

Phygital Wellness: A qualitative analysis

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Context and aim of the research. 'Wellness' is defined as achieving health benefits such as increased energy, improved mood, better sleep, stress reduction, and overall well-being, as well as maintaining a well-trained body and weight loss, highlighting both physical health and appearance (Riseth et al., 2019). This study investigates the rising popularity of fitness centers that aim to deliver an engaging 'phygital' customer experience, combining physical and digital elements to create interactive and immersive environments (Mikheev et al., 2021), a concept we refer to as 'phygital wellness'. Our goals are to identify the needs and expectations of customers that are satisfied through fitness center technologies, detect the strategies used by fitness centers to make their environments attractive and experiential through these technologies, assess technological sustainability, particularly whether members feel comfortable with the collection and use of their data for study purposes and the potential involvement of AI in the gym's software, and develop a phygital wellness model, which categorizes strategies into physical and digital, highlighting how these can be blended to enhance customer engagement and satisfaction.

Theoretical background. The fitness industry has significantly adapted to the phygital trend, particularly under the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fitness centers have increasingly integrated virtual technology by offering subscriptions for fitness apps, which include virtual classes, personalized training plans, and fitness tracking features. This shift not only ensured the continuity of fitness routines during the pandemic but also enhanced how individuals engage with physical activity, creating a seamless blend of online and offline experiences (Matteucci, 2021). Fitness services are increasingly using IoT devices to offer real-time feedback and personalized workouts, allowing users to monitor performance and receive tailored guidance. These intelligent systems track fitness data and provide customized exercise and diet recommendations. Interactive dashboards further enhance this experience by visualizing progress, seamlessly blending digital analytics with physical fitness (Jamil et al., 2021). Previous studies reveal significant gaps in the literature on the phygital phenomenon, with a focus on retail and tourism, and a neglect of physical exercise facilities like gyms. This results in biased insights toward consumer experiences in these sectors, leading to an incomplete understanding of the phygital experience. Additionally, most research is concentrated in Europe and Asia, particularly Italy, and often within a single country, limiting the generalizability of findings due to varying cultural, economic, and social contexts. Considering the evolution toward phygital offerings, we formulated the following research question to guide our investigation: How do fitness center technologies address the needs and expectations of phygital customers, and what strategies can be employed to create an attractive, experiential, and technologically sustainable environment, leading to the development of a comprehensive phygital

wellness model that integrates physical and digital elements to enhance customer engagement and satisfaction?

Methodology. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology by conducting in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of members from two gyms that have adopted phygital environments, located in different countries: O2 Wellness Center in Madrid and Forum Sport Center in Rome. Additionally, interviews will be submitted to members of the management of each investigated gym. Gym members will discuss their use of digital and physical features, the impact on motivation, and their perceptions of the sustainability of phygital elements. Managers' interviews will address challenges, technologies, engagement strategies, and customer satisfaction. Participant observation will enrich the data collected through the interviews.

Expected findings. Preliminary data from our first interviews and observation show that gym members value personalized workout plans and real-time feedback from IoT-enabled equipment. This feedback is valued not only during the exercises themselves but also through the data communicated via the app, including feedback on the progress of long-term training and consumer measurements such as weight, fat mass percentage, lean mass, and other values collected in the gym by the machines. Moreover, we expect that members will be comfortable with data collection and AI integration, as consumers do not find the phygital experience in fitness centers intrusive. In a hybrid environment, they feel empowered to use the technology when they see its benefits and to ignore it when they prefer, without affecting their training.

Conclusion and implications. This research fills a gap in the literature by exploring the integration of physical and digital elements in fitness centers. Additionally, the development of a phygital wellness model categorizes strategies into physical and digital elements, providing a framework for blending these components to enhance customer satisfaction. Managers can use these insights to address challenges in adopting phygital technologies, ensuring they meet customer expectations. Future research should use quantitative methods to complement qualitative findings and reach a broader audience.

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