting events such as the CrossFit Games take place on the world's largest stages and generally involve only the most elite athletes. However, what happens on these stages shapes how individuals at a local level think about and experience their own identities when they engage with others in sport and fitness contexts. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) estimates that 19.3 percent of Americans aged 15 years and older participate in some kind of sports, exercise, or fitness activities each day. There are more than 41,000 health and fitness clubs in the United States, and the industry generated more than $87 billion in 2021 (Stasha, 2022).

Group fitness—or exercise within a group setting and led by an instructor—exists in a variety of formats such as cycling (e.g., SoulCycle), high intensity interval training (HIIT; e.g., F45 or Orangetheory), and ballet (e.g., Pure Barre). Individuals who participate in group fitness credit the community-based environment as what helps them decrease feelings of depression and pursue their physical health goals (Bidonde et al., 2009). Despite the global COVID-19 pandemic, group fitness class popularity is on the rise with more than six million Americans participating in fitness classes at least twice a month (Stasha, 2022). CrossFit, the focus of this

study, is one of the largest strength and conditioning group fitness enterprises. Founded in 2000, CrossFit is a form of high-intensity interval training that uses a variety of different equipment such as kettle bells, rowers, medicine balls, barbells, and dumbbells. The classes, typically 60 minutes in length, are intended to be adapted for people at any age, ability, and level of fitness (CrossFit, n.d.-b). CrossFit now has more than 15,000 affiliate gyms in over 160 countries and generates approximately $100 million in annual revenue (Belluz, 2018).

The CrossFit brand identifies community as a central part of the CrossFit experience (CrossFit, n.d.-b). An article posted through The Morning Chalk Up, a daily newsletter covering CrossFit, describes the CrossFit community as being developed through "struggling to learn something new" and "banding together" through the process (Edmonds, 2020). One Google search of "CrossFit and community" presents results of different webpages for CrossFit gyms throughout the world, each describing what community means. For instance, MagMile CrossFit of Chicago, Illinois lists "a sense of belonging, social support, and common interests and goals" as cornerstones of their community (MagMile CrossFit, 2019). Despite this emphasis on inclusion and community, there are many people—evidenced by Jönsson's story—who have experienced exclusion in CrossFit at one time or another, a particularly problematic dichotomy in the context of a fitness program that "works for everyone" (CrossFit, n.d.-b).

There are a variety of definitions of community, and the concept has long been researched by scholars in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, and communication. Indeed, anthropologist Morris Freilich (1963), one of the earliest scholars who sought to operationalize a definition of community, stated, "Definitions of 'community' are usually vague and of great variety and number" (p. 117). Freilich conceptualized community as the presence of people who have frequent interactions, exchange information in specific

geographic colocations, and develop their interactions based on past information shared in interactions. Frankenberg (1966) used an anthropologic lens to more narrowly define community as groups comprised of people with common interests (e.g., religion, hobbies, job functions, proximity). One of the most frequently cited conceptualizations of community used today was forwarded by Chaskin (2012), a psychologist who argued that community is concerned with the function, structure, and interpersonal interactions of individuals within social groups, including how they collectively articulate and experience related identities, norms, and actions. Finally, communication scholars Shepherd and Rothenbuhler (2000) conceptualized community as the desire to experience and maintain commonality between people, and that interpersonal communication is specifically what makes doing so possible: "To say that communication is interpersonal is to say that when communication occurs, something communal is made. It is something of self and other, but not self and other. It is something synergistic. It is community" (p. 32). According to Shepherd (2000), community is accomplished through communication. In sum, there is variance in definitions of community, but there are also underlying commonalities among contemporary conceptualizations: communities are comprised of individuals orienting around something shared, and interpersonal interactions constitute communities.

I draw three conclusions from reviewing conceptualizations of community in the literature. First, the wide variety of conceptualizations suggests that what comprises community is a matter of individual definition (Freilich, 1963). Understanding individuals' experiences necessitates that researchers privilege how people define and experience community for themselves rather than imposing a set of criteria for what a community is. For example, geographic colocation is not necessary for individuals to experience community. The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic—because of repeated social distancing mandates and in-person event

closures—demonstrated such. Many gyms transitioned to asynchronous or synchronous Zoom-based programming, and at-home fitness company, Peloton, grew 172% in 2020 due to a boost in sales associated with pandemic-related gym closures (Valinsky, 2020). Today, in-person group fitness classes have resumed, but individual Peloton users still report experiencing community each time they log in remotely to complete a workout (Thomas, 2021). As another example, groups characterized by identity markers and roles (e.g., athletes, female athletes) do not ensure that people will identify with community. Thus, because the definition of community is so highly contextual and subjective, this study focuses on what community means to CrossFit athletes, including how they construct and experience it.

A second conclusion is that community's dynamic nature is produced and reproduced through interpersonal interactions over time. Freilich's (1963) definition acknowledges the necessity of *people* who have *frequent interactions*; Frankenberg (1966) describes community as *groups of people with common interests*; Chaskin (2012) argues that community is concerned with interpersonal interactions of individuals within social groups; Shepherd and Rothenbuhler (2000) acknowledge outright that community is inherently *interpersonal*; and Shepherd (2000) conceptualizes community as the *interpersonal accomplishment* of communication, specifically acknowledging that individuals must *participate* in order to create such an experience. Yet, despite its centrality, there is little to no articulation of what is meant by *interactions* and *interpersonal communication* within them. Instead, "interactions" is painted in broad strokes, and interpersonal communication is not defined. Even conceptualizations of community forwarded by communication scholars remain vague and do not articulate specific interpersonal processes and behaviors. The absence of the articulated role of interpersonal communication—that is, what this study conceptualizes as "communication between two (or more) people in which the

message exchanged significantly influence their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships" (McCornack, 2015, p. 11)—is particularly problematic for the examination of something so dynamic and (re)produced through interactions as community. Turning to interpersonal communication literature for conceptual insights on community yields a similar shortcoming: communication scholars examine interpersonal communication within communities and community-like groups, for example, family communication, online support groups, and in mass media campaigns. Yet, such contexts are rarely conceptualized as being communities, and scholars are not yet theorizing about how interpersonal communication constitutes these communities. In short, theorizing about communities is disconnected from theorizing about specific interpersonal communication processes and behaviors, although each body of literature recognizes the other as essential to social life. This study is an opportunity to combine the two literatures.

A final conclusion is that identity and (dis)identification influence experiences of community. Conceptualizations of community discussed in this study specifically acknowledge identity in the experience of community (e.g., Chaskin, 2012). However, the conceptualizations do little to complicate the role of identity and (dis)identification in the experience of community. Evidenced by Jönsson's story alone, community is complex and intersectional. It is not experienced and (re)produced in the same way by each person, nor is it likely that affirming experiences of community exist without intentional cultivation. Identity and (dis)identification underlie what makes communities real and valuable to people. Individuals have and express varying identities within these collectives, and they also engage in identification processes to imagine and claim belonging with or to a specific group. Furthermore, groups themselves have identities (Gossett & Tompkins, 2000). Existing conceptualizations of community do not

adequately acknowledge the role of identity and (dis)identification in the community experience. Theoretical frameworks and concepts, such as social identity theory, disidentification, and intersectionality, each reviewed in the sections that follow, work to give depth to the role of identity in community and also serve as a useful lens for demonstrating how identity is produced and reproduced through interpersonal communication.

Therefore, I forward three goals for this study. First, I aim to explore the variety of ways individuals experience community, including feelings of inclusion and belonging, but also exclusion and rejection. To properly theorize about the role, I must unpack individuals' relationship to community, seeking to understand what about the experience is most relevant for them. Second, I aim to identify the role of interpersonal communication specifically in how people (dis)identify with community in CrossFit. For example, what are the interpersonal communication processes that (re)produce community? Increased knowledge in this area can shed light on not only how interpersonal communication impacts the community experience, but can begin to isolate certain processes in an effort to shape future communication behaviors. In addition, further exploration of this area can begin to identify what prompts (dis)identification with community in CrossFit, creating a foundation for the final goal of the study. The third goal for this study is to explore how athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit. Generating a better understanding of these strategies can shed light on how individuals attempt to normalize or reconcile community experiences with which they experience tensions or resistance.

Each of the study's goals advance knowledge about what makes community more or less compatible by way of (dis)identification. As such, a lack of theory about what community is and what it means to individuals' interpersonal relationships is the impetus for this study. Such theorizing can bridge understandings of the ways in which community influences

communication, in addition to how communities are built out of interpersonal relationships. Those who study interpersonal communication and community, in addition to individuals outside of academia, can benefit from this blending of examining not only the interpersonal behaviors and practices that work to initiate, maintain, and terminate community, but also the ways in which (dis)identification influences this relationship.

To best prepare for this exploration, I will first discuss current conceptualizations of the experience of community, including community as: (a) relational; (b) as a sense or feeling; (c) imagined; and (d) as practice. Next, I will review several identity-related theories that are implicated in the role of interpersonal communication in community, including social identity theory, disidentification, and intersectionality. Finally, I provide an overview of relevant context-specific literature, including the role of community in group fitness and, specifically, CrossFit.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizations of Community

In the section that follows, I provide an overview of four most common conceptualizations of community discussed in the literature, including relational community, sense of community, imagined community, and community of practice. In addition to being the most common, each of the conceptualizations address varying accounts of community across various dimensions, such as spatial, psychological, and social. In doing so, I first discuss the ways in which the literature has defined each conceptualization, including examples of studies in which it has been examined. Then, I summarize the ways in which interpersonal communication is passively involved in each conceptualization but not explicitly defined.

Relational Community

Relational communities, also referred to as identity or common interest communities, are formed through a shared identity, issue, or characteristic amongst members of the community (Bess et al., 2002). Examples of this include the academic community, Black community, Catholic community, or the CrossFit community. Chaskin (2012) suggests three dimensions through which to view relational community, including social, spatial, and political. The social dimension of relational community features interpersonal relationships amongst individuals and their common identities, shared norms, or interactions. Social communities may provide a source of support and connection, and they can be spread throughout a variety of spaces and affiliations (Mitchell, 1969). One example of social community is seen in neighborhoods dominated by one ethnicity, such as the iconic Chinatown in San Francisco, Ukrainian Village in Chicago, or Little Italy in Manhattan. Motivated by available work and a sense of familiarity, immigrants clustered

into these local communities, banning together to generate a sense of identity, security, and belonging. Indeed, a social dimension of community is one driven by interactions. It is in the social dimension of community that "interpersonal relationships are created and maintained, participation in activities is shared, and the circumstances of local life are held in common" (Chaskin, 2012, p. 5).

The second dimension of relational community is *space and place*. Community as space and place suggests community experiences are conceptualized spatially, including buildings (such as CrossFit gyms), streets, or landmarks. A spatial conceptualization of community may include places in which certain activities, relationships, institutional, or symbolic activities occur. For instance, a college student may perceive their community to be that which takes place in the buildings on their university campus, or a church member may perceive their community to be what takes place within the walls of their church (Guest & Lee, 1983; Lee & Campbell, 1997). The global coffee chain, Starbucks, refers to its cafes as being the "third place," a place between work and home intended for work, socializing, or community building (Simon, 2009). In addition, community as spatial manifests through artifacts present in a co-located space, such as flags, posters, or t-shirts. Artifacts such as flags serve as symbols for groups to "construct ownership" over spaces (Garcia, 2018, p. 1). This "ownership" can be contested by social groups, for example, with some using the symbols to vie for ownership that would have otherwise been inaccessible (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals advocating for recognition in a majority heterosexual CrossFit gym through the use of pride flags or stickers).

The final dimension of relational community is *political.* Community as a political unit emphasizes collective engagement toward a common (political) purpose. This includes experiencing and cultivating community through political mobilization and activism. Community

as a political unit sets a foundation for broader social action, for example, by promoting specific change such as safer cities, housing for homeless, or racial equity. For example, the global organization, Black Lives Matter (BLM), was founded in 2013 and has the mission of eradicating White supremacy and counter acts of violence inflicted on Black communities by assembling locally-based political units of people committed to the cause. Edrington and Lee (2018) conducted a content analysis of the public tweets sent by BLM, arguing that the organization worked to not only share information and promote action, but also build community. The amount of community building messages, in particular, increased as the organization aged, suggesting that maintaining community and continuing to encourage action became more important than information sharing, and that community-oriented messages were most successful at amplifying the organization's purpose and reach. This finding played out in a 2020 CrossFit-relate issue; when a public health entity issued a statement saying that racism was a public health issue, Glassman compared the murder of George Floyd to COVID-19, tweeting "It's FLOYD-19" (Gold, 2020). CrossFit affiliates throughout the world revoked their CrossFit affiliation in response, and elite CrossFit athletes who were poised to compete at the 2020 CrossFit games pulled out of the competition, returning only if Glassman resigned, which he did later that week (BBC News, 2020).

Sense of Community

The third conceptualization of community focuses on individuals' perceptions, understandings, attitudes, and feelings about the *experience* of community (Sarason, 1974). The psychological sense of community is a concept stemming from the field of psychology and initially conceptualized by Seymor B. Sarason (1974). Sarason lays the foundation for the exploration of community in the discipline of psychology, describing the psychological sense of

community as "the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (Sarason, 1974, p. 157). Sarason also acknowledges the slippery nature of the psychological sense of community, writing "You know when you have it and when you don't… the psychological sense of community is not a mystery to the person who experiences it. It is a mystery to those who do not experience it but hunger for it" (p. 157).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) built upon Sarason's initial conceptualization, developing the conceptual framework and theoretical definition that is most widely referenced in the literature today. Specifically, one's individual "sense of community," as McMillan and Chavis shortened the term, is defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Sense of community has four components, including: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

Membership is an individual's sense of being able to interpersonally relate to other people in the group. Membership suggests investment, boundaries, and sacrifice. Members of the group are expected to invest resources (e.g., time, money, relationships) into becoming a member. In doing so, members cultivate relationships through self-disclosure and intimacy, generating a sense of emotional safety and confidence that one belongs. Boundaries, constructed through the observation of group deviants, establish norms used as exemplars of who does and does not belong. Members must personally sacrifice all in the name of preserving the sense of community; this sacrifice builds member confidence, entitlement, and loyalty.

Next, *influence* addresses whether an individual feels like they matter to the group and that they are making a difference. Individuals are more attracted to communities in which they feel they are influential (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). *Integration and fulfillment of needs* describes that an individual's needs are met through the resources obtained through group membership. For an individual to experience a sense of community, the membership needs to be rewarding (e.g., a perceived elevated status linked to membership or access to a perceived competent network of members). Finally, *shared emotional connection* is the belief that an individual shares similar experiences, history, goals, or time spent together with others in the group.

For some, a "sense of community" is seen as a desired end goal. For example, in 2020, Forbes.com featured an article about workers' feelings of exhaustion, frustration, and disconnect exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, citing community as the elixir for it all (Brower, 2020). "Build your community by staying in touch with people—even if you have to accomplish it virtually. Invest time and energy in maintaining your bonds," Brower wrote. In a 2014 blog post, CrossFit gym owner Scott Keyser credited his gym's success and retention of more than 150 members to "the community," citing connecting all athletes, being socially conscious, and making the CrossFit gym athletes' "third place" as factors that contributed to building and maintaining the gym's sense of community.

For others, a sense of community predicts other affirming or disaffirming outcomes. Jason et al. (2016) explored the relationship of an individual's sense of community to the fostering of hope among individuals recovering from substance use disorders, finding that both sense of community and feelings of trust were predictors of hope. Similarly, Barragan (2021) explored the role of community-based fitness programs for women over the age of 60, finding

that their shared experiences and collective pursuit of wellness goals fostered a sense of belonging and served as a conduit for social relationships. Conversely, scholars have also explored outcomes associated with the absence of an experienced sense of community, finding that low sense of community can also predict negative outcomes, such as poor retention (McCole, 2015), lower desire for team interaction or collaboration (Chatterjee & Correia, 2020), and lack of physical and emotional safety in a geographic community (Brodsky, 1996). Sometimes these issues are identity-related. For instance, despite CrossFit offering a greater sense of community compared to a traditional gym (Pickett et al., 2016), large body athletes (i.e., those who are "fat," "overweight," or "obese") report feeling excluded from their gyms. Large body CrossFit coach, Athena Perez, is quoted in the CrossFit Blog, as saying "I can't say for sure I've ever seen another coach who looks like me," and that CrossFit athletes "don't want somebody obese teaching them how to do CrossFit" (Yinger, 2020, para. 1). Such issues of feeling rejected for identity-related visible (and non-visible) markers can sometimes lead to athletes not experiencing a sense of community in their gyms.

Imagined Community

Imagined community, a concept developed by Anderson (2006), refers to the notion that community is imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that specific group. Anderson originally illustrated this concept by applying it to the experience of national identity, stating that a community "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 6). Citizens of the United States, for instance, communally identify as being Americans, imagining a general image of what it means to "be an American." Imagined community holds such weight for many Americans that they are willing to

enlist in the military and risk death in support of their own sense of imagined community, despite plenty of Americans resisting the image of what it means to "be an American" in both active and passive ways.

Pahl (2005) built upon Anderson's original conceptualization of imagined community, arguing that "community-on-the-ground, often based on materialistic assumptions, should not be conceptually privileged over the real community-in-the-mind" (p. 621). Imagined communities may have even greater potential for longevity than others that require collocated presence, such as many occupations or group fitness gyms. Kalman-Lamb (2021) concurred with Pahl, arguing that the imagined communities of sports teams are *actual* communities due to their work towards a desired goal (e.g., winning) and that their continual interactions over time in pursuit of this goal cement the authenticity and practices of the community.

Sport serves as a well-suited example of such an argument. Sports fans around the world are members of the same "fan" community, sharing similar interests and identities but likely never knowing each other personally. Jerseys or other sports-related clothing like t-shirts are one way individuals forge a visual representation of imagined community. CrossFit affiliates often engage in the practice of hanging up artifacts such as t-shirts as a "expression of fandom" for specific athletes and CrossFit as a sport overall (Ornella, 2019, para. 10). Such a practice, Ornella (2019) argues, communicates that a single CrossFit affiliate does not exist in isolation but is instead part of a larger, more global (i.e., imagined) community. In short, sport prompts athletes and fans to labor for as long as the body and the wallet allows, with athletes physically and mentally destroying themselves and fans spending thousands of dollars, all while pledging allegiance to their imagined sports communities and striving to demonstrate the extent of their fandom (Kalman-Lamb, 2021).

One clear application of the notion of imagined communities is how imagined communities transpire on social media. Social media enables sports fans to generate and widely distribute team information that extend beyond official team activities and communications, blurring the line between what is team-endorsed and what may instead be sponsored by fans (Kavoura, 2014; Levental et al., 2016). In addition, users can tailor their posts in accordance with their own imagination of their intended audience. For instance, it is likely that former director of the CrossFit Games, Dave Castro, imagined a specific audience when he posted an image to Instagram of himself posing with a Glacier TI rifle and the dead wild boar he shot with it. Castro was fired from CrossFit's global headquarters staff in an effort to "change the leadership of the Sport team" (Morning Chalk Up, 2022) and, while it cannot be verified that Castro's controversial social media posts were indeed the reason he was fired, many in the community speculate it is due to him being "a very controversial figure" within the CrossFit community. A post from the Morning Chalk Up, a CrossFit-related news source, highlighted the voices from a variety of individuals in the community, with one coach in particular saying, "I assume hunting and other things he shared weren't viewed favorably" (Kalil, 2022, para. 26). Indeed, imagined communities can and do have real-life consequences, many of which can be interpersonal in nature.

Community of Practice

The final conceptualization of community relates to communities of practice. Lave and Wenger's (1991) scholarship on situated learning, or "the relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs" (p. 14), lead to a greater focus on the socially organized, contextual nature of learning. Emerging from this focus was the concept of communities of practice, or groups formed by people who engage in collective learning on a particular topic to

fulfill both individual and group goals (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are functionally centered around "learning in the presence of others" and "outside-of-the-classroom" learning or practice opportunities (Culver & Trudel, 2008, p. 2). By definition, a practice is the repeated performance of an activity, exercise, or skill with the goal of developing or maintaining one's abilities (Wenger, 1998). Accordingly, communities of practice provide support for the everyday "doing" of the work, and members engage in a variety of activities such as problem solving, seeking experience, requesting information, growing confidence, or mapping knowledge (Vestal & Lopez, 2004). At their core, communities of practice possess the practical purpose of helping community members perform better through the generation of knowledge.

Wenger (1998) articulated three dimensions of communities of practice including mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, each of which serve as communication dependent processes that contribute to community creation and knowledge dynamics. *Mutual engagement*, a quality Wenger refers to as the defining pillar of communities of practice, refers to each community member's repeated participation in practice. Mutual engagement is made possible through individuals' interactions and the creation of shared meaning through action, and is thus inherently interpersonal in nature. Relationships built through mutual engagement link community members as a social entity. By regularly engaging in talk and doing associated with practice, community members come to understand where to go in the community for help and how to give help to others (Culver & Trudel, 2008). *Joint enterprise* refers to the community's shared understanding of what brings them together, including the joint pursuit of a specific project, undertaking, or goal. The enterprise, Wenger argues, is defined by the community's participants as a negotiated response to the practice itself. This negotiated response means that the enterprise is "never fully determined by an outside mandate, by a prescription, or by any

individual participant" (Wenger, 1991, p. 80). A joint enterprise is not only a stated goal but also the mutual accountability that results from the continual pursuit of the project, undertaking, or goal. It is the community's mutual engagement and/or accountability that reinforces its own joint enterprise. Joint enterprise promotes mutual accountability, and mutual accountability suggests reliance on interpersonal communication, given the involvement of two or more parties. Finally, *shared repertoire* refers to the community's set of shared experiences, stories, and resources—including shared routines, discourse, tools, symbols, and actions—that stem from the community's continued practice. Like a friendship in which individuals come to have inside jokes or shared memories, developing a shared repertoire takes time and sustained interaction and engagement. The development of a shared repertoire over time can compound to produce shared stories and history, giving the members a sense of belonging at its best and exclusion at its worst.

To summarize, individuals must be *mutually engaged* in a *joint enterprise* in which they have created a *shared repertoire* in an ongoing fashion to meet the criteria of a community of practice. I argue that CrossFit communities, due to athletes' sustained, collective focus on practicing and learning about fitness, setting individual and group goals, and repeated performance of fitness-related movements and activities, can be considered a community of practice. CrossFit gyms are embedded in the larger organization of CrossFit. Thus, each CrossFit gym is its own sub community of practice and, according to Gongla and Rizzuto (2004), how a sub community relates to the overarching organization can affect how well and if the community functions.

Scholars have explored what it takes to build thriving communities of practice, finding that personal contact and the development of social capital are key because they can motivate

and facilitate communication and collaboration (Stuckey & Smith, 2004). In addition, communities of practice must be "purposefully cultivated and supported" (Culver & Trudel, 2008, p. 3), lest members suffer from weak, directionless ties. Moreover, the literature articulates factors that lead to success communities of practice. Vestal and Lopez (2004) addressed critical success factors necessary to guide the success of communities of practice, including (a) the development of a clear value statement for those involved (e.g., articulating the value and purpose of community participation), (b) an identifiable and skilled facilitator or leader, (c) clear knowledge maps on the core content (e.g., to whom a person could ask questions) (d) an articulated knowledge-sharing process (e.g., do members know how or when to share knowledge?), (e) an appropriate technology platform to share knowledge exchange, (f) an updated roster of members, (g) a recognition plan for members.

Conversely, scholars have also investigated how or why communities of practice fail or disappear. Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) explored sub communities of practice and identified three factors that commonly initiated a community of practice's disappearance, including organizational change, knowledge domain change, or community leadership change. *Organizational change,* such as the redefinition of the mission, goals, or values or a change in leadership, can causes communities of practice to fracture, typically because communities do not support or are unequipped to deal with the changes. *Knowledge domain changes* refer to a community of practice's change in its core shared repertoire, for instance, under the direction of the overarching organization. Resources dissipate, sub community leaders receive minimal support, and some even turn elsewhere. Finally, *community leadership change* refers to the departure of key community leaders, resulting in changes associated with the practice or passion associated with the community. When dynamic leaders depart, communities have the strong

potential to disappear. To summarize, communities of practice are social driven entities centered around the practical outcome of learning and knowledge production. Ongoing interactions cultivate the negotiation of meaning in a community of practice, and successful communities of practice do not happen on their own but instead must be intentionally cultivated.

Summary

There are a variety of conceptualizations of community, some that are more concrete and fixed (e.g., spatial) and others that are more fluid, dynamic, and personal (e.g., sense of community, imagined community, community of practice). Regardless, this review demonstrates that the experience of community vastly varies for each person based on their identities, desires, and access. The experience of community is highly subjective and contextual. Therefore, I argue it is short sighted to categorize an individual, or structure this study, based off of one specific conceptualization of community. Instead of selecting a specific conceptualization of community to frame this study, I believe it is necessary to consider each conceptualization in tandem. Doing so allows for the examination of interpersonal communication in the experience of community in a manner that has both breadth and depth.

Community is understudied in interpersonal communication. Yet, interpersonal communication is the key element that enables individuals and groups to experience community through the initiation, maintenance, and termination of social structures (Ackerson & Viswanath, 2009). Such a claim can be made clear by examining each conceptualization of community more closely. Specific descriptors repeatedly appear, including: interaction, identity, social, similarity, interdependence, belonging, emotional connection, and trust. Each of these descriptors make a nod to interpersonal communication, suggesting that community is initiated, sustained, and terminated through communication.

Yet, some of the conceptualizations articulate this more directly than others. Relational community, for instance, places interpersonal relationships in the center. However, what still remains unclear is the specific interpersonal communication practices that take place in relational community. For instance, what is it about being part of the "Black community" or the "CrossFit community" that constitutes community for individuals? How do interactions with others shape how individuals initiate, maintain, and terminate communal relationships? Similarly, sense of community emphasizes a person's perception that they are similar to others in the group. However, what are the interpersonal moments, interactions, and practices that shape this perception?

This review of community demonstrates two of the core observations made at the start of this proposal: (a) the experience of community is highly subjective; and (b) interpersonal communication is central to the experience of community, but definitions make this claim broadly and without theoretical explication. The third observation, that identity and identification are central to the experience of community, is addressed in the section that follows.

Social Identity Theory, Disidentification, and Intersectionality

The nature of community is cannot simply be distilled into a "good" or "bad" experience. Instead, experiences of community can be messy and complicated, largely because they centrally involve matters of *identity*. *Personal identity* refers to one's sense of self, including individual appearance, beliefs, qualities, personality traits, and interests. For instance, personal identity may refer to the external characteristics an individual has, such as race, height, sexuality weight, or religion. Personal identity can also encompass espoused values, such as an individual's desire to be a "good" person, a "socially just" person, or an "adventurous" person. An individual's sense of identity is often shaped by social networks (i.e., their communities), such as parents, peers,

teachers, and coaches (Pelican et al., 2005). An individual's identities are activated or perceived interpersonally though a variety of factors, including: (a) by being linked to the context itself; (b) being put forward intentionally by the individual; (c) being perceived through cues in one's appearance (e.g., clothing), linguistic traits (e.g., accent, vocabulary, tone), or nonverbal communication (e.g., gestures, haptics, proxemics); or (d) by being projected onto the individual by other people (Frame, 2016). In sum, one's personal identity is the image of themselves that is embodied through communication.

Personal identity, however, is only one factor that shapes community experiences. *Social identity*, or an individual's sense of who they are as derived from their perceived membership in relevant social groups (Tajfel, 1978), is relevant to better understanding underpinnings of community. In the section that follows, I will literature relevant to social identity—including social identity theory, identification, disidentification, and intersectionality—and address how each of these theories and concepts serve as useful tools for understanding underpinnings of community experiences.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed social identity theory (SIT) as a way to understand and explain the role of social identities in influencing individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. SIT addresses two key points relevant to the interrelated nature of identity and experience of community, including (a) the psychological processes explaining how people come to understand social identities as being different from personal identities and (b) the strategies individuals use to generate a positive social identity.

Psychological Processes. SIT posits that individuals come to understand their social identities through, in no particular order, social categorization, social comparison, and social

identification. S*ocial categorization* refers to the separation of individuals into different social groups. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that categorization is a natural, functional process made possible through classification and stereotyping. Social categorization prompts people to create schemas (i.e., biases or schematic shortcuts) that evaluate certain characteristics, resulting in the creation of ingroups (us) that share said characteristics and outgroups (them) that do not. Any type of group, for instance, can be categorized by their similarities and differences, for example, as coaches/athletes, teachers/students, man/woman, or White/Black. The result of social categorization and stereotyping, regardless of whether an individual's schemas are accurate or not, allows individuals to exaggerate the similarities of the ingroup in addition to the differences between the ingroup and outgroup. For example, some sports remain highly stereotyped, such as "White people can't jump" or "Black people can't swim." It is clear, however, that social categorization functions as a schematic shortcut, reducing individuals to a defining characteristic of the group (e.g., all athletes run) and failing to acknowledge each group members' individual identities (e.g., this particular athlete uses a wheelchair).

Social comparison refers to individuals' interpretation of group features—or entire groups themselves—as positive or negative based on group characteristics such as traits, attitudes, or behaviors. Similar to interpersonal comparisons intended to determine worth, social comparison contrasts one group to another with the intent of determining the social status of that group. People engage in social comparison as a way to determine which group is more desirable than another group. For example, an athlete may see themself as "more fit" than an individual who does not exercise at all, deeming themself more socially desirable than people who do not exercise (Pila et al., 2014). Group membership serves as a barometer in this way, prompting individuals to instill meaning into social situations and determine how they relate to others. What

it means to be an "athlete," then, is defined by the group's ability to positively distinguish fitness from sedentarism or inactivity. Such comparisons, however, are highly contextual because such definitions depend on the social setting (Rees et al., 2015).

Finally, *social identification* refers to the process of individuals adopting the identity of the group they have categorized themselves into. Identification is an individual's perception of their oneness with or belonging to other individuals or an organization. For example, a CrossFit athlete may define themselves in terms of the organization (e.g., "I am a CrossFitter"). Additionally, a CrossFit athlete may define themselves in terms of smaller groups of individuals within the organization (e.g., I am a *queer* CrossFitter). Moreover, an individual who follows the CrossFit Games has a self-schema, but they may also have a schema of six-time Games winning athlete Tia-Clair Toomey, including that she is determined, talented, athletic, and one of the greatest CrossFit athletes of all time. If that individual sees their self-schema overlapping with the schema they have created for Toomey, they likely identify with her. Furthermore, they may identify with CrossFit as an organization (the driver of the CrossFit Games) and may thereby identify themselves as CrossFit fan. Thus, people have their own personal identities, and they also have social identities with which they identify, suggesting that personal and social identity is often intertwined.

Research suggests that social identification can predict health outcomes. For instance, Tajfel (1978) argues that social identification directly influences self-esteem. To maintain positive self-esteem, an individual must perceive their ingroup to have higher social standing than the out-group. SIT argues that individuals prefer to maintain a positive image of themselves and their associated groups. Therefore, to the extent that individuals care about the groups they belong to, people will seek out what they perceive to be the more positively-valued

characteristics and behaviors of their ingroups and downplay the positive characteristics of their outgroups. Furthermore, identification has been shown to predict *self-efficacy*, or an individual's belief that they can exert control over their own motivations, behaviors, and social environments (Bandura, 1977). For example, Cameron et al. (2018) found that individuals participating in a chronic disease self-management program felt a greater sense of illness-related self-efficacy when they experienced higher levels of identification with the group. Similarly, Vella et al. (2020) found that athletes describe their participation in sport-related activities to be more positive and rewarding when they experience high identification with their team. Findings like these demonstrate that identification has been shown to promote positive outcomes, such as an increased sense of self-efficacy and well-being. Findings like these suggests a link between identification and continued engagement, for example, in community activities.

Social Identity Management Strategies. Social categorization, social comparison, and social identification are the means by which identities, and thereby social realities, are constructed. Indeed, the self is implicated in any group membership, prompting members of groups deemed highly valuable by society to continually ensure the success of their group. Social identity management strategies play an important role, as they shed light on how members of high-status groups work to secure the standing of their group. To ensure the continued success of their social group, SIT posits that individuals engage in social identity management strategies, including individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition. These management strategies likely bear upon and are enacted through interpersonal communication processes central to this study.

Individual mobility refers to a strategy in which individuals move between social groups, particularly if group membership does not positively contribute to one's self-concept, self-

esteem, or social identity (Tajfel, 1978). Individuals may exit a group if doing so is possible, or seek to pass as a member of a higher status group. For example, a CrossFit athlete might grow tired of being grouped into a less athletic, lower status group in their gym and instead might try to navigate their way into a more athletic, higher status group. However, individual mobility is not always as straight forward as improving one's athleticism, especially when group characteristics are difficult to change (e.g., skin color, physical ability, socioeconomic status). Instead, SIT argues that individuals employ two other strategies: social creativity and social competition.

Social creativity refers to a strategy in which group members try to redefine the interpretation of their group by reinterpreting the group in a favorable way. This strategy helps individuals in lower status groups cope with their position in society, but it does not necessarily change the underlying societal belief or stereotype. The Paralympics, the Olympic games for athletes with disabilities, serves as an example of the social creativity strategy; Paralympic athletes created a dimension for comparison that was something other than their disability.

Social competition refers to a strategy in which group members seek to change the status quo by engaging in various forms of conflict such as protests, political pressure, or advocacy work. High collective self-esteem, the perception that their low social status is unjust, and a belief that the hierarchy status is unstable are the most likely reasons when social competition will be employed and effective (Wright, 2001). In 2019, Harvard swimmer Schuyler Bailar became the first openly transgender swimmer in the NCAA (Mineo, 2019), a move that prompted the January 2022 announcement by the NCAA that they would adopt a new policy aimed at being more inclusive of transgender athletes (NCAA.org, 2022). However, social competition strategies are not always successful. Higher status groups also compete for status

which can leave historically marginalized groups disadvantaged. For example, in 1968, Olympic medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos demonstrated the Black Power salute during their podium of the 200-meter race at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City (Nittle, 2021). Smith and Carlos were both celebrated and vilified for the action, but were ultimately suspended from the U.S. team and Olympic Village. Nearly 50 years later in 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the national anthem during NFL games as a way to protest racial injustice and mobilize Black Americans (Jude, 2020). Kaepernick faced backlash and did not play in the NFL after his 2016 season. Unlike individual mobility and social creativity, social competition is an attempt to address the underlying societal belief associated with the group. Such examples demonstrate that sport regularly serves as an avenue for addressing issues of advocacy, activism, and social change and as a site in which identities clash, are contested, and negotiated (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010).

SIT aims to understand intergroup relations and behavior, an important framework to consider when exploring how identity and (dis)identification impacts experiences of community. A foundational contribution of the theory is that individual aspects of identity both influence and are influenced by the dynamics of group life (Rees et al., 2015). Moreover, SIT provides a framework for better understanding group belongingness. Groups become incorporated into a person's sense of self and thereby have the potential to influence other parts of their overall behavior and identities. For instance, SIT-related literature demonstrates that social identification with a minority identity, such as being a person of color, can be positive for an individual's mental health, but this visibility can also lead to the individual being a greater target for anti-people of color attitudes (Evangelista et al., 2022). Thus, a strong sense of social identification with a marginalized identity can have adverse effects when those social identities are devalued in

that context. Thus, SIT serves this study well by illuminating the strategies people use to both understand and manage their social identities.

However, despite its strengths, SIT does not address interpersonal communication processes specifically, a function that is a central goal for this study. For instance, SIT identifies individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition as strategies individuals use to move between social groups. These strategies, however, are highly process-oriented and do not address communication's relational nature, such as *with whom* and *how* an individual manages their social identities. SIT can therefore be used to foreground the social nature of identity, and the proposed study can contribute to the theory by uncovering more *relational* aspects of social interactions in community. Experiencing and enacting identity is just as much something someone does, as SIT would suggest, as it is a relational process accomplished through community-related social interactions. An additional critique of SIT is that the theory addresses a unidimensional view of personal identity and is not well-suited to explain the different facets of an individual's sense of self and the personal identities they hold (Frame, 2016). Thus, SIT on its own is somewhat limited in its ability to theorize about the role of multiple personal identities and how they influence interpersonal communication, social interactions, and the experience of community. A final critique of SIT is that, although the theory has served as a useful tool for understanding social identification, less has been done in conjunction with the theory to examine how social identity impacts disidentification.

Disidentification

Disidentification refers to the process of an individual distancing themselves from identities they perceive to be threatening (Dean, 2008). Disidentification occurs when an individual experiences misalignment with their group membership and their self-concept (Becker

& Tausch, 2014). Disidentifying allows individuals to put psychological distance between themselves and the group to thereby lessen the threat they experience to the self. Disidentification manifests through three dimensions, including detachment, dissatisfaction, and dissimilarity (Becker & Tausch, 2014). *Detachment* refers to an individual actively disconnecting from a group, typically because they have experienced some kind of misalignment with the group, such as a moral transgression or a values violation. The misalignment can occur internally to the individual and may not necessarily be expressed to other group members. Individuals experiencing detachment from a group may still be part of the group, but commitments to the group may be damaged. Ultimately, detachment results in some type of distancing from the group. For example, an individual may experience detachment with their if CrossFit gym leaders continually spout the importance of diversity but regularly fail to recruit people with diverse identities to join the gym. *Dissatisfaction* refers to an individual's feelings of group-related discontentment. Dissatisfaction typically manifests through individuals' experiences of stigma, discrimination, or rejection (van Laar & Levin, 2006). For example, an athlete may become dissatisfied with their experiences of community CrossFit if they continually feel rejection associated their athletic ability or their personal identities. Finally, *dissimilarity* refers to an individual's recognition that they are different, and sometimes completely opposite, from others in the group. An athlete might experience dissimilarity in CrossFit if they view themselves to be highly athletic when the rest of the group is not, or if they hold a minority racial identity.

Individuals can disidentify with other group members, and they can also disidentify with organizations themselves. Organizational disidentification occurs when individuals want to both affirm what they perceive to be positive traits of the organization and avoid what they perceive to

be negative (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Organizational disidentification can prompt people to take action (e.g., by voicing their opinion) as a result of their dissatisfaction with the organization's identity (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). However, disidentification can also curtail action-oriented efforts. The dimensions of disidentification can prompt personal energy depletion catalyzed by persistent negative feelings, resulting in mental and physical exhaustion and limited desire to engage (De Clercq, 2022).

Disidentification occurs for a variety of reasons. For instance, people often choose to disidentify with a group or an organization when it is not possible to leave, for example, when leaving harms an individual more than it helps them or if there are no better options (Becker & Tausch, 2014). Individuals may disidentify with groups that reject or marginalize an identity group they belong to (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). In addition, individuals may disidentify with groups that personally violate their moral standards (Glasford et al., 2008). As such, disidentification has been shown to have harmful effects on individuals' well-being. For instance, disidentification causes some individuals engage in identity concealment as a way to distance themselves from felt stigma resulting from group membership (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Feelings of shame can manifest as a result of disidentification, for example, through embarrassment about their group membership (Becker & Tausch, 2014). Furthermore, research suggests that disidentification can lead to concealing one's group membership or avoiding the group altogether (Becker & Tausch, 2014).

In sum, disidentification is a process that varies from feelings of misalignment (detachment), discontentment (dissatisfaction), and difference (dissimilarity). Individuals disidentify as a way to distance themselves from dominant cultural prescriptions, and disidentification can have harmful effects on individuals' well-being. Identification and

disidentification are social processes, and social identity theory is a helpful tool for further examining the ways social identities impact community experiences. To best serve the purposes of this study, SIT and disidentification are best considered in tandem with a theoretical framework that addresses the role of the individual in social identity: intersectionality.

Intersectionality

The experiences of race, gender, sexuality, social class, and (dis)ability are not mutually exclusive, and overlapping structures of oppression, such as systemic racism or ableism, influence people's identity-related experiences. Societal institutions like culture, religion, and government reinforce the oppression of historically marginalized groups by deeming who or what should be included or excluded and who or what deserves power in community experiences. Thus, identity and identification can be understood in the most comprehensive and multi-dimensional way when one also considers intersectionality. Intersectionality, a critical theoretical framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and advanced by Black women scholars (Collins, 2019; hooks, 1990), describes the ways different social identities—such as gender, race, class, religion, or ability—overlap, or *intersect*, with one another to influence social systems of power. Intersectionality, like social identity theory, assumes that reality is socially constructed. However, intersectionality also acknowledges that some groups of people have more power than others to impose power or shape knowledge. The knowledge experience, therefore, is political and value-laden.

The goal of a critical theory like intersectionality is to deconstruct what is believed to be reality with the underlying goal of creating change and empowering oppressed groups. Crenshaw (1991) argued, "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address

the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). Moreover, the field of interpersonal communication at large—despite scholars' acknowledgement that individuals are complex and exhibit a variety of identities in their everyday encounters—many studies tend to address one identity at a time (Frame, 2016; Suter, 2018). Therefore, it would be a shortcoming of this study to examine the experience of community only from a lens of social identity. Instead, the study must acknowledge the multiple and unique identities each individual holds.

Indeed, intersectionality demonstrates that multiple systems of oppression are interconnected and context-specific, particularly in the lives of people with more than one marginalized identity. For instance, Black women continually face stereotypes and stigmas associated with their participation in sport that is both racialized and gendered. On one hand, despite her obvious success and talent, Serena Williams is not necessarily embraced and celebrated by the traditionally White, upper-class world of tennis. During the 2018 US Open (her record-tying attempt at a 24th Grand Slam), the umpire accused Williams of cheating. She was socially ridiculed and framed with the "angry Black woman" stereotype for demanding an apology from the umpire and later criticized for smashing her racket on the court (Blackburn, 2018). On the other hand, White tennis player Roger Federer was celebrated for his decision to challenge the umpire's calls during his competition at Wimbledon in 2016, with broadcasters praising his ability to "exude confidence" (Melton & Bryant, 2017, p. 36). Williams' example reminds us that "gender is never the only appropriate category of analysis, nor can it be the most significant, because it is always mediated by other systems of inequality" (Jamieson, 2000, p. 162).

Intersectionality is a useful framework for acknowledging that each person experiences discrimination and oppression in different ways, and it is not any single identity that

marginalizes people. Acknowledging intersectionality when examining a sport and fitness context is paramount; when singular parts of identity are examined at a time, it is difficult to acknowledge the nuance associated with how each identity overlaps (i.e., recognizing Williams' Black woman identity allows the nuance associated with stereotypes of both Black people and women to be acknowledged). Intersectionality suggests that individuals with marginalized identities face different social dynamics than their counterparts along similar, singular axes, and this assertion rings true in sport and fitness literature, particularly related to issues of race (Anderson & McCormack, 2010), gender (Paccaud & Marcellini, 2022), and LGBTQ issues (Stewart, 2019). True to the nature of intersectionality, the research chosen here to serve as an example of how a theoretical lens utilizing intersectionality is, by its nature, intersectional. Although each section is divided by a particular identity marker, such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, each example is best explained and understood through the acknowledgement of the multiple identities it addresses.

Summary

This review addresses the third observation of this study: Identity is central to the experience of community. SIT suggests that our social groups (i.e., our communities) shape how we experience our identities, and intersectionality illuminates that identities are multifaceted, multidimensional, and informed by power and privilege. Exploring the role of identity in social interactions may shed light on some of the critiques posed in this proposal's review about community, namely, that each conceptualization of community fails to address specific interpersonal communication patterns, behaviors, or practices that influence the experience of community. For instance, an individual's identities are influenced by a number of factors, such as nonverbal communication, cues in one's appearance through clothing, or though linguistic

traits such as vocabulary or tone. Thus, layering literature addressing identity and (dis)identification upon literature addressing community provides insight to what some of these specific interpersonal practices may be. In the section that follows, I make a case for why the context of group fitness—and specifically CrossFit—is well suited for exploring the interpersonal nature of community.

The Case for Exploring Community in CrossFit

CrossFit is considered group fitness. Group fitness—or exercise within a group setting and led by an instructor—is a popular exercise modality. More than 40% of regular exercisers participate in group fitness classes (Phillips & Meyer, 2020). Approachability, accountability, and a social or community-based environment are primary reasons group fitness appeals to people trying to maintain or improve their fitness levels. For instance, some claim that group fitness classes feel more approachable or accessible to them than working out alone in a traditional gym setting. Traditional gyms, or typical big-box fitness franchises designed as one large room with special equipment and no organized classes (e.g., also referred to as "globo gyms;" examples include LA Fitness, Anytime Fitness, 24 Hour Fitness, Crunch Fitness), can be intimidating (Coulter, 2021), particularly to individuals who are new to exercise, do not fit the typical "gym bro" aesthetic (Young-Saver, 2014), or prefer a more personalized approach to exercise. SilverSneakers, for example, is a group fitness class designed for individuals aged 65 and over. The program's accessibility is promoted on its website: SilverSneakers is free for people with select Medicare plans and there are "more participating fitness locations available in the U.S. to SilverSneakers members than there are Starbucks" (SilverSneakers, n.d.).

In addition, group fitness classes are a way for some people to maintain accountability to their fitness goals (Pizzo et al., 2020). Group dynamics, such as interdependence and shared

purpose, have been found to reinforce accountability to exercise program adherence and reduce feelings of intimidation (Carter & Alexander, 2020). Shared purpose, for example, can be cultivated through standardized workout programming; trainers working for CrossFit headquarters write a "Workout of the Day" and post it to CrossFit's website for their global affiliate gyms to use. A pre-written workout appeals to individuals who may be new to the exercise routine, who have limited time, or do not have the knowledge to design a workout of their own. In addition, it can unite large groups of people in the shared purpose of completing the same workout.

Finally, those who participate in group fitness often cite a social or community-based environment as a reason they join gyms and stay engaged. For instance, Bidonde et al. (2009) found that a fitness program served as the primary access to a social network for older women, helping them decrease their feelings of depression, generate positive social bonds, and pursue physical health goals (e.g., increasing mobility and losing weight). Community is valuable and useful for increasing social support for weight loss (Wing & Jeffery, 1999), maintaining motivation (Feltz et al., 2011), and helping individuals feel a sense of well-being and purpose (Sofija et al., 2018). Acknowledging its benefits, many group fitness outlets sought to maintain or recreate the community feel of their classes when the COVID-19 pandemic closed gyms around the world. However, recreating a community-like atmosphere was sometimes difficult to achieve. For instance, Andersson and Andreasson (2020) explored how the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing mandates affected the everyday lives of Les Mills group fitness instructors (approximately 140,000 instructors worldwide), finding that online classes were an insufficient substitute to face-to-face instruction and that they lacked the "social connectedness that is normally maintained through successful rituals or social scripts" (p. 1).

CrossFit

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied CrossFit as an exercise and social phenomenon. One approach to CrossFit-related research examines CrossFit as a form of exercise, focusing on its efficacy as an exercise program (Eather et al., 2016), the rates of injury (Hak et al., 2022), and comparing CrossFit to other group fitness workouts (Whiteman-Sandland et al., 2018). Others examine CrossFit from a more social lens, including gender representations (Knapp, 2015a, 2015b), its cult-like nature (Dawson, 2017), reports on the embodied nature of participation (Brighton et al., 2021), and psychological variables of participants, including their motivation to exercise, meet their goals, and increase their self-esteem (Dominski et al., 2021).

At first glance, CrossFit is a health and fitness brand. CrossFit generates its funding, and therefore its members, through an affiliate gym model. CrossFit loans its name to independent gyms (i.e., "affiliates") for an annual affiliate payment. CrossFit's headquarters oversees very little of what affiliate gyms do, and affiliate owners are left largely on their own to manage all business operations. In 2004, CrossFit opened its fifth affiliate gym; by 2008, the count had grown to 500. The boost in affiliate gyms is largely tied to CrossFit's growth in 2007 after hosting the inaugural CrossFit Games, a competition that is referred to today as "the definitive test of fitness" (CrossFit, 2022). In 2010, CrossFit partnered with Reebok, an athletic footwear and clothing company, boosting CrossFit into more mainstream fitness and exercise circles (Rookie Road, n.d.).

For some who participate in CrossFit, they are not just athletes or people who exercise: they are "CrossFitters," a label that speaks to the centrality of the CrossFit identity (Dawson, 2017). Like any other sport, CrossFit athletes further identify with sub-identities, such as CrossFit women (CrossFit Koncepts, 2011), LGBTQ CrossFitters (Dodge, n.d.), Black

CrossFitters (Marquez, 2020), and adaptive athlete CrossFitters (Browne, 2020). Indeed, the context of CrossFit is a site for rich observation and analysis of identity. For instance, Knapp (2015b) used participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and online archival work to explore gender in one CrossFit gym, finding that gender norms were both reinforced and resisted. Knapp notes that athletes at CrossFit gyms complete workouts referred to as "The Girls" (p. 42). These "benchmark" workouts (i.e., workouts designed to measure athletes' progress) were named by founder Glassman citing workouts "that left you flat on your back looking up at the sky, asking what the f*** happened to me deserved a female's name" (Kleyn, 2019, para. 3). The use of "girls," Knapp argues, infantilizes and disempowers women.

Similarly, some scholars have taken note of CrossFit's "gender-equality narrative" (Schrijnder et al., 2021, p. 383). Schrijnder et al. (2021) explored gender narratives in a Dutch CrossFit gym and described CrossFit as a fitness activity in which men and women can participate equally. However, this participation is not without complications. For instance, coaches instruct athletes in a gendered manner to use a "women's" or "men's" barbell (p. 390). The difference between the two barbells is that one is 35 pounds and the other is 45 pounds and thicker in diameter. This distinction between a men's and women's barbell, Schrijnder and colleagues argue, is based on an assumption that women are weaker and have smaller hands than men. Therefore, despite the notion that men and women can participate equally, dichotomous gendered thinking is still deeply embedded in the CrossFit experience.

Some women use CrossFit as an avenue for pushing back against hegemonic expectations of femininity. Circling around the Internet is an image detailing "the CrossFit woman's creed." In part, it includes: "I am a CrossFit woman. I do not wear makeup in the gym. I wear chalk. I scrub the calluses off my hands. I do not glisten or smile while I'm working out. I sweat, grunt,

and curse" (CrossFit Koncepts, n.d., para 1). This creed clearly juxtaposes expectations of "desirable women" (i.e., those who need to get manicures) with what it means to be a "CrossFit woman" (i.e., one who sweats, grunts, curses, and has calluses), suggesting CrossFit makes some women better than others. Despite this, and with exception of the obvious display of their muscles, women who are CrossFit athletes are stereotypically portrayed as encompassing traditional aspects of femininity, such as wearing makeup, having styled hair, and painted nails, simultaneously disrupting gender roles while reinforcing them (Knapp, 2015b). Washington and Economides (2016) examined the ways in which CrossFit's rhetoric articulated the "ideal woman" to CrossFit athletes, noting the obvious tension between CrossFit being a sport "for everyone" but idealizing the CrossFit woman who is not too old, already active, White, and has access to time, money, and energy. By "embracing media-ready mantras like 'strong is the new sexy,'" (p. 156) CrossFit, they argue pushes docility as the source of empowerment, not strength for its own sake.

Indeed, the labels to which athletes adhere are nuanced, and although some participants experience benefits associated with CrossFit as an identity, some also cite its challenges or problematic associations. For instance, Beasley et al. (2021) call attention to athletes' steadfast belief that CrossFit is superior to other group fitness outlets. Indeed, CrossFit's slogan is "forging elite fitness," suggesting all other fitness programs are something less than elite. Additional research echoes this sentiment, with James and Gill (2018) arguing that CrossFit "reproduces neoliberal self-made discourse by *physically wearing one's moral choices*" (emphasis in original; p. 703) in an effort to communicate the salience of their CrossFit identity to others. Similarly, many CrossFit athletes embrace a "redemption through physical suffering" narrative, believing that hard work in the CrossFit gym makes them better (than you) people

(Hart, 2021, para. 20). Suffering plays out not only in physical and mental exhaustion stemming from a workout, but also through physical injury. Athletes cited "being hard core," achieving results, and the pursuit of camaraderie as values of CrossFit athletes, sometimes disguising injury or becoming defensive and denouncing critics in the pursuit of these values (Beasley et al., 2021). These findings suggest that interpersonal factors, such as pressure from coaches to train though the pain (i.e., the emphasis of a "no pain, no gain" mentality) or positive evaluation by other members, influences athletes' community experiences.

Research Questions

There is preliminary evidence to suggest that individuals who participate in CrossFit experience a greater sense of community, satisfaction, and motivation to exercise when compared to individuals who participate in a different type of group exercise or workouts on their own (Pickett et al., 2016; Whiteman-Sandland et al., 2018). This may be related to the positive psychological effects for athletes, such as exercise enjoyment, goal setting and achievement, and fitness satisfaction (Gianzina & Kassotaki, 2019). Furthermore, research addressing the psycho-social aspects of CrossFit highlights the centrality of relationships in community experiences. However, less is known about the role of identity and (dis)identification in shaping community experiences. Given that gyms have different communities and cultures, and that not all athletes identify with community in their gym, more work is needed understand how community is experienced and constructed through interpersonal communication. Therefore**,** this study's research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do athletes experience (or not) community in CrossFit?

RQ2: What are the interpersonal processes that facilitate (dis)identification with community in CrossFit?

RQ3: How do athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The study had three goals: (a) explore how athletes experience (or not) community in CrossFit, (b) identify the interpersonally processes that facilitate (dis)identification with community in CrossFit, and (c) identify how athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit. Each of these goals relied on collecting detailed accounts from individuals who are current and former members of CrossFit communities, including how they construct and co-construct meaning in their everyday CrossFit experiences. Two qualitative methods—observations collected through ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured, one-on-one interviews—were fitting to gather the insight needed to shape findings that could make both theoretical and practical contributions. The study's methodological approaches were chosen for several reasons.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews encourage detailed stories about an individual's experiences (Tracy, 2020). Interviews help researchers gather rich, detailed data derived from participants' own words and expressions, a process that can give texture to participant feelings, motivations, and behaviors (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In addition, interviews present the opportunity for researchers to encourage participant self-reflexivity (Kleinman et al., 1994). In such one-on-one interactions, researchers have the opportunity to witness (re)constructions of the self, learning how participants use specific experiences, relationships, and identities to articulate their everyday experiences (Charmaz, 1991). I anticipated that, due to the potentially stigmatizing nature of identity-related discussions, participants might be hesitant to publicly reveal private feelings, beliefs, or experiences, particularly when that information might doubt "what everyone thinks" (Kleinmann et al., 1994, p. 44). Because this study's goals were centered

around the experience of (sometimes stigmatized) identities in a group experience, it was necessary for me to connect one-on-one with participants.

The strengths of the interview as a methodological approach made the use of this method obvious. However, interviews alone—due to the nature of participants being slightly removed from the context I was inquiring about (Kleinman et al., 1994)—would leave gaps in my ability to fully articulate the experience of community in CrossFit which, due to its highly interactive and laborious nature, is an embodied activity (Brighton et al., 2020). Embodied knowledge "begins with the body" (Ellingson, 2017, p. 1); it is tacit, internalized, and is not often discussed but instead is just "done" (Kwan, 2019). Thus, embodied knowledge can often be difficult to capture and articulate through interviews in which a researcher asks participants to recall or explain their experiences. In addition, it is possible that conducting interviews alone without fieldwork might risk collecting of only psychosocial aspects of community. Ethnographic fieldwork, coupled with interviews, was a useful tool for examining how athletes use language to create meaning through their interpersonal interactions (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972). Moreover, fieldwork allowed for the opportunity to observe non-vocal and non-verbal communication aspects of community, such as spatial (Hymes, 1964). Finally, it can be difficult for a researcher to know what to ask a participant if they are not familiar with the participant's everyday contextual communication. Therefore, fieldwork served as a tool to fill the gaps presented by interviewing alone. Together, interviews and fieldwork helped me more richly articulate how athletes interpersonally communicate verbally and nonverbally and how this communication impacts their experiences of community.

Thus, this study's findings are based on 50 one-on-one interviews and more than 100 hours of fieldwork at two CrossFit gyms in the United States. The study's analysis consisted of a

combination of two qualitative analysis approaches, including Tracy's (2020) phronetic iterative approach and the use of methodology derived from constructivist grounded theory (i.e., Charmaz, 2006; 2008; 2014). I chose to combine approaches developed by Tracy and Charmaz for three reasons. First, Tracy's phronetic iterative approach pairs existing theory, the study's guiding research questions, and emergent qualitative data to generate theory and provide guidance on social practice and action, each of which align with the goals and nature of the data of this study. Second, Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach makes assumptions that I hold in my own research philosophy, including that (a) reality is multiple and constructed, (b) the research process emerges from interactions, (c) the researcher's positionality shapes the outcomes of the research, and (d) the researcher and the participant co-construct the data, making data a product of the research process (Charmaz, 2008). Finally, Tracy and Charmaz's approaches address the importance of reflexivity and positionality and provide strategies for identifying and addressing preconceptions. Reflexivity is the process of a researcher acknowledging their own involvement with the construction and interpretation of the data (Tracy, 2010). Charmaz (2017) suggests that the researcher is not separate from the research, but instead a critical part of it, as the data are undisputedly affected by the researcher's interaction with the people and places through which their data are generated. Authentic qualitative research depends on self-reflexivity and transparency (Tracy, 2020). Therefore, this combination of methodological approaches was chosen because they shape the study to be theoretically sound and practically applicable.

In the sections that follow, I address each of these points in greater detail. I first describe my positionality as a researcher, including addressing the strategies I used to reconcile my biases during data collection and analysis. I then provide an overview of the data collection methods

used in this study for both fieldwork and one-on-one interviews. For both fieldwork and interviews, I describe my recruitment methods and criteria, data collection procedures, and participant characteristics. In addition, I provide the details of my analytical approach for all data sources. Of note, before data collection began, the study was approved by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

Positionality and Reflexivity

A researcher's positionality shapes their research and influences their interpretation of the data. Indeed, Malterud (2001) writes, "A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (pp. 483-484). Reflexivity is a crucial component of qualitative research and holds special importance. Indeed, researchers cannot be objective about their data, nor can they separate themselves from it (Charmaz, 2016; Tracy, 2010). Therefore, in the spirit of positionality and reflexivity, it was important for me to first reflect on my own positionality and identities so I could reflect on my identities and my relationship with this research context. I want to first acknowledge my standpoint as an educated, queer, able-bodied, cisgender White woman without any visible physical disabilities. I am not currently a member at a CrossFit gym, but I have in the past been a member at several CrossFit gyms. For context, I briefly review each of those now.

I started CrossFit in March 2018 while living in Denver, Colorado. I joined because I was interested in losing weight, building strength, and because I had other friends who told me I would enjoy it. I have always been one to enjoy group exercise and had participated in a variety of group programs in the past, including club swimming, Les Mills programming, spin classes,

group training for half marathons, and hot yoga. I was completely new to any type of exercise that included barbells, rowing machines, or rope climbing, but I took a two-week introductory class to become familiar with the movements and structure of classes. I quickly learned that I loved working with the barbell and that many of the movements included in CrossFit were technical and demanding. Each night, the gym would post the next workout of the day at 10 pm, and I would stay up late to check the workout because I was anxious about what it might be. What if the workout included a movement I did not know how to do? What if it included a lot of rowing and I would be the last one to finish? These questions and ones like them cluttered my mind and created a brain filled with anxiety about the workout to come. To complicate matters, I was nervous about interacting with other people in the gym. Everyone else was such a better athlete than I was. They looked muscular, and I did not. They knew the movements and could execute them flawlessly, and I did not. They had their groups of friends, and I did not. They knew what they were doing, and I did not.

Despite my genuine fear about how my body would look and feel during and after the workout and whether other athletes would acknowledge me, I felt compelled to keep attending. Like a child new to summer camp, I was told by friends that CrossFit would become less stressful and more fun the more I kept at it. Plus, I was holding on to the fact that I might lose weight, get stronger, and make a few friends. So, I attended classes religiously for three to five days each week. These feelings of anxiety and nervous repeated for about three months until I started to become more familiar with both the workouts and the people at my gym. I learned the movements. I learned the names of other athletes and they learned mine. Some athletes even began to compliment me and my performance. I can recall three specific instances from that time that helped shape what the community experience looked like for me.

The first memory I can recall is the feeling of dread when I realized the coaches wanted me to verbally report my score after each workout. I absolutely did not want any other athlete to pay attention to my performance. Public reporting was especially painful when I was the last person to finish a workout or when I had the lightest weight on the barbell. Despite my desire to be invisible, I reported my scores and experienced embarrassment each time I did it. Eventually, I got used to this expectation and started to become desensitized to its—what I found to be—problematic and complicated nature.

The second memory is of the first (unfortunately, not the last) time I cried during a CrossFit workout. I had been a member at this gym for approximately two months and was slowly improving but was still rather clueless and physically limited. The workout required we row a specific distance and then complete a variety of other exercises. The stimulus was a sprint: do everything as fast as you can. I was the last person off of the rower every single round, and this was extremely frustrating and embarrassing to me because I felt that I *should* be doing better. I was trying my best and my best still meant I was last. I tried to hold in my tears, catalyzed by embarrassment and frustration, but doing so was just as impossible as getting off the rower first would have been. I kept rowing through my tears and kept pushing, hoping nobody would notice. To my knowledge, nobody did, because nobody said anything to me. I was not sure which fact was harder to reckon with: that nobody noticed or that nobody seemed to care.

The third memory is of the first time I realized my identity as a queer person would be celebrated by others at the CrossFit gym. The city of Denver hosts a Pride parade every June. The gym opted to make a float for the parade and invited all athletes to both decorate and ride it during the parade. I joined other members on a Saturday afternoon to decorate the float and engage in social time that was not a workout. It was the first-time people in the community

started to engage with me as a person separate from my athletic abilities. For a fleeting moment, I felt like I mattered.

Each of the memories at this gym showcase the complicated journey I have had with CrossFit, including experiencing both moments of inclusion and exclusion. My experiences at this gym highlighted the importance of relationships in the community experience. As others in the gym began to acknowledge me, as I developed stronger relationships. As I was able to reveal parts of my identity, I came to understand community differently, sometimes more positively or negatively, depending on the situation.

Several months later, I moved to a different part of the city, and my commute to the gym would have been 30 minutes. This commute was not compatible with my schedule, so I decided to find a new gym. At the new gym, I made friends almost immediately. The coaches and athletes were kind, they remembered my name, and they helped me learn the norms and expectations of this gym. It was a marked difference from my previous gym; I consistently felt important, acknowledged, and like I was improving my physical fitness. The coaches took special time with me to help me improve my lifting and rowing technique, and I took advantage of the additional classes they offered (e.g., a barbell club and cardio club). Overall, my confidence grew and I finally felt that I had a home. I was a member at this gym for only eight months before I moved again, but almost the entire gym attended my going away party. It was clear this CrossFit community had become central to who I was, and I had become central to this CrossFit community. The experiences at this gym again helped me understand the importance of being seen by others in the community. The athletes and coaches consistently helped me feel like an included and valued person who was more than what I looked like or how much I could lift.

My wife, who is also involved in CrossFit, and I moved to Champaign, Illinois in June 2019 for the start of the PhD program. The first thing we did was find a CrossFit gym. For both of us, CrossFit was not only our physical outlet, but our social outlet. It was critical we found a CrossFit gym right away so we could begin making friends in our new area. We joined the first gym we visited because we found the other athletes and coaches to be kind, welcoming, and informed. We attended five to six days per week, making friends quickly and staying committed to the programming. In March 2020, however, COVID-19 uprooted all of our lives and the gym temporarily closed. The owner loaned the equipment to members and we began Zoom workouts. The deficiencies of the Zoom workout approach were apparent (e.g., not clear instruction or assistance with movements, limited interactions with our friends), but it was the best we could do. Other athletes at the gym and I were forgiving.

It turns out, however, that my forgiveness was conditional. Racial tensions started to rise in the United States after George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020. His murder resulted in increased conversations about race, anti-racism, and policing. CrossFit's founder, Greg Glassman, formed the organization with roots in a conservative, pro-military and first responder ideology. Racist remarks he made in relation to Floyd's murder divided the CrossFit community at large, and more than 500 gyms chose to revoke their affiliation (Mazziotta, 2020). In addition, support for anti-racist behaviors led many CrossFit gyms to show solidarity for Black Lives Matter by making statements on their social media pages (e.g., "Our gym believes that Black Lives Matter"). These statements of solidarity were polarizing (Rose, 2020); some gyms made "All Lives Matter" social media posts and others said nothing at all.

At the time, I was a member at a gym with an owner who made the decision to say nothing. I became frustrated by this because I believe organizations, and especially health-

serving institutions like CrossFit gyms, should stand in solidarity with human rights issues and be, for example, outwardly pro-LGBTQ+ and pro-people of color. I set up a conversation with the owner of the gym. My goals were to (a) better understanding his rationale and (b) make the case for why I believed the gym needed to make a statement in support of Black Lives Matter. During the conversation, it became clear that he was not interested in making a statement either way because he did not want to "offend" members or potential members. Despite sharing my opinion and rationale for why the gym should make a statement of support, he declined. It is my belief that saying nothing was a racist act; therefore, the conversation served as the catalyzing moment that prompted me to leave this CrossFit gym. I was no longer willing to spend my money in a way that supported someone with an ideology I disagreed with, even though I had aligned with the community at other points in time.

My experiences with the gym in Champaign illustrate again the often-complicated nature of community in CrossFit. In this gym, my experience of community shifted throughout the duration of my membership, and I experienced grief and frustration when I ultimately decided to cancel my membership. Over time, I had to reconcile my experiences at each of the three gyms I was a member of, acknowledging the road to community can be long, winding, and matter of iteration.

Today, my involvement in CrossFit looks different than when I joined more than five years ago. I often complete CrossFit-style workouts at home, I appreciate CrossFit's approach to fitness, and I am grateful for what I learned during my time as a member of various CrossFit gyms. I am no longer a member at a CrossFit gym, and I do not currently have an interest in joining. I follow CrossFit news, CrossFit Games-level athletes, and I am interested in the stories and experiences people have in CrossFit gyms. Furthermore, I am invested in improving the

quality of exercise spaces for people with historically marginalized identities, and my involvement with CrossFit revealed that the experience of CrossFit cannot exist without identity-related implications, factors that ultimately impact athletes' identification with the CrossFit community. Each of my experiences inform my research because they shaped my first introductions to CrossFit and how I have come to personally understand it. My experiences can be summarized as oscillating between feeling like an outsider, feeling like I belonged, and feeling disenchanted. I acknowledge that my positionality and previous experience with CrossFit influenced this study, and I worked to become aware of my biases.

Strategies Employed to Reconcile Biases During Data Collection and Analysis

To reconcile and acknowledge my biases during data collection and analysis, I employed a number of measures, including writing memos, triangulation, member reflections, and meeting with scholars unrelated to this study to ensure I was including voices and experiences that may be different than my own. During both data collection and analysis, I wrote reflective memos to record my observations and hunches about the data. Memos are free written notes intended to help sort out stories from the data and better understand how codes relate to each other (Tracy, 2020). Memos were written before, during, and after the data collection process to ensure the integrity of data collection and analysis by serving as an electronic paper trail. I wrote memos *before* data collection about preconceptions that may arise about the study population (e.g., what I thought I might observe based on my previous experience in CrossFit). I wrote memos *during* data collection to recall what I had observed and begin to make sense of the patterns I was observing in both fieldwork and interviews. Finally, I wrote memos *after* data collection to reflect on my before and during memos and to theorize about the larger story the data were beginning to tell. Frequent reflection of my own experiences was important to ensure I earnestly

considered the data from a variety of perspectives, attempting to mitigate the influence of my own experiences and biases.

Triangulation refers to the use of two or more sources of data to gather a variety of findings on the same research subject, a methodological move aimed at making conclusions pulled from the data more credible (Tracy, 2010). In this study, I collected data through both fieldwork and interviews. My fieldwork included not only my observations of the space, but also my observations of interpersonal interactions. I recorded my personal reflections about how I physically and mentally felt during my interactions and the CrossFit workouts themselves, each an attempt to reflect on my own experiences of community in each gym. In addition, during analysis, I compared my observations to what participants shared during interviews as a tool for identifying converging or diverging patterns. An added layer of triangulation is that I engaged in member reflections.

Member reflections refer to the inclusion of participants in the analysis of the data and findings (Tracy, 2020), a strategy I employed in two ways. First, because I commenced analysis at the start and throughout the data collection phase, I talked to participants about what I was observing in other interviews and during fieldwork and asked for their opinions on the issues. These conversations took place before and after CrossFit classes (to limit class disruptions) and also during interviews (typically to when referencing potentially sensitive topics, such as identity-related questions). During this time, I sought to engage multivocality, or the inclusion of a variety of viewpoints, particularly those that were divergent (Tracy, 2020). As such, I was careful to ask athletes with different identities the same questions (e.g., asking both a Black and a White athlete during an interview, “What role does your racial identity play in shaping how you experience your CrossFit community?”). These questions asked to individuals with different

identities often presented different responses, indicating that different groups of athletes had different assessments of similar situations. This was an especially important reflection tool for me, as I shared identities with most athletes in this study (e.g., White). Second, I emailed a summary of the findings to all participants (something I requested permission for during interviews), and asked if they would reflect on the following questions: "Does this information resonate with you? Did I miss anything? Is there something you would expand upon?" I clearly indicated in the email that they were not required or obligated to respond. Of the 50 participants emailed, four responded and each indicated the findings were consistent with their experiences.

Finally, throughout the analysis, I met in four 60-minute sessions with two other researchers who were not involved in the study to discuss the data. Doing so allowed me to check for resonance, or whether the findings meaningfully reverberated or impacted the audience (Tracy, 2020). During these sessions, these scholars helped me better understand the transferability of the findings and whether they could be applied to other community contexts. Additional scholars also helped me think critically about the data in ways I had not previously (e.g., shedding light on the different interpersonal communication processes they saw in the data or questioning the claims I had made about the data). Next, I will address the methodological approaches for both fieldwork and interviews.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Fieldwork was well suited for addressing this study's research questions for several reasons. First and foremost, ethnographic approaches to studying communication serve as a tool for analyzing patters of language use within specific speech communities (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972). Ethnographically exploring the use of language in the CrossFit community served as a means to better understanding the use of interpersonal communication behaviors in the

experience of community, allowing for the analysis of the community's communication patterns overall (Hymes, 1964). The customs, social norms, and beliefs of a group—in addition to their shared language, rituals, and expectations—all illustrate the group's ways of being and likely influence their experiences of community (Tracy, 2020). Therefore, I could not adequately examine this topic without utilizing a method that literally involves situating myself as a researcher within the community itself to observe their communicative practices and interactions. Fieldwork as a methodological approach positioned me as both a researcher and a participant and allowed me to be immersed in the day-to-day lives and culture of the study's CrossFit communities.

Second, fieldwork allowed me to strengthen the quality of data collected, as I was able to triangulate the data through the use of multiple collection methods (Tracy, 2020). Fieldwork complemented interviews in that it allowed for the description and examination of aspects external to the talk itself, such who the speakers are, their pre-existing beliefs and customs, and the communication patterns of the group (Cameron, 2001). Fieldwork presented the opportunity to observe interpersonal interactions and enabled the collection of retrospective accounts from athletes (e.g., asking them to reflect on specific instances I witnessed). Multiple types of data (in this case, observations and interviews collected during fieldwork) allowed for more in-depth data exploration and for the collection of a variety of accounts of the ways athletes experienced community.

Third, Tracy (2020) notes that fieldwork involves "witnessing" what takes place at a site (p. 76). Witnessing is an embodied experience and includes a variety of senses, including sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Being present in the field was necessary to help me observe how athletes interpersonally communicate verbally and nonverbally and how this communication

impacts their experiences of community. Privileging an embodied research approach meant paying attention to the feelings, sensations, and emotions that arose during my own lived experiences. Being physically present in a gym space helped me better witness interpersonal interactions and processes, moments of identity negotiation, and community-related behaviors and rituals.

Finally, fieldwork is recognized as being a useful tool for understanding stigmatized behaviors and interactions, largely because stigmatized behaviors are often ones that individuals do not readily *talk* about (Tracy, 2020). Identity-related experiences are often paired with stigma, and witnessing these experiences can lend to a more in-depth description than interviews alone would allow (Goffman, 1963). For example, when conducting fieldwork at Rocky Mountain CrossFit (RMCF), I came to understand that most athletes in that space were White and that few, if any, people of color were present in classes. All athletes I interviewed from RMCF were White, and many did not notice that it was an almost entirely White space. Thus, fieldwork helped me shed light on not only what people were saying and doing and who was present or not, but also on what they were *not* saying and doing and who was present or not. Next, I address more information on each of the fieldwork sites.

Fieldwork Recruitment Methods and Site Characteristics

Two sites were selected for fieldwork, including a CrossFit gym in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States (pseudonym: Rocky Mountain CrossFit; RMCF) and a CrossFit gym in the Midwestern region of the United States (pseudonym: Midwest Fitness; MWF; a pseudonym chosen to reflect the owner's decision not to include CrossFit in the name of the gym). Next, I provide an overview of how I gained access to each gym, describe each site's

demographics, detail the rationale behind why each gym was chosen for the study, and list agreements of what I would provide to each gym after data collection concluded.

For the sake of research transparency and articulating the complicated nature of fieldwork, I believe it is important to note that my original research plan dictated I would complete fieldwork at only one gym, MWF. I was able to secure access to MWF in a relatively uncomplicated way, largely because I have a previous connection with the owner of this gym and have attended classes as an athlete on several occasions. This connection helped me more easily negotiate access because I had previously established trust, rapport, and credibility (Tracy, 2020). Despite the previous relationship, MWF was an appropriate research site because I did not have personal relationships with current athletes at the gym. However, the owner consented to my fieldwork only if I limited my observations to one week. Despite approaching my fieldwork using the concept of a compressed time mode in which the researcher engages in fieldwork intensely for a short period of time (i.e., "living the life" of the participants "without prejudicing the research, antagonizing the inhabitants or disturbing the research site itself;" Jeffrey & Trouman, 2004, p. 538), I did not deem one week to be enough time to reach saturation in data collection. Therefore, because I would be unable to stay longer than one week at MWF, I needed to adjust my data collection plan and find an additional site.

To find an additional site, I conducted a search for CrossFit gyms in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, my place of residence. I targeted gyms that were within what I deemed to be a reasonable driving distance from my home (i.e., within 20 miles or 30 minutes), as I needed to be present there a minimum of five days per week for a minimum of two months. I compiled a list of all gyms which totaled to 12 within the pre-determined radius. I reached out via email to the owners at all 12 gyms. A visual of this outreach and response rates is included in

Appendix A. The outreach process to gyms in the Rocky Mountain region was three months in length, lasting from November 2022 to January 2023.

Of the 12 gym owners I reached out to, five responded. Two of the five owners declined outright. Another two of the five agreed to have conversations with me about the study, but ultimately declined. The first of these owners had a phone conversation with me about the study and its goals but declined because he was concerned that my presence would distract members, make them feel judged, and cause them to cancel their memberships. The second of these owners permitted me to attend a class at their gym and agreed to meet with me about the study. After three weeks and several conversations, this gym's owners also declined because they feared my presence would be disruptive and cause members to cancel their memberships. The owner of the final gym, Rocky Mountain CrossFit, agreed to meet with me. In our initial email exchange, she revealed that before becoming the owner of a CrossFit gym, she earned her PhD, worked in the field as a research scientist, and "know[s] the value of research science." During our meeting, I introduced myself and described both my professional pursuits and my involvement with CrossFit, including how many years I had been involved and where. In addition, I explained the goals of the study, what my data collection process would entail, and the ways in which the research could personally benefit the gym. She agreed to partner in the research process, and I was permitted to conduct two to three months of observation at RMCF.

Although conducting fieldwork at two different gyms was not in my original research plan, I came to understand that conducting fieldwork at two different gyms strengthened the study and had additional research benefits and purposes. First, collecting data from only one site would provide a quite narrow glimpse into the experience of community in CrossFit. Second, collecting data at two different gyms presented the opportunity for comparison. Having

comparison groups within a study can highlight how phenomena vary between groups, add rigor to the study, and enhance evidence-based practices (Lindsay, 2019). Comparisons can help reveal important differences in the populations (e.g., comparing a CrossFit community with racial diversity to one without and exploring the variance in individual experiences). Finally, I found it beneficial to conduct fieldwork at two gyms in different parts of the United States (i.e., the West and Midwest). Doing so helped me observe variance in gym communities, and my personal experience made me confident that such variance existed. Indeed, MWF and RMCF—from my own observations, assumptions, and limited self-reported data available—have different demographic makeups of their gyms.

At the time of data collection, RMCF had approximately 118 members, and the majority of athletes at RMCF were between the ages of 30-49, presumably in heterosexual marriages (i.e., I deduced this from hearing conversations of men speaking about their partners who were women and vice versa), and parents. I was not permitted by the gym ownership to collect demographic information from each member. Instead, I have included all available information from the gym's client management records which the owner gave me access to. According to these records, at the time of data collection, the gym was comprised of 33% female members and 66% male members. There were athletes of varying ages present in the gym including, 10-19 years (18%), 20-29 years (12%), 30-39 years (27%), 40-49 years (33%), 50-59 years (8%), 60-69 years (2%), and 70-79 years (< 1%). Based on my visual observations and assumptions during fieldwork, I believe RMCF to be similar to other CrossFit gyms throughout the United States in that their membership is largely White and middle to upper class. Of the 11 athletes who participated in interviews and self-reported their demographic data, 100% identified as White

and 81% reported household incomes of $150,000 or more. In addition, the majority of athletes in classes at RMCF were White presenting.

Conversely, MWF has a more (visibly) diverse athlete population related to age, physical ability, race, sexual orientation, national origin, and religion. Midwest Fitness (MWF) is a CrossFit gym with 126 members at the time of data collection. I was not permitted by the gym ownership to collect demographic information from each member. Instead, I included all available information from the gym's client management records that the owner shared with me. At the time of data collection, membership was comprised of 53% female members and 47% male members. Of the 20 athletes from MWF who participated in interviews and self-reported their demographic information, 50% identified as White and 35% reported household incomes of $150,000 or more. Although I was not able to collect self-reported data from all of MWF's athletes regarding their specific demographic information, I did see and hear visible differences in the athlete population during my fieldwork. For instance, there were several classes I attended when more than 75% of the class members (i.e., 16 out of 21 athletes) were people of color. In addition, I overheard an athlete telling another athlete their pronouns (i.e., the use of they/them pronouns) and observed one woman with a hearing impairment who regularly attended class.

The criteria for determining which gym had "more demographic diversity" is not foolproof, and there are flaws associated with a researcher making their own assumptions about the demographics of study participants (e.g., perpetuating bias and stereotypes, eliminating the ability for participants to self-identify). However, CrossFit headquarters does not make public, nor was I able to confirm that they collect, demographic information about the members at CrossFit affiliates. In addition, CrossFit affiliates do not report, and may not collect, demographic information about their athletes. The reason for this is unclear. I emailed the Chief

Analytics and Research Officer at CrossFit Headquarters on March 10, 2022 and asked to connect to learn more about research and data collection at headquarters but did not receive a response. I had several phone conversations with the former Global Head of DEI at CrossFit headquarters who was unable to point me toward any demographic information the organization collected about its affiliates. In consulting literature regarding organizational decisions to not collect this data (e.g., Andrus et al., 2021), I can only speculate that the choice may be influenced by (a) limited staffing and resources; (b) limited knowledge of which data to collect; (c) being uncertain about how to collect this information from members; (d) having low motivation to collect the data; (e) privacy laws and policies; and/or (f) avoiding criticism. Therefore, because demographic information was not available, I drew upon my knowledge about the typical demographic makeup of those who participate in CrossFit, insight that was derived from three factors, including my personal experience with CrossFit (i.e., drawing upon experiences of being a member at three gyms and having taken classes at more than 15 CrossFit gyms in various U.S. states over the last five years), the demographic makeup of athletes who participate in the CrossFit Games, and news and social media coverage about CrossFit broadly.

Paid membership was required by the gym owners during my observation periods. To conduct research in the way my protocol outlined, I needed to work out during class times (i.e., to personally experience the community experience), and participation during classes would not have been permitted unless I was a paying member. It may have been possible to conduct observations in these spaces without being a paying member, but I am uncertain of this because I did not approach the research in this manner. I funded this aspect of the research through the Department of Communication's Ruth Anne Clark Award. I paid one month of membership at

MWF ($160/month; this gym did not offer a student rate) and two months of membership at RMCF ($110/month; with the student rate).

Finally, I agreed to provide each gym with a list of follow-up information after data collection concluded. First, I agreed to provide a written summary of what I observed, including descriptions of what the athletes shared with me regarding their community experience. Second, I agreed to have a one-on-one phone call with the owner of the gym to further discuss the summary and answer any questions. Third, I offered to present the findings to all members of the gym either via web conference or an in-person presentation. Finally, I offered to provide one additional workshop specifically tailored to the gym on topics such as how to use gender inclusive language in the CrossFit gym, how to make the CrossFit gym inviting to people with disabilities, or strategies for how to include people with marginalized identities into the CrossFit community experience. I emailed reports to both MWF and RMCF. I held a call with the owner of MWF and discussed the study's findings. I emailed the owner of RMCF to schedule a call and did not receive a response. I did not provide additional presentations to either gym, as neither owner requested this. A summary of these outcomes can be found in Appendix B.

Fieldwork Data Collection Procedures

My observation period at RMCF took place from January 16, 2023 to March 15, 2023. I was present at the gym for five days each week, varying whether I attended morning or afternoon classes. During my first week of observation, I engaged in participant observation only as an athlete (i.e., I did not stand to the side during classes, but instead only participated). The goal of participating in observation only as an athlete was to more subtly integrate myself into the RMCF community and have a first-hand experience of the athlete experience. After the first week and through the final week of observation, I combined my participant observation with

observations in which I stood or sat to the side of classes and took notes. I combined the notes after determining that the two sets of notes tended to contain similar content (i.e., my observation notes often included personal feelings, senses, and observations).

I conducted fieldwork at RMCF for 67 hours, including observing 55 classes over a two-month period. RMCF offered six CrossFit classes during each week day (5 a.m., 6 a.m., 7 a.m., 9:15 a.m., 12:15 p.m., and 5 p.m.) and two CrossFit classes on Saturdays (8 a.m. and 9 a.m.). Saturday's 9 a.m. CrossFit class was a "community class" in which there was no fee or membership required to attend and it was promoted as being open to "anyone" interested in CrossFit. I attended the "community class" as a way of observing how the experience of community varied with the addition of non-paying members (i.e., potential "outsiders" to the experience). An overview of class offerings and times can be found in Appendix C. I was able to conduct observations during each class time on each day of the week. I ended data collection after two months of observation because I continued to observe the same patterns of behavior, topics of conversation, and members taking classes and deemed my data collection to be saturated (Tracy, 2020). By the end of the two-month period, no new information was emerging.

I spent one week at MWF, an observation period that took place between February 19 – 26, 2023. I conducted fieldwork at MWF for 27 hours, including observing 19 CrossFit classes over a seven-day period. MWF offered an average of six CrossFit classes during each week day and two CrossFit classes on Saturdays. In addition to CrossFit classes, MWF offered kettlebell, Olympic lifting, gymnastics, and endurance-style classes. An overview of class offerings and times can be found in Appendix D. I was able to conduct observations during each class time on each day of the week. I ended observations at MWF after one week, as that was the pre-determined amount of time for which I could be present. Despite being present for only one

week, I was able to identify repeating patterns, such as seeing the same athletes in the same classes and coaches leading classes multiple times.

At each gym, I announced my presence to the coaches and athletes by both sending an email prior to my first day of observations and making myself visible and known during each day of observations (i.e., at the start of each CrossFit class). The template used for these email introductions is included in Appendix E. Making athletes aware of my presence looked different at each site and as fieldwork progressed. At MWF, due to my brief observation timeline at this location, I made myself known every day and in each class by introducing myself, sharing why I was there, and sharing what my research entailed (i.e., what I was looking for during fieldwork). I announced myself each time to ensure each athlete was aware of my presence. Sometimes, depending on coach preference, the coach would introduce me and I would share more about the study's goals. At other times, I would introduce myself without the coach's introduction. After my introduction, the class would begin. I followed this same procedure regardless of whether I was working out with the class or observing.

I followed a similar structure at RMCF. Because my observation timeline was longer at RMCF, I had more frequent opportunities for athletes to see me repeatedly and become more used to my presence. For the first week of data collection at RMCF, I exclusively exercised with the classes and did not conduct observations from the side of the room. During this time, I introduced myself at the start of each class by sharing my name, why I was there, and describing what my research entailed. During week two, I began observing classes without working out and would introduce myself in a similar fashion. By week three, because most athletes were aware of my presence and goals, I lessened my introductions and instead greeted each person with a smile

and by saying “hello” as they entered the gym. If a person entered the gym and I had not previously met them, I would introduce myself and explain the study’s goals.

I agreed to specific codes of conduct, or behaviors, I would engage in when conducting fieldwork at each gym. First, I agreed to make my presence and goals known to athletes and coaches. Second, I agreed to stay off of the gym floor (unless I was working out in a class) and not enter each athlete’s workout space, instead observing primarily from the sides of the gym. Third, I agreed that I would not engage with athletes during the workout, instead restricting my conversations to before and after class. Finally, I agreed to not pressure or make the impression that I was forcing an athlete to participate in one-on-one interviews. I upheld this agreement by sending my recruitment announcement via email (i.e., a more passive approach to recruitment) and making announcements about interviews during class times as opposed to asking each person I spoke with if they would complete an interview with me.

At both RMCF and MWF, I took jottings (Emerson et al., 2011) using an iPad and Apple Pencil as I either participated or stood to the side during each class. Jottings are brief words or phrases written down as a result of observation at the field site. I used Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater’s (2011) list of what should be included in fieldnotes: (a) date, time, and place of observation; (b) specific facts, numbers, and details of what happened at the site; (c) sensory impressions, such as sights, sounds, textures, smells, and tastes; (d) personal responses to the fact of recording fieldnotes; (e) specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language; and (f) questions about people or behaviors to be investigated. For example, one portion of an entry from my fieldnotes can be found in Appendix F.

In addition, I engaged individually with athletes when they were available before or after class and asked them questions from the interview protocol with the goal of better understanding

how athletes experience community. I tried to speak with every athlete who was present at the gym, though it was not possible to speak with every member because of my own capacity (i.e., too many people to speak with at one time) or not all members attended classes during my observation period (e.g., they were out of town, chose not to attend classes, or attended at times in which I was not present). The conversations I had with athletes during fieldwork typically unfolded in two ways and were based on the length of time and level of rapport I had developed with the athlete (or group of athletes).

First, I usually had brief amounts of time (2-3 minutes) to speak with athletes. I was often engaging with them before or after class, and athletes usually arrived just in time for class and left immediately after. To make the most of these time restrictions, I typically engaged in small talk (i.e., light talk or chit-chat; Driessen & Jansen, 2013) as a way to establish credibility and maintain relationships with athletes. To do so, I started by approaching athletes who had previously smiled or made eye contact with me, or who had asked about the research. I engaged with these athletes before others because they had indicated verbally or nonverbally that they were interested in engaging with me. These interactions consisted of responses centered around questions such as, "Where are you from?", "What do you think of today's workout?" and "How long have you been doing CrossFit?" These interactions, due to their brevity and casual nature, did not permit me to gather much detail about their experiences of community. Instead, these interactions were centered around helping athletes see me as a familiar, approachable person, and decrease any threat or uncertainty they may have experienced as a result of my presence. However, there were times in which I was able to engage with athletes for longer periods of time (e.g., 10 minutes). These were mostly instances in which athletes arrived early and had time before the class or they had chosen to stay late after class. Additionally, these were sometimes

instances in which I was able to engage with athletes who had taken the class with me. Oftentimes, they were individuals I had worked out next to. In these cases, I asked them questions such as, “What brought you to CrossFit?” “How did you choose to become a member at RMCF/MWF?” or “What has your experience been like with the community here?” In addition, I made attempts to develop these relationships by bonding over the workout difficulty (e.g., making statements such as, “Wow! That workout was harder than I expected! What did you think?”).

According to Emerson et al. (2011), fieldnotes should be written during the site visit and organized immediately after leaving the site. Therefore, immediately after each observation period, I reviewed and organized my notes by reading over each page, making edits to improve readability, and prepare each page for uploading into NVivo for coding. In addition, I took my own voice memos in which I recorded my thoughts immediately after the observation period. Once I returned to my workspace, I transcribed these voice memos verbatim and uploaded them to NVivo for coding. The data collection for all fieldwork resulted in 211 pages of single-spaced typed notes.

Interviews

Interview Recruitment Methods and Criteria

The interview portion of data collection included 50 one-on-one interviews with several groups of people, including: (a) athletes from Rocky Mountain CrossFit (n = 11); (b) athletes from Midwest Fitness (n = 20); (c) athletes from a variety of CrossFit gyms throughout the United States (n = 13); (d) athletes who do CrossFit style workouts, but are not members at a CrossFit gym (n = 1); and (e) individuals who were formerly members at a CrossFit gym in the United States and those who no longer affiliate with CrossFit (i.e., they have left the CrossFit

community altogether; (n = 5)). Individuals must have met at least one of the above criteria to be eligible to participate in the interview. The purpose of recruiting from each of these groups was to ensure I collected a wide variety of experiences of community, including a variety of perspectives from those who chose to stay involved in the community and those who chose to leave.

Recruitment Procedures

To inform participants of the study opportunity, I reached out to eligible athletes in several ways. A visual of the sampling plan is included in Appendix G. First, I began a simultaneous recruitment effort at RMCF and through network sampling via my personal social media pages. I began participant recruitment at RMCF because of convenience: this group of athletes were the first to whom I had access. In addition, my goal was to gather a typical instance sample in which participants were chosen because they are typical of the CrossFit community experience (Tracy, 2020). In this case, I anticipated athletes at RMCF to be typical of what one might observe in a CrossFit community. Therefore, in my email introduction to athletes at RMCF, I asked that participants contact me if they were interested in being interviewed. In addition, as I continued to conduct fieldwork at RMCF, I developed relationships with athletes (i.e., building trust and credibility) and would sometimes ask athletes directly if they would be interested in participating in interviews. This was a helpful strategy, as athletes often recalled not seeing my email introduction and that they appreciated the direct ask. I concluded sampling at RMCF when I was no longer able to recruit athletes to participate (approximately the end of February 2023). While sampling athletes from RMCF, I simultaneously began my attempts to recruit athletes who were not affiliated with RMCF or MWF. To do so, I made recruitment announcements on my personal Facebook and Instagram pages. These posts were made public so

they could be shared with individuals outside of my personal network. The recruitment text is included in Appendix H.

Initial rounds of analysis began after the first interview and continued upon interview completion. After the analysis of approximately six interviews from athletes at MWCF and those who had been recruited through network sampling, I began to have an idea of the variety of community experiences athletes had. Categories began to emerge, and participants were then sampled based on the emergent categories and the "hunches" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3) that had developed. For example, Mary, a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman, shared that she "sometimes [felt] out of place when other women wore revealing clothing" to the gym. I developed the hunch that athletes may experience a CrossFit community differently depending on their body presentation or size. Thus, I made a call for more participants who identify as "large body, fat, obese, or overweight" to further pursue that hunch. Similarly, William, a gay man, shared there have "definitely been times where I've felt bad about being in [the CrossFit] space and not being included in whatever conversation is going on," and had his own suspicions that it was because of his sexual orientation. To explore this further, I sought to include additional participants with minority sexual orientations.

I thus initiated theoretical-construct sampling, or recruiting participants because they met specific theoretical characteristics (Tracy, 2020). This study's interview portion of data collection supported theoretical sampling in a way that fieldwork could not (i.e., the athletes who were members at RMCF and MWF were consistent and the data collection pool was thereby limited during the data collection period). Theoretical sampling was used to collect data from a variety of people and aided in maximizing opportunities to develop concepts in the data with rich dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In anticipation of the need to engage in theoretical sampling, I had previously collected specific categories of athletes' self-reported identities (i.e., race, gender identity, sexual orientation, household income, disability status). At the start of theoretical sampling, I turned to the list of athletes who had indicated interest and scheduled interviews with those who had marginalized identities (e.g., non-White race, LGBTQ, low-income, disability). Because the initial round of recruitment did not gather the interest of athletes with minority identities, I made a shareable, public call on my personal Facebook and Instagram social media pages specifically for athletes with minority identities in which I posted: "I am looking to connect with current or former CrossFit athletes who identify as being a member of one or more of these populations: large body, obese, fat, overweight, LGBTQIA+, low income, person of color, person with a disability, person with a chronic condition. I am conducting research about how CrossFit athletes experience community in their CrossFit gyms."

My final stage of sampling was to recruit athletes at MWF. I waited to recruit athletes from MWF because I wanted to (a) attempt to build credibility and trust with MWF athletes by being able to introduce myself in-person during my fieldwork at this location and (b) first observe the community experience at MWF so I would have a clearer idea of what to specifically ask them about during interviews. I concluded sampling at MWF when I was no longer able to recruit athletes to participate (approximately the end of April 2023). Of note, at all points throughout the data collection period, I engaged in snowball sampling in which I asked participants to suggest other individuals they knew who would fit the study's parameters (Tracy, 2020). This technique was particularly helpful for recruiting individuals with marginalized identities, as I was able to develop trust with one individual and then they shared their experiences with others with similar identities in their network.

I concluded data collection in April 2023 after collecting 50 interviews and after I had made my best attempts at reaching saturation, or no emergence of new codes or categories (Tracy, 2020). I am confident I reached saturation in narratives from athletes with majority identities. However, I struggled to reach saturation with the sample that included individuals with historically marginalized identities. For issues of saturation and how to determine the number of interviews I would need to collect, I tuned into three factors. First, at the start of the study, I knew I would likely need to collect a larger number of interviews because the study's criteria for participation was quite broad (i.e., *any* person in the United States who did CrossFit or had left CrossFit). As such, I needed to collect a wide number of narratives to begin to identify patterns across a wide variety of experiences. Second, I also knew I needed to collect a heterogeneous sample that included the voices of CrossFit athletes with a wide variety of identities. Third, I regularly reflected on the demographics of the sample I was collecting and kept in mind the necessity of the study to include a heterogenous sample. I wrote a memo on February 15, 2023 that addressed this issue:

> I have collected almost 30 interviews since I began data collection. I am confident I am seeing similar issues and themes come up in each of these interviews. However, I am concerned that most of the sample so far is comprised of individuals with homogenous identities (e.g., mostly White, higher income, heterosexual). I know from my personal experience, fieldwork, and interviews with people with different identities (e.g., people of color, LGBTQ) that folks with marginalized identities do have different experiences of community. I believe it is best to spend my time now trying to recruit people with marginalized identities (e.g., those who identify with a minority race, sexual orientation, income, body size, and/or having a disability). I anticipate it is going to be difficult to find these folks, but I will turn to network and snowball sampling to continue to increase the sample and see how it unfolds. If I am unable to recruit additional participants with these identities over the next one and a half months, I will discontinue recruitment.

Thus, I spent the rest of my time aiming to collect data from individuals who indicated they had marginalized identities. By the time I collected 50 interviews, I began to sense saturation in stories from folks with marginalized identities, but I do believe this portion of the data could

benefit from additional narratives. However, I after four months of recruitment, I was unable to recruit any additional people from this pool to participate and general participant interest had dissipated. Thus, I concluded data collection, confident I had reached saturation with part of the sample and knowing future research would need to explore additional narratives from people with marginalized identities.

To track participant interest and information, I developed a survey used by participants to (a) indicate their interest in participating in the study, (b) indicate their eligibility for the study, and (c) voluntarily report their demographic information. Completing the survey indicated their interest in participating in the study. To indicate their eligibility for the study, participants were asked to respond to indicate their current relationship to CrossFit (i.e., a current member at a CrossFit gym, someone who was once a member but is no longer affiliated, or that neither of those statements were true). In the event that a participant indicated they had no previous experience with CrossFit, they were deemed ineligible for the study. Finally, demographic information included gender identity, sexual orientation, transgender status, race, ethnicity, age, education, annual household income, and disability status. The full survey is included in Appendix I. All demographic questions were modeled after those recommended by the National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT, 2023), an organization that provides guidance for using inclusive language in survey measures. It was important to me in this survey that I signaled to all potential participants that I recognized and welcomed all types of identities in this study. For all individuals who were eligible and indicated their interest in participating, I reached out via email and prompted them to select a time on my calendar (via Calendly.com) that worked best for them. Participants had the option of selecting either Zoom or phone (conducted via Google Voice) for their interview. Once a participant selected their time, they

were sent an automated follow-up email with a Zoom link or phone number. The template for this email correspondence is included in Appendix J.

Participant consent and permission to audio record was obtained prior to the start of each interview. Participants were prompted to choose a pseudonym. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). The interviews began with questions intended to build rapport and help participants feel more comfortable in the interview (e.g., "What are some reasons you have an exercise routine?" and "Why did you choose CrossFit as opposed to another exercise program?"). The interviews then focused more specifically on the community experience (e.g., "How do you define community? What has someone done in the CrossFit gym to help you feel more included? Excluded? What do athletes or coaches do to build or take away from community?"). Finally, questions addressed identity-related issues (e.g., "What parts of your identity do you see as being important to you in your experience at the CrossFit gym?" and "How do you think different parts of your identity contribute to your experience of community at your gym, if at all?"). The full interview guide can be found in Appendix K. Athletes were compensated for their participation with a $25 e-gift card of their choice. Interviews ranged in length from 23 minutes to 54 minutes (M = 40 minutes, SD = 7.31). Interviews were transcribed verbatim by either myself (n = 6) or a transcription service (n = 44). Transcripts resulted in 553 single spaced pages.

Interview Participant Characteristics

A total of 50 individuals participated in interviews. Of the 50 participants, 45 (90%) were current CrossFit athletes and five (10%) had left the CrossFit community. Of all participants, 17 (34%) identified as men, 33 (66%) identified as women, and zero identified as transgender. Thirty-eight participants (76%) identified as straight, five (10%) identified as gay or lesbian, four

(8%) identified as bisexual, two (4%) identified as pansexual, and one (2%) identified as queer. Thirty-two participants (64%) identified as White, six (12%) identified as African American or Black, four (8%) identified as Mixed Race, three (6%) identified as Asian, two (4%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx, two (4%) identified as Middle Eastern/North African, and one (2%) identified as Scandinavian. Participants varied in age; 21 participants (42%) were between the ages of 25 and 34, 21 participants (42%) were between the ages of 35 and 44, five participants (10%) were between the ages of 45 and 54, two participants (4%) were between the ages of 55 and 64, and one participant (2%) was between the ages of 18-24. Forty-two participants (84%) identified as not having a disability, seven (14%) identified as having a disability, and one (2%) did not report. Eighteen athletes (36%) reported having an annual household income of $150,000 and above, 15 (30%) reported income of $50,000 - $89,000, seven (14%) reported income of $130,000 - $149,000, six (12%) reported income of $90,000 - $129,000, and four (8%) reported income of $20,000 - $49,000. Nine states were represented, including California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, New York, and South Carolina. Table 1 includes a high-level overview of all participant demographics and Table 2 includes specific demographic information for each participant.

Table 1

Overview of Participant Demographics

CrossFit Status	45 (90%) current members 5 (10%) former members
Gender	17 (34%) men 33 (66%) women 0 (100%) identified as transgender
Sexual Orientation	38 (76%) identified as straight 5 (10%) identified as gay or lesbian 4 (8%) identified as bisexual 2 (4%) identified as pansexual 1 (2%) identified as queer
Race	32 (64%) identified as White 6 (12%) identified as African American or Black 4 (8%) identified as Mixed Race 3 (6%) identified as Asian 2 (4%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx 2 (4%) identified as Middle Eastern/North African 1 (2%) identified as Scandinavian
Age	1 (2%) identified as 18-24 years old 21 (42%) identified as 25-34 years old 21 (42%) identified as 35-44 years old 5 (10%) identified as 45-54 years old 2 (4%) identified as 55-64 years old
Disability Status	42 (84%) identified as not having a disability 7 (14%) identified as having a disability 1 (2%) did not report
Household Income	4 (8%) reported annual income of $20,000 - $49,999 15 (30%) reported annual income of $50,000 - $89,999 6 (12%) reported annual income of $90,000 - $129,999 7 (14%) reported annual income of $130,000 - $149,999 18 (36%) reported annual income of $150,000+
Locations	9 states were represented: CA, CO, IL, IN, MD, MI, NC, NY, SC

Table 2

Specific Participant Demographics

Name	Status	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Ethnicity	Age	Education	Household Income	Disability Status	State
Abby	No longer with CrossFit	Woman	Queer	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$130,000 - $149,999	Yes	NC
Bert	Current member	Man	Gay or Lesbian	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	45-54	MA	$150,000+	No	MI
Beth	Current member	Woman	Pan-sexual	Hispanic or Latinx; White	Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	BA	$20,000 - $49,999	No	MI
Bob	Current member	Man	Gay or Lesbian	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	PhD	$130,000 - $149,999	No	CO
Boots	Current member	Woman	Hetero-sexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	MI
Cathy	Current member	Woman	Hetero-sexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	55-64	MA	$130,000 - $149,999	No	MI
Chris	Current member	Man	Hetero-sexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	45-54	BA	$150,000+	No	CO
Ellen	Current member	Woman	Hetero-sexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	45-54	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	CO
Emily	Current member	Woman	Hetero-sexual	African American or Black	Not Reported	35-44	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	Yes	IN
Grace	Current member	Woman	Hetero-sexual	Hispanic or Latinx	Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$20,000 - $49,999	No	MI

Table 2 (cont.)

Name	Status	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Ethnicity	Age	Education	Household Income	Disability Status	State
Hank	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	BA	$150,000+	No	CO
Hannah	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	NC
Hogsmeade	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$150,000+	No	MI
James	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	BA	$150,000+	No	CO
Jane	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	Yes	NC
Joe	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$150,000+	No	CO
Kate	No longer with CrossFit	Woman	Bisexual	Hispanic or Latinx	Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	PhD	$90,000 - $129,999	No	MD
Kevin	Current member	Man	Gay or Lesbian	White; Native American; Alaska Native; First Nations	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	MI
Kia	Current member	Woman	Bisexual	African American or Black	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	1 or more years of college	$50,000 - $89,999	No	CO
Leslie	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	CA

Table 2 (cont.)

Name	Status	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Ethnicity	Age	Education	Household Income	Disability Status	State
Lotus	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Eastern; North African	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$20,000 - $49,999	No	MI
Luke	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	BA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	IL
Lynn	Current member	Woman	Pansexual	Hispanic or Latinx; White	Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	1 or more years of college	$50,000 - $89,999	Yes	CA
Maggie	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Eastern; North African	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	MI
Mandolin	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$150,000+	No	CO
Maria	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$130,000 - $149,999	Yes	MI
Mary	Not a member but does CrossFit	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	SC
May	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	18-24	BA	$20,000 - $49,999	No	MI
Melissa	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	African American or Black	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	PhD	$90,000 - $129,999	No	MI
Molly	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$150,000+	No	IL

Table 2 (cont.)

Name	Status	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Ethnicity	Age	Education	Household Income	Disability Status	State
Natalie	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian; White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	BA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	IL
Nicole	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	African American or Black	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$90,000 - $129,999	No	IN
Noel	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$150,000+	No	MI
Penelope	Current member	Woman	Bisexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	45-54	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	NC
Peter	No longer with CrossFit	Man	Gay or Lesbian	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$90,000 - $129,999	No	NY
Pierre	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	BA	$150,000+	No	CO
Rachel	No longer with CrossFit	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	PhD	$130,000 - $149,999	Yes	NC
Rey	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	Asian	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$90,000 - $129,999	No	MI
Rodderick	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	45-54	MA	$150,000+	No	CO
Sal	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	55-64	MA	$50,000 - $89,999	No	MI

Table 2 (cont.)

Name	Status	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Ethnicity	Age	Education	Household Income	Disability Status	State
Sara	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	PhD	$150,000+	No	CO
Sidney	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	BA	$150,000+	No	CO
Skippy	No longer with CrossFit	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	BA	$150,000+	N/R	CA
Sky	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	BA	$150,000+	No	MI
Special K	Current member	Woman	Bisexual	Scandinavian	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$150,000+	No	MI
Stacy	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$130,000 - $149,999	No	CO
Tom	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	1 or more years of college	$150,000+	No	MI
Vanessa	Current member	Woman	Heterosexual	African American or Black	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	MA	$90,000 - $129,999	Yes	CA
Vincent	Current member	Man	Heterosexual	African American or Black	Not Hispanic/Latinx	35-44	1 or more years of college	$130,000 - $149,999	No	MI
William	Current member	Man	Gay or Lesbian	White	Not Hispanic/Latinx	25-34	MA	$150,000+	No	CO

Data Analysis

One of the greatest strengths of qualitative research and analysis is its diversity and flexibility of approaches, each aimed at producing a comprehensive, rigorous outcome (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). In the spirit of using a variety of tools to generate the strongest analysis possible, I combined several qualitative analysis approaches. The analysis strategy I used for this data was primarily Tracy's (2020) phronetic iterative approach, and I also referenced additional analysis procedures and techniques inspired by constructivist grounded theory development (e.g., Charmaz, 2006; 2014).

A phronetic iterative approach was well suited as the primary analysis approach for this study. This approach involves visiting and re-visiting specific portions of the data, identifying emerging concepts and refining understanding of the data by referencing pre-existing literature, all with the goal of developing theory and providing guidance on social practice and action (Tracy, 2020). A phronetic iterative approach draws from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and is an inductive methodology that asks researchers to consider data in light of their own positionality (Gioia et al., 2013). In addition, the approach emphasizes gathering data to be problem-oriented, contributing to improving relationships and organizations (Tracy, 2020). It is important to me that this study made both a strong contribution to communication theory and was useful to practitioners.

To engage in a phronetic iterative analysis approach, I followed five steps outlined by Tracy (2018; 2020). First, I determined how I would organize the data. Second, I identified sensitizing concepts. Third, I engaged in first-level coding, identifying in vivo codes and following the constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2014). Fourth, I engaged in second-level coding. Finally, I conducted negative case analyses. I next provide greater detail of each step.

Step 1: Organize the Data

First, I determined an organizational approach for the data. I prepared all materials, including fieldnotes and interview transcripts, and uploaded them to NVivo coding software. NVivo is a data management tool that supports qualitative and mixed methods research. I chose NVivo as opposed to another software or a "pen and paper" approach to coding because NVivo offers portability (i.e., I could more easily and safely take my research with me anytime I had my password-protected computer), convenience (i.e., all documents are stored in one place and do not need to be printed), systemization (e.g., I was able to easily search for a specific quote more easily, and codes are organized by group and sub-group which supported the different stages of the iterative analysis process), and affordability (i.e., $10 per month). In addition, there are ample tutorials of how to use this software to its greatest capabilities (e.g., Allsop et al., 2022). I developed separate files for fieldnotes and transcripts to ensure I could differentiate my own observations from insights shared by participants during interviews. I coded all data chronologically, as it helped illuminate the trajectory of my analysis and track how codes and the data changed over time (Tracy, 2020).

Step 2: Identify Sensitizing Concepts

Second, qualitative scholars argue it is both unavoidable (e.g., Tracy, 2020) and necessary (e.g., Charmaz, 2014) to approach the analysis with sensitizing concepts. Sensitizing concepts come from past literatures and are theories, interpretive devices, or ideas that serve as frameworks for experiencing or organizing the data (Bowen, 2006; Tracy, 2018). These concepts provide "an analytic frame, serving as a point of reference and a guide in the analysis of data with theory-producing potential" (Bowen, 2006, p. 4). The sensitizing concepts referenced here were first generated as I determined the goals of the study and were revisited during data

analysis. To identify sensitizing concepts that would be of most utility for the analysis, I considered the primary areas of focus for the study as outlined by the three research questions: community, identity, (dis)identification, and interpersonal communication processes. Appendix L includes sample sensitizing concepts used to guide data analysis. Examples of concepts related to community included relational community, sense of community, and CrossFit norms and traditions. Examples of concepts related to identity and (ds)identification included inclusion, exclusion, race, gender, and identification. Concepts related to interpersonal communication processes included identification, uncertainty, nonverbal communication, and support. Finally, because language is central to many interpersonal interactions, I paid special attention to speech acts as a tool for suggesting directions for how to analyze experiences of community and (dis)identification. Speech acts are goal-directed actions produced through words and the utterance of sounds that convey meaning in an overarching communicative event (Searle, 1971). Examples of speech acts I paid close attention to included greetings, invitations, gratitude, smack talk (Fennell, 2022), and trash talk (Yip et al., 2018). Closely examining these speech acts over time helped me gather context for the communicative event, increasing my ability to identify linked events and more holistically comprehend and tell stories about athletes' experiences (Wortham & Reyes, 2015).

Step 3: First-Level Coding

Third, I immersed myself in the data, familiarizing myself with information from fieldwork and one-on-one interviews. Coding is the process of marking parts of the text that are of special interest to the research questions. I engaged in first-level coding for each of the research questions (i.e., descriptive coding; Tracy, 2020) and named what I saw in the data (e.g., specific behaviors, routines, character types). During this time, I regularly turned back to the

research questions and sensitizing concepts to ensure my codes and analysis continued to align with the intended research directions (Tracy, 2020). Examples of first-level codes for RQ1 (i.e., How do athletes experience [or not] community in CrossFit?) included "relationships," "identity," "inclusive," "gym space," and "exclusive." Examples of first-level codes for RQ2 (i.e., What are the interpersonal processes that facilitate (dis)identification with community in CrossFit?) included "coaching," "support," "immediacy," and "recognition." Examples of first-level codes for RQ3 (i.e., How do athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit?) included "advocacy," "acceptance," "small groups," and "exit."

During first-level coding, I identified *in vivo* codes, or codes named with actual words spoken by the participants. The purpose of identifying *in vivo* codes is to identify the language and terms the participants use themselves, a particularly helpful strategy to more closely identity the specific cultures or sub-cultures of each CrossFit community experience (Tracy, 2020). Examples of in vivo codes for RQ1 included "supportive" and "cliquey." Examples of in vivo codes for RQ2 included "asking questions" and "feeling seen." Examples of in vivo codes for RQ3 included "ignore it," "speak out," and "be the representation."

Finally, through the first-level coding process, I engaged in the constant comparative method in which I compared the data to each code and modified codes and their definitions to fit new data (Charmaz, 2014). For instance, the code "coaching" fit the data well at the start of coding. However, I was able to compare newly coded items with this "coaching" code and determined that these descriptions of coaching could more accurately be coded as "good coaching" or "bad coaching," depending on the athlete's description.

Step 4: Identify Second-Level Codes

I then initiated second-level coding (i.e., analytic coding; Tracy, 2020) in which I consulted existing literature and began to link codes identified during first-level coding to establish overarching themes. Themes work to convert codes into concepts that represent the most salient parts of the findings. During this cycle, I began to develop thematic models of the data and identified negative cases to strengthen credibility of the data. For instance, I began to notice that certain communication processes tended to promote inclusion and foster (dis)identification with community more than others. To expand on this, I referenced other literature exploring communication processes that fostered identification and inclusion in interpersonal relationships and social groups, such as confirmation theory (Dailey, 2006), organizational identification (Pratt, 2000) and relational identity and identification through work relationships (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). In addition, I hypothesized about the relationship between codes and identified exemplars to represent each category. For instance, I noticed data coded as "dismissal" and "negative community experience" frequently overlapped. Furthermore, I noticed instances coded as "dismissal" often overlapped with codes such as "minority identity-related experience." Thus, I began to hypothesize that there was an intersecting relationship between athletes' personal identities (especially for athletes with historically marginalized identities), their CrossFit community experiences, and their identification with community.

Step 5: Negative Case Analysis

Finally, I conducted negative case analyses. Negative case analysis involves identifying data that do not appear to support the emerging claims and revising arguments so data better fit the claims (Tracy, 2020). The purpose of conducting negative case analyses is to acknowledge alternative or deviant viewpoints and their sources. Doing so can strengthen the findings by more clearly presenting the strengths and limitations of the data. Negative cases were not prominent in

the data. However, I developed memos to hypothesize alternative explanations for the negative cases that did emerge. The following memo serves as an example.

> I have noticed that many athletes have spoken of the need to feel supported and encouraged in their CrossFit communities. A prominent theme in the analysis regarding RQ2 is that support and encouragement are central to athletes' experiences of community. However, one athlete I interviewed discussed less of a need for support and affirming feedback during workouts. This was because, he shared, that he is very confident in his athletic abilities and does CrossFit just "for something to do." He described CrossFit as not being a central part of his everyday life. Therefore, it would seem that he is less invested in feeling support because he gets support in his life elsewhere. I do not believe, however, that this is the typical experience of people in CrossFit, as other athletes I have spoken with have expressed the centrality of CrossFit to their daily lives. For most people I have spoken with, CrossFit is a place where they go to both improve their fitness and seek out affirming social interactions. (Fieldwork memo, April 1, 2023)

In this memo, I highlight how I sought to provide explanations for negative cases. An additional example of a negative case included a woman of color who did not experience feelings of exclusion in her CrossFit gym. Upon speaking with her to better understand why, she shared that members regularly engaged in interpersonal immediacy behaviors in a way that made her feel consistently invited and welcomed, despite holding a minority racial identity.

In the section that follows, I begin to tell the story of the ways in which CrossFit athletes experience community in their CrossFit gyms, including how athletes' intersectional identities bear upon their experiences of community and the role of interpersonal communication in how people experience community.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

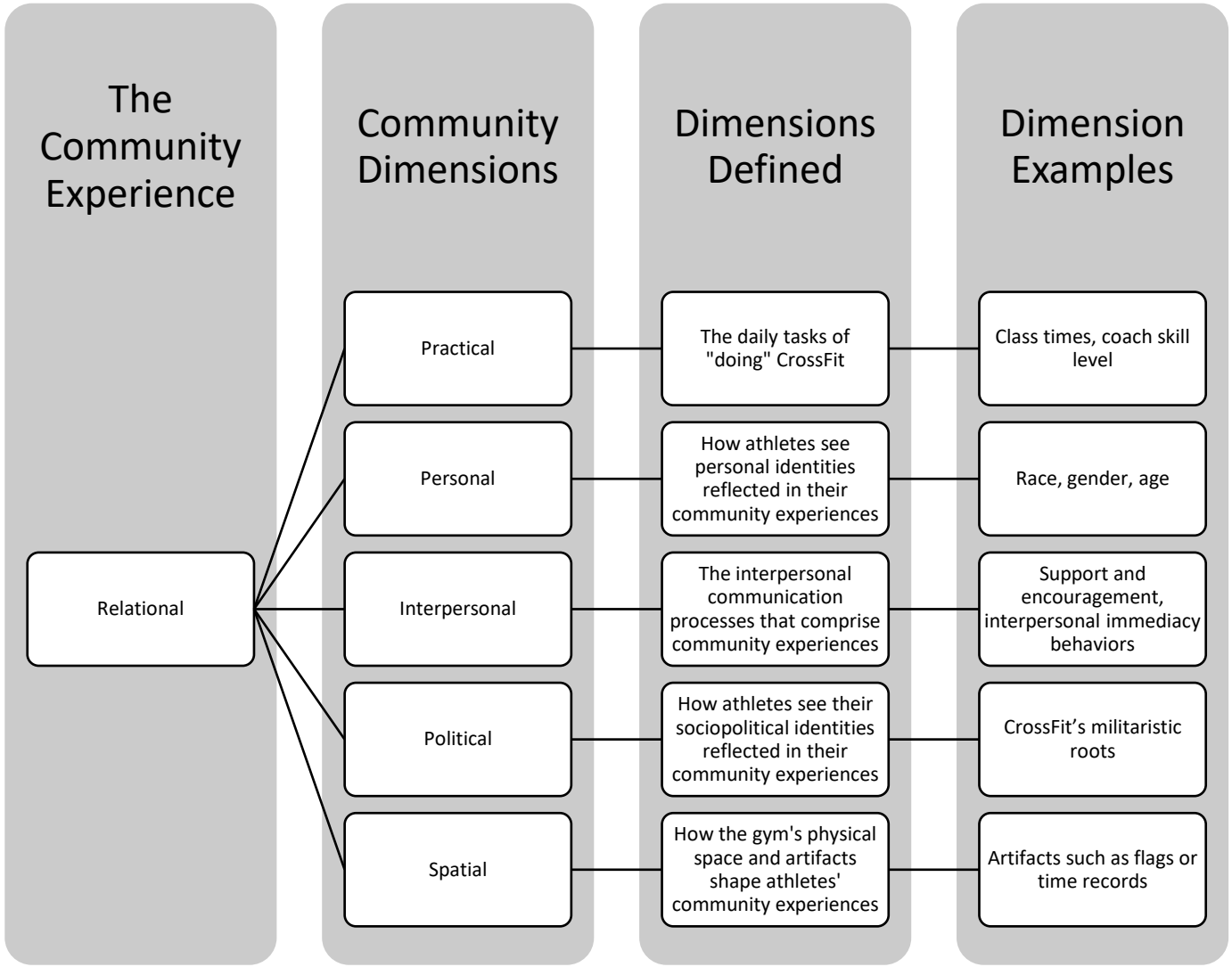
The goals of this study were to explore (a) how athletes experience (or not) community in CrossFit, (b) identify the interpersonal processes that facilitate (dis)identification with community in CrossFit, and (c) identify how athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit. Findings of this study yield a dynamic model of community in CrossFit that acknowledges preexisting, longstanding conceptualizations of community. No one conceptualization "fit" the data; rather, the data spoke to each conceptualization of community. For instance, athletes' descriptions of community prominently align with the conceptualizations of relational community (Chaskin, 2012) in that one of athletes' primary behaviors in this space is seeking out others with shared identities. Indeed, community in CrossFit is just as much an exercise experience as it is a social experience. In addition, community in CrossFit is initiated through its function as a group of people who engage in collective learning on a particular topic to fulfill goals, a tenant central to communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Athletes described community as (a) a complicated, layered, and nuanced negotiation between personal and organizational identities, (b) a bundle of interpersonal communication processes amongst athletes, such as support and encouragement and immediacy, and (c) a collection of athletes in pursuit of common fitness goals. The model of community in CrossFit explicated in the following sections situates community as a relational process constituted in communication over time along practical, personal, interpersonal, political, and spatial dimensions. The *practical* dimension refers to the daily tasks of "doing" community in CrossFit, such as class times and experiences, coaching abilities, workout programming choices, or the community's mentality around competition. The *personal* dimension refers to the ways in which

athletes saw their personal identities—such as health status, race, or age—reflected (or not) in their everyday CrossFit community experiences. The *interpersonal* dimension refers to interpersonal communication processes—such as the provision of support and encouragement or interpersonal immediacy behaviors—that make social interactions in a CrossFit community inclusive or exclusive. The *political* dimension refers to the ways in which athletes saw their sociopolitical identities reflected (or not) in their everyday experiences of community and whether they perceived the political climate of the community to be inclusive or exclusive. Finally, the *spatial* dimension refers to how the CrossFit gym's physical manifestation—for example, through its layout or artifacts such as flags—shapes community interactions and communicates inclusion or exclusion. A visual representation of this model of community in CrossFit is included in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Model of Community in CrossFit



Each dimension is shaped by athletes' experiences of identity and identification. The model of community in CrossFit presented here is predicated on the definition of interpersonal communication used to frame this study: "Communication between two (or more) people in which the message exchanged significantly influence their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships" (McCormack, 2015, p. 11). Indeed, according to SIT, social identity and identification are central to understanding communicative behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As SIT would suggest, athletes defined their sense of self in terms of their social categories and in- or outgroup membership. Social identity influenced community experiences through group norms which worked to regulate the thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships of athletes in their communities and prompt the self-classification of ingroups and outgroups. This social categorization prompted (dis)identification processes with particular groups; as such, community became a product of social identity and communicative behaviors. To identify meant athletes could see their own personal identities reflected in other individuals' identities and the gym's identities. Athletes felt a sense of security, companionship, purpose, and self-worth as derived from their ingroup community membership (e.g., "I belong here," or "My CrossFit community is valuable to me;" Haslam et al., 2009). Yet, identification was not absolute for many individuals. For instance, an athlete might find themselves identifying with one dimension of community, such as the personal dimension. However, that same athlete might find the interpersonal dimension to be incompatible. The athlete, then, might experience tensions associated with their identification, oscillating between identification and disidentification depending on the situation or the criteria they were evaluating. When athletes found themselves disidentified with their community, many used one or more strategies to manage tensions associated with their

disidentification, such as speaking out, compartmentalizing, being the representation, developing a sub-community, or leaving the gym or CrossFit entirely.

There are three additional notes about this model of community in CrossFit. First, the dimensions included in this model of community are intersectional and dynamic. Dimensions do stand on their own, but most athletes' experiences of community are impacted by one or more dimensions at once. For example, having a strong relationship with an athlete (i.e., interpersonal dimension) informs a coach's ability to coach the athlete in a way that is preferrable to them (i.e., practical dimension). In addition, some dimensions include more robust descriptions and examples than others. Typically, the more robust dimensions, such as personal and interpersonal, were addressed more often, or emphasized more heavily, than less robust dimensions, such as sociopolitical or spatial.

Second, each of these dimensions have a temporal nature in that individuals experience community based on positive, negative, and neutral interpersonal interactions over time. As Agha (2007) articulated, "Things that last for seconds can have effects that last for years" (p. 3). In other words, athletes remembered their interpersonal interactions in ways that had a long-term ability to shape how one experienced community. Consequently, an athlete's experience of community changed over time based on both their perception of the group and the group's perception of them. Community was sometimes taken for granted in this way; ingroup identities were often strongly assimilated, and outgroup identities instead tended to be isolated in ways that had the ability to change athletes' behavior, for example, by using strategies to manage disidentification that resulted from undesirable interpersonal interactions. Fieldwork and interviews with athletes suggested that identification is highest when individuals in the gym invested in learning about each other's goals, identities, and life experiences. These

communicative behaviors sometimes did not occur with outgroup members; instead, they were often ignored, devalued, dismissed, and made to search out affirming experiences of community on their own.

Third, community in CrossFit did not just *happen*, and simply becoming a member at a CrossFit gym did not entitle an athlete into affirming community experiences. Instead, athletes recalled the importance of community experiences being intentionally cultivated. Again, an athlete's sense of affirming community was often linked to their status as an ingroup or outgroup member (i.e., outgroup members often needed to work harder to find affirming experiences of community). Moreover, athletes' experiences of community were not bound to interactions that took place inside the walls of the gym. Instead, community experiences were influenced by interpersonal interactions that spilled outside of the gym, including invitations (or not) to coffee dates or beers after a workout and interactions on social media. Both the presence and absence of these interactions were significant, as they communicated a sense of belonging.

Next, I unpack each of the five relational dimensions of community in the model, including what each dimension means and how components of the dimension facilitated identification and disidentification with CrossFit. Then, I describe the strategies athletes used when attempting to manage disidentification with their CrossFit community.

Practical

Athletes identified with their CrossFit community when they experienced the community as being aligned with the everyday needs of being a member at a CrossFit gym. Practical considerations for athletes related to the daily tasks of "doing" community in CrossFit, such as class times, class experiences, coaching abilities, workout programming choices, or the community's orientation to competition. Many of these practical considerations either met

athletes' needs or they did not. In addition, practical dimensions of community were made evident through interpersonal interactions (i.e., interpersonal dimension) such as those between other athletes, coaches, or the gym owner. This finding aligns with the dimensions of communities of practice as articulated by Wenger (1998) in that communities of practice (i.e., a CrossFit community) must *jointly* pursuing a specific goal (i.e., the goal of fitness through CrossFit).

As community of practice literature would suggest, identification occurs when group goals are clearly articulated (Gongla & Rizzuto, 2004), there is consistent personal contact and the development of social capital (Stuckey & Smith, 2004), and when community is purposefully cultivated and supported (Culver & Trudel, 2008). Athletes identified with community when their experiences included behaviors intended to generate inclusion. In addition, athletes jeopardized others' identification with community when they engaged in bad behavior, such as drama or sexual harassment. In the following section, I address the practical dimension of community as it manifested through (a) each gym's philosophy and approach to CrossFit as a practice and (b) the individual conduct demonstrated by athletes, coaches, and gym owners.

Gym Philosophy and Approach

Each CrossFit community has a unique philosophy and approach for how they practice or enact the everyday doing of CrossFit. The CrossFit methodology and ethos are guidelines written by CrossFit headquarters about how affiliate gyms should implement the practice of CrossFit. The practice of CrossFit acts as facilitator of joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998) in which athletes come together to pursue a specific undertaking or goal: CrossFit and exercise. First, the CrossFit *methodology* refers CrossFit's methods and principles for executing CrossFit as an exercise routine and program at its affiliate gyms. The CrossFit methodology is similar to an

organization's guiding principles and purpose. Every CrossFit gym, due to its affiliation with CrossFit as a brand, must integrate the CrossFit methodology and ethos to some degree. First, I will provide an overview of the methodology and ethos. Then, I will describe how a CrossFit gym's approach to integrating the methodology and ethos shapes athletes' identification with community.

There are two components of the CrossFit methodology. First, the methodology—as articulated in a blog post by CrossFit's Director of Training and Education, Nicole Carroll—references what CrossFit is: "Constantly varied functional movement executed at high intensity combined with eating meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no added sugar in quantities that support exercise but not body fat" (Carroll, 2023b, para. 5). Second, the methodology references what CrossFit achieves: "Increased work capacity across broad time and modal domains. Pursuing this goal is pursuing fitness, and aiming to maintain your work capacity over your lifetime is pursuing health" (Carroll, 2023b, para. 6). Together, what CrossFit *is* and what it *achieves* forms the methodology. Through its methodology, CrossFit has positioned itself to be not only an exercise program, but also a nutrition and lifestyle guide. CrossFit, therefore, positions itself to be all-encompassing for an individual. The notions of "constant improvement" and that the pursuit of fitness is for a *lifetime*, not one moment, suggests underlying pre-requisites of intensity, consistency, and commitment. Such pre-requisites—and expectations of character for those who participate—are articulated in the CrossFit ethos.

The CrossFit *ethos*—again articulated in a blog post by Carroll—comprises the guiding beliefs, ideals, and "values that have come to characterize CrossFit and the CrossFit community" (Carroll, 2023a, para. 7). The ethos is expressed through CrossFit's values, including: "results, personal responsibility and accountability, belonging, humility, camaraderie, service integrity

and excellence, work ethic and discipline, resilience and grit, humility, and virtuosity" (Carroll, 2023a, para. 8). The ethos promotes a "no-bullshit" (Carroll, 2023a, para. 9) approach to fitness and health, one in which efforts are measurable and tracked, and athletes are expected to be disciplined, have humble attitudes, perform workouts intensely, and cheer each other on.

The CrossFit methodology and ethos are intended to shape a variety of aspects of CrossFit as a practice, including the flow and function of a class, variance in programming, movement modification options, nutrition recommendations, and attitudes in the gym. The methodology prescribes how workout programming should be practiced and implemented, such as constantly varied movements (i.e., different workouts each day) or functional movements (e.g., pushups, squats) performed at high intensity and in *quantifiable* terms (i.e., athletes are expected to track, often publicly, their workout results). The ethos articulates how athletes should respond to the methodology.

However, because CrossFit follows an "affiliate" model as opposed to a "franchise" model, local CrossFit gyms (also referred to as "CrossFit affiliates") are not *required* to exactly adhere to the implementation of the CrossFit methodology and the ethos (unlike, for example, a Starbucks Coffee franchise which requires all components of existence to be identical no matter the location). Affiliates are not required to implement any specific branding or consistency of experience. They are expected, however, to use some resemblance of the CrossFit methodology and ethos, but how that is done varies dramatically from gym to gym. The degree to which each CrossFit affiliate identifies with CrossFit's methodology and ethos varies greatly. These loose requirements contribute to the variance of experiences articulated by athletes in this study and observed during fieldwork.

Each CrossFit community's approach to integrating the methodology and ethos influences athlete (dis)identification. It is often the gym owners who initially interpret the methodology and ethos—and thereby the everyday manner of practicing or doing CrossFit—in varying ways. For example, some owners stive to implement the CrossFit methodology and ethos almost exactly, integrating intensity, consistency, and commitment into every aspect of their experiences. Others are more flexible in their approach, allowing for less intensity and focusing more on "every day fitness." Gym leaders, such as owners and coaches, communicate these philosophical choices through their interpersonal communication, such as how they deliver messages or styles of support and encouragement. When athletes view these implementation efforts are compatible with their desired fitness goals or experiences, they identify.

MWF and RMCF varied greatly from one another in terms of how they implemented the CrossFit methodology and ethos. For example, MWF implemented the methodology and ethos in a way that was more flexible and focused on the practice of everyday fitness. In observing the artifacts included around the gym, MWF did not feature CrossFit in any of their artifacts, such as photos or signage. In addition, the name of their gym does not include "CrossFit." The only acknowledgement of MWF being affiliated with CrossFit is in the naming of their classes. I asked the owner, Joshua, about this apparent distancing from the organization, to which he replied, "We believe in the CrossFit methodology, but otherwise choose not to closely affiliate with CrossFit [as a brand]." The sentiment behind his comments were that MWF chose to cultivate a community without the influence of the CrossFit brand's complicated history, perhaps because some of the thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships of gym members were negatively impacted by the CrossFit brand's choices (e.g., the brand's response to Black Lives Matter or Glassman's blunders).

MWF was somewhat particular about the types of athletes they included as members in the gym. For instance, Joshua recalled several times in which prospective athletes connected with him to discuss whether MWF would be a good fit for them. One prospective athlete shared that her goal was to train to qualify for the CrossFit Games. The athlete shared that she would largely use the gym for its "open gym" time in which athletes can use the gym to complete their own programming. Joshua shared with her that MWF would not be the best gym to support her training goals, as "the type of community we are trying to create is one where the athletes work out together and support each other, and we're all working towards a common goal of functional fitness for life." Joshua directed this athlete toward other gyms in the area, as he knew the prospective athlete's goals were not compatible with MWF's community and goals.

The CrossFit Open. One of the places we see the integration of the CrossFit methodology and ethos clearly is through the implementation of the CrossFit Open, the largest global CrossFit competition in the world. In the memos that follow, I demonstrate this point by articulating the two different experiences of the CrossFit Open at RMCF and MWF.

> It's 4:45 pm on a sunny but chilly night in February, and I am well into the 20-minute drive to Rocky Mountain CrossFit. Winter sunsets in Colorado strike early, and the sun is drooping behind the mountains just as I make my way down one of the busiest arteries in town. I need to be there in 10 minutes. Frustratingly, I find myself stopped in traffic, an atypical sight in this town.
>
> *A fender bender.*
>
> This traffic is a problem. I'm about to miss the kickoff for what might as well be Christmas for CrossFitters: night one of the CrossFit Open.
>
> The CrossFit Open is CrossFit's largest world-wide competition. It's three weeks of physically and emotionally taxing workouts. Similar to qualifying rounds of the Olympics, top tier athletes use the Open as a qualifier that catapults them to competition in the CrossFit Games, a global stage in which athletes compete for the title of Fittest Man and Woman on Earth. However, the majority of the 300,000 global athletes who participate in the Open do so to compete against themselves, and maybe a handful of others in their gym. As one RMCF athlete, Brian, shared with me: "Am I a stronger,

faster, better athlete than I was last year? Sure, I'd love to beat some of the top athletes in my gym. But for me, it's just about being better than I was yesterday."

I'm supposed to be at the gym for the 5 pm Friday Night Lights kickoff, the event in which athletes at RMCF complete the Open workout together in heats. RMCF coaches, and even some athletes, have been hyping the Open for *months*.

"Are you registered for the Open?"
"You should definitely do the Open."
"You get a free t-shirt if you register for the Open!"
"Everyone's doing the Open, and you should too!"
"It's only $25! Did I mention you get a free t-shirt?"
"You don't want to be the only one not doing it."
"Come on, just do it!"

I had lost count of how many times someone at RMCF asked me if I was "doing the Open." *No, I'm not. I'm just here to watch this year.*

And boy, was I there to watch. From my previous experiences with the CrossFit Open and Friday Night Lights at different gyms, this event was a treat. Athletes pushed their limits: dripping with sweat, gasping for air, muscles giving out as they tried to get *just one more* rep. This year, RMCF had theme nights for each week of competition: Western wear, RMCF t-shirts, and tonight was 80s night.

If only I could make it to the gym in time.

Unfortunately, I didn't. I was late. But only by 10 minutes. I slipped in unnoticed and unacknowledged. I entered a packed gym buzzing with nearly 60 people, including friends, spouses, and children each wondering about, some cheering, some awestruck, and others—the children—running around and making up their own workouts and games.

Apparently, a lot can happen in 10 minutes, because by the time I entered the gym, the first heat was already underway. Athletes were steadily, sweatily, working through the following:

Complete as many reps as possible in 14 minutes of:
60-calorie row
50 toes-to-bars
40 wall-ball shots
30 cleans
20 muscle-ups

This workout was a grind, and the six athletes in this heat were about halfway through. In true 80s fashion, Van Halen and Metallica were blasting through the speakers, making up only half of the gym's loudness. The other half was wild fans—the other athletes in the gym, and even some of their family members—they were jumpin' and hootin' and

hollerin' like monkeys in a zoo. There was nothing better for these folks than seeing their friends and family members push themselves and make it through an absolutely grueling 14 minutes.

And make it through they did. Each athlete who competed in a heat that night pushed themselves hard, and I felt like I had gotten my own workout just from watching them. Like watching your favorite sports team win a national title or watching your favorite country win an Olympic gold medal, watching CrossFit athletes of any caliber push themselves is exhilarating.

And then, the comedown.

"I should have gotten more reps."
"That was terrible."
"I felt like shit."
"Fuck that workout."
"I'll re-do it tomorrow."

Athletes who had just attempted a workout that was certainly above the average person's physical limits were disappointed in themselves, not only because they hadn't performed to their expectations, but because they were nowhere near the performance level of CrossFit's most elite athletes. That could only mean, of course, that they were in terrible shape.

"They think they're in bad shape? What must they think of me?" I thought.

The thing is, they weren't thinking of me. They had only one thing in mind: the "right way" to do CrossFit.

*****

One week after the first night of the CrossFit Open, I had flown more than 1,000 miles to start fieldwork at Midwest Fitness. I was concluding my fifth day of observations at MWF by joining them for their own Friday Night Lights as athletes completed night two of the Open, a two-part, 20-minute burner that was designed to terrorize both the body and mind:

Part 1
Complete as many reps as possible in 15 minutes of:
5 burpee pull-ups
10 shuttle runs (1 rep = 25 ft out/25 ft back)
*Add 5 burpee pull-ups after each round.

Part 2
Immediately following part 1, athletes will have 5 minutes to establish:
1-rep-max thruster (from the floor)

> Like all Open workouts that had come before and all to come after, this workout was sure to make even the toughest CrossFit athlete weep.
>
> *Or, would it?*
>
> I was struck by some of the differences between MWF's and RMCF's versions of Friday Night Lights. Most notably, there were only about 20 people present at MWF, a slim comparison to RMCF's more than 60-person attendance. Last's week's event—one bustling with people, sounds, smells, and energy—was chaotic and zoo-like. This event, by all accounts, was tame.
>
> The starkest difference, however, was the shift in athlete attitude and energy in the comedown.
>
> "I got more reps than I expected."
> "That was great."
> "I felt pretty good."
> "Not a bad workout."
> "No need to re-do that one."
>
> My mind was spinning. What could possibly be contributing to the stark change in the way these athletes approached their evaluations of the workout?
>
> *"They think they're in pretty good shape? What must they think of me?"*
>
> And again, the thing is, they weren't thinking of me. They had only one thing in mind: the "right way" *for them* to do CrossFit. (Fieldwork memo, February 17, 2023)

This memo highlights the stark differences between the ways RMCF and MWF approached the CrossFit Open. This approach was representative of how each gym would approach any given day outside of the Open, and these varying approaches were shaped by the gym's practice of the CrossFit methodology and ethos. RMCF athletes pushed hard, and they had exceedingly high expectations for themselves that tended to result in deprecating talk. MWF athletes also pushed hard, but their talk was much gentler and forgiving.

RMCF organized programming centered around the CrossFit Open by organizing teams and themed days for each of the Open workouts. In addition, athletes regularly discussed participation in the Open (e.g., "Are you participating in the Open? You should sign up!

Everybody's doing it!"). Conversely, although MWF did organize "Friday Night Lights" events in which athletes completed the weekly workouts at the gym with one another, the promotion of the Open was much more subtle at MWF. That is, the same Friday Night Lights event at MWF was approached differently (i.e., with less intensity) than at RMCF. Athletes at MWF seemed to be minimally aware that the Open was taking place, whereas RMCF athletes' lives seemed to surround the Open during and for the one-month prior in preparation.

Competition. RMCF's close affiliation with the CrossFit Open could have been a result of the community's attitudes around competition. The CrossFit methodology and ethos makes it clear that competition is baked in to the CrossFit experience. In addition, the CrossFit methodology claims that CrossFit has "precisely and comprehensively defined [the methodology]— from work capacity to fitness to health — in *quantifiable terms*" (Carroll, 2023b, para. 7, emphasis mine). However, not all athletes view competition as being compatible with the CrossFit community experience they want to have. For athletes in this study, preferences were mixed.

At RMCF, the practice of quantifying workout results translated to athletes publicly tracking their workout scores (e.g., time of completion, number of reps completed, weight lifted) on a white board in the gym and on an app available to all gym members. During fieldwork, I made note of the repeated instances in which athletes at RMCF yelled their scores across the gym to be recorded by the coach on the white board. This practice of publicly recording one's workout scores led to highly competitive experiences and instances of comparison. For instance, I regularly saw athletes at RMCF discussing their workout scores and teasing each other depending on the outcome (e.g., "What did you get? Oh, I beat you!"). Some athletes at RMCF, like James, thrived in this competitive environment. James described himself as someone who

"really likes to push myself very, very hard," someone who "pushes myself through injury," and being "inherently good at certain things that most CrossFitters actually hate." Before coming to CrossFit, James had trained alone for Ironman competitions. All of his solo training drove him to a place of fatigue and burnout, and he craved an exercise community comprised of other athletes who were motivating and wanted to push themselves as hard as he did. He found his way to RMCF and surrounded himself with other athletes who approached the practice of CrossFit in a way that appealed to him. Similarly, an athlete who participated in interviews but was not a member at RMCF or MWF, shared appreciation for his gym's competitive environment: "I think it is good for a lot of people to have others around them who can push them to push themselves."

At MWF, the process of tracking scores was less formal and more relaxed. Athletes tracked their workout scores in the app available to all gym members. Unlike at RMCF, athletes at MWF were not asked to share their scores with the class, nor were scores discussed often. Instead of asking what someone's score was, an athlete might instead ask, "How did that workout feel?" or "What was the hardest/best part?" For MWF athletes, the focus was less on the score and more on the experience the athlete had with the workout. Despite this difference, athletes at MWF did not describe their gym as being non-competitive, but instead as being a place of "friendly competition" (Sky) of humble people doing their best. Sky continued with his assessment of competition at MWF, sharing:

> People aren't trying to be good [athletes] to impress people… Everybody's being naturally themselves, 'cause you don't have a choice. You're about to get in the most primal and honest version of yourself humanly possible when you're sweating and can't breathe on the floor, and there's something that forms a connection there when you do that with somebody. You can't really form that bond in any other way.

Sky's assessment of competition at MWF promoted identification for him, as MWF served as a space not for comparison, but for bonding. Similarly, an athlete who participated in interviews but was not a member at RMCF or MWF, Kate, shared:

> I really do enjoy CrossFit as a sport. So, I still watch the CrossFit Games and competitions and stuff like that and keep up with the athletes. So, I really like the sport itself still and I still follow it. What I *don't* like is the CrossFit gym.

In referencing that she does not like "the CrossFit gym," Kate is referring to the components that comprise different social aspects of the gym that are often catalyzed through the quantification and tracking of results, such as competition and comparison.

The variance in the ways CrossFit gyms implement the CrossFit methodology and ethos influence athletes' identification with the CrossFit community. MWF and RMCF each crafted their own identities through their different approaches to implementing the methodology and ethos. In some ways, their athletes' fitness goals and desires were reflected in those implementation efforts. In addition, each person's individual conduct in the gym influenced practical aspects of the community experience.

Individual Conduct

Individual conduct refers to the degree that athletes, coaches, and gym owners in the CrossFit community communicated effectively and appropriately in regards to factors such as effective class management, productivity, accepting responsibility, team work, good attitude, and ethical behavior. Individuals' conduct influenced (a) the class experience and (b) the outcomes of how owners dealt with inappropriate gym behavior that impacted the community experience. For nearly all athletes in this study, the class experience was one of the most influential components of identification. The following fieldwork memo highlights the ways in which the class experience can impact an athlete's identification with their CrossFit community.

“Never miss a Monday” is phrase used by many gym rats. Its sentiment is to build momentum and healthy habits for the week to come.

But to RMCF athletes, it’s “never miss a Saturday.”

At many CrossFit gyms, Saturday workouts are special. They typically include partner workouts, which means athletes get to complete the workout with a friend or someone they don’t know as well. In other words, Saturday workouts are often about building new relationships and, according to RMCF athlete Victoria, “they’re less pressure than workouts during the week and more fun.”

At RMCF, Saturday workouts were not only special; they were sacred. Saturday morning 8 a.m. classes were consistently some of the most packed classes RMCF had. The gym allowed space for 12 athletes, but Saturday classes sometimes included well over 20. The mood of these classes was always jovial and light hearted. Athletes were often very chatty.

“How was your weekend?”
“How was your daughter’s dance recital?”
“What did you do last night?”
“Did you watch the game?”

Because of this chattiness, the 8 a.m. class often ran late. There was no transition time between the 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. class, which meant any time the class runs long disrupted the experience athletes had in the next class.

After each 8 a.m. class on Saturdays, RMCF offered a 9 a.m. “community” class in which individuals who were not members at the gym could come and take the class for free. These folks were often unfamiliar with CrossFit and exercise in general. Their wide eyes and closed off demeanor told me they were timid but their presence suggested eagerness.

There was one particular Saturday when I watched this theoretically good idea of a “community” class—one that could consistently expose individuals to CrossFit for free—unravel in ways that exposed cracks in the RMCF foundation.

As had happened on past weekends, the 8 a.m. class was running late. Individuals began showing up for the 9 a.m. class at around 8:45 a.m. Because the coach had his hands full coaching the large class, he did not have the capacity to greet these new individuals. Instead, these new folks milled around, looking nervous, uncomfortable, and a little troubled by the sight of sweating athletes in agony they walked into. Was this their fate?

The mood was eerily similar to a high school lunch room: there’s the cool kids (i.e., the 8 a.m. athletes) and the uncool kids (i.e., the 9 a.m. newcomers). They were all in the same room, but they seemed to mix like oil and water.

> The coach turned to the group of six newcomers and said, "You can come in and start your banded 7s."
>
> It was 9:01 a.m., the 8 a.m. class was still in session, and I was certain nobody in this newbie group knew what "banded 7s" meant. I learned this term only after starting my fieldwork at RMCF. In short, the coach was instructing them to begin the warmup. The newbies looked around at each other, hoping someone would step up and save the group from perpetual un-coolness. A member who just completed their workout from the 8 a.m. class stepped in and demonstrated the movements.
>
> At 9:10 a.m., the coach unceremoniously departed from his role coaching the 8 a.m. class and turned his attention to 9 a.m. There were no introductions. The 8 a.m. class still cooling down and very loudly debriefing their workout which made the room feel chaotic and disorganized. The coach gathered the 9 a.m. class at the white board and begin to explain the workout.
>
> The coach dismissed the group from the white board and instructed them to gather their equipment and find spaces in the gym to complete the workout. A major challenge, however, was the sheer amount of people in the gym. Athletes from the 8 a.m. class had slowly eased their way back onto the gym floor and were taking up the space intended for the 9 a.m. class.
>
> The 9 a.m. class continued with their workout under the guidance of the coach, and I felt deeply bothered by the class they were having. It was loud, disorganized, the coaching they received impersonal, and they didn't even know each other's names. I felt they were being cheated not only of a positive workout experience, but also of a positive social experience that CrossFit athletes so often boast. (Fieldwork memo, February 11, 2023)

This memo highlights the many moving parts of a CrossFit class, each of which have both practical and social implications. Specifically, the coach's facilitation and leadership skills, athletes' consistency of attendance, and incidents of inappropriate behavior were aspects of individual conduct that impacted identification.

A coach leads each CrossFit class, and consequently, the coach shapes the experience of each class through their (in)ability to lead and facilitate the class. For instance, one aspect of facilitation included whether the class had a clear beginning, middle, and end. During fieldwork, I noticed differences in the way classes were run at RMCF and MWF. At RMCF, the class experience was inconsistent at times. For example, athletes were not reliably welcomed by the

coach, nor were new athletes consistently introduced. In addition, because coaches did not always wear t-shirts or other items to indicate they were a coach, coaches were sometimes indistinguishable from other members of class. These behaviors sometimes left athletes, particularly newer athletes, with little guidance about what to do or who to ask. For instance, I sometimes observed athletes new to RMCF walk in to the gym and stare, nervously attempting to locate the coach of the class. Similarly, because there was not always a specific end to class, athletes would leave class before all athletes had completed the workout; some at RMCF, like Stacy, described this behavior as "discouraging." Conversely, coaches at MWF were required to wear specific t-shirts during their time coaching so they could be clearly identified (i.e., having an identified leader; Vestal & Lopez, 2004). Lucy, an athlete at MWF, shared she felt this practice increased the professionalism of the gym and made class functioning clearer for athletes.

Another facilitation behavior present was MWF coaches' use of a "question of the day" to start each class. Coaches asked an approachable question to the class in an effort to help everyone get to know each other better (e.g., What is your favorite food? What is your favorite song?). Moments like these in which members had the opportunity to get to know one another beyond the exercise context promote identification because athletes were able to learn more information about each other in a purposeful manner (Culver & Trudel, 2008). In addition, a clear start, middle, and end of class, executed consistently, lead athletes to know what to expect from their time at the CrossFit gym. A consistent experience helped athletes have a more affirming experience of community, particularly because it helped them know how to relate with other athletes. The use of a question of the day served as a tool for generating the dimension of a shared repertoire in which the community's set of shared experiences and stories was sustained through consistency over time (Wenger, 1998).

As the community of practice literature suggests, ongoing, consistent interactions through regular attendance were foundational for athletes' community experiences as they facilitated the dimension of mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). People most often attend the same classes, so their description of community was highly reliant on the class they attend. Therefore, for many athletes, their experience of community in their CrossFit gym was shaped almost entirely by the class time that they attend. Indeed, athletes often referred to people by the class time they attended (e.g., "They are a nooner," implying that the person attends the 12 p.m. class). The consistency at which an athlete attended classes also impacted their experience of community. The more consistently an athlete attended, the more in-depth they were able to get to know other athletes, developing inside jokes and getting to know other athletes' goals.

As with most organizations, there are threats of abuse and inappropriate interactions that take place in CrossFit communities. Athletes described several examples of inappropriate interactions, or "drama" (Bob) they experienced. For instance, Bob recalled that his experience with one CrossFit community was comprised of "a lot of inappropriate talk, mostly sexual stuff that you'd be like, 'Hmm… this doesn't seem like a healthy environment for you people.'" Because of the drama he experienced, he was less inclined to invest time in his CrossFit community beyond the attitude of "show up, do the workout, move on with your day." Bob recalled that the interactions he observed were never addressed by the owner, and the behavior persisted.

Similarly, Hogsmeade shared about one of her former CrossFit communities and how inappropriate behavior exhibited by the owner caused her to question her membership and disidentify:

> [The owner] unfortunately had issues. He had issues with substance abuse. And then he was also really known for sleeping with all his members. I was like, "That's terrible. No."

> And then I've heard even more now. Again, as a human being, he just sounds like trash. So that was what I knew then [that I had to leave].

Hogsmeade's narrative demonstrates the importance of the owner and that, ultimately, the level of professionalism upheld in the gym can shape athletes' identification with the community. Articulating this point further, Boots described a time in which an inappropriate situation was handled in a way she deemed to be professional and appropriate. She shared:

> There was a situation where one of the… the CrossFitter women, you know, you wear some skimpy stuff. And there was a member/coach that was there. And one of the members, like, smacked her butt…. And so, the member/coach was like, "I don't know what to do." And I didn't know what to do. I feel really uncomfortable. And another member is like, "You need to tell [the owner]." You need to really tell [the owner] this happened." This and that. And so, she did, and [the owner] kicked him out. He was like, "You are not welcome here anymore. That is not acceptable at all." And he was like, "I want a safe environment and you disrespected one of our members, and that's not allowed." And just hearing that, I know that [the owner] is a business man, but he wants to take care of his members first versus worrying about making the extra dollar. And that was just one instance where I was like, "Good, I'm glad he didn't just have a talking to with him." He legit said, "You're done. There's no if, ands or buts about it." And I like that.

This example shared by Boots describes a sexual violation and the ways in which the owner appropriately handled the violation. In doing so, he demonstrated that he "leads by example" (Boots) and increased her identification and her sense of belonging as a woman with the community.

Personal

The personal dimension of community refers to the ways in which athletes saw their own sense of self reflected in their everyday CrossFit community experiences. Sense of self included personal identities like race, age, body size, or ability, as well as personal values like inclusion, integrity, and respect. Athletes' perceived similarities and differences related to identities and values (i.e., "Do people in this community have compatible identities to me?") played a central role in determining (dis)identification. Similarity of identities with others (i.e., perceiving oneself

as part of the ingroup) generated feelings of security and belonging (Chaskin, 2012). This finding aligns with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) conceptualization of individuals' sense of community in that each athlete, regardless of their personal identities, shared the need to be surrounded with other athletes with whom they shared identities and felt a sense of representation (i.e., to be "seen" and see others who look like them). Moreover, athletes came to experience community based on their social identities and perceived ingroup or outgroup membership (Tajfel, 1978). Social categorization, comparison, and identification influenced athletes' experiences of community, largely because they acted both as schematic shortcuts and protective mechanisms to reduce disaffirming experiences of community. In the following sections, I address the five personal identities athletes recognized as influencing their (dis)identification with community, including health status and disability, socioeconomic status, race, gender, and age.

Health Status and Disability

Interactions linked to athletes' health-related identities were central to shaping community experiences in the CrossFit gym. Examples of health-related identities included physical ability/disability (e.g., acute injuries, mobility limitations) and mental health-related issues (e.g., anxiety, depression). When athletes shared their health-related conditions and experienced affirming reactions from others, they experienced validation and identification with community. The examples most often shared by athletes were from interactions had with coaches. For instance, Lotus shared she felt "supported" and "validated" when the coaches at MWF altered the workouts to accommodate her temporary shoulder injury. In addition, she shared that she was never made to feel like a burden when she asked for accommodations; indeed, once coaches were aware of her limitations, they began to make accommodations without Lotus having to ask.

Conversely, athletes also described instances in which they experienced health-related dismissal from coaches. Abby shared about a difficult interaction she had with a coach related to her mental health:

> I had panic attacks… In part because of the pressure to keep doing better… [The coach] really just wants you to be the best you can be, but she doesn't necessarily understand how mental health shows up for other people… I was saying, "I can't do this right now, but I could have yesterday," kind of situation. So, I work out on my own now because I can control the input and manage my expectations and there's not a lot of external pressure to perform to somebody else's expectations on me.

In this example, Abby articulated that the pressure she felt in the CrossFit gym was one factor that contributed to her panic attacks and that her coach exacerbated that pressure. Abby's narrative emphasizes the importance of a coach's ability to meet an athlete where they are on a day-by-day basis.

Socioeconomic Status

Research on physical fitness and exercise often addresses socioeconomic status as a variable (e.g., Bohr et al., 2013). Socioeconomic status refers to the social standing and class of a person as shaped by their income, education, occupation, and place of residence. Athletes regularly addressed the burdening expense of CrossFit, and that expense alone makes it so CrossFit is inaccessible to the general population. For example, Luke shared:

> CrossFit gyms are expensive. And I also know there's certain people who I've had the conversations about trying to get them into the gym. And it's just, "Yo, that's too much money." And that's 100% understandable when the low end of a membership is $125, $150. That's some people's one-week, two-week, whole month grocery budget that you're asking them to come work out an hour a day for three to five days a week. That is a lot of money to be spending on what could be three hours of your week and 12 hours of your month total. Again, I think CrossFit has a lot of value. It's not to say I don't think it has value. But there's socioeconomic status to it.

Luke's description of the economic burden CrossFit can present articulates how the CrossFit community is inherently inaccessible to people in lower socioeconomic brackets. When

individuals who were self-described as being low income were able to set aside money for a CrossFit gym membership, some addressed the tacit communication they experienced that told them they did not fit in. For example, William shared:

> I still have my car from when I turned 22 and graduated college and got my first job, and it's like a Kia Soul from 2010, that has been in a car accident and been repaired, has been stolen and has been repaired, and has done eight or nine cross-country road trips... She's an older car and needs a little bit of work, kind of thing... No one has ever made me feel any kind of way about this, this is totally just, like, me thinking about how I'm perceived going into the gym, when I roll up in that 2010 Kia Soul and I'm parked between two brand new to Toyota 4Runners or expensive trucks or, like, there's a handful of Teslas that'll be in the parking lot, just like cars that definitely cost more than what my annual salary was when I started doing CrossFit, kind of thing.

In this narrative, William addressed how other members at his CrossFit gym never explicitly addressed his older car, an implied symbol of his lower socioeconomic status. However, William felt and saw the socioeconomic status differences between he and other members which signaled his personal doubt about whether he belonged. William's narrative highlights that it can be difficult to feel wholly part of a group when personal identities, such as socioeconomic status, are not shared.

Race

Athletes in this study described how interactions with others about race shaped the personal dimension of community in both affirming, disaffirming, and neutral ways. First, athletes felt both included and excluded based on their race. Second, racial tensions surfaced in local communities with CrossFit as an organization experiencing turmoil initiated through racial comments made by the then-owner, Greg Glassman. Finally, some athletes denied that race relations were issues in their communities altogether.

Race is often a visible social identity, and implicit racial prejudice can shape individuals' interpersonal interactions (Sinclair et al., 2014). Indeed, people of color in this study were the

individuals who most often addressed the role of race in their community experiences. Athletes reported that visible race differences could sometimes make people of color "feel different" and like the "the odd one out" (Natalie). Some athletes in this study were the only, or one of few, people of color in their gym. These athletes repeatedly assessed the race-related climate in their gyms and made decisions day by day on whether they would stay. For instance, Emily shared, "I honestly probably would not have stayed [at my gym] if I didn't get the feeling that they were inclusive of different people from different backgrounds. 'Cause that to me, that really matters." Similarly, Grace, an athlete at MWF, shared that the visible diversity of the gym is "what made me stay." In our interview, Grace went as far as to count the number of people of color on the MWF coaching staff:

> 'Cause when I joined, the coaching staff was like, there were like three Black coaches, there was one Latina, and then the rest were White, but they were... They're like, good coaches too, you know? So, I was just like, "Wow, this is a pretty diverse gym," and the members are also really diverse.

In addition to valuing communities in which they were not the token people of color, athletes needed to feel like their identities as people of color were seen and valued. When athletes felt supported because of, not despite, their identities, they felt more included, supported, and identification increased. For instance, Grace recalled instances in which she felt supported in her race and heritage though athletes' non-CrossFit-related communication in the gym: "I identify as Mexican-American, as Latina. I get a lot of people approaching me like, 'Oh, is Hispanic okay to say?' after a workout, which actually I think shows a lot of sensitivity." Similarly, Grace described a time that MWF "went the extra mile" to support their athletes by supporting Black Lives Matter:

> And during Black Lives Matter when those movements were going on, MWF did a lot, I think, to support its people of color… They weren't just pretending like nothing is going on, and this gym is where we exist just to work out. Like, no. We are a part of this

community and we're a part of this movement that's going on.

Grace described the importance of MWF taking a stand on supporting people of color by taking actions that demonstrated support for Black Lives Matter, such as making anti-racist social media posts, encouraging athletes to wear Black Lives Matter shirts during workouts, encouraging the use of inclusive language, or programming workouts that memorialized the Black men and women killed by law enforcement through hero workouts.

Hero workouts are workouts originally designed to pay tribute to (White male) fallen first responders or military members who died in the line of duty (CrossFit, n.d.-a). Hero workouts are held in high regard in CrossFit gyms, and hundreds of hero workouts have been published on CrossFit's official website since their inception in 2005. Over the years, individuals or small groups of CrossFit athletes began to organically extend the notion of hero workouts to honor individuals outside of those who died during military service or law enforcement. For instance, Stacy Pugh of Black Power Cleans, a now inactive Instagram account, wrote "Big Floyd," a workout designed to honor George Floyd after his murder at the hands of law enforcement (Black Power Cleans, 2020). The workout includes "pre-work" (i.e., a "cash in") in which athletes are prompted to read anti-racist articles and "post-work" (i.e., a "cash out") in which athletes are to donate, sign petitions, vote, or otherwise spread awareness about Black lives and anti-racism.

Emily completed "Big Floyd" with her CrossFit community in 2020 and, although she appreciated the sentiment, the engagement in this hero workout highlighted some of the limitations she saw in her community and affirmed her belief that "those in the minority are kind of overlooked." She shared:

> They don't really do anything that's for people of color… I think one year we did do [a Hero workout] for George Floyd, but I think that was too, you know, not... It wasn't... I

> don't think it was performative. But at the same time, there's a lot of [support] for LGBTQ, which I have, you know, I'm a fan of inclusivity, but then there's nothing that celebrates, like, Black history. Not a lot of people participated [in the George Floyd workout], to be honest with you. So that kind of just showed me of like how some of the members truly felt about things. So that was kind of disheartening.

In my interview with Emily, it was evident she was struggling with not wanting to criticize her community (i.e., "but I think that was too, you know, not... It wasn't... I don't think it was performative. But at the same time, there's a lot of [support] for LGBTQ"). She hesitated to name the behavior as "performative." Yet, she acknowledged that she felt the community did more to show support of LGBTQ people than they did for people of color, and specifically Black people. Emily's hedging demonstrates the tensions she experienced by being heartened by the community's engagement in Big Floyd but still feeling like there was still a great deal of work to still be done. Echoing Emily's sentiments, Grace articulated how these efforts in CrossFit communities were often tinged by "just a little bit of maybe tone deafness."

Finally, the issue of racial identity or representation was more important to some athletes than others, and some athletes denied that the absence of people of color in their CrossFit communities was an issue. Narratives shared by some athletes in this study stood in opposition to each of the examples shared by many athletes of color in this study, and athletes typically deemphasized the importance of racial inclusion when they held the dominant, ingroup identities in their gym (e.g., White). As such, their identities (and CrossFit's overall homogeneity) were not top of mind or questioned (Frankenberg, 2004). Instead, the shared identity of "CrossFitter" was sufficient for them.

For example, when asked which or whether identities played a role in shaping his experience of community in the CrossFit gym, Tom, an RMCF athlete, said, "not off the top of my mind." I regularly observed this sentiment during my fieldwork at RMCF, a CrossFit gym

comprised largely of White athletes. Chris, an athlete at RMCF, included more detail that shed light on perhaps why Tom and others did not recall any identities as being relevant to their community experience:

> I have the benefit of being a middle-aged, White, decent-sized guy…To be honest with you, [city] is pretty White. If I was in the middle of New York, would I feel a little bit different walking to a class of all colored people? I probably would, not in a negative or positive way, but I would probably look for something in that environment. Whereas here, there's nothing to look for. I blend right in, as far as I'm concerned.

When Chris mentions, "I would probably look for something different in that environment," he was addressing what kind of *diversity* and representation he would be looking for in a CrossFit environment. Because the city in which RMCF is located is "pretty White," and Chris as a White man perceived himself to be part of the ingroup, he did not look for or expect to experience diversity. This privileging of the ingroup, in addition to Chris' ability to "blend right in" because of his own Whiteness, renders ingroup identity markers as essentially invisible. This invisibility likely contributed to some athletes' perceptions that race was not particularly relevant to shaping identification with their CrossFit community.

Others did acknowledge the "Whiteness" or "lack of diversity" in their CrossFit community experiences, but they did not take steps to increase diversity. For instance, Stacy, a White athlete at RMCF, shared:

> We're a little bit beige right now... All of our members of color have moved or took new positions at work and aren't at the gym anymore. Anyway, but I felt like this was... I feel like that inclusion piece is really important to me, and feeling like all athletes have a place there is really important to me.

In our interview, it was clear Stacy was disappointed by the fact that there were no people of color at RMCF (i.e., "beige"). She expressed the importance of inclusion while simultaneously seemed to accept the circumstances and not take any steps to change the racial makeup of the

gym. Stacy's response was indicative of a diversity/community tension in which it is often difficult for communities to hold diversity and community in tandem (Neal & Neal, 2014).

Gender

Gender and gender binaries play a key, often taken for granted, role in CrossFit. One reason for this is instrumental: gender is the most common way that coaches inform athletes of which weights to use for workouts. The amount of weight workout programming "prescribes" to athletes is based on gender (e.g., men use 50-pound dumbbells, women use 35-pound dumbbells). Coaches instruct athletes in a gendered manner to use a "women's" or "men's" barbell—the difference between the two being that the men's barbell is heavier and thicker in diameter. Furthermore, CrossFit competitions, like the CrossFit Open, contain binary competition categories of male and female. Some athletes, like Mary, were bothered by this and found the designation frustrating and limiting. She shared: "Things are still written like male/female. I take that as, 'We're gonna give you less because you're a woman.' And in a way, that's annoying."

Another reason gender and gender binaries play a key role in CrossFit is that, like other spaces, gender can influence power dynamics and athletes' experience of community in affirming and disaffirming ways. For instance, some women described feeling "empowered" by seeing other strong women athletes in their community. In addition, women described having other women athletes in the gym as motivational and fun. Grace shared, "I get kind of competitive. I wanna be the best woman at the gym. I know I'm not, but I want to race." Similarly, Leslie shared:

> It's just like incredible how fit CrossFit women can be, like how strong they are. And I think sometimes people can think that, like, women lifting weights, that's like a bad thing and that's not necessary. Well, that's not true. And so, I think just being able to celebrate women being strong and powerful, like that's really cool. And also salient for me when it

> comes to CrossFit, 'cause I'm always inspired by seeing what incredible fitness fit people are able to do. Not just like lifting heavy weights, but just getting a PR on whatever thing that they're working on, at the gym. So, that's definitely really inspiring too.

Leslie's narrative highlights how affirming representations of gender in the community experience can be "inspiring." Communities that "celebrate" strong women can be motivational, inclusive, and can strengthen women's commitment and identification.

Conversely, Mary described her CrossFit community experienced as "sexualized" and that being sexualized by men in particular was "just something that's always in your mind that you're conscious of… I've seen men look at women in a certain way [i.e., sexually]. Like, when they're just stretching." For Mary, experiences and feelings of being sexualized in the CrossFit gym led her to doubt whether the CrossFit gym was the right exercise space for her. Abby saw similar power dynamics unfold in her CrossFit gym. She shared:

> So, the class that I went to most often due to work schedules and all was a class that was almost entirely men. There would be two to four women in the class out of probably 20 at that time. The men ran the gym. If they didn't want to do the workout, they would change workouts. And then, when we had a female coach, they would sometimes give her a lot of hell and it was sometimes difficult to tell if it was out of respect or not respect. It always had a little bit of a vibe of, "You're being funny but *are you being funny*? [emphasis in original]" And so, between that and not necessarily being the strongest person there, it would be hard if there was nobody to pair with. Because the men didn't want to pair with the women. It was literally like, "This is the men's side. This is the women's side." And if it got full and one of the men came to the women's side, the men would give him hell for being on the "wrong side" of the gym. And so, that just wasn't something that I enjoyed. Some of the other classes were not like that, and I enjoyed those better when I could go. But they didn't fit the work schedule that I had. And so, having the separation of classes and that distinct culture of that class, and my work schedule, that was very frustrating.

Abby's narrative highlights the highly gendered experience of community in her gym. Not only were classes physically divided by gender, but "men ran the gym" and cultivated an environment that was desirable to those with the loudest voices. In addition, Abby's narrative highlights that identification can shift on a class-by-class basis (i.e., her desire to attend some classes over

others). Grace echoed this sentiment:

> Sometimes I'll go to [the noon class], even though it's kind of a dude fest. So, it's kind of like every class has its own little vibe... [In the noon class,] I've been asked if I go to the gym because I just wanna fit in my wedding dress, and I'm like, "Ugh. Could you not say that?"

Grace's narrative highlights that gender is a personal identity that can weigh heavily in the community experience, especially for women when they feel underrepresented (i.e., "it's kind of a dude fest"). Sexist or insensitive comments (i.e., men asking Grace if she goes to the gym to fit into her wedding dress) can lead to feeling dismissed or unseen. Moreover, Leslie, Abby, and Grace's narratives considered together demonstrate the fluid nature of identification, specifically that it can strengthen or weaken depending on the (gendered) interpersonal interactions that take place during each class.

In addition, gendered language and practices that take place in the CrossFit gym present obvious difficulties for transgender and non-binary athletes. I did not speak with any athletes during interviews or fieldwork that confirmed this difficulty, but there are countless recounts of this online (e.g., Yinger, 2021), and I observed such an interaction during fieldwork. For example, the following memo addresses a time during fieldwork in which I saw challenges associated with gender and gendering in action:

> During a Saturday morning class at RMCF, I introduced myself to a person standing on their own waiting for the class to begin. I gravitated to them because I was unsure of their gender, and I wanted to learn their name. Maybe learning a name would help me determine their gender. Not an ideal shortcut, and it's one I was guilty of taking.
>
> Taylor.
>
> A gender-neutral name.
>
> My interaction with Taylor was brief, and I was not able to ask for their pronouns. Looking back, I wish I would have approached the situation differently. I could have introduced myself with my name and pronouns, but I got nervous and my words felt

> clumsy. Plus, I wasn't even sure if this person did identify as trans or non-binary. I felt my own queer identity magnetizing us together.
>
> Class had started. The coach skipped introductions and kicked off the class by providing an overview of the workout.
>
> "The workout will be at this weight for the men and this weight for the ladies," he said.
>
> "Oh, no," I thought. "*Taylor."*
>
> As the class continued, I approached a member I was familiar with. This member was very involved at RMCF, and she knew almost everyone's names. My goal was to see if she knew Taylor's pronouns. She didn't.
>
> What I felt was unfolding right in front of me was something I feared would happen. Even as an observer of the class, I could feel myself becoming tense and worrying about Taylor's experience, fearing they would be misgendered or feel forced to confirm to the gender binary in the name of doing a workout. I wondered how many other times this had happened to Taylor and so many other athletes out there. (Fieldwork memo, February 17, 2023)

This memo highlights the taken for granted, underappreciated nature of gender in CrossFit as an aspect of the community experience that can be overlooked by some athletes but central to others. Although I was not able to connect with Taylor to ask them about their experiences related to the situation, the binary nature of CrossFit positioned the community experience to be a one in which gender was reproduced in ways that were arguably counterproductive to inclusion (Knapp, 2015b).

Furthermore, some athletes described the ways in which gender-inclusive practices in their gym increased their identification with community. Natalie recalled one of the first interactions she had others in her current CrossFit gym and how that interaction led her to diversify the way she approaches workouts now. She shared:

> I do remember when I went to this gym. I asked, I forget what I said like the first, I think I just asked 'em, "Oh, where are the women's bars?" And they were like, "We don't do that here." And I was like, "Oh." They're just like, "There's a 45 if you want it. There's a 35 over here if you want." And I was like, "Cool." So, I use the 45-pound bar every day now because it's just like great, I don't know. It's for anyone. And I've appreciated that,

> and I think it's great. Or when I'm doing snatches and I'll switch to a lighter bar, and if there's a day where we're just doing quick sets or something that you're supposed to crank through, then I'll pick up a 15-pound training bar and put more weights on that. So, it's just kind of more like, okay. The bar adapts to you, it's not like you have to adapt to the bar. (Natalie)

In this example, Natalie highlights how community members worked to orient her to cultural practices of that gym—namely, that gendered terms are not used to prescribe barbell weights or use. This shift in language and practice helped Natalie felt more included in her community and like the change was a step in making CrossFit "for anyone."

Age

Athletes described the ways that age shaped identification with their CrossFit community, and specifically how age impacted athletes feeling a sense of similarity and belonging. First, athletes described their desire to be in a community comprised of athletes similar in age to themselves. Abby shared that she tends to "build community better with people who are in a similar stage of life" as her. To be surrounded with people the same age typically meant that those individuals would share similar life experiences and age-related interests, such as whether they were parents, had demanding work schedules, or whether they preferred casual evenings at home to going out drinking heavily with friends. Being in a space that included overlapping similarities in this regard meant people shared a greater number of social identities outside of CrossFit-related activities.

In addition, another narrative that was shared by several athletes was their desire to be in a CrossFit gym with people who varied in age. Repeatedly, athletes shared stories about the older man or woman at their gym who consistently came to class and gave their best effort each day. These older individuals were legend-like. In describing one of the older athletes in his gym, Luke shared. "Everybody knows Sheila. She's there for the fitness, but she's also there for the

community." In other words, Sheila became well-known to the rest of the CrossFit community because of her dedication, consistency, and commitment.

In this vein, seeing older athletes in the gym was inspiring to younger athletes. Natalie described a time in which she entered a CrossFit gym for the first time and noticed the varying ages of athletes:

> I just thought, "Oh my God." Everybody's here in very different places with their familiarity with [CrossFit]. There's a big span in age... I remember feeling like, "This is really cool," and thinking that it was a very neat space to try something new.

Natalie's early exposure to athletes in her gym who varied in age made her excited about her experience in the gym because she saw a path for her potential future self through others. She later shared that the older athletes in her gym taught her that "this is a lifestyle and something I can be doing for a long time."

Some athletes struggled to identify with their community at times because of a mismatch in age and being in "a different phase in my life" (Bob) than other athletes at the gym. For example, Sal shared:

> There are times, I look at it like, "Do I *want* to hang out with a bunch of 20- or 30-year-olds?" and the only reason I say that is, I mean, people are at different stages in their lives. And I think how you relate—it's like, okay, you've got little kids. And I'm *done* with that. I don't need to go back to that. I don't want to hear about your day-to-day struggles of being a parent. Because I've been there, I've done that, and it's yeah, it's not the easiest thing. I don't want to sit around and hang out and talk about that.

Sal's desire to spend time with people who are in a similar phase of life indicated her desire for shared identity, particularly when it came to social interactions at the gym.

Summary

The personal dimension of community squarely addresses athletes, including who they are and who they want to be in the gym, including that they want to feel represented. Personal identities, such as health status and disability, socioeconomic status, race, gender, and age are

sometimes taken for granted and underappreciated in CrossFit. In short, athletes' perceived similarities and differences in terms of identities and values with others in the CrossFit community played a pivotal role in shaping individuals' experience of community (Sarason, 1974).

Interpersonal

The *interpersonal* dimension of community refers to communication processes amongst individuals that promote or impede connection and make social interactions inclusive or exclusive. According to Chaskin's (2012) conceptualization of community, the *social* dimension of community encompasses interpersonal relationships amongst individuals, including their common identities, shared norms, or interactions. In this model of community, I have chosen to make the distinction between "social" and "interpersonal" dimensions of community, opting for interpersonal instead, because my goal is to draw attention to the specific interpersonal communication processes that make social interactions in a CrossFit community inclusive or exclusive.

Community, to many athletes, was almost entirely interpersonal, and identification with community was highly dependent on whether athletes felt like they had strong interpersonal relationships with each other. As Luke shared:

> [Community] has everything to do with conversations that have nothing to do with that person's fitness or fitness levels or fitness goals… In terms of building individual relationships, one-on-one, and being able to kind of interweb those relationships between two, three, four, five members at a time—it takes being able to communicate with all those people individually on what they care about outside the gym and then find things that they all care about that have nothing to do with how many pounds somebody can deadlift.

As Luke's narrative demonstrates, the interpersonal dimension of community relied on individuals' abilities to facilitate relationships amongst each other. In addition, interpersonal

relationships were foundational to identification not only because they make up the bulk of interactions in the CrossFit gym, but because the weight of these interactions was significant. For most participants, if they identified with their interpersonal interactions, they identified with community. Athletes' identification often hinged upon whether they felt they had affirming, rewarding relationships and whether they experienced confirmation in their relational climates (Dailey, 2023). Affirming relational climates occurred when athletes felt invested in and cared for by individuals with whom they were interacting. The interpersonal dimension intersected with the personal, as personal identities often predicated interpersonal interactions. The presence or absence of several factors shaped the interpersonal dimension of community, including interpersonal immediacy behaviors, support and encouragement, non-CrossFit-related support, and gym-sponsored events. In the section that follows, I will address each of these factors and provide characteristics that promoted identification and disidentification.

Interpersonal Immediacy Behaviors

A primary characteristic of the interpersonal dimension of community was the role of interpersonal immediacy behaviors in promoting or impeding interpersonal connection. The displays of interpersonal immediacy behaviors—or the actions that communicate warmth, involvement, closeness, care, and investment in others (Gass, 2009)—were brought up repeatedly in interviews, and both their absence and presence were notable during my observations. For instance, the following fieldwork memo highlights the varying, yet important, ways athletes describe how interpersonal immediacy behaviors shaped the community experience.

> Hannah described a kind and welcoming community as "feeling like people see you." Sal described the CrossFit community as a place where "It's a place where everybody knows each other." Grace said "it's a place where people can get along and collaborate in different ways or catch up." Penelope said you can tell when others in the gym are

> invested your personal fitness: "You can tell by the way they talk to you… When you get coaches that will explain things to you and talk to you, and you can just tell that they actually care." (Fieldwork memo, March 25, 2023)

Hannah, Sal, Grace, and Penelope each had different but similar ways of describing their experiences of community, and their comments were mirrored by many others. As Penelope's narrative demonstrates, *how* individuals engaged with each other in the gym (i.e., "the way they talk to you," including *what* was said *when* and by *whom*—was particularly relevant. Four behaviors—including knowing and using each other's names, posing a question of the day, remembering and reciting facts about each other, and pairing up during partner workouts—stood out as characteristics of interpersonal immediacy behaviors that influenced (dis)identification and community.

First, knowing and using each other's names was repeatedly acknowledged as a behavior that promoted identification. For example, Natalie stressed the importance of interpersonal introductions as a way of honoring personal identities. She shared, "When you're newer and you have people who, they'll just come up and they're like, 'Hey, I haven't met you before, what's your name? Tell me about you.' That feels also really warm and inviting." Similarly, Hannah shared, "I don't think it takes a whole lot of effort, but just making people feel seen. Calling them by name, inviting them to join in whatever is going on, really goes a long way." Indeed, I witnessed athletes new to RMCF express looks of surprise and delight when a coach remembered their name after only one visit: "Wow. I didn't think anyone would remember my name after only being here one time," Kelly, an athlete at RMCF, said as she smiled at the coach. During our interview, Sal, who is a coach at MWF, emphasized the importance of names: "I encourage people to introduce themselves, get to know the new people… learning everybody's names so you can call them by name… Making it personal." I watched another coach at MWF

start the class by welcoming all 15 athletes by name: “Welcome Ashley! Michael. Great to see you, Chris! Joshua. Peter. Welcome back, Jose!”

Conversely, not knowing or using athletes’ names communicated lack of warmth and care and prompted disidentification. For example, Mary commented on the lack of kindness and warmth she experienced at several CrossFit gyms: “I have gone to a couple of gyms where it’s like, you can literally meet no one. I would go there for two weeks, so probably 10 classes, and didn’t even really make a connection with anybody.” As Mary’s narrative highlights, not being acknowledged through the use of names can be an isolating and exclusionary community experience. Furthermore, athletes described how genuine and inviting a community could feel when athletes took the time to get to know one another. Molly described the importance of individuals taking steps to make relational connections with and for others. She shared:

> [Community] feels more genuine than just, you know, “Hey, this is Sally, she’s new.” Instead, it’s like, this is who this person is. They live two blocks away. Oh, like John, she actually lives in your building. We’re kind of helping make some of those connections so that I think the new people can see that this is an approachable gym that you can walk into and that it’s not scary. These are people that live maybe just down the hall from you, or in the same building or around the corner.

Molly’s narrative articulates that there are many similarities athletes could have at their CrossFit gym, and sometimes other members are useful in making those connections. Indeed, athletes stressed the necessity of going beyond learning someone’s name and learning something personal about them.

Second, the use of a question of the day was one method coaches used to facilitate interpersonal interactions and encourage relational connections. For example, coaches at MWF posed a question of the day at the start of each class. Questions I observed being asked during classes included, “What is your favorite food?”, “What is something good in your life right now?”, and “What is one word that describes you?” Often, responses to these questions were

accompanied by laughter and stories. When sharing something good happening in his life right now, Kevin shared about his new job, and the class all clapped and shouted affirmations like, "That's awesome! Congratulations!" Members of the class asked follow-up questions: "What's your new company? What kind of work will you be doing?" When Hogsmeade talked about her favorite food, she talked about cloud cake and hot pot, two foods that have roots in her Asian culture. Again, members asked follow-up questions: "What's cloud cake? What's hot pot?" Hogsmeade had the opportunity not only to share more about her own likes, but also about her heritage. These moments, routinely initiated through an approachable prompt, created opportunities for interpersonal warmth and for members to get to know one another outside of CrossFit.

Moreover, the ritual of asking a question of the start of each class at MWF led to a consistent and reliable experience where athletes began to understand and trust what their interpersonal experiences in the gym might consist of each time they visited. An athlete at MWF likely knows that each day they go to class, they will either meet someone new or learn something new about someone. Athletes at MWF did not just go to class for the sake of exercise; they also attended class knowing they would be interacting with other people. In fact, a few athletes shared that they desired the interpersonal interactions more than the exercise on some days. The experience and expectation described at MWF, however, was not necessarily the case at RMCF.

RMCF's approach to class organization was much more inconsistent; coaches did not reliably do introductions or ask a question of the day but would instead immediately provide an overview of the workout. Instead, it was typically the responsibility of each athlete to introduce themselves and learn information about other athletes. Some athletes, perhaps those who were

more extraverted, thrived. However, fluttering eye contact, nervous smiles, and stances away from the large group told me that some of the more timid athletes felt uncomfortable or hesitant to engage in this way. Upon noticing this difference between MWF and RMCF, I asked an RMCF coach about his approach to classes. Specifically, I said, "I noticed you don't always do class introductions or a question of the day. Why is that?" He replied, "That's usually because everyone already knows each other. Most of them have been here for a long time, so we don't really need to do those introductions." While the coach's statement was true—that *most* people in the class already knew each other—it was not *always* true. There were sometimes new athletes in class, and interviews with athletes repeatedly relayed the importance of knowing each other beyond name or the CrossFit-specific context. MWF and RMCF took different approaches to facilitating interactions between athletes, of which MWF's was more proactive.

Third, in addition to remembering names and learning about athletes beyond the CrossFit context, remembering and reciting facts was repeatedly acknowledged as a behavior that promoted identification. For instance, I observed during fieldwork how some athletes became almost giddy when a coach remembered specifics about their lives. At RMCF, I watched Julie's eyes light up when her coach asked how her marathon training was going. Robert, an athlete at MWF, let out a big belly laugh when his coach revisited a funny moment from a previous class. Athletes described that coaches and other athletes remembering specific information about them was an action that made them feel welcomed in the CrossFit community. For instance, Natalie appreciated that others remembered "where I'm from" and Pierre appreciated others remembering his strengths and limitations:

> [Coaches] will tune their coaching. For instance, on power cleans. I tend to catch it a little bit more forward. And so, then it's not like, "Oh, your form's not perfect." It's more like, "Okay, your form is good *for you*."

Remembering specific information helped athletes feel like they mattered and that they were an important part of the community. Indeed, Chris went as far as to say the welcoming and conversational nature of a CrossFit gym is, in addition to exercise, its purpose of existence: "Everybody has their bad days. But if you're that way in general, and you're not willing to engage and you just wanna go in and get a work out and get out, that to me, it defeats the purpose."

Finally, pairing up during partner workouts was repeatedly acknowledged as a behavior that promoted identification. CrossFit workouts are sometimes done in pairs or groups of three; this is referred to in CrossFit as a "partner workout" or a "team workout," and these types of workouts typically take place at least once per week. Partners are typically not assigned by the coach but are instead initiated by other athletes in class. I watched several partner workouts unfold at both MWF and RMCF over the course of my observation period. Each time, I watched as athletes in the class paired off. Some athletes confidently paired quickly with a best friend or a spouse. Others paired quickly and based their partnering on other factors, such as athletic ability or gender (i.e., highly skilled athletes of the same gender would often pair because their workouts would include the same weight or movements). Yet, I would always notice a few athletes lingering on the sides of the room making skittish eye contact and trying not to have a middle school flashback of being picked last for the team. Unless an athlete was seen as highly desirable (i.e., athletic) or had a close friend in the class with them, the process of choosing a partner was almost always clunky. To be chosen last, or to not be chosen at all, could lead to feelings of embarrassment and exclusion.

The potential stress of being paired with somebody for a partner workout seemed to be a well-known feeling in CrossFit. For instance, in our interview, Hannah specifically addressed what she did to ensure other athletes felt acknowledged during these situations:

> If it's a team workout and you're, like, desperately hoping somebody will pick you and nobody is looking your way. That's the kind of situation I like to help people avoid. I don't think it takes a whole lot of effort to be kind and welcoming.

What Hannah referred to as "kind and welcoming" gestures, like inviting someone to join a team workout, were behaviors that athletes frequently reported as being central facilitators of identification.

Conversely, when relationships were poorly facilitated, or not facilitated at all, athletes reported feeling left out and disidentified. For example, Natalie recalled an instance in which she experienced "cliquiness" in her gym to the point where she did not feel comfortable or welcomed to attend specific class times:

> I think, like, going to a class where like you're with other athletes who all know each other or who… just people talk to themselves and you're not included in that… I experienced that, like, with that 4:30 class where I was like, "I'm not gonna go." That was kind of like my experience then, and I was like, "All right, you all know each other." I wasn't really talked to during that class and I don't feel like that was for me.

As Natalie's narrative highlights, being ignored or excluded in gym interpersonal interactions can create cliquey environments that exclude members. Similarly, Hank relayed a story about his wife in which she had attended a CrossFit class but she "was very turned off by the snottiness of the class that she went to. And it was a very, 'Ugh, she's new. Ugh, she's doing *that* weight. Ugh.'" Judgement about new people attending a class or their physical abilities often led to fear of finding oneself in a "last picked" moment which prompted some athletes, like Natalie, to want to avoid community interactions altogether. In summary, the presence of interpersonal immediacy behaviors—including knowing and using each other's names, facilitating

interpersonal interactions through prompts such as a question of the day, remembering and reciting facts, and pairing up during partner workouts—created warmth, closeness, and care in CrossFit communities and promoted identification. Their absence made some athletes feel excluded and disconnected and promoted disidentification.

Support and Encouragement

Support and encouragement referred to communication that was affirming, motivating, and confidence building. Athletes identified with community when they felt affirmed in the ways they received support and encouragement in the CrossFit communities. For many athletes, the CrossFit community was "a place where people are recognized for their progress" (Sal) and "a safe space to ask questions or do what you need to do to support your own body and your own fitness journey" (Mary). Consistent and repeated interactions amongst individuals in the CrossFit community built relational climates, or how athletes felt regarded in their relationships (Dailey, 2023). Athletes regularly assessed their relational climates for confirmation, or communication that accepts and validates a person but also encourages growth (Dailey, 2023). Three support and encouragement-related behaviors promoted identification for athletes, including the provision of esteem support, tailored support from coaches, and coaches' use of supportive language. Conversely, four support and encouragement-related behaviors promoted disidentification for athletes, including coaches' communication of unrealistic expectations, poorly delivered coach feedback, interpersonal interactions that failed to communicate care, and dismissive interpersonal behaviors.

Promoting Identification

First, athletes regularly discussed their desire to receive esteem support as a way to increase identification with community. Esteem support refers to communication intended to

enhance how people feel about themselves (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Esteem support promotes a person's skills, abilities, and intrinsic value. Examples of esteem support that took place across athletes' CrossFit communities included providing affirmations, giving compliments, and celebrating successes. I regularly witnessed behaviors that promoted esteem support during fieldwork, and athletes spoke of these behaviors consistently during interviews. The following fieldwork memo illustrates an example of RMCF's relational climate and the esteem support in action.

> The 5:30 a.m. class at RMCF was a particularly competitive group of athletes. In addition to being a group of 10-12 of RMCF's most tenured athletes, they were also some of the gym's most talented. Many, if not all, in the class were able to confidently execute some of CrossFit's most challenging movements, such as handstand walks and snatching considerable weight overhead. On this particular morning, I had the treat of watching the group compete with one another to complete a wildly challenging workout as fast as possible. Though, I suppose that's every morning when you're observing a CrossFit class.
>
> Some trash talking ensued between a handful of men in the group.
>
> "You think you can beat me? I'd love to see you try."
> "No way, bro! Bring it on!"
> "I'll bet my first born you're not going able to finish this."
>
> The women—just as talented—looked on. I'm fairly certain I saw some rolling their eyes at the men's overt displays of competition and peacocking.
>
> The coach began the countdown on the clock: *3-2-1* and they're off.
>
> All athletes got right to work completing the long workout. About 20 minutes in, it was clear their bodies were fatigued. Sweat dripped on the ground from the chests of shirtless men. Faces grimaced with each rep. Then came the ring muscle ups.
>
> Ring muscle ups are one of the most complicated movements in CrossFit. The athlete starts from a hanging position on gymnastics rings, pulls up to the top of a pull up, transitions into the bottom of a dip, and then pushes out from the dip to position themselves on top of the rings with straight arms. It's a movement that requires muscle, coordination, and endurance. Athletes know they're in for a challenge when they see these written into a workout, especially if they are the *end* of a workout.
>
> As the athletes started the ring muscle ups, there were a few failed attempts. These failed attempts didn't go unnoticed. I was holding my breath, nervous to see if they would be

> able to complete the workout. Between gasps of breath, athletes—each other's competition—called out to each other:
>
> "It's okay! Take a rest and get back up there. You got this!"
> "Make your swing bigger for more momentum!"
> "You got this, try again!"
>
> And then, a completed rep. One of the men completed a ring muscle up. It was exhilarating to watch. The other athletes erupted in cheers.
>
> "Nice job man!"
> "Let's go!"
> "Now do it again!"
>
> The very people who were talking trash at the beginning of the workout were the ones shouting words of encouragement and celebrating when their "direct competition" achieved the very goals they had attempted and failed. (Fieldwork memo, February 3, 2023)

As this memo highlights, the relational climate at RMCF was filled with esteem support-related messages, including, "You've got this! Keep pushing!" These confirming messages increased athletes' identification with community because they communicated acceptance and promoted team cohesion (Cranmer et al., 2017).

Esteem support was particularly moving when it took into account athletes' hard work. For instance, Hogsmeade shared, "I've had a few members now already tell me how far I've progressed and how far I've come, which is awesome. I'm like, 'Wow, you noticed.'" Similarly, William commented on how he felt that verbal encouragement conjured a communal feel he had not experienced at other gyms: "People would be like, 'Wow, that was really great. Good job today. You really killed it. I saw you working really hard. I didn't realize you got that many reps.'" Furthermore, feeling encouraged and supported was magnified when athletes were acknowledged by other athletes they respected and admired. Tom shared:

> There's a specific member whose physique and tenure in the gym just blows me away… And very early in my time with the gym, I noticed how much respect he carried by everybody else in the gym, based on the hard work and kindness that he's put in there for

> years and years and years… And I noticed that he had paid attention to the hard work I put in, and he came up to me and just gave me a fist bump, and it was like, "Good job." That level of encouragement from someone with that tenure made me feel like I was at home. It made me eager to keep coming back every day and to be excited as I made progress, to see a tenured level of involvement in the gym recognize that. It was the best feeling.

The encouragement Tom experienced from another member in the gym with clout was not only supportive and encouraging to him, but made him feel "at home" and eager to return to the CrossFit community frequently. Athletes and coaches showing support and encouragement to members was an approach that encouraged identification. These behaviors helped individuals develop trust, friendship, and affinity with each other in the community.

In addition, athletes commented on the importance of nonverbal behaviors that encouraged esteem support. For example, fist bumps, clapping, and cheering were common exchanges after workouts. In addition, some athletes reported experiencing pressure around not being the last person to finish a workout (i.e., being last to finish has underlying tones of being "weak" or "undesirable"). To curb this pressure, Natalie shared that members at her gym would "[wait] to clean up until the last person's finished… it keeps people from feeling like they have to just feel crummy about themselves when they finish." Some athletes shared that their CrossFit communities had white boards or chalk boards where athletes could visually track their goals and progress. MWF featured a chalk board in which athletes could set a goal at the beginning of the year and track their progress. If a goal was achieved or an athlete set a personal record, they could ring the "PR bell," a gold metal bell hanging near the board. Athletes were often encouraged by other athletes to ring the bell, and I witnessed much fanfare around doing so, such as cheering, clapping, and words of congratulations.

Second, athletes relayed the importance of receiving tailored support specifically from coaches. Athletes varied in the types of support they desired, and they expressed the desire for

coaches to know the kind of support they desired and deliver it consistently. For instance, some athletes felt embarrassed or uncomfortable receiving public feedback and would prefer to receive feedback privately (e.g., one-on-one). In high energy environments like a CrossFit gym, yelling is often part of the experience (e.g., coaches yelling phrases like, "Push harder! One more rep! Don't be weak!" at athletes). Some coaches I spoke with during fieldwork and interviews acknowledged this need. For instance, I observed one coach at MWF approach an athlete to deliver feedback, and she did so by stepping close to the athlete and almost whispering to them, as if to make the athlete feel like they were the only person in the room. In the same class, I watched this same coach yell across the gym to a different athlete mid-work out and say, "Come on! Push it! You've got this!" Her approach seemed unique to me, and so I later asked this coach about her behaviors. She shared that previous experiences with those athletes helped her understand their preferences. In addition, she made a habit of tailoring her communication in ways that would be best received by each person.

Conversely, other athletes described thriving in competitive environments wherein feedback was given publicly (e.g., during a class or in a gym Facebook group). Bob described that his coach's feedback, especially when delivered publicly in a class setting, "does make you feel seen, make you feel like part of it, make you a little proud of yourself." Similarly, Rodderick shared, "When the coach is going, 'Go, go, go! You can do this! Finish that! Go! Finish strong!' That helps a lot." Regardless of whether athletes desired support and encouragement to be delivered privately or in public, identification was based on a coach's ability to meet this need consistently.

Finally, data collected through fieldwork and interviews suggest that the language coaches use when showing support influenced athletes' identification with community. For

instance, during fieldwork, I noticed coaches at both RMCF and MWF using "we" language, such as a coach asking, "What questions do *we* have?" or "How are *we* feeling today?" This language activated communal coping and helped athletes feel like they were working together as a unit (Lyons et al., 1998). Additional examples derived from fieldwork of tailored approaches included coaches approaching athletes individually and asking, "How is your body feeling today?" or "How are you feeling about this workout? What modifications might we need?" Participants relayed to me during interviews that this approach of coaches connecting with individuals individually as opposed to saying "come see me if you have any issues" helped participants feel more comfortable, invited, and like the experience was tailored to them.

Promoting Disidentification

First, athletes described experiencing a lack of support and encouragement when they were part of community environments in which coaches held unrealistic expectations. For instance, Stacy described coaches in her gym as having "extremely high expectations" that took the fun out of the community experience and added unnecessary stress. Stacy postulated that the lack of perceived support and encouragement was because of her (lack of) athletic ability. Stacy shared about a time in which one of her coaches—a woman who consistently scored at the top of the leader board and was at an advanced level of fitness—was not encouraging of athletes who she did not deem to be "giving it their all" during a workout. Stacy shared:

> [This coach] was just a kind who seemed to be like, "Sell my soul for every single workout," and not as encouraging or as vocal in her encouragement of any other athlete. That was a little hard for me with her at first.

Stacy's coach did not support or encourage her in a way that was compatible with her desires of a CrossFit community experience.

Second, athletes described difficult interpersonal interactions stemming from poorly delivered feedback. For instance, Hannah shared a time in which one of her coaches provided feedback to her and a group of other athletes that was not only unsolicited but also unhelpful:

> All three of us were doing the best that we could, and [the coach] had actually taken video footage on his phone so that he could come up to us afterwards—he was not the coach for this class—come up to us afterwards *unrequested* and essentially ripped to shreds our form on these movements. And I remember just thinking like, "*Who are you to do that?*" And there was no lead in with like, "Hey, I'm trying to be helpful…" It was literally just to criticize, and that was not the first time that I had seen him do that, and it's not the last time that he did it to me.

Hannah's narrative highlights the frustration that can emerge from poorly delivered feedback (i.e., criticism) and how this type of coaching behavior can make athletes feel isolated. Experiences like Stacy and Hannah's demonstrate how environments that consistently challenge an athlete without confirming their sense of self may promote disidentification (Dailey, 2010).

Third, interpersonal interactions that failed to communicate care prompted athletes' disidentification. For instance, Peter described the circumstances surrounding an injury he obtained during a CrossFit workout, a situation that eventually prompted him to leave CrossFit:

> During the whole time I was going, they were really friendly and really encouraging and we follow each other on social media, and we went out to happy hours and stuff like that and it was great. But then after I got hurt, no one really reached out to me which I was annoyed about. There was one coach, but the rest of them didn't. The owner of the gym didn't. And I was kind of like, "Well, that's a bummer." The only time they reached out to me was like, "Oh, are you ready to come back?" And I was like, "Yeah, no way. Sorry. It might have been different if you guys reached out to me and wanted to know my progress and were looking out for me, and this, that, and the other thing but the fact that the only time I heard from you was asking me to rejoin." Yeah, I don't wanna rejoin. As great as the workout was and eating whatever I wanted, I don't wanna get hurt again.

Peter's perception of the community's failure to provide care and investment during his injury was enough to trigger his exit from CrossFit.

Finally, interpersonal interactions often communicated community norms that were dismissive to some athletes. For example, one way in which some athletes did not feel supported

or encouraged was during the process of completing workouts. Some communities, like MWF, take a "no athlete left behind" approach in which athletes are not permitted to pack up their equipment or leave class until all athletes are finished. Athletes who have completed the workout are encouraged to cheer for those who are still working. The reason MWF adopts this approach, according to MWF athletes, is because it is an easy way to show support for all athletes, regardless of skill level. Acknowledging the importance of the "no athlete left behind" mentality, Natalie described the disappointment and isolation she felt when she was the last person to complete the workout and athletes began packing up before she was done. She shared:

> But when you finish a workout or something, and if there's people who are taking longer with it and the other people have blazed through it. If you are one of the few people left and everybody's packing up and leaving and then you'd be like, "Okay. I guess I'm just finishing that on my own." And I feel like I've watched that happen a couple of times where I was like, "That feels like it was a little isolating."

As Natalie's narrative highlighted, dismissive norms of a CrossFit community, such as not waiting for all athletes to finish workouts, can make athletes feel excluded and encourage disidentification with community.

Providing Non-CrossFit-Related Support

For athletes, community members not only provided support and encouragement related to fitness-related goals and activities, but also supported each other in ways that were meaningful to their other identities and roles outside of CrossFit. This support was particularly relevant during times of emotional distress like navigating an illness, the death of a family member, or job loss. For instance, Stacy shared:

> [The members] were such a huge support to me and to my family when my mom was dying. I feel like they're so caring and so funny and have become a lot more of my social circle than I ever would have thought they would be.

Stacy's story of experiencing deep care from her CrossFit community was shared by others, and athletes often had multiple examples of caring and investment of this nature. For example, Jane recounted a time her gym hosted a fundraiser for a member whose son had leukemia, a time in which her gym hosted a baby shower for members expecting a baby, and about support during her own job loss: "I lost my job in 2019, and everybody's like, 'What? What can we do? What do you need? What kind of context can we make for you? Where do you wanna go?'"

Likewise, athletes regularly commented that their CrossFit community was "more than a gym" (James) and a place where people care about others enough to spend time together with and depend on outside the gym. Abby shared, "I think of the, 'Who can I call if my car breaks down?' or 'Who would I just like to grab a cup of coffee and just chat about life with?" Hank shared that his long-time, consistent membership at the gym and investment he has put into developing strong relationships with other members means he not only has an outlet for exercise, but an outlet for diverse friendships: "At this point, I'm getting a group of people that are not only like-minded and opposite minded, but are open to life conversations as well as the challenge of doing double-unders." As these examples demonstrated, the CrossFit community became a context in which athletes were brought together initially through the instrumental goal of exercising, but then also became a place to spend time with individuals they enjoyed.

Gym-Sponsored Events

For athletes, gym sponsored events provided opportunities for developing relational climates and confirmation outside of CrossFit classes. CrossFit gyms typically sponsor events as part of the community experience. These events serve as moments that work to unify the community, rallying athletes around specific purposes, building relationships, and increasing identification. Examples of events shared by athletes in this study included in-house

competitions, holiday parties, going away parties for members who were moving out of town, and regular monthly socials. Of note, events were not a required component of the community experience for members and instead were, for most athletes, "nice to have."

In-house competitions, or "throw downs," were gym-sponsored events in which the gym organized teams and competitions between members. Sometimes, these events would be used as functions to raise money for nonprofit organizations, such as "Barbells for Boobs," a breast cancer awareness organization. Athletes expressed feeling unified by these events because they needed to engage in teamwork, friendly competition, and build relationships with others in their gyms. Several athletes in this study reported that their gyms hosted annual holiday parties in which the gym membership got together to celebrate December holidays. At holiday parties, athletes reported that their gyms would give superlative awards to their athletes, such as "most welcoming," "most improved," or "athlete of the year." These events tended to be focused around strengthening relationships and sharing appreciation for the year that had passed. Athletes reported special occasion events that were typically planned inconsistently but held great importance, such as going away parties for members. During my fieldwork at MWF, I was present for a going away party for Boots, a member who was moving out of state. During this party, the members spontaneously threw a "breakfast club" event in which each athlete brought a breakfast item and, as a group, they proceeded to cook an entire breakfast for members who had attended the workout that morning. At the start of the workout that took place the hour before the event, the coach asked, "What is a good memory you have about this member?" and each of the more than 20 athletes in attendance shared a memory they had with Boots, in addition to clearly expressing the affection they felt for her by describing her with words such as helpful, nice, kind,

encouraging, and strong. The mood of the event was talkative, jovial, and clearly filled with lightness and appreciation.

Finally, athletes shared that their gyms would host regular social events designed with the intention to help athletes get to know one another. For example, William described that his gym hosts "First Fridays" each month:

> They'll have a food truck and an open bar. And not that everything needs to be centered around alcohol, this one happens to be, but they'll have options if you're... There's plenty of people who are either sober or for their physical fitness, they're not drinking. And so there are other, like it's not a judgmental kind of zone, and it's not a place where it's like, "Come get super fucked up and then drive home." I mean, that's not what's happening either, but yeah, having those opportunities for First Fridays has been really nice to go and just sit down on a random table and be like, "Hey, how's it going? When do you go to the gym? That's why we've never met." And build some kind of a relationship.

As William's example highlights, some gyms would host regular opportunities for connection amongst athletes which helped athletes like William increase their identification.

Regardless of the type of event, athletes described experiencing higher identification because of their attendance at the event, largely because it gave members an opportunity to spend time together doing something other than working out. Events were frequently reported by members as being key memories in their experiences at the gym and as being moments in which they experienced a closeness to the community in a way they had not before.

However, events sometimes felt exclusionary for some athletes. For instance, holiday parties typically included activities such as games and a potluck-style dinner, but often involved drinking alcohol and consuming recreational drugs, like marijuana. Some athletes thrived in these environments, building relationships with one another and creating memories. Others, however, felt excluded and uncomfortable in an environment centered around alcohol. Hannah described that bringing alcohol into the gym can be "really unfair" for some people (i.e., those who struggle with addiction). Similarly, Leslie shared:

> Like, we know having alcohol is fun and whatnot. You can do that on your own time. But when it is like big gym events, like, we don't want that to be a part of our community experience just because we've seen it gone, like, into the deep end, off the edge, like in unhealthy ways.

As Hannah and Leslie's examples demonstrate, including alcohol at gym events can create feelings of exclusion for some athletes and promote disidentification with community. Overall, events served as a key avenue for the intentional facilitation of relationships.

Summary

To summarize, the common thread through many of these interpersonal actions was the degree of confirmation and disconfirmation present in messages (Dailey, 2006). Athletes who experienced validating, valuable, and respectful (i.e., confirming) messages from coaches had more affirming experiences of community in CrossFit than athletes who experienced messages from coaches they perceived to be invalidating, insensitive, or that conveyed a sense of inferiority to the athlete (i.e., disconfirming). In addition, these examples demonstrate the interrelated nature of each dimension of community. Community in CrossFit is not only shaped by the everyday "doing" of CrossFit (i.e., practical dimension). Instead, the interpersonal dimension highlights that athletes must be recognized as individuals, of which this is made possible (or not) through communication.

Political

The political dimension of community refers to how CrossFit athletes saw their sociopolitical identities—such as their political beliefs, social class, or cultural identities—reflected in their everyday experiences of community. Athletes identified with their CrossFit community when they experienced the sociopolitical climate of their community as inviting and inclusive. This finding aligns with Chaskin's (2012) conceptualization of community as a political unit, including experiencing and cultivating community through politically motivated

mobilization and activism. The political dimension of community differs from other dimensions (e.g., the personal dimension) in that the community as a unit, as opposed to an individual, needs to espouse political beliefs and practices that align with the beliefs and practices of the athletes. In addition, the political dimension of community in CrossFit materialized differently than Chaskin's conceptualization in that activism or political mobilization were often not prioritized for individuals in this context. However, politics did play a role in shaping community in CrossFit gyms because of the notion that the personal is political. The political dimension of community was demonstrated through athletes' communication about sociopolitical identities and CrossFit's roots in support for the military and first responders.

Sociopolitical Identities

As a group fitness activity, CrossFit inevitably involves people talking with each other about themselves, including their politics with often intersects with personal identities (i.e., personal dimension). Sociopolitical identities refer to the combination of social and political factors that make up an individual's identity. For some individuals, the sociopolitical identities expressed by other athletes and the gym promoted their identification with the gym. For example, Stacy shared she is proud that her gym community has "a Pride flag right in the lobby. They do a Pride workout every year… We had a Pride heart on the door, on the two doors when you walk in." Similarly, athletes described their desire to participant in gym-sponsored activities that supported causes that athletes believed in. For instance, athletes at MWF fondly recalled the events in which the gym raised money for Barbells for Boobs, an organization that raises money for breast cancer research and support.

For others, the sociopolitical identities expressed by other athletes and the gym prompted disidentification. For example, athletes expressed frustration with "stereotypes associated with

CrossFit" (Molly) or the widely held belief that CrossFit is a "cult" (Bob) of fitness enthusiasts. Similarly, Leslie shared:

> There's some controversy around CrossFit, like especially during the pandemic with having Greg Glassman [CrossFit's founder] make just really terrible comments during that time, sometimes it feels hard to say like, "Yeah, I do CrossFit, but I'm not one of those CrossFitters, those mean, super macho, all about the intersections of religion, military and all those different things. So, yeah that can be a little bit, I think, confusing as a member of the CrossFit community at large, even though it doesn't necessarily exist in my smaller CrossFit community at my gym personally.

Leslie's narrative shares an example of athletes varying levels of identification. Here, Leslie describes identifying with CrossFit through her local gym, but not at the global level (i.e., "I'm not one of those CrossFitters"). In addition, she expressed her dislike for CrossFit's reputation as "mean, super macho." Leslie did a great deal of communicative work (Donovan-Kicken et al., 2012) to distance herself from CrossFit as an institution due to her disagreement with its values and reputation, all while constructing a version of CrossFit that affirms her sense of self.

CrossFit's Militaristic Roots

Briefly mentioned in Leslie's narrative is the also role that CrossFit's militaristic roots and influence played in her decided level of identification with CrossFit as a global brand and institution. One characteristic not addressed in the CrossFit methodology and ethos (i.e., the everyday "doing" of CrossFit) but regularly acknowledged by athletes in the study was CrossFit's militaristic roots and influence. As one athlete in this study shared, some CrossFit communities can be distilled into three words: "God, Country, CrossFit" (Emily). CrossFit's origins are that of a fitness regimen specifically designed for military and police personnel and firefighters. Characteristics of militarism, such as obedience, respect for rank, loyalty, courage, patriotism, and responsibility—are baked in to what CrossFit is and athletes' descriptions of it.

For example, Nicole shared that "CrossFit communities tend to be really conservative." Similarly, Luke shared:

> I think something CrossFit does poorly is they do this blind loyalty or blind patriotism thing… There's a blind loyalty for patriotism through U.S. Military service as well as police service. And I'm not trying to say that U.S. Military service is inherently good or bad… But I think the blind loyalty to anything means that it's harder to have big picture conversations.

In this example, Luke directly challenged an attitude enacted by CrossFit as a global organization: "blind loyalty" and "blind patriotism" in a way that does not challenge a (sometimes problematic) militaristic status quo. Luke's observation was mirrored by other athletes in this study. For instance, other athletes criticized CrossFit as an institution, mainly because of the summer 2020 scandal in which the former founder and owner, Greg Glassman, made racist remarks about the murder of George Floyd. CrossFit affiliates throughout the world revoked their CrossFit affiliation in response, and elite CrossFit athletes who were poised to compete at the 2020 CrossFit games pulled out of the competition, returning only if Glassman resigned, which he did later that week (BBC News, 2020). Taken together, these examples demonstrate the varying degrees to which athletes' perceived compatibility with sociopolitical identities expressed at their gyms can affect athletes' identification with their CrossFit community.

Summary

The political dimension of community encompasses the ways in which CrossFit athletes saw their sociopolitical identities reflected in community experiences. Athletes identified with community when the gym espoused sociopolitical beliefs that reflected those of the athletes (e.g., support for Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ+ issues). Conversely, athletes disidentified with community when CrossFit as a global brand and institution promoted ideals that were contrary to

what the athlete supported (e.g., pro-military or pro-conservative values). Findings reflect Chaskin's (2012) conceptualization of community as a political unit in which individuals experience community through activism and political mobilization.

Spatial

The spatial dimension of community is characterized by the gym's physical manifestation and its function as a place in which community-related interactions occur. Athletes identified with their CrossFit community when they experienced the material space of the gym as inviting and inclusive. This finding aligns with Chaskin's (2012) conceptualization of community as space and place in which individuals experience community spatially, such as through buildings, landmarks, or other location-bound artifacts. The two most prominent factors comprising the spatial dimensions of community are gym-related artifacts and the gym's materiality, including layout and cleanliness.

Artifacts

Athletes regularly acknowledged the ways in which gym artifacts influenced the spatial dimension of community. Artifacts are objects, like decorations or clothing, that have cultural relevance to a community and are expressions of human thought. Before addressing the artifacts that played the most prominent role in shaping the spatial dimension of community, it is noteworthy to address the artifacts that athletes reported played a minimal role in shaping identification with community: words, phrases, and images featured around the gym.

Like other shared group spaces like classrooms, CrossFit gyms often feature words, phrases, or images on the walls intended to communicate the gym's purpose or goals. For instance, words such as "technique, consistency, intensity, strength, flexibility, and stamina" were painted near the white board (i.e., the focal point) of the gym at MWF. The placement of these

words was if to reinforce what should be important, guiding forces in athletes' training. Similarly, MWF prominently featured the gym's goals in painted lettering by the entrance of the gym, some of which included: "Make it the best hour of your day, leave your ego at the door, relax, have fun" as well as a common phrase shared in CrossFit gyms: "Routine is the enemy." On the black gym walls at RMCF, "THRIVE" was painted in bold white letters nearly three feet tall. In addition, RMCF featured a "work hard and be nice to people" print and artistic, high-quality photos of their athletes lifting, as if to remind athletes that they are strong, competitive, and that those among them have accomplished great things in the past and can continue to do so in the future.

This consistent articulation of the goals and purpose of the gym presented athletes with numerous opportunities to be informed of what the gym's organizational values were. Yet, when asked about how visual imagery such as this impacted their community experience, athletes frequently commented that they "don't really notice" (Jane) visual imagery around their gym or that the imagery had little impact on their experience of community. This finding was surprising, given the amount of time and money it can take to decorate a gym space in this manner. However, there were visual artifacts that did influence identification and disidentification for athletes, including (a) flags, (b) plaques, posters, and t-shirts, and (c) time records and visual recording of workout results.

Flags

The presence of flags as artifacts promoted identification for some athletes. Athletes described appreciating the presence of a variety of flags—such as the LGBTQ pride flag, country, state, or city flags, or flags for each of the military branches—in their CrossFit gym because it demonstrated the community's commitment to diversity. For instance, Molly shared:

> The first gym I was at had a lot of CrossFit flags. Not CrossFit, but other brands in the space, like supplement companies, NoBull, Reebok, stuff like that. So, my current gym, which again, I think is probably another reason why I love it. The only flag that we have in the gym is the City of Chicago flag, and there's something to me about... I get why they might hang up branded materials and things like that, but it says something about, again, the community of... Everybody in Chicago knows what the City of Chicago flag is. You see it everywhere, you see the four red stars everywhere, and it's just kind of cool that that's the one big thing up on the wall of like, this is here, this is your home, this is where you live. And for, I think the people that drop in too, they're like, "Oh, I don't know what that is. What is it?" And you can say, "Oh, it's the City of Chicago flag. Let me tell you what all the colors on it mean."

In this example, Molly describes how the City of Chicago flag unites her CrossFit community as one, unlike the branded flags like NoBull, Reebok, or the supplement companies, which do not work to unify the community because those brands are not directly related to members. In addition, the flags served as prompts for visiting athletes to create conversation, an action that helps visiting athletes and members alike feel more comfortable and invited in the space.

Leslie shared a similar sentiment to Molly in that location-oriented flags worked to unite her community in their pride for country and commitment to diversity:

> At my gym, we have different countries flags, which is really cool. It's because our gym owner, he's from Fiji and so he has Fijian flag up. We have a flag for New Zealand, one that's up for Mexico, and just for various countries that people want to represent in the gym.

Leslie and Molly's narratives both highlight how artifacts like flags around the gym had great potential to communicate the gym's values in ways that united the community. Leslie continued, however, by describing how flags more typically hung in a CrossFit space can be divisive. She shared:

> I know when I go to other gyms though, a lot of times it's like military flags, which you know, all respect for that, but I think that can also be really intimidating. It kind of sparks, like, a thought process for me of how often CrossFit intersects with things that you might see more for, like, the military or police force or firefighters or, like, those different professions where it's very, like, macho and can lend itself into toxic masculinity. And so that's why, like, I do pay attention to that because I am really grateful that we just have like different countries represented and it's very inclusive.

In this example, Leslie articulates how flags showing support for the military or first responders can sometimes articulate a community environment threaded with the toxic masculinity that can sometimes be associated with such professions, due to their promotion of stoicism and power. This addition in Leslie's narrative was a sentiment more commonly shared by athletes, and her narrative demonstrates that flags could be a divisive artifact that prompted disidentification.

For instance, athletes described feelings of isolation and exclusion, particularly in relation to military- or police-related flags. Abby described her gym as having: "Every single military flag of every single branch including Space Force the day it became a real branch of the military. And, oh, the Don't Tread on Me Flag was over the front door. It was *very*, very clear [emphasis in original]." The clarity Abby speaks of is in reference to how she became aware of the owner's political stance based on the flags he chose to hang around the gym (i.e., conservative, military and police supporter). Abby, someone who did not support the conservative ideology shared by the owners, disidentified with the community because she viewed sociopolitical differences to be irreconcilable.

Some athletes took to proactively searching for flag artifacts upon entering a gym for the first time. Vincent, for example, described specifically looking for which flags were hung up around the gym in order to determine whether he would be welcomed in a gym or what the community's ideology might be. He shared:

> There were times where I go visit other gyms in different cities, and I walk in, I see a giant "Blue Lives Matter" flag, and I go, "Okay, I'm not welcome here," off the rip. And they've already ruined my expectations for the gym in and of itself. So, I see those type of signs, those, kind of, authoritative signs, that's when I have already kind of checked out… In my opinion, the Blue Lives Matter flag is just a mockery of the Black Lives Matter flag and ideology. It's the exact anthesis of it. So, seeing that, I think, "You don't think I matter as a Black man." And there have never been large signs of racism that I've experienced at a gym, but sometimes I feel like, you know, I'm not from here. I'm just gonna get through this workout and leave.

Despite not experiencing overt signs of racism, Vincent came to understand more about a CrossFit community by reading the room for cues that communicated what was going unsaid by community members. Vincent's experience reflects incorporated exclusion, in which people of color are technically allowed in a space, but their presence in the space is marginalized and discouraged, which prompts those individuals to withdraw and retreat (Chaskin & Joseph, 2015).

Plaques, Posters, and T-Shirts

MWF prominently featured plaques and posters around the gym that celebrated athletes who had completed a milestone number of classes, including 1,000 and 2,000 classes. Each person who had completed 1,000 classes at MWF was featured on a 12-inch by 12-inch plaque that included their name, the designation "1,000 Club," and the MWF logo. The 22 plaques were affixed to one of the gym walls that could be seen at all times during classes. At least 15 posters were created for athletes who had completed 2,000 classes. Each poster was approximately three feet long and two feet wide and were displayed prominently on the walls around the perimeter of the gym. Each poster featured the athlete's name, their photo, the designation of "2,000 Club" and the MWF logo.

To comprehend the sight of the plaques and posters was almost overwhelming because of the obvious amount of time and dedication it would take a person to achieve such recognition: likely at least five years to join the 1,000 Club more than eight years to join the 2,000 Club. This sight felt particularly moving to me as an observer because the photos on the posters featured a diverse mix of individuals as it pertained to age, body size, race, and gender. This diversity communicated one message clearly: anyone can be part of these clubs. Such an accomplishment and display of commitment, particularly to an individual just starting out with exercise, certainly

would be inspiring, especially because the individuals who were named on the plaques and posters were still active members of the gym community each day.

Major milestones like completing 1,000 or 2,000 classes were not the only demonstrations of commitment that MWF recognized. Athletes who had completed 250 or 500 classes were recognized with "250 Club" and "500 Club" t-shirts, and coaches would proudly present athletes with their shirts during a class period. I watched a video recording of an athlete being presented with a 250 Club shirt, and the athlete beamed with pride as they donned their shirt and the class cheered to celebrate the accomplishment. During my observations at MWF, I saw a number of athletes wearing their t-shirts to class. Peers would sometimes comment on their accomplishment: "Nice shirt, man!" or "That shirt looks good on you! You've worked hard for it." Athletes described seeing those posters and t-shirts as "inspiring and motivational" (Tom) and "community building" (Noel).

Time Records and Visual Recording of Workout Results

Fifteen 8-inch by 10-inch white boards mounted around the perimeter of the gym at RMCF featured the top all-time best scores athletes in the gym had earned on some of CrossFit's most well-known "benchmark" workouts. Benchmark workouts are designed to be standard workouts across all CrossFit gyms and intended to allow athletes to compare (i.e., "benchmark") their progress against their previous performance and the performance of others. In addition, benchmark workouts are notorious for being extremely physically demanding. These white boards were like a "hall of fame" for RMCF athletes current and past, and some athletes appeared on the board multiple times. The reoccurring athletes, because of their stellar athletic ability and performance, were "living legends" of RMCF.

Each white board held space for the top five men and top five women's scores on each benchmark workout. RMCF athletes regularly commented on these legendary athletes and their presence on white boards during class. For example, it was not difficult to notice that Preston was featured on nearly all of the benchmark boards. When Preston was in class, athletes would sometimes make comments such as, "Watch out, Preston! I'm coming for that score!" as if to both tease Preston about his stellar athletic performance and also motivate themselves to improve their performance on their own workouts. Athletes commented that seeing the scores of these athletes was "inspiring," "motivational," and made them "want to work harder" (quotes obtained from conversations with athletes during fieldwork; names not recorded). Conversations with athletes during fieldwork illuminated that the more athletes bought in to improving their performance in the gym, the higher their commitment and identification with the community.

Gym Layout and Cleanliness

A CrossFit gym's layout and materiality sometimes influenced how athletes experienced identification and disidentification with community. The layout of each CrossFit gym varies and is dependent on the size and space of the building or unit. Some gyms, for example, have relatively little floor space and can accommodate a maximum of 10 athletes comfortably for each class. Others are larger and can accommodate 20 or more athletes per class. Like other types of gyms in the United States, some CrossFit gyms have amenities such as showers or coffee stations available to their members whereas others take more "bare bones" approach and include only the basics, like workout equipment and a single bathroom.

Furthermore, some CrossFit gyms are sparkling clean and ask that members clean equipment after each use. Others have visual dust, dirt, and grime and even the occasional residual blood from a bleeding hand on a barbell. Cleanliness was sometimes brought up as an

issue that shaped athletes' desire to spend time in the gym's physical location. Hogsmeade shared that one of the previous gyms she attended was "just festering with germs" and that she "ended up bringing my own wipes" to clean the equipment before and after her own use. Hogsmeade ultimately left this gym, prompted in part by the gym's filth.

Aside from the issue of cleanliness, variations in gym layout and amenity inclusion tended to be a secondary thought for athletes, having little impact on the ways they described their experience of community to me. For example, Hank shared:

> If I'm gonna pay X amount of dollars at that point, I'd probably look at it almost more like a car, right? What features does it have? Does it have… Does it look clean, does it not? And so, the one I was at in [city] was very new and rough and it was still great and the people were great and this one [RMCF] is probably a step or a couple steps up from that, from a care and equipment and visual standpoint. But I think as you get into it, you probably... I guess I don't necessarily look at it [the gym space] that much.

Like Hank, other athletes described considering the layout of the gym almost secondarily and instead prioritized how they felt in the space (e.g., included, invited, or supported). Some amenities served as tools for building relationships amongst athletes. For example, Jane shared that she appreciated her gym's coffee station because it was a central, communal space where athletes greeted each other and spent time before and after class chatting and building relationships.

Perhaps a more tacit factor of a gym's materiality and layout is how athletes are physically positioned during a CrossFit class. CrossFit equipment typically requires a lot of space. A "rig," for example, is a metal structure that consists of multiple squat racks and pull up bars that can be used by several athletes at once. Due to their size (typically at least 14 feet long, four feet wide, and nine feet high), rigs require a large amount of floor space. Because of this, rigs typically are affixed to the ground in areas of the gym that may not be ideal for fostering

interpersonal interactions. The flowing excerpt from my fieldnotes captures the initial moments in which I began to notice that the rig's positioning at RMCF may be significant:

> RMCF is housed in a vast rectangular warehouse and features two rigs, one at the west side of the room and another at the east. Between the two rigs is floor space to accommodate approximately 12 athletes. The west rig, however, perhaps because it is closer to the white board where workout overviews take place, seems as if it is the preferred rig of choice during classes. It appears that athletes with closer relationships tend to gravitate to this rig in groups which leads athletes with less established relationships—perhaps newer athletes or more reserved athletes—to use the east rig. Sometimes this division results in six athletes working out together on the west rig and maybe one or two working out on the east rig. It appears as if the coach spends more time interacting with athletes on the west rig, intentionally or otherwise. It reminds me of a lunchroom segregated by the haves and the have nots. (Notes from February 8, 2023)

The same scenario described in my fieldnotes of tended to play out each time I attended a class with more than six athletes in attendance: the higher skill athletes grouped together to use the west rig and all others were forced to use the east rig. Although my interviews with athletes did not bring this division up as an issue that influenced their identification with their experience of the RMCF community, the difference between the two groups on the different rigs was obvious to me as an observer. While I cannot make a definitive claim staying that this layout did impact the experience of community for athletes, spatial factors such as this do impact individuals' feelings of inclusion and exclusion (Chaskin, 2013). Thus, such claims are not unfounded.

Summary

Gym-related artifacts and the gym's materiality, including its layout and cleanliness, comprised the spatial dimension of community. Each of the different artifacts, including (a) flags, (b) plaques, posters, and t-shirts, and (c) time records and visual recording of workout scores served as visual demonstrations of athletes' commitment to CrossFit. In addition, artifacts developed a sense of community amongst athletes because they served as avenues for athletes' celebration of the self and others. Finally, the materiality of the gym, including its layout and

cleanliness, were perceived by athletes as factors that influenced whether they felt invited and comfortable.

Strategies Used to Manage Disidentification

Athletes did a great deal of work to resolve or tolerate the tensions they experienced related to identification and community. As a result of experiencing CrossFit-related interpersonal interactions over time, athletes came to understand their membership as part of the ingroup or outgroup. Ingroup athletes typically held the gym's dominant identities, such as White, able-bodied, fit, and competitive. Outgroup athletes typically held identities that stood in opposition—or, at least, in contrast—to the ingroup, such as people of color, large body, and non-competitive. Ingroup and outgroup classifications varied based on the composition of each gym (e.g., ingroup athletes at RMCF were different than ingroup athletes at MWF).

Athletes who used disidentification management strategies were typically those who identified in some way with the outgroup. Athletes regularly sought to distance themselves from community-related identities they perceived to be threatening, disaffirming, or that caused misalignment (Becker & Tausch, 2014; Dean, 2008). Disidentification with community occurred related to each of the five dimensions of community—including practical, personal, interpersonal, political, and spatial—and was used as an attempt to put psychological distance between themselves and the experience related to the threat (Becker & Tausch, 2014). In addition, disidentification typically occurred because athletes experienced discrimination or rejection in some way and/or because they recognized their membership in the outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Laar & Levin, 2006). Disidentified athletes reported having negative feelings about their community experience and a low desire to engage (De Clercq, 2022).

Athletes typically used one or more of five strategies when they disidentified with their gym, including speaking out, resigning and compartmentalizing, being the representation, developing a sub-community, or leaving the gym or CrossFit entirely. Speaking out refers to athletes expressing their opinions on issues or social situations as a way to advocate for change. Resigning and compartmentalizing refers to the practice of separating disaffirming and affirming gym moments, focusing instead on cultivating experiences and interactions they enjoyed. Being the representation refers to athletes attempting to make a change in their experience of community by resisting through being the representation they desired. Developing a sub-community refers to the practice of creating smaller groups comprised of athletes from the larger community who held similar identities and values. Finally, some athletes chose to leave their gym or CrossFit entirely.

Some athletes used multiple strategies over their course of their CrossFit community experiences. Often, when one strategy did not produce a desired result, athletes shifted to another. If an athlete felt affirmed by the result of a strategy, they might cease to use any additional. In this way, strategy selections were highly dependent on context and past outcomes. In addition, athletes generally wanted to do everything they could to maintain identification with their CrossFit communities. Most athletes saw their membership in the community to be highly valuable, at minimum, for practical reasons (i.e., as a way to exercise). Peter, for example, shared that there were no other exercise routines that had worked for him, and Boots shared that CrossFit is the "best part" of her day. Many saw their membership in the community as an investment in both their physical and social well-being. For these reasons, athletes used these disidentification management strategies as a way to distance themselves from what they identified as disagreeable aspects of community and attempt to improve their overall experience.

In the section that follows, I introduce each strategy and provide examples shared by athletes. Some athletes are mentioned multiple times in different strategies. This is intentional, as it demonstrates the ways in which some athletes used multiple strategies in order to manage disidentification.

Speak Out

One of the first steps athletes would take when trying to manage disidentification with the gym would be to speak out and attempt to change the issues they experienced (i.e., social competition or seeking to change the status quo through advocacy; Tajfel, 1975). In speaking out, athletes would express their opinions on issues or social situations as a way to evoke change. Speaking out might include providing feedback to a coach about their communication or actions, advocating for change to decision makers, such as the gym owner, or interjecting when overhearing problematic conversations. Speaking out was seen as something that made for a "healthy" community. As Leslie shared, "I think healthy community doesn't mean there's no conflict at all. It means that you feel comfortable enough to confront things together and then to have those conversations but knowing that it's for the betterment of those around you."

The success of speaking out varied. When speaking out was successful, athletes described feeling able to reaffirm their sense of self and restore their connection to community. For example, Vincent, a Black athlete and coach at MWF, was well-liked, respected, and deeply valued by the MWF community, partially due to his time as a member and his improved athleticism and health. Vincent shared how he approached the owner of MWF and articulated his desire to see the gym become more diverse, recalling that he advocated, "[we're] missing such a large sub group of people." In doing so, he shared the potential benefits of increased diversity both for members and the business as a whole. He also shared his desire to become a coach in

hopes that his increased visibility could recruit more people of color. Vincent shared the outcome of this strategy:

> We have different types of people getting to know each other and moving. The music is more diverse. You get to talk to people who are more diverse. It just makes for a better experience overall… It just helps the whole vibe of the space. I don't have the words to describe it. It feels more open now to have different types of people.

Vincent's narrative highlights how speaking out can have systematic change in the CrossFit gym.

Unlike Vincent, other athletes were not able to resolve disidentification. For example, Penelope, a CrossFit coach, felt a sense of duty to respond to another member in the gym when she overheard him dismissing that transgender individuals exist. She shared:

> There was one time I was just doing extra accessory stuff, and there was another person there doing accessory stuff, and they made a comment about transgender [people], and I can't remember exactly what he said. It was something pronoun-related… and I just couldn't tolerate it. And I said, "I won't entertain that, and you might wanna rethink about what you say out loud."

Penelope was not able to resolve the disidentification created by the interaction; however, she was able to better tolerate her disidentification with community because she spoke out and pushed back on what she viewed to be troubling messages from another member.

Similarly, Jane, a person who works in higher education, described reading an article about the importance of using gender neutral language in her everyday work. She applied the article to her experience in the CrossFit community and decided to provide feedback to one of the coaches at her gym about using gender inclusive language when coaching. Jane shared:

> I said something to one of the coaches one time, and he kinda gave me a look. And I was like, "No, seriously. It's not, 'Oh, this is the male weight and this is the female weight.' Instead, say, "Hey, here's one weight and here's the other, and here are the scales for those. Choose as you see fit." Just to make it welcoming. Because you don't wanna ostracize maybe somebody who's a transgender female from walking in the door and feeling comfortable.

In Jane's interaction, she could sense that the coach was perhaps offput by receiving the

feedback (i.e., “he kinda gave me a look”), and Jane was not able to recall whether she had seen this coach, or other coaches in her gym, implement the feedback she provided. However, she felt better about her interactions in the gym because she took the time to provide the feedback.

Through the strategy of speaking out, some athletes were able to catalyze change in their communities and take steps to resolve, or at least tolerate, disidentification. Typically, athletes who used this strategy were well-respected by community members, even holding elevated positions in the community (i.e., coach), suggesting it is beneficial for individuals to be viewed favorably by others for effective use of this strategy. Even if the outcomes of their efforts were not apparent, athletes did reaffirm their sense of self in moments of speaking out and, even if momentarily, created a space in which they felt they could remain. If disidentification was not resolved through speaking out, some athletes continued to speak out and others used a different strategy.

Resign and Compartmentalize

When athletes experienced interactions that prompted disidentification with their CrossFit community, some first resigned to the situation and then chose to compartmentalize related thoughts and feelings. The purpose of this action was to reduce the cognitive dissonance that arose when experiencing tensions associated with identification. Instead, athletes chose to navigate their CrossFit community by separating their various gym moments or interactions into experiences they enjoyed, felt affirmed by, and wanted to continue. In doing so, athletes acknowledged that they would never fully identify with their CrossFit community and sought identification in other ways.

For example, Hannah described having repeated challenging interpersonal interactions with a coach at one of her previous CrossFit gyms:

> She was a great coach, but her personality could be really harsh. And so, if you tried to say anything to her or to anyone kind of above her, you were gonna get a ton of blow back. And so, it just got to the point where you just didn't bother to say anything 'cause it wasn't gonna be heard.

In her narrative, Hannah acknowledged that she was resigned to the reality that she would consistently have difficult interactions with this coach (i.e., "you just didn't bother to say anything"). Hannah felt like she had little power or ability to change the situation. As a result, Hannah retreated and instead chose to focus on other parts of the community experience she enjoyed (e.g., affirming interactions with others).

Similarly, William described a situation in which he interacted with another individual in his gym in the noon class they both regularly attended:

> There was a guy in the gym, and he would always call me bud. He'd be like, "Hey bud," and I could tell he didn't know what my name was. I noticed he started using my name when he went to my partner's class early in the morning one day, and he came up to me the next day at noon and said, "Hey, William! I was working out with your fiancé this morning at the 6 a.m. class. He's a really strong." And I was like, "Yeah, he can lift a lot." And, I noticed from that moment on, he has used my name. And it was like, I'm happy that he's using my name, but I also had this like, "Fuck you, dude." Like sort of like, "Oh, okay, so now that you know my partner is really strong, now I matter in your world?" kind of thing. That was almost how I perceived it, but I'm sure he did not put that much thought into it. He was just suddenly like, "Oh, I know who your fiancé is, and now I know your name." But at the moment, I remember just being like, "I got what I wanted, for him to use my name, and I hate it."

In this example, William expresses the frustration he had with another member about the member not knowing his name, but suddenly seeing value in William when he learned that his partner was a talented athlete. William described getting what he wanted, but the interaction left William angry. Moreover, he found little benefit to strengthening his relationship with the man, and this specific relationship had little impact on how he perceived his overall experience of community in his CrossFit gym. Thus, William resigned to the member's behavior and compartmentalized this disaffirming interaction, choosing instead to focus on his affirming

relationships with other athletes and CrossFit's physical benefits.

Some athletes chose resignation and compartmentalization because it was a strategy used by necessity outside of CrossFit. These athletes described disaffirming experiences in CrossFit as a microcosm of the world at large, and there was little that could be done to change that. For example, Emily, a Black woman, described staying as a member at her gym, despite the racism she encountered, because racism was a familiar and often unavoidable experience for her. She shared:

> I grew up in racism, basically. This community I'm from. I don't wanna say I got used to it. But you kind of learn to grow kind of a backbone. So, I feel like… I've gone through way worse and come out better so I'm not... It's like, I wasn't gonna leave or find something else. Because I've tried other things. I've tried F-45 or other things and it's just not—to me, it's just, like, a workout class. It's not like a community. So, I've tried other drop-ins with friends and stuff. I've tried other things and just didn't care for it.

Emily's narrative stands as an example of the resignation some athletes experienced—particularly athletes of color. Despite feeling on the margins of the community, athletes like Emily faced practical constraints and could find no exercise outlet that was a better fit for them than the CrossFit membership they had now (i.e., engaging in social creativity, or redefining the interpretation of their group by reinterpreting the group in a favorable way; Tajfel, 1975). In short, because they had experienced a lifetime of exclusion, some athletes felt resigned to grim community experiences and compartmentalized disidentification, instead choosing to focus on other aspects of community they did identify with (e.g., fellowship amongst other athletes of color).

Finally, some athletes described needing to compartmentalize their feelings about CrossFit as a global organization from their local gym experiences. Vincent, the same person who had successfully implemented change in his CrossFit community by speaking out about the need to recruit a more diverse athlete population at MWF, found the need to compartmentalize

his disappointment in CrossFit as an overarching organization. For instance, Vincent recently attended an event sponsored by CrossFit Headquarters and intended for gym owners and coaches in the Midwest region. He shared, "I was the only Black man there, and I was one of the presenters… Out of 200 coaches and gym owners, I was the *only Black person* [emphasis in original]." Sensing his disappointment and frustration, I asked him how he felt about being the only Black person at the conference. He shared:

> Well, I personally don't have that much faith in CrossFit as a corporation, but I love the methodology behind it. Like I think their methodology behind CrossFit—you know, the movements, the sense of community, the ethos of it is great. It's just not being run very well. I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I don't want to turn my back on it. I want to take it and do it right. We are trying to make it as inclusive as possible.

In this example, Vincent drew upon the personal dimension of community and described divorcing himself from CrossFit's lack of diversity, instead focusing on the things he likes about CrossFit (i.e., the methodology and ethos) and using his energy into making his local CrossFit community more diverse and inclusive (i.e., social creativity, Tajfel, 1975). Vincent's positive experiences in his local gym prompted him to compartmentalize his identification with CrossFit to his local gym and away from CrossFit as a global company or brand. In sum, to manage disidentification, athletes resigned to and compartmentalized their experiences, isolating disaffirming community experiences and instead choosing to focus on aspects that affirmed their sense of self and identity.

Be the Representation

When athletes grew frustrated with their CrossFit community experience or experienced tensions associated with identifying with their community, athletes attempted to make a change by being the representation they desired (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Often, athletes' acts of being the representation came from a place of athletes being frustrated with their marginalization

in the CrossFit space. This marginalization was typically associated with identity-related markers, such as race, body size or ability, or sexual orientation. Athletes who utilized this strategy tended to have a level of confidence, resolve, and drive for justice that prompted them to make these decisions or perform the actions. These athletes were fueled by their desire to make community experiences more affirming for others like them.

Often, these acts of being the representation were not grandiose; instead, they were subtle yet brimming with importance for these athletes and others like them. For example, William took steps to be the representation for the LGBTQ+ community in his gym by putting rainbow stickers on his water bottle and shoes to help people in the gym see that there were other queer people in the space. Similarly, Emily took steps to be the representation for large body athletes by taking her shirt off and wearing only a sports bra during workouts, an action traditionally "fit" people in the gym do regularly. Emily shared, "I take my shirt off. I don't have the best flat stomach, but if I do it, maybe another girl who maybe, she might feel good. So, I just think, just like representation, just in all forms matters." In addition, Emily extended her example to how she sought to be the representation for other people of color in her gym, saying, "There are some people who do want to start CrossFit, but they don't see another Black person there, so they just kind of walk by [the gym]." She described an interaction she had with another Black woman who was new to her gym:

> My friend now, she even said like, "When I saw you working out, I knew it was a good place to go because you were there." Because at the time, I was probably the only Black girl there. So, that made me feel good.

Emily's hope that maybe another Black athlete or large body athlete would see her and then feel invited to join the gym suggests the power of representation of identities in these community contexts.

Similar to Emily, Vanessa remained a member at her CrossFit community, despite repeatedly experiencing feelings of isolation and frustration associated with the personal dimension of community, because she wanted to serve as a representative for other people of color. She shared:

> I felt like I almost needed to stay with CrossFit because of my identity. Because I was like, right now, there's not that many Black females in the CrossFit community. So, in a sense, I am making a difference by staying, so that was kind of where I landed at.

Vanessa was willing to keep spending time in a community in which sometimes her values did not align with those of other athletes in the gym for the sake of representation. Vincent took Vanessa's sentiment a step further by becoming a coach at his gym after growing tired of seeing few athletes of color at his gym. He shared that, because of his efforts, he saw the number of people of color at his gym grow:

> I've already had a lot of members new and old come to me and say, "The reason I came to this place is because your face is on the website. There's a Black coach here, and I felt more comfortable with that."

In sum, to manage disidentification, athletes chose to resist the status quo by being the representation they desired, often in hopes of creating a more affirming community experience for other athletes.

Develop a Sub-Community

When athletes grew frustrated and disappointed by their community experiences, some attempted to manage this disidentification by developing a sub-community (i.e., engaging in social categorization and the creation of ingroups and outgroups within a larger community; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Sub-communities were smaller groups comprised of athletes from the community who held similar identities, values, or compatible points of view. These connections typically took place either in their own CrossFit gyms or through social media. Athletes tended

to use this strategy when they shared minority identities with a small outgroup of others. These collective identities ran deeper than CrossFit and were social identities that extended beyond the walls of the gym. When athletes held multiple outgroup identities, as many of the individuals who used this strategy did (e.g., large body, Black, LGBTQ), this social difference often prompted athletes to experience even greater exclusion, which in turn motivated them to push even harder to develop sub-communities. These sub-communities then became their frame of reference for what was deemed ingroup or not (i.e., their new membership in the sub-community became their ingroup experience). In this way, identity served as a catalyst for both disidentification and identification and the development of sub-communities. Moreover, once athletes took steps that affirmed their sense of self, such as speaking out or finding like others, identity often became less critical to athletes' everyday community experiences. For example, during our interview Abby, expressed her desire to join a CrossFit gym as a strategy both for meeting new people and for improving her fitness. A large body athlete, Abby expressed concerned that "I'm out of shape and I'm not gonna fit in." However, after attending classes regularly, she found:

> There was another woman who started coming to the same class as me who had a similar body type as me. And we were able to just focus on how much we could lift. And that was more of the focus, at this box, was how strong we could be.

Because she found another athlete with whom she shared an identity (i.e., larger body), Abby felt more comfortable regularly attending and starting to be herself. Similarly, Vanessa described a connection she had with the only other Black woman at her gym:

> We now have another Black woman, so there's two of us that are at the gym… We have a cultural bond that—Somehow her and I, not somehow, but we know how it is. Basically, she's like a little sister to me… You can see where those cultural dynamics come to play and just like her and I can have inside jokes or get something that others don't.

The connection Vanessa described went beyond the two women being members at the same CrossFit gym—it was cultural. For Vanessa, simply seeing someone else who looked like her was an affirming experience of community.

William, a gay man, described instances in which he felt left out at his CrossFit gym and often associated this with his LGBTQ identity. He shared:

> There's definitely been times where I've felt bad about being in that space and not being included in whatever conversation is going on, even though I'm within five feet of them… I would get to the gym and just see conversations going on amongst the straight guys who are buddy-buddy about whatever is going on in their lives or the workout, and I just felt not invited into—not that I wouldn't have been welcomed—but just not actively invited into those conversations.

Instead, William spent time trying to cultivate relationships with other LGBTQ+ people in the gym, expressing pride over the development of this sub-community in his gym: "There are more queer people who come to the noon class now. One of the trainers who's a regular is queer as well. That's nice that I can feel like I can be a little more open and flamboyant." William came to understand over time, and from his experiences outside of CrossFit, that relationships with other queer people were more affirming to him than relationships with other athletes in his gym more generally. When William was around people who are similar to him, the outgroup became the ingroup, and he felt he could be more himself when spending time with others like him.

Vincent continued to relay the importance of diversity in a CrossFit community. By developing a sub-community of people of color at MWF, Vincent helped build athletes' confidence and also retain them as members for longer periods of time. He shared:

> I know a lot of Black people don't feel comfortable working with White trainers because a lot of time, White people don't really respect Black bodies. They think that we don't feel pain the same way that they do. And I think they think we are being lazy. I've had coaches treat me that way. And so, [Black people] give it a shot, and they say, "Hopefully he'll be kind, and nice, and listen." And I am, and they stay. That is the reason why our gym has become more diverse, because they think, "Maybe this spot will work out for me." And it's working out for most of them.

Vincent's narrative highlights the way systemic racism impacts the community experience. In addition, Vincent's narrative demonstrates how the strategy of developing a sub-community also contributes to athletes feeling represented and seen. Through his personal identity as a Black leader at MWF, he not only united other Black athletes, but also worked to problematize the narrative held historically by some White coaches that Black bodies are "lazy" or "don't feel pain." Moreover, Vincent's narratives came from his entire life experience as being a Black man. Outside experiences such as these bring inside CrossFit community experiences to life. Community, therefore, is shaped by experiences and attitudes formed outside the gym, and every athlete brings their pre-existing experiences and prejudices with them. In other words, a CrossFit community does not exist outside of life experiences; it is instead a microcosm of everyday life outside of CrossFit.

Sub-communities took different shapes depending on the situation and athletes' needs. Some, like Abby's, were informal (i.e., large body athletes exercising together) whereas others were organized by the gym leaders. CrossFit's brand typically conjures ripped, sweaty athletes who spend their time throwing tires around. Acknowledging this, some athletes—particularly those over the age of 60—expressed hesitation about joining a CrossFit gym because they thought they would be the oldest ones there, the only individuals without previous exercise experience, or unable to complete the movements. Noting this reservation, MWF held bi-weekly "masters" CrossFit classes—a sub-community designed for athletes over the age of 60. I was able to observe one of these classes during my fieldwork at MWF. In informal conversations after class, athletes shared with me that they felt more welcomed, included, and comfortable in the masters CrossFit classes. Each of the masters athletes I spoke with described their community experience as one that was approachable, inclusive, and so unique that it not be

replicated anywhere else. Some athletes age 60 and older exclusively attended the masters classes. Others, like Cathy, split their time between masters classes and non-masters classes. Cathy described doing this because she wanted to both demonstrate her commitment to the masters sub-community. She shared, "I really wanted to make sure that I could support those people that were coming into that masters class."

Instead of putting forth efforts to develop sub-communities in their gyms, some athletes would turn to social media for community-related validation (i.e., imagined community; Anderson, 2006). Consistently feeling like they did not belong or like there was nobody else like them were factors that prompted some athletes to look elsewhere for identity-related connections. Athletes described following other CrossFit-related content (e.g., athletes, brands, gyms) or CrossFit athletes with similar identities as them on social media. For instance, Emily explained:

> I started following a lot of Black-owned CrossFit gyms in bigger cities like Atlanta or like Boston. There was one called… Black at CrossFit. So, people would talk about their experiences of being Black people and doing CrossFit and it's like, we may not feel like we're welcome in this space, but we do what we love and we have a right to be here. So, you know, because if we're here, then at least that will make other people feel more comfortable to come.

Present again in Emily's narrative is the desire for representation in community, to not only see herself represented but be present to represent for others like her. Similarly, Vanessa shared:

> I know there are not a lot of Black identities within CrossFit, but I have started to realize that on Instagram, I have connected with a couple more of those communities, and some are doing great things for the youth and some are just doing adult CrossFit competitions and things like that, that center around Black identity.

Athletes like Emily and Vanesa were not able to, or were not satisfied with their ability to develop sub-communities of other Black athletes in their gym. Thus, they turned to a place where access to other Black CrossFit athletes was more plentiful: social media. Moreover, narratives

like Emily's and Vanessa's were regularly reported by people of color in this study. This drive for connection typically was initiated during Summer 2020 in which the United States experienced increased racial tensions reignited by the murder of George Floyd. Simultaneously, CrossFit as a global organization was criticized for their responses to these racial tensions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and founder Greg Glassman's leadership. In sum, some athletes chose to develop sub-communities in their gym as a way to manage their disidentification. The stories shared by these athletes demonstrate that sub-communities were necessary because the community at large would not adequately serve them. Thus, these athletes had more affirming experiences of community when they were able to dedicate their time to developing relationships with others they respected and felt respected by.

Leave the Gym or CrossFit Entirely

A final strategy that athletes would take to manage disidentification is to leave the gym or CrossFit entirely. Athletes typically chose this strategy after they had exhausted other strategies to no avail and continued to have disaffirming interactions in their CrossFit communities. Often, the harm caused by these moments was irreparable, and athletes felt the only way they could manage their disidentification was to leave. The reasons behind using this strategy varied. Often athletes no longer felt joy in sharing the CrossFit space with others; instead, their membership was more taxing than it was rewarding. In addition, athletes who used this strategy were members of the outgroup, and decisions were often couched in identity and political ideology. For example, Abby, a queer person, decided to leave her gym because of conflicts with the political dimension of community; she did not feel the gym owner's values and ideologies aligned with her own. Despite feeling welcomed after finding people with whom she shared physical identities, Abby ultimately decided to leave CrossFit entirely because none of the

CrossFit communities in her area had members who she felt shared her political ideology. She recalled:

> Some of the people at the box [CrossFit gym] became very vocal within the box and on social media and in the community around their political views. And it became hard to feel respected, even if they respected me as an individual, when they were really vocal about their beliefs or their political beliefs online that directly contradicted my well-being as a queer human… As a queer woman, I did not feel—well, from the woman perspective and the queer perspective—I, at times, questioned whether this would be a safe space to be in.

Abby's narrative tells the story of community members respecting her identities conditionally. Abby the athlete was welcomed, but not Abby the woman or queer person. To Abby, these identities were inseparable and unconditional and thus, the only option for her was to leave. In addition, although no community members directly communicated their dislike or disapproval of her gender or sexual orientation, Abby could decipher their ideologies from other communication outlets, like social media, suggesting that the experience of community does indeed go beyond the walls of the CrossFit gym itself and is a microcosm of the real world.

Similarly, Nicole decided to leave one gym and join another because of a comment that the gym's owner made around the Black Lives Matter movement:

> I know that there are a lot of people at my current gym that I love who is someone that would probably scream Blue Lives Matter. And that's fine. But I think the problem for me was that the owner of the gym whom I pay my money to for him to pay his bills. And when I asked, when we just started talking about [Black Lives Matter], he made very weird comments and, you know, expressed his opinions in a very offensive way. I decided in that moment, like, I'm gonna stop giving you my money. And he tried to, you know, ask me to come back in many different ways and I just said no.

Despite the political dimension challenges she faced at one CrossFit community, Nicole did not leave CrossFit altogether. Instead, she opted to find another gym, a decision that speaks to the draw of CrossFit as a group exercise activity and one that—despite disagreements—can attract members through the shared experience of exercise.

Finally, athletes most frequently chose to leave their gym or CrossFit entirely if none of the other strategies had worked. Peter, however, chose to leave without employing any other strategies. After experiencing a CrossFit-related injury to his shoulder, Peter grew frustrated with his community when nobody reached out after his surgery and during his recovery. This situation prompted Peter to leave CrossFit entirely because he (a) was deeply hurt by this silence and lack of support and (b) did not want to risk getting injured again, sharing: "[Leaving] sucks because I really did enjoy the competitiveness of it and lifting and all that… So, if I didn't get hurt, I probably would still be going to CrossFit, but it's not worth having another injury."

Summary

To summarize, disidentification is the process of individuals distancing themselves from threatening or misaligned community identities (Dean, 2008). Disidentified athletes regularly attempted to distance themselves by using one or more of the five management strategies outlined here, including speaking out, resigning and compartmentalizing, being the representation, developing a sub-community, or leaving the gym or CrossFit entirely. Underlying each of these strategies were catalysts of disidentification. Consistent with existing literature, such catalysts included discrimination or rejection and/or feeling different, even sometimes completely opposite, from others in the group (van Laar & Levin, 2006). Typically, disidentified athletes were those who held minority identities in their gym communities. As such, the information discussed in this section highlights not only the disidentification strategies, but also the central role marginalization plays in CrossFit community experiences. Higher socioeconomic statuses, Whiteness, heterosexuality, and militarism are invisible in CrossFit contexts because they are deemed "normal," or the standard, expected social makeup and ideology of CrossFit gyms. Unlike athletes who shared most identities with most others in their gym (e.g., White,

heterosexual), these findings demonstrate that people with marginalized identities do not have the option to ignore their marginalized status. Instead, they must turn to management strategies in an attempt to, at the least, tolerate disidentification and, at the most, resolve their disidentification, making moves to reaffirm their sense of self and restore their connection to community.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Multiple definitions of community address its social (Chaskin, 2012) and psychological (Sarason, 1974) nature. Yet, there has been little to no definition of the role of interpersonal communication in community interactions. Moreover, despite decades of literature articulating how social situations influence personal identity (i.e., social identity theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), scant research specifically addresses the role of identity and (dis)identification in social community experiences. Without this knowledge, it can be difficult to pinpoint the interpersonal behaviors and processes that influence (dis)identification with community. It is critical to learn more about the interrelated nature of interpersonal communication, identity, (dis)identification, and community, as broader knowledge can begin to operationalize the interpersonal communication processes that influence community. Greater knowledge of these processes can identify behaviors that do and do not cultivate inclusion and belonging.

To address these gaps in literature, this study explored experiences of community in the group exercise routine, CrossFit. Exercise is one strategy individuals use to improve their overall mental and physical wellness, and group exercise in particular is reported as an effective strategy for getting more people to exercise, with individuals who participate in group exercise crediting community-based environments as what motivates them to pursue their health goals (Biodonde et al., 2009; Pizzo et al., 2020). CrossFit, one of the largest group exercise enterprises, identifies inclusion and community as central parts of the group exercise experience (CrossFit, n.d.-b). Yet, some people—particularly individuals with marginalized identities—experience exclusion and disidentify with community in CrossFit. In pursuit of these aims, this study examined (a) how athletes experience (or not) community in CrossFit, (b) the interpersonal processes that facilitate

(dis)identification with community in CrossFit, and (c) how athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit.

Fifty one-on-one interviews and more than 100 hours of fieldwork at two CrossFit gyms in the United States revealed that athletes experienced community as a complicated, layered, and nuanced negotiation between personal and organizational identities. The model of community presented in this study integrates conceptualizations of community from a variety of disciplines (e.g., communication, psychology, sociology) and forwards a definition that situates community as an inherently *relational process* constituted in communication along practical, personal, interpersonal, political, and spatial dimensions. Findings demonstrated that community experiences were comprised of interpersonal interactions amongst athletes in pursuit of common fitness practices and goals. Community was initiated, sustained, and terminated through interpersonal communication processes, such as support and immediacy. Moreover, athletes experienced tensions associated with disidentification and use strategies to cope, such as compartmentalizing their disidentification or attempting to change their circumstances by speaking out. In this final chapter, I review major conclusions of the study by first discussing theoretical implications followed by practical implications. I conclude with a discussion of limitations and future research directions.

Theoretical Implications

This project makes a number of theoretical contributions, including: (a) initiating a conversation between existing literature by proposing a dynamic model of community, (b) identifying the significance of interpersonal communication processes in the experience of community, and (c) articulating the role of identity and (dis)identification in community-based interactions. These findings both align with previous literature and present novel perspectives

that warrant further exploration. In the sections that follow, I discuss each of these theoretical contributions.

Proposing A Model of Community

Community was articulated by athletes in ways that align existing conceptualizations. For example, community in CrossFit is a *community of practice* in that athletes have mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). Together, CrossFit athletes complete workouts, set and achieve goals, and share routines. Furthermore, community in CrossFit is *relational*; athletes share common interests and seek out interactions in which they have shared identities with others (Chaskin, 2012). In addition, athletes often described their *sense of community* in CrossFit, including how they felt emotionally and psychologically about their experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). These feelings were prompted not only by interactions with others, but also by symbols and artifacts present around the gym, suggesting the *spatial* nature of community (Chaskin, 2012). Moreover, community in CrossFit is expansive in that it is *imagined* (Anderson, 2006). Not only do CrossFit athletes experience relational or psychological community with others in their co-located gym, but they also experience community as more expansive than their everyday gym experiences. This is especially true when they interact with CrossFit-related social media outlets or tune in to annual CrossFit events that take place on a global stage, such as the CrossFit Games. Imagined community is particularly salient for athletes who struggle to experience psychological community in their own gyms; Black athletes, for example, turned to CrossFit-related social media accounts intended specifically to engage Black audiences.

Each conceptualization in the literature, however, tends to be siloed. For instance, psychological conceptualizations tend to not acknowledge relational conceptualizations and vice

versa. This study challenges the traditional conceptualizations of community and builds on existing knowledge by putting each of these conceptualizations in conversation with each other as dimensions, or aspects, of community. Several conceptualizations of community can be—and are—present at once in athletes' experiences of community in CrossFit. The model of community forwarded in this study demonstrates that community experiences are not defined by one dimension (e.g., practical or interpersonal), but instead defined by the *interrelated nature* of each dimension. The integration of each dimension develops a rich tool that can be used to not only explain community but also to evaluate, and perhaps eventually predict it.

In addition, conceptualizations of community tend to place emphasis on the relational (Chaskin, 2012) or psychological (Sarason, 1874) aspects of the community experience. This study, however, highlights that community in CrossFit is not only psychological or relational but also *practical*. In many ways, the practical dimension of community set the foundation for other dimensions to materialize. For instance, (dis)identification cannot occur if an athlete's needs—such as attending classes with a suitable level of competition—cannot be met, because an athlete simply will not attend classes. Indeed, experiences of community are reliant upon the sometimes-mundane practical matters, such as whether athletes find classes to be run well, whether they find coaches to be effective, or whether they find CrossFit as an exercise program to be rewarding. Such practical considerations are key to the community experience because, as McMillan and Chavis (1986) articulate, individuals' needs must be met through group resources. In other words, practical considerations must be met before athletes are able to focus on more rewarding dimensions of community, such as interpersonal interactions.

Athletes have more affirming experiences and identify with community when practical aspects are in place that create consistency and communicate group expectations. One

explanation for this may be seen through the lens of classroom management. For instance, education-adjacent literature highlights the importance of classroom management in establishing environments that are not only helpful to teachers but also students (e.g., Freiberg, 1983). A well-managed classroom establishes and maintains conditions in which communication can take place effectively, efficiently, and respectfully. Like in a classroom, providing guidance on rules and procedures, or helping athletes learn how to engage in the CrossFit gym, is one practical step of community development. Furthermore, the practical dimension demonstrates the necessity of not discounting the importance of the everyday, sometimes mundane aspects of community that comprise an athlete's everyday experience.

However, practical considerations are not necessarily controlled by athletes, but instead by gym leadership like coaches and owners. This is consequential because it demonstrates that, despite community being a co-created, iterative effort, its malleability has limitations. Community is experienced by all people in the gym, but not all people in the gym are able to influence what that community experience consists of. This complicates the "self-made" narrative sometimes present in CrossFit gyms in which "the ideal CrossFitter is the one who adopts practices to literally make or compose themselves" (James & Gill, 2018, p. 715). Evidenced by many athlete examples in this study, the community experience is sometimes top-down in that its ideals are set by gym leadership beginning with owners and trickling down to coaches, then athletes. Athletes, then, have disenfranchised community experiences; they can only do so much to compose themselves and their own community-related realities. This lack of control is a limitation that promotes disidentification. Athletes take steps to manage disidentification because—interestingly—many did not want to leave their CrossFit experiences. Often, when the (community) going got tough, the tough CrossFit athletes—especially those

with marginalized identities—got going and did what they could to push back against hegemonic powers that initiated disidentification in the first place.

Wenger (1998) argues that communities of practice must *jointly* pursue a specific goal. Often, the way in which a gym owner chooses to implement the CrossFit methodology and ethos causes fractures in the membership because it inevitably cultivates one kind of community identity and suppresses another, inhibiting joint pursuit. Each CrossFit gym approaches these philosophical choices differently. These practices even showed up differently class-to-class, prompting some athletes to choose attending some classes over others. For instance, RMCF's close alignment with CrossFit as a brand promoted greater emphasis on competition and comparison amongst athletes. This emphasis was well suited for some athletes but not others, suggesting athletes have different practical needs and desires that gym leaders are not always aware or considerate of. Conversely, MWF managed to circumvent traditional practical aspects of the CrossFit experience by distancing themselves from the CrossFit brand, instead prioritizing actions that cultivated an environment shaped by the wants and needs of the members, not CrossFit's expectations. By distancing themselves from CrossFit's complicated, often racist and sexist history, MWF placed emphasis on cultivating a more inclusive, approachable environment in which athletes were valued for their identities beyond athletic performance, race, or gender. These findings are in line with those of previous studies in which communities are most successful when individuals' practical needs are met (e.g., Vestal & Lopez, 2004).

Furthermore, this study provides support for the role of physical spaces and artifacts in shaping community experiences. The spatial dimensions of community played a key role in athletes' identification because communal spaces, such as CrossFit gyms, have artifacts that communicate messages about the values of the gym. Community in CrossFit is spatial (Chaskin,

2012) in that the material space of a gym is the "seen-but-unnoticed backdrop" (Sidnell, 2003, p. 328) of athletes' everyday experiences. However, for athletes with historically marginalized identities, the gym space is both *seen* and *noticed*, and artifacts make a difference in influencing whether athletes do or do not feel included and comfortable. The study's findings are consistent with existing research evaluating spatial environments of CrossFit, like Kerry (2017) who argued that "Signage may aim to structure the classes and the space but, consequently, it may also structure the practices and bodies of those who interact with the signage" (p. 232). A CrossFit gym's materiality conducts the actions and affairs of a community by producing truth for the artifact's viewers and users (Hepworth, 2016). Artifacts communicate who or what is valued in a space, and this value may or may not align with member identities. This study demonstrates that artifacts such as signs or flags may be benevolent but often perpetuate the marginalization of minority groups like people of color. As such, similar to practical matters of community, spatial concerns cannot be understated. The presence or absence of an artifact is not inconsequential to athletes. Gym leadership must recognize the critical role spatial concerns play in facilitating (dis)identification with community. Signs matter, they should be intentionally selected, and they communicate meanings beyond what someone may first think or believe.

Significance of Interpersonal Communication Processes in Community

In addition to the contribution of a model of community, the study adds to a burgeoning literature on community and the centrality of interpersonal communication in how people experience and create community in their everyday lives. Specifically, this study demonstrates that the interpersonal processes that facilitate identification with community in CrossFit are those that invite warmth and inclusion. This study draws attention to specific interpersonal communication processes that make social interactions in a CrossFit community inclusive or

exclusive. Indeed, the findings highlight examples of communication processes that were most commonly addressed by athletes as influencing (dis)identification with community (e.g., interpersonal immediacy behaviors, support and encouragement). Underscoring each of these examples of identification, however, are interpersonal processes that foster warmth and inclusion. Conversely, underscoring each example of disidentification are interpersonal processes that foster the opposite, including chronic disconnection and exclusion. There are a number avenues that may be fruitful in better understanding the "why" behind each of these interpersonal communication processes and behaviors, including communication competence, immediacy behaviors, confirmation, and support and encouragement.

First, community in CrossFit is predicated on athletes', coaches', and gym owners' interpersonal communication competence. Communication competence, or the ability to choose a communication behavior that is both effective and appropriate for a given situation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), underscored all interactions that took place in athletes' CrossFit communities. Often, when athletes recalled moments that prompted both identification and disidentification, other individuals' communication competence influenced the interactions. For example, Hannah disidentified with her community after she received insensitive, poorly delivered feedback from her coach. Conversely, Abby identified with her community when she interacted with other athletes who were empathetic of experiences had by large body athletes in CrossFit. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) list characteristics of competent communication, including communication that is empathetic, adaptable, ethical, and self-monitoring. Communication competence also includes nonverbal cues, such as eye contact and spatial immediacy. In short, low levels of communication competence seemed to produce low levels of identification. Arguably, for

CrossFit communities to be more affirming and inclusive, athletes, coaches, and gym owners should invest in developing communication competency skills.

Second, immediacy behaviors aid in efforts of intentionally facilitating relationships. Actions such as using people's names, asking questions, remembering facts about individuals, and later recalling those facts play a role in demonstrating care and concern. Immediacy behaviors initiated practices that helped athletes build relationships. In addition, interpersonal immediacy provided opportunities for expanding athletes' cultural competency by allowing athletes to share stories about their own attitudes, beliefs, and memories (e.g., when Hogsmeade shared that her favorite meal was hot pot, a traditionally Asian dish, and was able to also explain more about the meal's cultural importance).

Third, interpersonal communication that privileged confirming messages promoted identification. Confirming messages are those that are responsive, validating, and convey value in relationships (Dailey, 2006). Validating messages are positively linked to individual well-being (Reis et al., 2000) and a greater sense of intimacy in relationships (Reis et al., 2004). In addition, however, confirming messages also push or challenge individuals to achieve their highest potential (Dailey, McCracken, & Romo, 2011). As such, confirming messages both (a) show others that they are accepted and (b) seen for what they can become (Buber, 1965). A confirming message, then, is one that may communicate disagreement or disapproval but still communicate the value and worth of a person. These types of messages seemed to resonate with athletes and promote identification, perhaps because CrossFit is a context that promotes constant improvement and the idea that improvement comes only through challenge. Moreover, confirming messages accomplished the goals of the personal dimension of community by communicating care for the well-being of the person, perhaps because they have been shown to

facilitate the discussion of ideas, feelings, and sharing of perspectives (Dailey, 2006). Confirming messages have been shown to contribute to positively in a variety of contexts, including motivation to change health-related behaviors (Dailey, Romo, & Thompson, 2011) and sport (Cranmer et al., 2018). This study further demonstrates that lifestyle sports, such as group fitness, do call for and benefit from confirming messages.

Finally, consistent with existing research, the findings demonstrate the critical role of support and encouragement in shaping athletes' identification with community in CrossFit. Like other communication behaviors, athletes considered a number of criteria, including how support was delivered (e.g., verbally, nonverbally, tactfully, poorly), what was said (e.g., whether support was tailored, if language used was supportive), and who delivered the support (e.g., coaches, athletes). As such, this study demonstrates that not only the presence or absence of support is critical, but also how support is delivered, who delivers it, and at what frequency shapes identification with community. In addition, the findings echo existing support research in that enacted social support (i.e., intentionally conveying concern, information, or aid) can help individuals reduce the negative effects of stress and instead increase their health and well-being (Goldsmith, 2004).

The Role of Identity and (Dis)identification in Community-Based Interactions

The findings demonstrate the central role identity and (dis)identification play in shaping athletes' everyday community experiences. There are a number of associated implications. First, athletes experienced community through the lens of their identities. As outlined by SIT, athletes' stereotypes, preconceptions, or misconceptions of certain identities led to division between ingroups and outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Athletes in the outgroup compared themselves to the ingroup and determined their social standing in the community. For instance, athletes

categorized each other as “fit” or “not fit,” “high skill” or “low skill,” or “looks like me” or “does not look like me” (i.e., social categorization; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These classifications created ingroups and outgroups from which athletes further created sub-communities, and the creation and utilization of identity-based sub-communities can be a useful strategy for managing disidentification. One theoretical explanation for this relationship might be that disidentification can be a survival strategy used by marginalized populations to resist dominant cultures (Muñoz, 2013). By resisting the dominant CrossFit culture (e.g., White, physically fit, male), disidentification can help people sustain and enhance positive social identities (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). Moreover, some athletes took pride in and were motivated by the role their minority identities played in the CrossFit community. For instance, Vincent’s identity as one of the only Black CrossFitters in his gym both motivated him to recruit more Black athletes to join MWF and made him feel more proud of his Black identity. Thus, disidentification is multifaceted in that it can both push athletes away from community and also drew them back in.

Second, athletes tended to experience a greater “sense of community” (McMillian & Chavis, 1986) when they saw themselves represented in the gym, for example, through gym artifacts or other members. Athletes came to believe their community experiences in CrossFit were positive or negative, worthwhile or not, based on whether they saw their identities reflected in their everyday experiences. As such, representation of identities matters and is one of the primary drivers of identification. When athletes saw themselves reflected in the community, they felt like they belonged, were seen, and that they mattered to the group (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). The reverse was also demonstrated through the data; when athletes did not see their identities represented, they felt excluded, isolated, and like they were unimportant to the group. Even when athletes felt like the gym met all of their practical needs, for example, they

experienced disidentification with their community because they experienced low commitment from the rest of the group. This was especially poignant for people with minority identities. This finding suggests the need for diversity and representation, particularly in contexts that might be difficult to frequent, such as an exercise class. However, community members do not need to be similar from the outset. For instance, Abby shared that she identified with community *after* she developed relationships with other large body athletes, and Emily identified with community *after* she developed relationships with other Black athletes. If athletes share similar identities, less communicative work—such speaking out or compartmentalizing— needs to be done to bridge gaps between disidentification and identification, evidenced by the way many White athletes described identifying with community and "blend[ing] right in" (Chris). These findings highlight that community, then, is a process of creating visibility for and with different identities and integrating varying identities over time.

Third, CrossFit athletes are initially brought together through a common interest or practice of building fitness-related skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, athletes reported staying together as communities when the have affirming social interactions that facilitated getting to know the whole person (Chaskin, 2012). As Luke said, "[Community] has everything to do with conversations that have nothing to do with that person's fitness or fitness levels or fitness goals." Identification with community is highest when individuals in the gym invest in learning about each other's goals, identities, and *life* experiences—not just those related to CrossFit. Thus, it may be beneficial for CrossFit communities to intentionally facilitate relationships amongst community members in ways that help them get to know each other outside of the CrossFit context. The study situates both community and identity as political. The

CrossFit gym is inherently a political place because it involves people talking with each other about themselves, including their identities and thus including their politics.

Fourth, Chaskin's conceptualization of relational community addresses community as a *political* unit, laying the foundation for broader social action. Some athletes in this study did find community in CrossFit to be deeply political in that they wanted their communities to take bold stances on social issues, such as support for Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ-related issues. Others, however, argued that CrossFit was an apolitical space in which "all" types of people could come together and unite through fitness. Sociopolitical issues, therefore, were sometimes divisive and highly contextually dependent. Identity and ideological orientation played a role in shaping which perspective athletes took, with historically marginalized populations and allies making the claim that CrossFit gyms should, indeed, be communities of advocacy. Moreover, communities are situated in time and are thus affected by the larger political landscape. One of the strongest examples of this was evidenced by athletes' repeated acknowledgement of the sociopolitical issues CrossFit faced in the summer of 2020 following George Floyd's murder. CrossFit communities found themselves forced to reckon with the division Glassman's statements created (Edmonds et al., 2022). Community is situated in this historical knowledge, and such folklore can be difficult to erase or leave behind which may be particularly difficult for marginalized populations to overcome. This study highlights how CrossFit communities are political spaces in that sociopolitical issues are raised by members, and these issues impact identification. Sometimes people leave their CrossFit gyms because they perceive the gym leaders' and members' political views to be incompatible with their own. This is important because, even if gym leadership attempts to cultivate a community that is deliberately apolitical, they must be aware that the political nature of identity may disrupt and derail their efforts.

Instead, gym leadership should be aware of the political aspects of community and work to proactively address them.

Finally, multi-dimensional experiences of community that are affirming personally, interpersonally, politically, and spatially are necessary and something athletes long for. Indeed, athletes both want and need validating experiences of community, and they will go through great lengths to create these experiences if they do not exist. The study demonstrates that athletes disidentify because they believe they differ from the typical beliefs, behaviors, and identities of the community, and they use disidentification management strategies to reduce dissonance (Graupensperger et al., 2018). Disidentification management strategies serve as tools used by individuals—especially those with marginalized identities—as a way to navigate oppressive acts and "attempt to survive within inhospitable spaces" (Morrisey, 2021, p. 1). Evidenced by athletes' use of these disidentification management strategies, I argue that CrossFit communities are, at times, inhospitable places for people with historically marginalized identities. On the whole, the findings show that, as a microcosm of larger society, CrossFit is a space where socio-political attitudes can either be challenged or perpetuated. Group exercises spaces like CrossFit have the potential to advance the inclusion of marginalized groups, for example, by validating and celebrating marginalized identities. However, it is likely these spaces will continue to fall short if proper training is not provided to help increase coach and gym owners' knowledge of this topic. The experiences of participants with historically marginalized identities further reveal the need to question the underlying power structures behind patriarchy and hegemonic whiteness. The study has demonstrated how disidentification, as a form of rejection prompted by disaffirming community experiences, is intertwined with systems of power and marginalization.

Athletes' disidentification may provide support for the burden on athletes to generate affirming experiences of community.

Practical Implications

This study offers a model that could be used by key stakeholders in a CrossFit community, such as athletes, coaches, gym owners, and CrossFit as a global organization. First, this study demonstrated the role that communication plays in shaping experiences of community. It was through communication that athletes experienced identification with community. For example, it was through interpersonal immediacy behaviors that generated warmth or words of encouragement that made athletes feel included. Similarly, it was through communication that athletes experienced disidentification with community. Dismissive communication that did not acknowledge athletes' individual contributions or judgements that made athletes feel othered made athletes feel excluded. In addition, coaches who lacked communication skills facilitated classes in ways that were a disservice not only to themselves, but to the entire community. If coaches were better equipped to engage specific communication skills shown to promote identification, such as the use of interpersonal immediacy behaviors or the provision of support and encouragement, they would not only be able to have higher quality interpersonal relationships, but they could better foster relationships amongst the community at large.

Second, this study adds to existing literature that addresses the strategies CrossFit affiliates can use to develop a culture of inclusion (e.g., Lautner et al., 2020; Woolf & Lawrence, 2017). CrossFit as a group exercise routine has a high barrier of entry for several reasons, including high price of membership and the perceived skill or athleticism needed to participate. An additional barrier of entry for people with marginalized identities in particular is that CrossFit is perceived to be dominated by specific identities, including White, heterosexual, able bodied,

and traditionally "fit." Even before the potential for disaffirming experiences in CrossFit, people with marginalized identities tend to face greater obstacles, such as discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or social class, and tend to have health issues at rates higher than non-minority populations (Baah et al., 2019). The study provides insight on how communication can be used to make CrossFit more inclusive, especially for people with historically marginalized identities. For example, the interpersonal dimension revealed a number of strategies individuals in the gym could use to increase athletes' feelings of belonging and inclusion in the community, such as the use of interpersonal immediacy behaviors or adequate provision of support and encouragement. However, although interpersonal communication is central, there are other dimensions of community that impact athletes' (dis)identification. For example, a CrossFit gym space itself may not be inclusive. Nonbinary athletes might feel uneasy using gym bathrooms that are given the binary designations of men or women. Athletes who use wheelchairs may be discouraged from visiting their local CrossFit gym if the entrance is not wheelchair accessible. Low-income people may not have the disposable income necessary to purchase a membership. A CrossFit gym's leaders or its marketing materials might deliver the message that "all are welcome," but despite this messaging, other elements of the gym—such as its limiting physical space, expensive price, or the lack of visible identity differences in members—will still serve as barriers to inclusion. If a CrossFit community has not addressed issues such as these, communication alone will not solve identification-related issues. Moreover, many of the potential barriers discussed here might only be addressed through successful interpersonal communication. The nonbinary athlete, the wheelchair user, or the low-income person can successfully provide feedback about issues only if the culture is one that encourages the provision of such feedback. In addition, the gym leadership must be equipped to listen and make

change. Therefore, although interpersonal communication is not the panacea for all issues of exclusion or disidentification in CrossFit communities, this study does provide evidence that interpersonal communication is the cornerstone for identification and inclusion in CrossFit communities. In order for CrossFit to be a group exercise routine that "works for everyone" (CrossFit, n.d.-b), the organization and affiliate gyms could benefit from considering this research in attempting to anticipate the outcome of community experiences and encouraging all athletes, coaches, and gym owners to engage in interpersonal communication that promotes more enriching experiences and, in turn, healthier behaviors.

Third, the study may provide support for the intentional creation of sub-communities in CrossFit—such as those specifically for people age 60 and older, large body athletes, or people of color. There is evidence to suggest, in this study and others (e.g., Peacock et al., 2001) that membership in sub-communities may not detract from attachment to the CrossFit community, but instead be one of the primary ways that athletes connect with and manage some of the aspects of the larger CrossFit community found to create dissonance. Affirming interactions in sub-groups may build confidence and prompt identification with the group at large (Peacock et al., 2001). This study suggests that purposefully designed CrossFit community events, such as in-house competitions or fundraisers for local organizations, may promote identification by increasing group ties and strengthening social connections. To purposefully design an event could mean including components that intentionally facilitate relationships, such as when MWF members coordinated a going away party for Boots and part of the party involved responding to the question, "What is a good memory you have about this member?" People who are more socially connected experience better health than those who are not, with group ties being positively linked to cognitive health, as shared social identification contributes to effective social

and emotional support (Haslam et al., 2016). Thus, intentional relationship building in CrossFit sub-communities may solidify the identity of the community at large and build connections to promote the inclusion of athletes whose identities are different from others in the gym (McCormack, 2017).

Fourth, this study provides clear pathways for developing and evaluating trainings and interventions about interpersonal communication skills and community development. The findings bring attention to a topic that is sometimes intangible. Athletes in this study remarked on how much they enjoy the "community" aspect of CrossFit, but often had trouble articulating what community meant to them, suggesting experience can be immaterial. This study operationalized what community is comprised of for these athletes. By attempting to list and describe these community aspects, the study's findings serve as a tool for athletes, coaches, and gym owners to address community in more tangible way. For example, gym leaders could use this study to make a quarterly checklist that prompts them to think about the different ways they are addressing (or not) the five dimensions of community. Does the gym's philosophy and approach fit members' needs (practical)? Do athletes see their identities reflected in each other or represented in the community (personal)? Do coaches regularly use immediacy behaviors when interacting with athletes (e.g., using athletes' names; interpersonal)? Is the gym a safe space for the discussion of sociopolitical identities, or do people with varying sociopolitical identities feel welcomed in this space (political)? Finally, do the gym's artifacts accurately communicate the community's values or reflect members' identities (spatial)?

Fifth, the attention to interpersonal communication processes sheds light on possible needs and interventions designed for athletes, coaches, and gym owners. For instance, through the development of coach-oriented communities of practice, trainings could be developed for

gym owners that describe the dimensions of community. Trainings could be developed for coaches that describe key interpersonal communication processes and behaviors, such as the use of inclusive language or immediacy behaviors. The attention to processes provides insight into possible training and interventions needed to foster a positive sense of community experience. Interventions on how to communicate in ways that generate a positive sense of community, for example, by teaching coaches about immediacy behaviors, effective delivery of support and encouragement, etc.

Finally, some may argue that CrossFit itself is an exclusive sub-community within the group exercise landscape, one that privileges the privileged. Furthermore, some may argue that CrossFit, because of its inherent exclusiveness, is not a suitable avenue for examining community and that people who do not identify with CrossFit should instead find other group exercise outlets to engage. However, the argument that athletes should find another group exercise regimen implies that dissent is unwarranted or that change is not permitted. This study demonstrates that, despite its exclusive nature, community in CrossFit is ripe with stories of diversity, challenging marginalization, and growth. Indeed, MWF in particular may stand to be a case study example of CrossFit communities that directly challenge the CrossFit brand's reputation of being exclusive, predominately White, and inaccessible. Although MWF is arguably still inaccessible due to price alone, the community is an example of how the majority group is working alongside the minority group to attempt to fix the system instead of forcing minority identified individuals to leave. Through its philosophical approach to implementing the CrossFit methodology and ethos, MWF attempted to divorce itself from aspects of CrossFit's global brand and reputation that was not aligned with MWF's values. Thus, this study presents

ways in which the community experience in CrossFit can be different and, with intentional effort, more inclusive.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. First, due to the qualitative nature of this study, the findings are not generalizable. In addition, I was a CrossFit athlete at the time of data collection, and the participants knew about this aspect of my identity when I conducted interviews and fieldwork. Therefore, interviewer effects cannot be ruled out (Babbie, 2007). By nature of many participants being current CrossFit athletes, proactively opting into that community, it is likely participants in this study were more eager to describe their experiences with community. Because some participants actively chose to leave CrossFit, it is possible some participants were particularly eager to give their negative reviews of CrossFit.

In addition, this study's participant sample was largely heterogenous. Most athletes who participated identified as White, had incomes above the average household income in the United States, were highly educated, and did not have disabilities. An in-depth focus on participant variety, including varying identities, length of time as members, in-depth following of CrossFit.com activities would provide greater insight on specific community experiences within each group. I began to sense saturation in stories from folks with some marginalized identities (e.g., Black athletes). However, the intersectional nature of identity complicates this claim. Therefore, additional research should be done that collects a more diverse range of perspectives and approaches to identification at each level.

The study proposes a model of community that situates community as a relational process constituted in communication along practical, personal, interpersonal, political, and spatial dimensions. However, the study only begins to identify the depths of each of these dimensions

and how the dimensions affect (dis)identification in community. There is preliminary evidence to suggest that some dimensions—such as personal or interpersonal—may have a more pronounced impact on (dis)identification with community than others. Future research could explore this claim by perhaps comparing dimensions with each other or beginning to quantify community experiences by developing scales to measure the experience of community in the different dimensions.

Despite their differences, the two gyms in this study at which fieldwork took place were relatively similar, for example, in membership numbers. It is possible that experiences of community and (dis)identification could vary based on the characteristics of community, such as size (McCormack, 2017). Therefore, future research could explore segmented aspects of community experiences based on characteristics such as membership size, athlete identity composition, or geographic location to explore how varying characteristics may affect identification or the manifestation of community dimensions.

This study demonstrates that CrossFit is a rich social and health context that affects athletes' social, physical, and emotional health. Future research could more specifically explore how experiences of community impact these dimensions of health, including access to exercise opportunities. Whiteman-Sandland et al. (2018) found that CrossFit athletes reported a higher sense of community and belongingness than athletes at traditional gyms. However, community belongingness was not an independent predictor of athletes' class attendance. These findings, considered in tandem with this study, suggest that a fruitful future area of research may be to evaluate the dimensions of community as an avenue for determining how or whether these dimensions impact class attendance and adherence to behaviors that improve health outcomes.

Finally, the findings demonstrated that community sub-groups facilitated affirming social interactions for some athletes, especially those with marginalized identities. Future research could explore this evidence further. For instance, one way to better understand the utility of sub-groups may be to longitudinally explore athletes' experiences at each point of the community process, including pre-, during-, and post-community joining. In addition, an additional avenue of research may be to explore the intentional integration of sub-communities, such as those for athletes age 60 and older or athletes with disabilities, to explore the impact of these groups and whether the groups promote identification long-term.

Conclusion

Through 50 one-on-one interviews and more than 100 hours of fieldwork in two CrossFit gyms in the United States, this study explores (a) how athletes experience (or not) community in CrossFit, (b) the interpersonal processes that facilitate (dis)identification with community in CrossFit, and (c) how athletes manage disidentification in CrossFit. The study uses findings to propose a model of community in which practical, personal, interpersonal, political, and spatial dimensions of community are put in conversation with each other. Indeed, this study highlights the importance of intentionally cultivating community experience; in the absence of intentional facilitation, individuals are left on their own to seek out and provide affirming interactions with others. Furthermore, this study underscores the valuable role interpersonal communication plays in cultivating (dis)identification, belonging, and inclusion in community. Interpersonal communication is the vehicle through which community is initiated, sustained, and terminated. Finally, this study underscores the ways in which CrossFit communities can, at times, be inhospitable for affirming experiences of community, especially for people with marginalized identities. Despite its limitations, the study provides both theoretical and practical contributions

about experiences of community in a group exercise context and, in turn, demonstrates the utility of future research that explores community as an influential factor in individual and group well-being.

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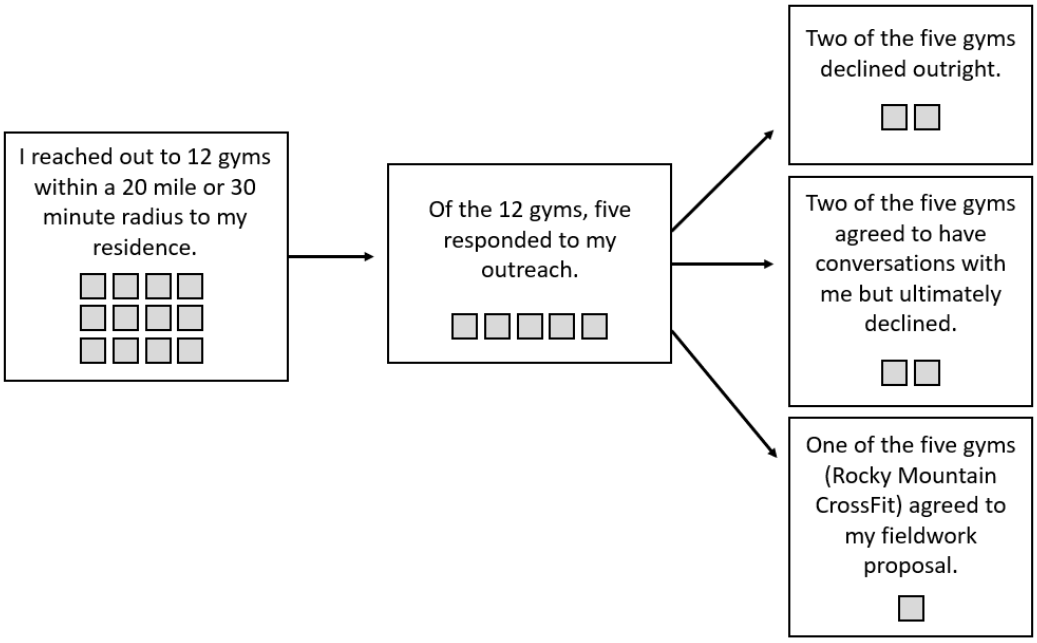
Appendix A: Gym Outreach and Response Rates



Appendix B: Summary of Gym Follow-Up Outcomes

	Indication of Whether the Gym Accepted Offerings	
Post-Data Collection Offerings	Midwest Fitness (MWF)	Rocky Mountain CrossFit (RMCF)
Provide a written report of findings	Accepted	Accepted
Host a phone call with the owner to discuss findings and answer additional questions	Accepted	Did Not Accept
Host a web conference or in-person meeting with gym members with an overview of study findings	Did Not Accept	Did Not Accept
Host a web conference or in-person training with gym members on a topic of their choice	Did Not Accept	Did Not Accept

Appendix C: Class Offerings, Times for Rocky Mountain CrossFit

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
5 – 6 am CrossFit	**5 – 6 am** CrossFit	**5 – 6 am** CrossFit	**5 – 6 am** CrossFit	**5 – 6 am** CrossFit	**8 – 9 am** CrossFit	**No Class**
6 – 7 am CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**9 – 10 am** CrossFit "Community Class"	
7 – 8 am CrossFit	**7 – 8 am** CrossFit	**7 – 8 am** CrossFit	**7 – 8 am** CrossFit	**7 – 8 am** CrossFit		
9:15 – 10:15 am CrossFit	**9:15 – 10:15 am** CrossFit	**9:15 – 10:15 am** CrossFit	**9:15 – 10:15 am** CrossFit	**9:15 – 10:15 am** CrossFit		
12:15 – 1:15 pm CrossFit	**12:15 – 1:15 pm** CrossFit	**12:15 – 1:15 pm** CrossFit	**12:15 – 1:15 pm** CrossFit	**12:15 – 1:15 pm** CrossFit		
5 – 6 pm CrossFit	**5 – 6 pm** CrossFit	**5 – 6 pm** CrossFit	**5 – 6 pm** CrossFit	**5 – 6 pm** CrossFit		

Appendix D: Class Offerings, Times for Midwest Fitness

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6 – 7 am CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**6 – 7 am** CrossFit	**8 – 9 am** CrossFit	**10 – 11 am** Gymnastics
9 – 10 am CrossFit	**7 – 8 am** Masters Class	**7:30 – 8:30 am** Barbell	**7 – 8 am** Masters Class	**9 – 10 am** CrossFit	**9 – 10 am** Barbell	
12 – 1 pm CrossFit	**9 – 10 am** CrossFit	**9 – 10 am** CrossFit	**9 – 10 am** CrossFit	**12 – 1 pm** CrossFit	**10 – 11 am** CrossFit	
4:30 – 5:30 pm CrossFit	**12 – 1 pm** CrossFit	**12 – 1 pm** Kettlebell	**12 – 1 pm** CrossFit	**4:30 – 5:30 pm** CrossFit		
6 – 7 pm CrossFit	**4:30 – 5:30 pm** CrossFit	**5 – 6:15 pm** Endurance	**4:30 – 5:30 pm** CrossFit	**6 – 7 pm** CrossFit		
7:30 – 8:30 pm CrossFit	**6 – 7 pm** CrossFit	**6:30 – 7:30 pm** CrossFit	**6 – 7 pm** CrossFit			
	7:30 – 8:30 pm CrossFit	**7:30 – 8:30 pm** CrossFit	**7:30 – 8:30 pm** CrossFit			

Appendix E: Email Outreach Template for Fieldwork

Hello Athletes,

My name is Shana Makos, and I am a PhD student in communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am conducting research for my dissertation about how CrossFit athletes experience community and personal identity in their CrossFit gyms.

For the next month to two months, I will be attending [gym name] classes as an athlete. I'll also sometimes stand to the side and take notes about the observations I have, in addition to chatting with athletes casually before or after class. I'm looking to learn more about things like how CrossFit athletes describe their community, what makes a gym's community special, and challenges people face in their CrossFit communities.

If you'd be willing to speak with me more in-depth about your CrossFit experience, I am also conducting one-on-one interviews via Zoom or phone. These interviews are approximately 60 minutes in length and all responses be kept confidential. **Participants will receive a $25 e-gift card as compensation.** Simply reply to this email and we can get a time set up!

More information about the study is included in the attachment. With the information I gather from the people I interview, I hope to educate other athletes, coaches, and gym owners about the experience and development of community in CrossFit gyms.

Please feel free to share my information with anyone else who you think might be interested.

Thank you!
Shana

Attachment:

Exploring Individuals' Experience of Community and Identity in CrossFit
You are being asked to participate in a research study being done by Shana Makos (myself) and Dr. Charee M. Thompson at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time by notifying me via email (smakos2@illinois.edu).

The purpose of this study is to explore how CrossFit athletes experience community in their CrossFit gyms. This research is the basis for my PhD dissertation.

- Participating in this research study will include you navigating your experience at CrossFit as you ordinarily do. This research does not require you to complete any additional activities. Instead, I will be present in the gym working out during some classes and observing on the side during other classes.
- I will take notes during my observation periods, and particular names of athletes will not be recorded in any notes taken; instead, generalities will be recorded (such as: interpersonal interactions between athletes, greeting procedures, notes about the layout or decoration of the gym).

- Should you be interested, I would like to connect with you before or after class just to speak casually and learn more about your experience of CrossFit and community. I will be present in the gym conducting this part of the research for about one to two months.

In addition, should you be willing and interested to engage with the research more in-depth, I am also conducting one-on-one interviews via Zoom or phone. I would like to talk to you about things like:

- How would you describe your CrossFit community?
- What makes your gym's community special? What are challenges you've faced in your CrossFit community?

These interviews will take approximately 60 minutes in length and all responses be kept confidential. **Participants will receive a $25 e-gift card as compensation.**

Faculty, students, and staff who may see your information will maintain confidentiality to the extent of federal and state laws and university policies. Personal identifiers will not be published or presented. Your de-identified information could be used for future research without additional informed consent.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me, Shana Makos, at smakos2@illinois.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Sincerely,
Shana Makos (she/her)
PhD Candidate, Department of Communication University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Appendix F: Sample Fieldnotes Entry

Title: Rocky Mountain CrossFit at 9 a.m. on February 2, 2023

Michelle provides a casual overview of the workout at the white board before class starts. She described this workout as "not terrible" and compared it to another workout I, and others, have done before called "Fight Gone Bad," which I did find to, indeed, be terrible. Michelle said, "For walking lunges, come talk to me if you have any knee issues." Michelle seemed very prepared for this interview compared to the last time I saw her coach. Last time, she seemed scrambled and as if she became familiar with the workout only at the moment she walked in. It also seems that she's not working out with the class this time, which I think may help her be more focused.

I complimented Josh's bright pink shorts and he said, "They match my shoes and wrist wraps! CrossFit is all about looking good. It's all about the clothes."

Jenny brought Bailey today, her English Golden Retriever, as she usually does. Josh told a story about how he ran with Bailey once during a workout. Bailey went left and Josh went right and it tweaked Josh's back. He couldn't work out for two weeks. This is an example of sharing stories and bonding over the difficulty of both injury and the difficulty of CrossFit.

Michelle provided an overview of the snatch to the class and gave a preview of the warm-up. She grouped the preview of the snatch and the preview of the class into one big speech event, and I wonder if some athletes found that to be too much information. Some seem to be looking around to other athletes as if to verify what they just heard. Nobody asks any clarifying questions, and they all proceed to completing the warm-up. Michelle completes the warm-up with them, and I now realize that is because she is also going to do the workout. My initial assumption about her was incorrect.

Bailey is mobile around the room, walking up to the athletes and sniffing them. I know this can be distracting, and it would be terrible if she was on the floor during a workout because she could get hit. I wonder, do the coaches get annoyed with the dogs who are regularly here? What challenges do those dogs pose?

Josh (pink shorts) and Paul (very tall) grew up together and have known each other since they were young. I learned this as they explained their relationship to the rest of the class. They are chatty with each other and with others in the class, talking about a variety of topics like Whole 30, rowing technique, and CrossFit Games athletes.

Josh gestured to me and then said to Paul, "This is Shana and she's studying why CrossFitters are so weird." Paul said, "Yeah. That's probably why she introduced herself to me!" And I tried to diffuse the awkwardness of the situation—in addition to trying to take the attention off of me as a researcher—by saying, "I introduced myself to Paul because I'm so friendly." They then both asked about my research in the middle of class, specifically asking what I am looking for. I explained, at a high level, the purpose of the study—language that was included in my email to the members.

Jenny said, “At noon yesterday, we were like, ‘Good thing Shana isn’t here today!’ because we were saying some pretty filthy things!” I am not sure what she is referring to here, exactly, but what’s clear to me is Jenny’s comment, combined with Josh’s, is that they’re noticing my presence and perhaps altering their behavior when I am present or not.

They start their snatch lifts. Michael, an athlete who is new to the gym, said “This is awkward.” Michelle said, “It’s gonna be awkward,” but did not provide specific assistance to Michael. Michelle proceeded to give pointers during some of the lifts, like that the athletes needed to open their hips. She walked around and gave this type of coaching, particularly to Jenna who is newer to lifting.

Michelle gave feedback to Josh: “Keep your feet narrower.” Josh said, “Yeah, but that’s harder.” And she said, “Yeah, but when you’re cycling snatches in the Open, you don’t want to keep resetting your feet.” He replied, perhaps somewhat embarrassed or defeated. “Yeah.”

Michelle is now covering strategy for the workout. She is reading off of the coaching notes paper and step by step breaking down how to do ab mat sit-ups. She is speaking in great detail, both demonstrating with her body how to do the movements and giving a very technical description of what the movement entails. There was a lot of breakdown of the movements themselves but not anything on the strategy of the workout – for example, how those reps should be divided or what you should feel like as you’re completing the workout.

Michelle counts the clock down and the class, including her, begin the workout together. In watching the athletes, it is clear there are people who would benefit from Michelle’s eyes on them. For example, greater depth into squats, keeping their chest up, or proper technique on lunges. But Michelle is missing all of this because she is completing her own workout.

It’s silent in the room other than heavy breathing from the athletes and music. Sum 41’s “Fat Lip” is the song playing. This silence is a striking difference, because typically classes are filled with chatting athletes plus music, plus the coach’s instructions. I can hear the thump of Michelle’s knee when it hits the floor during her lunges. I also realize it is more quiet in the gym because equipment, like barbells, are not being dropped because this is a no-equipment workout.

Michelle is continuing with the workout and not paying attention to the other athletes. She is not, for example, completing the typical coaching activity of relaying the time or communicating workout strategy to the athletes.

During a brief rest period of the workout, the athletes said Paul’s clothing choice (basketball shorts over tights) was silly. They were making fun of him for it. He said, “I just moved here from Southern California! It’s cold here!”

As the workout came to a close, the room was filled with sounds of heavy breathing from the athletes, and sweat drops sprinkled the floor. The gym smelled sweaty, and of metal from the barbells and the rig. As athletes’ heartrates came down, they initiated the typical routine of discussing the workout.

“How many arounds did you get?”
“That was brutal!”

Jenny said, “I don’t always go RX, but when I do, there’s no skill involved.” A quote that, intentional or not, belittled her own skill and athleticism.

Appendix G: Participant Sampling Plan

	January 2023	February 2023	March 2023	April 2023
Sampling at RMCF (including typical instance sampling)	X	X		
Network sampling (initiated through my personal Facebook and Instagram pages)	X	X	X	X
Sampling at MWF			X	X
Theoretical-construct sampling (through network sampling and snowball sampling)		X	X	X
Snowball sampling	X	X	X	X

Appendix H: Recruitment Text and Scripts

Text Option 1 for Facebook and Instagram Posts

Attention CrossFit athletes (and friends)!

I am conducting research for my dissertation about how CrossFit athletes experience community in their CrossFit gyms.

If you identify as:

1. A current member at a CrossFit gym in the U.S.
2. Someone who does CrossFit, even if you're not a member at a gym
3. A former member at a CrossFit gym in the U.S.
4. Someone who is no longer affiliated with CrossFit (i.e., you've left the community altogether)

I'd love to talk to you about things like: How would you describe your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)? What are some benefits or downsides of your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)? What are challenges you've faced in your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)?

If you qualify for this study and would like to participate, please complete this brief form and I will follow up with you via email to schedule an interview. Interviews will take place via either Zoom or phone and will last approximately 60 minutes. Your responses will be kept confidential. **Participants will receive a $25 e-gift card as compensation.**

With the information I gather from the people I interview, I hope to educate other athletes, coaches, and gym owners about the experience and development of community in CrossFit gyms.

Please feel free to share my information with anyone else who you think might be interested. Thank you!

Text Option 2 for Facebook and Instagram Posts

Are you:
A current member at a CrossFit gym in the U.S.?
Someone who does CrossFit, even if you're not a member at a gym?
Someone who is no longer affiliated with CrossFit (i.e., you've left the community altogether)?

If so, I want to talk to you! I am conducting research for my dissertation about how CrossFit athletes experience community in their CrossFit gyms.

If you qualify for this study and would like to participate, please complete this brief form and I will follow up with you via email to schedule an interview. Interviews will take place via either

Zoom or phone and will last approximately 60 minutes. Your responses will be kept confidential. **Participants will receive a $25 e-gift card as compensation.**

I'd love to talk to you about things like:

- How would you describe your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)?
- What are some benefits or downsides of your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)?
- What are challenges you've faced in your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)?

Please feel free to share this information with anyone else who you think might be interested. Thank you!

Email Outreach (General outreach)

Hello CrossFit Athletes,

My name is Shana Makos, and I am a PhD student in communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am conducting research for my dissertation about how CrossFit athletes experience community and personal identity in their CrossFit gyms.

I'm looking to connect with:

1. People who are currently members at a CrossFit gym in the U.S.
2. People who do CrossFit, even if they're not members at a gym
3. Former members at CrossFit gyms in the U.S.
4. People who are no longer affiliated with CrossFit (i.e., they've left the community altogether)

If you meet these criteria, would you consider talking with me? I'd love to talk to you about things like: How would you describe your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)? What are some benefits or downsides of your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)? What are challenges you've faced in your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)?

If you qualify for this study and would like to participate, please complete this brief form and I will follow up with you via email to schedule an interview. Interviews will take place via either Zoom or phone and will last approximately 60 minutes. Your responses will be kept confidential. **Participants will receive a $25 e-gift card as compensation.**

With the information I gather from the people I interview, I hope to educate other athletes, coaches, and gym owners about the experience and development of community in CrossFit gyms.

Please feel free to share my information with anyone else who you think might be interested.

Thank you!

Script for Verbal Recruitment

Hello!

My name is Shana Makos and I am a PhD student in communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

I am here observing today because I am conducting research for my dissertation about how CrossFit athletes experience community in their CrossFit gyms. I'm looking to learn more about things like how CrossFit athletes describe their community, what makes a gym's community special, and challenges people face in their CrossFit communities.

I am here observing. If you are open to it, I would love to connect with you before or after class just to speak casually and learn more about your experience of CrossFit and community. If you'd be willing to speak with me more in-depth, I am also conducting one-on-one interviews via Zoom or phone. These interviews are approximately 60 minutes in length and all responses be kept confidential. Participants will receive a $25 e-gift card as compensation.

With the information I gather from the people I interview, I hope to educate other athletes, coaches, and gym owners about the experience and development of community in CrossFit gyms.

Please feel free to share my information with anyone else who you think might be interested. Thank you!

Appendix I: Participant Survey to Indicate Interest

Hello, and thank you for your interest! My name is Shana, and I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

I am conducting research for my dissertation about how CrossFit athletes experience community in their CrossFit gyms. If you are interested in sharing your experiences connected to CrossFit in a one-on-one interview with me, I'd love to hear from you.

Use this form to express your interest in participating in the study. **I will follow up with you via email to schedule an interview time.**

- Interviews will take place via either Zoom or phone (whichever your preference) and will last approximately 60 minutes.
- Your responses will be kept confidential.
- Participants will receive a $25 e-gift card as compensation.

I will ask questions such as: How would you describe your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)? What are some benefits or downsides of your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)? What are challenges you've faced in your CrossFit community (or former CrossFit community)?

Please feel free to share this form with anyone else who you think might be interested. Thank you!

Shana Makos (she, her, hers)
PhD Candidate
smakos2@illinois.edu
(312) 775-2268
Department of Communication
University of Illinois Urbana-
Champaign

* = required response

Section 1
What is your first and last name?*
[open response]

What is your email address?*
[open response]

Please indicate which of the following statements apply to you [select one]:*
- ☐ I am a current member at a CrossFit gym in the United States.
- ☐ I am someone who does CrossFit, but I am not a member at a CrossFit gym.

- I am someone who is no longer affiliated with CrossFit (e.g., you've left the community and no longer identify as someone who does CrossFit).
- None of these statements apply to me.

Section 2
To better understand your experience based on identity factors, I would like to ask the following identity-related questions prior to the interview. These questions do not require a response in order for you to participate in the interview and are for research purposes only.

To which gender identity do you most identify? [select one]
- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

Which of the following best describes you? [select all that apply]
- Heterosexual or straight
- Gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Queer
- Prefer not to say
- Other [open response]

Do you identify as transgender? [select one]
- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Which of the following ethnic or racial categories best describes how you self-identify? [select all that apply]
- African American or Black
- Asian
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Middle Eastern/North African
- Native American/Alaska Native/First Nations
- Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian
- White
- Prefer not to say
- Other [open response]

How do you describe your ethnicity? [select one]
- Hispanic/Latinx/Latine
- Not Hispanic/Latinx/Latine

- Prefer not to say

What is your age? [select one]
- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 and over
- Prefer not to say

What is the highest level of education you have achieved? [select one]
- No schooling completed
- Nursery school
- Grades 1-11
- 12th grade – no diploma
- High school diploma
- GED or alternative credential
- Some college credit, but less than 1 year of college
- 1 or more years of college credit, no degree
- Associate's degree (e.g., AA, AS)
- Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)
- Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, Med, MSW, MBA)
- Professional degree beyond bachelor's degree (e.g., MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)
- Doctorate degree (e.g., PhD, EdD)
- Prefer not to say

Which of the following best describes your annual household income? [select one]
- $0 - $19,999
- $20,000 - $49,999
- $50,000 - $89,999
- $90,000 - $129,999
- $130,000 - $149,999
- $150,000+
- Prefer not to say

Do you identify as a person with a disability or other chronic condition? [select one]
- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Appendix J: Email Template of Interview Confirmation

Hello [participant name],

Thank you for your interest in this study about CrossFit and community. Please schedule an interview time that works best for you by visiting this link: https://calendly.com/shanamakos/connect.

Select either Zoom or phone, whichever is your preference for us to connect. You will receive a confirmation email with the conferencing information.

As a reminder, our interview will last approximately 60 minutes. The information you share will be kept confidential, and you will be compensated with a $25 e-gift card for your participation.

Please reach out to me if you do not see an interview time that would work well for you.

Thank you again!

Appendix K: Interview Guide

Welcome

- Thank you again for volunteering your time and experiences to this research.
- First, a little bit about me and then I'll tell us more about what to expect during our time together today.
    - I am a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign earning my degree in communication.
    - I study how people experience community in sports contexts. I've been doing CrossFit on and off since 2018.
    - I love talking to people and learning about people's experiences, which is largely why I decided to do this kind of work. But mostly, I am doing it to learn about the ways we can have better experiences when we exercise.

Purpose of the study

- The purpose of this study is to better understand how individuals experience community and identity in their CrossFit gyms, or factors that led to people leaving their CrossFit communities.
- You indicated you are someone is a member at a CrossFit gym, has previously been a member, or who has left CrossFit entirely. Is that correct?

Overview of our call

- The call will last approximately 60 minutes.
- I'll ask you questions related to the study, but you are not obligated to answer all questions and may skip a question at any time.
- As such, I'll be taking notes throughout our time together.
- I previously emailed a consent form. Did you receive that? Do you have any questions about it?

Recording

- May I record our conversation today?

Pseudonym and transcript

- After we are done, I will transcribe our conversation and remove all identifying information. So, that means I'll need to use a name other than your own.
- What name would you like me to use in place of your name?

PRESS 4 TO RECORD OR RECORD ON ZOOM

Warm-up/Background Questions

- Before we get into CrossFit-related topics, I'd love to learn a bit more about you.
    - How do you spend your days?
    - How would you describe yourself?
    - What state do you live in?
    - What are some of your hobbies or activities you enjoy?
- Reason for doing CrossFit

    - What brought you to CrossFit? What are some reasons you started doing CrossFit?
- Frequency
    - How long have you been involved?
    - How long have you been at your current gym?
    - How often do you attend classes?
- Their specific gym
    - What makes your gym unique? Can you give me an example?
    - Do you largely spend your workouts at your own gym, or have you ever dropped in to other gyms?
- Other gyms
    - Have you been a member of other gyms? Can you tell me about your experience with it? Why did you leave?
- Do you interact with other CrossFit athletes (different states, gyms, online, etc.)?

Core Interview Questions

The Community Experience

- Think back to the first few times you entered a CrossFit gym.
    - What entered your mind before you entered the gym?
    - What can you recall from your first few times doing CrossFit?
- Would you say you experience community in your CrossFit gym?
    - How would you describe this experience of community?
- Please tell me about your typical experience at the gym from start to finish. What typically happens when you enter the gym? During a class? After a class?
- What are some of the stories that come to mind for you about when you've experienced community at your CrossFit gym? What was the situation? Who was involved?
- Is this notion of "community" important to you and your CrossFit experience? Why or why not?

Identity

- Earlier in our conversation, you mentioned some of your hobbies and activities you enjoy in your everyday life. Another topic that is central to this study is identity. Identity refers to one's sense of self, including individual appearance, beliefs, qualities, personality traits, and interests. For instance, identity may refer to the external characteristics an individual has, such as race, height, sexuality weight, or religion.
    - I want to take a moment and ask you, what are some identities that are most relevant to you in your day-to-day life?
- What parts of your identity do you see as being particularly salient, or important, to your experience in the CrossFit gym?
    - For example: Race, socioeconomic status, physical ability, body size or type, sexual orientation, gender
- How do you think different parts of your identity contribute to your experience of community at your gym, if at all?

Closing Questions

- If you could change one thing about your current gym's community, what would it be?

- If you could change one thing about CrossFit as an organization (community) what would it be?
- What advice do you have for athletes, coaches, or gym owners about building community in their CrossFit gym?
- What else do you think I should know about this topic?
- Who else do you think I should connect with?

Appendix L: Sample Sensitizing Concepts

Community

- Spatial community
- Relational community
- Sense of community
- Imagined community
- Community of practice
- CrossFit norms or traditions

Intersectionality/Identity

- Inclusion
- Exclusion
- Gender
- Race
- Sexual orientation
- Ability/disability
- Visible/Non-visible health conditions
- Identification
- Social construction
- Ingroup/Outgroup behaviors

Interpersonal Communication Processes

- Uncertainty
- Social support
- Face threats
- Politeness
- Greetings
- Nonverbal
- Advice
- Ingroup/Outgroup behaviors

Speech Acts

- Greetings
- Invitations
- Gratitude
- Trash talk
- Smack talk