



The social media gym-class: another lesson learnt from COVID-19 lockdown

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During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, a common concern was that the "stay-at-home" measures adopted to counteract the virus spread would dramatically reduce the physical activity levels of the general population, and, importantly, of vulnerable groups of individuals such as, among others, the elderly and people with cardiovascular diseases, leading to increased risk factor burden [1, 2]. Such concern has been circumstantiated in a number of publications, showing a 27.3% decrease in daily step count globally within 30 days from the start of the lockdown, as assessed by smartphone-based apps from 455,404 unique users from 187 unique countries [3–5]. Italy, which was the first country to order a nationwide lockdown on 9 March 2020, exhibited a dramatic 48.7% maximal decrease [3].

Interestingly, not only smartphone- and web-based apps were helpful in monitoring changes in physical activity patterns as a result of quarantine and lockdown measures, they also proved particularly suitable to deliver exercise-based interventions and counteract the decline in individual exercise habits [5]. Due to the forced closure of gyms and the consequent limitations to the amount of group-based physical activity as a result of social distancing, the utilization of remotely supervised *digital exercise* showed a tremendous rise in popularity, thanks to several network-enabled apps available on marketplace platforms, such as the AppStore on iOS, Market on Android, and MarketPlace on Windows Mobile [5]. Overall, the wide range of available apps and websites offered valid means to resume or engage for the

first time in individual exercise programs performed at home as an alternative to face-to-face delivery. While some of these, such as exergames-related apps, were already popular before the pandemic outbreak and have grown in popularity following the lockdowns [5, 6], the main novelty, and possibly an important lesson learnt, resides in the birth of a new phenomenon: the social media gym-class.

Indeed, via popular social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) and communication platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and GoToMeeting, the conventional exercise class has now moved to a shared and social virtual gym space.

Compared with the established fitness apps and websites, this emergent form of gym-class has the potential to produce social interaction between the trainer and each participant and among participants as well, also offering the trainers the opportunity to visually and verbally monitor and supervise their exercise proposals in real time, often keeping the weekly and hourly schedule of gym-activities unchanged. Undeniably, this novel form of remotely supervised physical activity results of help to the whole area of sports and health professionals, a working sector that has been hardly hit by the global economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Needless to say, we are all eager to resume our lifestyle as it was prior to the pandemic, including face-to-face, in-person exercise programs. Until then, however, social media gym-classes will serve the relevant purpose to keep us in action and physically engaged, without forgetting what the use of social media gym-classes request to both fitness professionals and exercisers: to put close attention not only to each workout session, but to all the intervention phases to deliver a really safe and healthy exercise program. These steps start from the choice of the fitness professional to a proper workout periodization and conduction, passing through anamnesis and evaluation, as social media gym-classes are not free from potential musculoskeletal injuries [7]. Therefore, working in the right way, when such troubled times are over, and we will finally be able to pick up where

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we left off, we should not forget some of the lessons that the pandemic has taught us about physical activity:

(i) that we now have available and ready to use alternative and tested virtual supervised training systems, which are practical, low-cost and certainly more interactive than many conventional fitness apps; (ii) that even users with poor digital health literacy can easily join and enjoy an exercise intervention through social media; (iii) that for selected persons with physical or logistic impediments that may prevent or limit participation in face-to-face exercise classes (such as difficulty transferring to the gym or clinical issues), we can still opt for this novel exercise alternative that is supervised, socially interactive, and, importantly, performed in the safety of our own home.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report no relationships that could be construed as a conflict of interest.

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