

***The phygital customer experience in wellness settings: A qualitative analysis***

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**Abstract**

This study explores how integrating physical and digital touchpoints, known as phygital experiences, shapes wellness-experience management and perception in technologically advanced fitness centers. Guided by Batat's Phygital Customer Experience and Funk's Sport Experience Design frameworks, the analysis draws on 14 semi-structured interviews with managers, trainers, and members of three tech-integrated centers in Spain, Italy, and the UK. Analysis revealed four key themes: synergistic design, engagement, inclusiveness, and customer-centricity, that illustrate how value is co-created across physical, digital, human, and media connectors and redefine relationships between users, organizations, and context in hybrid environments. The findings empirically support the Phygital Customer Experience framework and extend Sport Experience Design to the wellness domain. While focused on urban fitness centers and active users, limiting broader generalization, the study offers actionable insights for wellness providers seeking to deliver phygital services and enrich member experiences, and highlights directions for future research into technology-resistant populations and other wellness contexts.

**Keywords:** Phygital customer experience, wellness, SX framework, PH-CX framework, service design, customer-centricity

**Introduction**

The wellness and fitness industry is rapidly becoming “phygital”, as wearables, mobile apps, and immersive AR combine with physical facilities to reshape the user experience (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Ozdamli & Milrich, 2023; Pizzo et al., 2021). Yet much of the existing literature continues to treat physical and digital touchpoints as distinct domains, restricting our understanding of the holistic ecosystems in which value is co-created through their interplay (Batat, 2022). Phygital research also remains concentrated in retail, tourism, and luxury (Del Vecchio et al., 2023) and frequently portrays customer journeys as linear (Mele et al., 2024). Despite rapid digitalisation, the wellness sector remains underexplored. Fitness centers offer a setting where members interact with facilities, trainers, and digital platforms (Pizzo et al., 2021), making them ideal to study how touchpoints shape the customer experience. Technology-mediated interactions are increasingly central to these experiences (Funk, 2017).

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how physical, digital, human, and media connectors interact within wellness centres to produce non-linear, adaptive, and emotionally rich customer journeys. Grounded in the Phygital Customer Experience

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(PH-CX) model (Batat, 2022) and the Sport Experience Design (SX) framework (Funk, 2017), we explore two questions: (1) How does the seamless integration of digital and physical touchpoints influence the management of the wellness experience? and (2) How does this integration shape customers' perceptions of the wellness experience? To address these questions, the study employs semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015) with a purposive sample of gym members, instructors, and managers from different technologically advanced wellness centers located in Madrid, Rome, and London. Findings indicate that combining wearables, mobile apps, immersive displays, and expert support enables real-time personalisation, optimises training workflows, and integrates customer-centric logic into service design. For participants, such integration heightens engagement through deeper personal involvement and digitally mediated peer interaction, while also fostering inclusiveness by accommodating diverse fitness levels, goals, and technological skills. Empirically supporting the PH-CX model and extending the SX framework to phygital wellness, the study redefines relationships among users, organisations, and context, showing how physical, digital, human, and media connectors co-create value through mutually reinforcing mechanisms of engagement, inclusiveness, and customer-centricity. From a managerial perspective, the results recommend providers to align digital tools with user goals, empower trainers as human bridges across touchpoints, and cultivate accessible, community-driven services that welcome a variety of abilities and digital expertise.

### **Methodology**

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the emerging phenomenon of phygital customer experiences in wellness centers, where such methods are well-suited given the limited existing research (Lim, 2024).

**Research context.** The study examines how three leading fitness chains are redefining wellness through phygital integration: O2 Wellness in Madrid; Forum Sport Center in Rome; Virgin Active (Rome, Milan, London).

**Data collection.** Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their balance of consistency and flexibility in exploring emerging phenomena (Adams, 2015). Fourteen participants (2 managers, 3 instructors, 9 members) from technologically advanced wellness centers in Spain, Italy, and the UK were recruited via purposive sampling (Bouncken et al., 2025), selecting individuals with meaningful engagement in phygital environments (Batat, 2022). Sample size was justified using Malterud et al., (2016) information power concept, citing the study's narrow focus, highly specific sample, and application of Funk's, (2017) SX framework, reducing the need for a large sample. Data collection occurred January-March 2025 using three stakeholder-specific interview guides. Interviews (30-40 minutes) were conducted remotely via video/phone (Hanna, 2012), audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated (from Italian) prioritizing conceptual equivalence (van Nes et al., 2010).

**Data analysis.** We applied Braun & Clarke's, (2006) six-step qualitative content analysis, using Funk's SX framework as a coding guide. Interview transcripts were line-by-line coded, grouped into themes, like "synergistic design", that showed how wellness centers blend physical and digital touchpoints. The study was informed by two complementary frameworks: the PH-CX framework (Batat, 2022), defining phygital

interaction components, and the SX framework (Funk, 2017), guiding research questions and analysis structure to explore sport user-context-organization interplay.

### **Findings**

Our findings indicate that phygital fitness centers enhance the exercise experience through four mutually reinforcing pillars: synergistic design, engagement, inclusiveness, and customer-centricity, each of which is both conceptually distinct and mutually reinforcing. **Synergistic design** emerges when digital and physical touchpoints merge. Wearable devices stream live biometrics to trainers, who can recalibrate programs instantaneously, while virtual coaching systems complement on-site staff, producing a dynamic equilibrium between autonomous self-regulation and expert supervision. **Engagement** operates on two axes. On the customer-to-brand dimension, synchronised devices enable members to customise routines and visualise longitudinal progress, yet many report residual friction when integrating third-party tracking applications. On the customer-to-customer dimension, digitally mediated communities, WhatsApp groups, leaderboards, and gamified challenges, foster social connections, although respondents still desire more, supported group events that maintain motivational momentum. **Inclusiveness** is advanced through hybrid service modalities: live-streamed classes, remote coaching sessions, and interactive, multilingual displays, that accommodate heterogeneous customers. Nevertheless, the complexity of certain interfaces can alienate non-expert technology users, underscoring the indispensable role of trainers as data translators who convert information into actionable insight. Finally, **customer-centricity** foregrounds the principle that technological innovation should amplify, not neglect, human needs. While immersive tools demonstrably heighten enjoyment and adherence, interviewees consistently emphasise that the motivational, interpretive, and empathic functions performed by trainers remain irreplaceable.

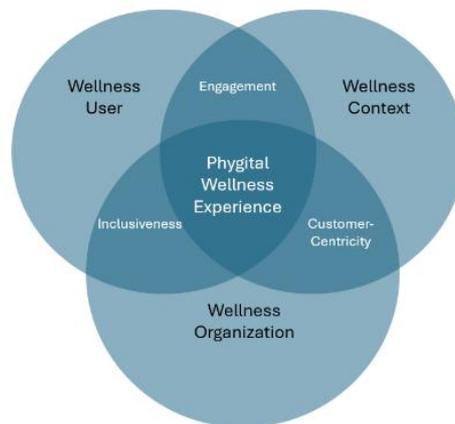
### **Discussion and Implications**

Addressing RQ1, the study shows that blending digital and physical touchpoints strengthens wellness management by enabling more personalised services, providing trainers with real-time data that sharpens their support, and creating a seamless, customer-centric journey across channels. Turning to RQ2, the same integration shapes user perceptions by elevating engagement, widening inclusiveness through remote access and adaptive interfaces, and cultivating immersive, motivating environments that keep participants involved.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study empirically supports and extends two complementary models: Funk's, (2017) SX and Batat's, (2022) PH-CX, within the under-explored domain of indoor wellness. Responding to recent calls for deeper insight into phygital integration (Del Vecchio et al., 2023; Mele et al., 2024), the findings confirm that the seamless integration of physical and digital touchpoints is reshaping service design and management, while advancing Batat's holistic ecosystem view of value creation, which highlights immersive, emotional and customer-centred

experiences. Funk's, (2017) SX framework, which maps interactions among user, context, and organization across four relational domains, can be reinterpreted to describe a phygital wellness ecosystem. Area A (user + context) becomes the engagement layer, where phygital technologies drive practical, emotional, sensory, and social engagement. Area B (user + organisation) is reframed as the inclusiveness layer, as trainers and digital touchpoints jointly deliver personalised and accessible services. Area C (organisation + context) becomes the customer-centricity layer, where data-driven design aligns offerings with evolving member needs, echoing Batat's technicality. Finally, Area D (user + context + organisation) represents the phygital wellness experience, a seamless journey that realises Batat's continuum of value. Figure 1 shows how the user, context, and organisation interact to co-create value in phygital environments.

From a managerial perspective, indoor wellness environments are most effective when managers coordinate physical, digital, media and human resources around customer-centred design. Wearables and apps generate real-time data yet remain disconnected from context (Pizzo et al., 2021), so trainers must become interpreters who translate metrics into personalised instruction and co-create service protocols to enhance engagement and outcomes. Gamified features such as leaderboards, badges and virtual competitions can intensify engagement, but without careful mediation they risk diverting attention from members' goals; framing digital rewards within each user's broader fitness plan ensures that playful elements reinforce, rather than diminish, meaningful progress. Equally, rigid targets, exemplified by the popular 10 000-step rule, may reduce autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Treating technology as a supportive tool that enables self-determined goal setting sustains long-term commitment and physical activity. Thus, human expertise, purposeful gamification and autonomy-supportive design mutually reinforce effective hybrid wellness services.



*Figure 1 Venn diagram illustrating the revised SX framework applied to the phygital experience in wellness contexts.*

### **Limitations and Future Research**

By concentrating on advanced, gym-based wellness centres, this study overlooks other phygital formats, such as digitally enhanced Pilates studios, suggesting that future research should broaden the contextual lens. The sample excluded non-users and drop-outs, leaving resistance, disengagement and potential re-engagement unexamined; incorporating these groups would illuminate barriers and motivation cycles across the user journey. Findings rest on qualitative data that capture emotional, functional and social dimensions yet still require quantitative and mixed-methods empirical testing across larger, more diverse populations. Moreover, the data-privacy and security implications of wearables and fitness apps remain underexplored. Future research should further investigate the potential intrusiveness of such technologies and their impact on users' sense of autonomy and privacy within phygital environments. Finally, because the analysis offers only a time-limited observation, it cannot track the rapid emergence of innovations such as immersive VR workouts or AI-driven coaching; longitudinal studies are therefore essential to follow how continual technological change reshapes phygital experiences and how organisations evolve to sustain value over time.

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