

Choosing to stay fit? Glocalized ideologies of health and fitness during a pandemic

1. Introduction

Health crises tend to expose tensions between different, often conflicting perspectives on what really matters in society. The focus of government responses to the crisis, for example, can be placed on a continuum that ranges from human life and well-being on the one side, to economic sustainability and growth on the other. In practice, political decisions tend to be made considering both or more aspects. A good example is provided by the first months of the COVID-19 crisis, where public debates habitually highlighted an alleged dichotomy between a solidarity approach (“Take good care of yourself and especially the others”¹) and an economy-centered approach (“Opening up America again”²). Characteristic of these debates is the construction of various in- and outgroups: COVID-19-deniers vs. others; young vs. old, strong vs. frail etc.³

In this paper we look at how another emerging tension, namely that between a neoliberal framework of health and a growing focus on security (Rushton & Williams 2012) is played out in the discourses of a specific category of health workers affected by the pandemic, viz. fitness professionals. In recent decades, being fit has increasingly been framed as an individual choice, an ideology referred to as “healthism”: one chooses to stay fit (Crawford 1980; Tolvhed & Hakkola 2018). However, a pandemic threatening millions of lives could destabilize the base of healthism as an ideology, as it does not seem to have convincing answers for a crisis of this magnitude: how can people “choose” not to suffer from COVID-19?

1.1. Background: COVID-19 and group fitness

In this paper we focus on group fitness instructors working for the global fitness company Les Mills. Since they study the same didactic material worldwide to become licensed instructors, and, thus informed by the same “fitness philosophy”, they were chosen as a case study. Since they teach classes in countries that were affected differently by COVID-19, and by the measures that were taken to stop the spread of the disease, comparisons were enabled.

Les Mills International (henceforth LM) is a New Zealand based company that grew from a chain of local fitness studios. The first studio was opened in 1968 by former Olympic athlete Leslie (“Les”) Roy Mills and gradually turned into a globally operating provider of standardized group fitness classes.

¹ Belgian Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès in a speech on April 5th 2020 (“Zorg goed voor jezelf en vooral voor de anderen”). <https://www.premier.be/nl/toespraak-van-de-eerste-minister>

² Name of a task force formed by President Trump in April 2020 (<https://www.nbcnews.com/business/economy/whatever-happened-trump-s-opening-america-again-task-force-n1244203>)

³ For a discussion of the situation in Austria see Körber (2020).

LM provides pre-choreographed group workouts franchised for local fitness studios, such as the program Bodypump (a 30- to 60-minute barbell workout) or GRIT Series, a 30-minute HIIT (*High Intensity Interval*) training. Studios have to acquire the licenses for the different programs. Most importantly, the programs are taught by instructors who have to complete a one- or two-day initial training for each program that they want to teach. LM group fitness, like any other group fitness (think of Zumba) involves physical proximity, as studios are often crowded; moreover, a program such as GRIT contains elements of personal training, viz. instructors are expected to correct and motivate individual participants. Additionally, socializing before, during, and after classes is essential, at least to some participants. LM instructors are specifically trained to connect with their participants (Andreasson & Johansson 2015). Both coaching and socializing have proven to be beneficial to physical, mental, and social health (Evans et al 2020: 88). However, during a pandemic, physical proximity, especially in larger groups, is discouraged because it increases the risks of contagion. Accordingly, group fitness, or at least some forms of group fitness, were restricted or even banned during the first lockdown phase in April and May 2020. In some regions, e.g. in Paris, fitness studios were closed again in October 2020, the same holds true for Austria and Belgium in the course of autumn 2020.

LM presents itself as a global family of instructors, featuring national trainers, presenters, and global ambassadors for each program. Over the past years, LM has organized numerous live events with their most famous instructors presenting the newest programs, attracting an international crowd of instructors and participants. Since the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, LM has relocated its networking activities into the virtual sphere. LM launched the #LesMillsUnited social media campaign in April 2020, asking instructors around the world to film their favorite “move” from an LM program, encouraging viewers to perform the exercises themselves, aiming at strengthening the connection between instructors around the globe (Les Mills UK 2020). The third program release of 2020 (new choreographies of every program are released four times a year) was filmed under the hashtag #UnitedRelease, in parks, living rooms, or offices, by instructors around the world and it was published imitating the “gallery view” of video conferencing tools like Zoom (Les Mills Program Directors 2020). Again, this was meant to foster global LM connectedness.

Additionally, during and after lockdown, LM aimed at supporting fitness studios and instructors who wanted to livestream LM classes, by providing license free music and by offering their on-demand service free of charge to fitness studios and their customers (Shortt 2020). LM had diverse motives, i.e. following economic interests as well as “helping” people to healthy lifestyles. It is known for its motto “for a fitter planet”.

On the one hand all the above translates into “selling fitness” to the planet. Providing customers with online workout options during lockdown is, clearly, part of a customer retention strategy. On the other hand, LM engages in debates focusing on the role of sports in the prevention of diseases (Luzi and Radaelli 2020: 4). Both in news articles on their global website (Macdonald 2020) and on a local level. In October 2020, the Mediterranean LM branch (Les Mills Euromed) was active in the #touchepasmaalle campaign, demanding that fitness centers reopen in Paris and Marseille, arguing that they are “part of the solution, not the problem” (FranceActive 2020).

1.2. Aim and research questions

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate how LM instructors make sense of imperatives of staying fit during COVID-19, a global crisis that threatens people's lives. We look into LM instructors' roles on three levels: global, national, or local. These three levels constitute the thematic areas of our analysis: we look into the linguistic construction of global instructorhood as well as the linguistic construction of national and regional belonging of instructors and their roles as instructors in local gyms.

Accordingly, our main research questions are as follows:

- How does LM, as a global family, support instructors in their quest to continue staying fit while keeping themselves and their customers safe?
- How do national measures preventing the spread of COVID-19 impact working as a LM instructor? What are the consequences of certain measures on global belonging and being local promoters of fitness?
- How do LM instructors connect with participants when social distancing is the norm? How has the relationship with different types of customers changed since the COVID-19 outbreak?
- How do LM instructors justify their roles as promoters of a healthy lifestyle discursively in the midst of a pandemic? How do they communicate the impact the crisis has on their lives to their peer instructors and how do they perceive the situation of their peers?

To capture the disparity between global uniformity and local enactment of instructorhood, we will connect to an ongoing debate on the concepts of glocal and glocommodification. While globalization usually refers to wider and more general processes, the term glocal addresses how it gives rise to national and regional variations of supra-national cultural and ideological processes (such as healthism) (Urry, 2003). We will use the glocal concept to capture how global processes and ideologies (#UnitedRelease; "For a fitter planet") blend into and impact on local patterns in gym and fitness culture generally, and group fitness instructorhood in particular. Comparing the ways in which group fitness instructorhood is enacted in different local settings (i.e. countries), it is possible to see a combination of structural uniformity, where homogenization occurs, and of symbolic and localized diversity (Steen-Johnsen 2007; Ram, 2010). Global commodities (such as the selling of fitness) appropriate local variations that influence - and are influenced by - deep-seated social and cultural relations and ways of communicating. In this way, we get glocommodification, that is, a combination of structural uniformity and symbolic diversity (Urry 2007). In relation to this we will analyze how new ways of doing and communicating instructorhood emerge and develop in a global, transnational, and local context during the pandemic. On a general level, this analysis will deepen our understanding of how global professions (in the domain of sports and beyond) are redefined discursively from a local perspective, when their uniformity is under threat in a global (health) crisis.

In the following section (2), we elaborate on the ideology of healthism, as part of a neoliberal paradigm, and more specifically on its relevance for fitness culture. In section 3, we go into details of our data collection and the methodological framework we adopted, Critical discourse analysis. In section 4, we provide an analysis of LM instructors' discourses on

health, fitness and the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a summary and brief discussion of the results in section 5.

2. Health ideologies

2.1 Healthism and fitness culture

The term healthism, coined by Crawford (1980), refers to an increased attention to healthy lifestyles. The seemingly most important result of healthism is that the individual is held fundamentally responsible for his or her own health. Healthism can be seen as part of a general awareness of and movement towards more individual responsibility for health, in combination with an increased impetus to pursue a healthy lifestyle, which, ultimately, becomes a normative behavior (Skrabanek 1994). While healthism can be conceptualized as a positive evolution towards individual empowerment, with patients acquiring enhanced health literacy, adopting a more critical stance and '[claiming] a more active role in the healthcare process' (Turrini 2015: 17), some have suggested that this could also be a dangerous development, exposing the patient to all sorts of pressures, including lobbying from various commercial stakeholders (Fox et al. 2005).

One prominent dimension of healthism has been an increased attention to, in some cases even an obsession with, diet and nutrition, as healthy living has become an individual, personal responsibility — individuals have the power to make informed choices concerning food (Declercq 2016) and invest a great amount of time, money and knowledge into choosing the “right” diet (Harjunen 2017).

Another dimension of healthism is found within gym and fitness culture, namely, the need to engage in intensive and structured physical exercise. In our data, LM instructors perceive themselves as important actors in promoting healthy lifestyles by making “the right” choices regarding exercise (but also nutrition) as well as motivating others to choose a seemingly healthy lifestyle (Andersson, Vogl & Andreasson 2021).

Healthism in this sense is a global (western) ideology, which is negotiated locally in diverse ways, especially during a global crisis, like the one in focus in this chapter. In the midst of this crisis, some respondents in our study continued exercising with LM programs even if they did not teach classes actively, while others did not. For those who made the sacrifice of continuing their training despite governmental restrictions, the reasons seem to be a combination of wanting to stay fit and setting an example to others.

2.2 Healthism as a dominant health ideology

Healthism is anchored in the development of the welfare state in Western countries after the Second World War, and, more specifically, to the 1970s. Crawford (2006: 409) sees healthism as related to the growing dominance of a neoliberal agenda. Neoliberalism has developed, from an economic doctrine of the 1980s in the United Kingdom and the US, into a globally hegemonic paradigm (Rushton & Williams 2012: 163; Cerny 2008: 2), i.e., a rarely

questioned stance towards social, political and economic issues. As Rushton and Williams (2012: 153) point out, by now, neoliberalism constitutes a “deep core of embedded beliefs”. They assert that “neoliberalism seems to structure debates [...] limiting what is ‘sayable’, ‘doable’ - and even what is ‘thinkable’ in global health governance” (Rushton & Williams 2012: 149).

Healthism is part of a global neoliberal paradigm, but is not an uncontroversial perspective on health issues. Rushton & Williams (2012:153) stress the importance of counter-hegemonic discourses: these are especially visible when global health policy runs contrary to the neoliberal logic, viz. during a pandemic, which restricts people’s choices in health matters. A health paradigm which comes to the fore during a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, is that of security. The normative power of security is its focus on existential threats, more specifically the issue of life and death. Another paradigm that comes into play is the paradigm of biomedicine with its focus on scientific research and its benefit for the individual patient, for example through the development of vaccines (Rushton & Williams 2012: 157).

It is the goal of this contribution to uncover discourses informed by a neoliberal deep core as well as contestations of healthism in debates on fitness professionals’ global and national roles in a health crisis.

3. Data and methodology

For the present study, we conducted two rounds of focus group discussions: the first round took place in April 2020 with altogether ten participants in clusters of two to four people. The participants were LM instructors, active in six different countries: Austria, Belgium, Finland, Israel, Jordan, and the U.S. They were invited to participate on a voluntary basis after having participated in an online survey on identity and belonging of LM instructors (Andersson, Vogl & Andreasson 2021). The second round of focus group discussions in September 2020 was conducted with nine participants in clusters of two to four people, including some instructors from the first round and some additional instructors. The participants are active in Austria, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Jordan, and the U.S. Their professional profiles are diverse: some are full-time LM instructors while others have their main jobs outside the fitness industry. Concerning age, the instructors in our sample range from their early twenties to being older than fifty, the majority being in their mid-thirties. All focus group discussions took place in English, the language that the participants shared as a lingua franca.

By September 2020, the impact of COVID-19 measures varied across the globe, ranging from fitness centers being “back to normal” to the obligatory use of face masks in group fitness classes. This contribution is based on LM instructors’ reflection upon the developments within the five preceding months and the effects these developments had on their field of work and their role as promoters of a healthy lifestyle⁴. Due to the international compositions of the focus groups as well as to corona restrictions, the semi-structured discussions were conducted by the investigators online, via Skype and Zoom. The

⁴ See Andersson, Vogl & Andreasson (2021) on how some LM instructors see themselves as „fitness leaders“.

conversations varied between sixty and ninety minutes in length and were recorded and transcribed. To secure confidentiality, names mentioned in the text are pseudonyms.

We decided on using focus groups because they provide a possibility for participants to engage in processes of “sharing and comparing,” which ideally “provide insights into both what participants think and why they think the way they do” (Morgan and Hoffman 2018: 250). Accordingly, participants, when talking to their fellow instructors from different countries, had to explain their situation, justify their views on the crisis and assess its impact on group fitness. The fact that we talked to several instructors twice, first about one month after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and next about six months into the health and economic crisis, helped the reflection process and allowed for a comparing and contrasting of experiences.

Of the nine instructors that we interviewed in the second round, all but one were back to teaching classes.⁵ This does not hold true for all LM instructors, of course; some decided not to come back teaching because they did not feel safe under the circumstances as we learned from the focus group discussions.

It can be assumed that LM instructors who have continued teaching group fitness classes after the first lockdown phase, are convinced that the benefits of group fitness outweigh risks, such as contagion. Or, alternatively, they could be financially dependent on the income from the classes. They can be expected to think that choosing to keep training is a way of keeping control of their health. Critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2008; Reisigl & Wodak 2009 & 2016; Forchtner et al 2013) provides us with the tools to uncover how the ideology of healthism is reproduced (or contested) and to show how instructors, while relating their experiences of the first five months of the crisis, justify their profession during the pandemic. More specifically, we analyze their discussions by focusing on the following two aspects:

- main discursive strategies used to legitimize their positions
- main topoi used to justify their claims

Our operationalization of the concept of strategy is based on Wodak (2008) and Reisigl & Wodak (2009). We conceive of strategies as “more or less intentional [i.e. also habitual] plans of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009: 94). An example of a discursive strategy in the context of COVID-19 is that of downplaying or trivializing by asserting that it is “only a flu”. Whereas, for example, in political campaigns (cf. Forchtner et al 2013) discursive strategies are mostly intentional, we can expect them to be of a less intentional nature in the case of fitness instructors’ justification of their roles in a pandemic.

Topoi are part of an argumentation scheme, they are “‘conclusion rules’ which connect the argument(s) with the conclusion, the claim. [...] Topoi are socially conventionalized and recur habitually.” (Reisigl & Wodak 2016: 35). An example of a commonly used topos in our dataset is the topos of terrible place (*locus terribilis*) - e.g. in the first months of the pandemic

⁵ The only instructor who is not back to teaching cannot teach because she has to travel between Austria and Sweden for her main job and quarantine regulations prevent her from teaching.

in Europe, Italy, more specifically Bergamo, was referred to when making clear which situation is to be avoided at all costs.

4. How to stay fit while staying safe? Justifying fitness in times of pandemic

4.1 Background

LM instructors across the world share many experiences: this also became apparent in our focus group discussions. They teach the same pre-choreographed releases for group workouts, they share the experience of initial and advanced trainings and many of them have attended LM live events, meeting fellow instructors.

However, as also became apparent, LM instructors who participated in the focus groups, live and work in countries that have been affected by COVID-19 in very different ways - regarding the numbers of infections and COVID-related deaths as well as measures taken by governments - measures that affected gyms and working conditions. They are translated into diverging perceptions of the gravity of the situation in September 2020. For example, LM instructors from Scandinavia and Austria leaning towards feeling “back to normal”, whereas instructors from the US rather felt as being in the midst of the crisis.

During discussions, whenever experiences or perspectives differed, participants’ reactions were generally respectful and sympathetic. A telling example is the third focus group where participants from Spain and Jordan dismissed the possibility of wearing a mask during workout when inquired about it by the investigators. However, at some point, US-based LM instructor Joy joined in the middle of the online interview wearing a mask because she was at her studio where she was obliged to wear it. When she told her fellow instructors that she had just taught a class wearing her face mask, they were struck by the gravity of the situation for instructors in the US and reacted very sympathetically.⁶

However, we see examples of co-construction of in- and outgroups, especially within groups that shared a similar evaluation of the situation - most notably in the second focus group discussion in September 2020, with LM instructors from Austria and Sweden. LM instructors in these discussions collaborated on identifying different types of customers, basically dividing them into “afraid” and “not afraid” of COVID-19 (see 4.2.2 Strategy of dissimulation).

In the following sections, we analyze in more detail, on the basis of rich points from the focus groups, how instructors negotiate the tensions or even contradictions between continuing their profession and keeping their customers safe: locally in their daily tasks as fitness professionals and as members of a global fitness family. Thereby, they make use of discursive strategies to uphold a sense of continuity for their profession; moreover, they engage in (re)defining in- and outgroups of fellow instructors as well as group fitness customers.

⁶ This example also illustrates nicely how LM instructorhood is enacted in different local settings.

4.1 Strategy of perpetuation

LM instructors participating in our study have been trying as much as possible to continue with their training and teaching activities, some being able to continue with live classes (e.g. Pekka in Finland), others resorting to online or livestream classes. In the discussions, this is mirrored by discursive strategies which support the impression of continuation (“LM classes never really stopped”) and perpetuation (“LM classes will never stop”).

Continuation and perpetuation manifest themselves, first of all, in the avoidance of reference to COVID-19. When omitting explicit reference to the virus while describing their experiences of the last months, LM instructors avoid addressing issues of change. Acknowledging the massive impact that COVID-19 has had on societies around the globe would mean accepting that their professional roles are under threat as well. Especially in the first round of focus group discussions, instructors generally avoided references to the pandemic, specifically omitting terms like “virus” or “COVID-19”.

In the September 2020 focus groups, instructors still mostly resorted to referential vagueness, talking about “*a really strange situation*” (Susanna), “*this stuff won’t be over next month*” (Gudrun). Another instructor, Peter, admits that he avoids thinking about it: “*I try not to get too cerebral about the whole thing*”. However, we see a certain familiarization with the terminology of the pandemic, for example with Jamal who frequently cites research results and statistics on COVID-19, introducing his narrative with “*let’s talk about COVID as a virus*”. Also, in the same focus group, Peter makes frequent reference to “viruses” when imagining future developments: “*there could be another virus, [...] it could come in lots of different guises, the virus, or a new virus*”.

So, we can see a decrease in vague references to COVID-19 or at least a growing normalization of COVID-19 related vocabulary. Related to this, we observe that instructors do reflect about possible changes to group fitness and LM classes in particular. Peter admits “*I don’t think we will ever be back as strong as we were*” because of the underlying threat that there could be another virus. He expects fitness centers to reduce the number of LM programs and not renew instructors’ contracts. Jamal has faith in a vaccine and is hopeful that “*we will get back to normal*”. Also, Gudrun acknowledges that there might be long-term changes that also affect gyms and therefore “*we need a long-term solution and we can’t do lockdown, open, lockdown, open*”. Hence, the sense of determination, the idea that by not “being too cerebral” about “the situation”, LM instructors can keep their professional roles unchanged, has been clearly challenged by the experience of five months of teaching under precarious conditions.

Secondly, in order to maintain a sense of continuity and to strengthen the belief in the perpetuation of group fitness, instructors resort to essentialist characterizations of actors involved in LM classes. They express generalized ideas about how people “are” and how they will continue to be, making use of generic nouns, generic “we” and adverbs of time indicating continuity: “*people are always gonna want to go to the gym*” (Klaus). In their arguments, they resort to the topos of nature, claiming that the perpetuation of group fitness is safeguarded because people will always act in a certain way, “wanting to connect”, irrespective of what is happening to them. “*Because human beings, they are like a creature of connection, [...] I think we are gonna seek for this every time and always*” (Jamal). In

another characterization of people in general, and potential customers in particular, Jamal claims that “*humans in the history, throughout the history, they adapt and evolve through any kind of struggle or obstacle that they have*”. With these generalized depictions of their fitness customers, LM instructors can uphold the image of “the strong and determined fitness supporter” who decides to stay strong in the face of changes (however, from the perspective of Jamal, helped by an innate ability to overcome adversities), thereby reinforcing the healthism paradigm.

Thirdly, specifically one instructor makes use of a strategy of intensification by referring to virtual classes and the obligation to wear masks while teaching, as “*an absolute last resort, it's like before the apocalypse*” (Klaus). This designation is picked up by another participant (Linda) and thus they co-construct a terrible place (*locus terribilis*). This topos of a terrible place - i.e. a country like the US where instructors have to wear face masks - serves as a stark contrast to the “back to normal” situation in their own region, i.e. Austria, and helps strengthen the idea of a continuation of normality there. The same instructor construes the case of the releases filmed during lockdown across the globe (the “United Releases”) as an exception — an emergency solution that has never happened before and should never happen again: “*Of course for some people it's better than nothing but it is definitely not what it used to be or what it is supposed to be. My opinion.*” Overall, this particular LM instructor does not consider the possibility of adapting group fitness to a changing context but rather embodies a black or white scenario of all or nothing: he recounts having done no sports at all during lockdown in April 2020. This specific case illustrates the tension between global developments and local ways of dealing with the disease and instructorhood. To overcome this tension, instructors redefine the pandemic as a locally restricted crisis (see 4.2.2).

Overall, omitting any explicit reference to the virus was a common practice, most notably in the first weeks of the pandemic. LM communications dating from March 2020 corroborate this interpretation, for example, in the promotional video for the #LesMillsUnited social media campaign, no mention is made of the virus. Instead, instructors are asked to “stay positive in adversity” and are urged to desist attention toward the disease and preferably not address it at all (Les Mills Netherlands & Belgium 2020). LM's way of communicating can be interpreted as an attempt at homogenization of its local branches and thus as an example of glocommodification (cf. section 2).

4.2 Strategies of transformation

As illustrated in the preceding section, LM instructors in our study reconfirm the narrative of continuation and perpetuation of LM group fitness. Some instructors also stress the importance of staying connected with the “LM family” in times of crisis, i.e. the continuation and perpetuation of the LM family spirit (“*United releases made us keep connected in a time when we were unconnected*” (Michelle)) and underline how much they enjoy “*to see everyone from every place of the world*” (Jamal). However, other instructors construe LM as a distant abstract company - “*there is this big community that they pretend there is*” (Linda) -, focusing solely on profit, offering no support whatsoever.

Nevertheless, all instructors (irrespective of their perspective on global instructorhood) have been confronted, during the past five months, with the reality of local restrictions and the

need to ensure the safety of customers. In order to reconcile the often conflicting tasks of promoting an individualized take on health ("*being fit would always mean that you are in good health*" (Susanna)), following national COVID-19 rules and gym regulations and actually trying to ensure the safety of customers, LM instructors resorted to strategies of transformation, more specifically redefinition and dissimulation.

4.2.1 Redefinition

Generally, in their daily tasks as instructors, the biggest obstacle is formed by the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, not the disease itself. In April 2020, these measures consisted in most countries of the closure of gyms (except Finland and Sweden) and the challenge to continue training and relocate instructorhood into the virtual (Andersson, Vogl & Andreasson 2021). So, in discourse terms, we actually witness a redefinition of a health problem as a problem that is mainly organizational in nature, i.e. it is not the pandemic that poses a problem but the (coping with) measures.

Accordingly, in the focus group discussions held in April 2020, the focus is mainly on how to maintain a high level of fitness - for oneself and for one's customers. Many of the statements uttered in these discussions in an early stage of the pandemic are clearly informed by an individualized take on health and fitness. Pekka, for example states "*this is my time to focus on myself, do my outmost to better myself as an instructor.*"

This perspective changed after gyms reopened in the course of spring 2020 and the issue of security, i.e. of how to prevent customers from getting infected in gyms, became more eminent. What we can observe then, are strategies of redefining the pandemic as something that can be kept under control, based on scientific insights.

This means on the one hand, that instructors focus on detailed descriptions of the safety protocol of their gyms, as for example the instructor Joy: "*we have something that is called an air fix that is something to clean the air [...] and like electro magnetically charges the air which helps kill germs in the air and on surfaces*". In Joy's example, measures against infection in the gym are framed as a war against the virus. Moreover, instructors stress that they themselves, as well as their customers, meticulously follow their gym's regulations: "*the members in my gym are pretty good in their cleaning habits, they all comply with it, they clean the materials with masks on*" (Peter).

On the other hand, to maintain a sense of control, instructors resort to higher authorities during the pandemic, i.e. to science. Jamal makes frequent use of the topos of appeal to authority. He refers to statistics, which lead him to the conclusion that he himself does not have to be afraid of the virus:

"Statistics says that basically it is a virus that is dangerous for people who is maybe old, above 60 and if they have any disease like diabetes, hypertension, immunosuppressive diseases. So basically for me, since the statistics says that it's not dangerous for me I'm not scared about it, at all"

Another instructor, Peter, also refers to scientific results, stressing that severe obesity is a contributing factor of the disease, and, therefore, "*we have got more chance of fighting it, not necessarily more immune, but more chance of fighting*", referring to fit people in general, and

fitness instructors in particular. His line of argumentation allows, at the same time, for a reconfirmation of the individual responsibility for being healthy, implying that training helps reducing obesity.

However, not all instructors appeal to authority to justify open gyms in times of pandemic. Klaus conveys his doubts concerning scientific insights, viz. our state of knowledge regarding the transmission of the disease: *“how big is the chance that everyone is gonna have it in the room, the answer is we don’t know [...], it’s all just guess basically”*. This can be interpreted as an argument from ignorance, which is, among others, characteristic of debates on climate change when opponents of measures to slow down global warming assert that basically one cannot know what happens, and, therefore, we should just continue as before (Reisigl & Wodak 2016: 53).

Another strategy to counter the loss of control in a global health crisis, is a redefinition of the pandemic as a locally restricted crisis. As we saw in 4.1., Klaus frequently refers to Austria as an exception. He stresses that in Austria the lockdown isn’t *“actually such a current topic”* and that *“everything feels almost 90% normal at the moment”*. Also, Gudrun, who lives and works both in Sweden and Austria, singles out Austria as a country *“where you have the opportunity of frequent testing and social distancing”* which is why the virus is under control. In this specific case, Klaus and Gudrun draw on the topos of island of bliss, which is based on the myth that Austria has been referred to as *“Insel der Seligen”* (island of bliss) by Pope Paul VI (Frey 2020) where nothing bad happens even if chaos prevails in neighboring countries or the rest of Europe. More generally, what can be observed here is a redefinition of a global event (a pandemic) into something local.

A third example where a strategy of transformation is applied to justify fitness professionals’ role in a health crisis, is the redefinition of ‘fitness as a lifestyle choice’ toward ‘fitness as a basic need of your body’, as in Susanna’s argument: *“being at home working is not really friendly for your body, you have to get out and exercise, otherwise your body will freeze up I guess”*. In Gudrun’s example, fitness, i.e. attending the gym, even turns into a remedy against mental illness when she argues that gyms should reopen because lockdown leads to depression and gyms can help people overcome depressions. This strategy is typical for the broader discourse on the role of gyms as essential businesses as manifest in the #touchepasmasalle campaign (FranceActive 2020).

4.2.2 Dissimilation

In our corpus of focus group discussions, we find multiple examples of how “the other” is represented in discourse. More specifically, instructors contrast their own practices and attitudes during the pandemic with how others - both instructors and participants - deal with the crisis. As Coupland (2010: 241) points out, “casting a person or a group as ‘other’ is not inherently and necessarily to marginalize or disparage them”. He stresses that “a wide range of social ‘effects’ can be achieved through patterns and contexts of representations”.

Overall, strategies of assimilation prevail in our corpus, i.e. instructors focus on commonalities and collaboration within LM and show empathy with their fellow instructors and their specific situations. They make use of an inclusive “we”, referring to fellow LM instructors worldwide or in their region, as Jamal does, with regard to his fellow instructors in the Middle East: *“I have been checking on them, they have been checking on me about what*

they are doing and how they are doing". Some instructors explicitly embrace LM's United campaign which aims at creating a sense of global "we" in times of crisis. Jamal for example states that *"it feels nice to see everyone from every place of the world"*.

However, notably in the September 2020 focus group discussions, we observe a strategy of dissimilation, transforming the we-group of LM instructors into two or more groups, based on their attitudes towards the pandemic. This particularly plays out in the context of Finland and Sweden, where gyms were not obliged to close and instructors could choose to teach live classes, even during the first months of the pandemic, in spring 2020. This context allowed for a division into the ones teaching and the ones preferring to offer virtual classes. Pekka chose to teach some live classes, even in April, and he complained about hostile reactions on Facebook, causing him to stop posting about onsite training or teaching. However, he *"decided to stay positive, to exclude negativity"*. Throughout both focus group discussions he continued to classify himself as being part of the group that "stays positive". This group, he recounts, usually summarizes the situation with the exclamation *"Fuck Corona"*, implying that they will not be held back by the restrictions imposed by the crisis and instead will make the best of a bad situation.

Apart from the case of Finland and Sweden, discursive strategies of dissimilation are mainly directed at the customer base, i.e. people attending LM classes (or not). These are typically divided into two types: *"those who are clearly afraid of the situation, afraid of corona"* and *"those who aren't scared and are pretty much okay with the situation"* (Klaus). The main topos we observe here, is the topos of comparison or topos of difference. On a linguistic level, dissimilation is mainly realized through lexemes with semantic components that construct difference: these include demonstrative pronouns such as "those", pejorative attributions such as "afraid" and "negative" as opposed to "not afraid", "not scared" and "positive".⁷

Moreover, instructors resort to personal stories in order to illustrate the difference between group fitness participants. Klaus, for example, retells an incident that took place during one of his live classes, more specifically the LM program Bodyattack, a one-hour group workout which includes a so-called running track halfway the class, when participants are running in one big circle in the studio, usually high-fiving the instructor when they pass by. This specific participant had not attended classes for some time but decided to try it. However, during the running track he decided that it was too dangerous after all and left. Jamal tells the story of a participant who *"attends outdoor classes only because he is afraid from the closed rooms because he is afraid of droplets and a lot of contact with people, so he comes only for outdoor classes"*.

In both stories, the illustrative example is portrayed using negative attributions: "afraid of closed rooms", "afraid of droplets", "thinking of the running track as dangerous". However,

⁷ Basically, as COVID-19 turned out to be more dangerous for the older generation than for younger generations (Jiménez-Pavón et al 2020), one would expect diverging perspectives on the risk of contagion depending on instructors' age. However, neither of them sees themselves as part of the „at-risk“ group, including Pekka from Finland who is 48 and continued teaching live classes in April 2020. It seems that people at risk are mainly located outside the fitness community: Jamal, for example, refers to elder members of his family who have to be protected: *„I am not afraid of the virus itself, however I have family members who are old or maybe have some diseases, so I don't want to spread the virus to them, that's my only concern that I have regarding the virus.“*

not all examples of in- and outgroups are cases of sharp oppositions (as in the opposition “scared” vs. “not scared”). Below, we cite examples where the construction of dissimilarities yields more complex results.

In the first example, Klaus asserts that there are participants who are scared and participants who are not scared and are “*okay with the situation*”. Gudrun joins in, using an intensifier to depict the “other” group as “*really afraid of corona*” and depicting the “not afraid group” as “*lots of people who do not really care*”. Thus, she provides a justification for people who stopped going to the gym - they are very afraid of a virus (which she even explicitly refers to as “corona”). Moreover, she portrays the second group of gym goers not as positively as Klaus, referring to them as people who don't really care, i.e. implying that they might be “careless”. Susanna finally adds a new subtype to the discussion, i.e. customers who are not too scared to go to the gym but who are not careless either: she depicts them as participants who are “*really respectful and get out of your way*” and mentions that most clients in her gym act that way.

In the second example, Peter is asked by the investigators what has changed, according to him, in the behavior of people in the gym and he observes that “*some people might be more clinical in the way they clean the plates and put things back*”. He continues with his comparison by depicting this specific type of participants as people who are not only overly cautious but even risk their own health by cleaning too much: “*I've heard people say that the chemicals are possibly more dangerous, because you are losing any kind of resilience to anything*”. Jamal confirms Peter's assessment of customers' behavior from his own perspective: “*a lot of people who like Peter said are spreading the chemicals, swiping, alcohol on their hands, alcohol on everything, total disinfection (laughs)*”. He then reinforces Peter's assessment of harmful behavior by referring to a higher authority, science (topos of appeal to authority), to help construct the outgroup of “cleaning fiend”: “*while science says the more you clean the less immune you will be*”.

So far, the examples involving “other representation” are not primarily aimed at depreciating the respective group. However, in two examples already cited above, individuals are portrayed as either cowardly or stupid: in Klaus's story about an incident with a participant, this participant is in fact depicted as someone who is afraid of running in circles with a group of people, a fact which is commented on with laughter, both by the narrator of the story and another instructor who joins in on laughing. The same holds true for the discussion on cleaning: Jamal laughs at the cleaning habits of some of his participants, implying that he regards them as exaggerated and even counterproductive.

Ultimately, the strategy of dissimulation in the above examples serves the goal of justifying the continuation of group fitness despite the contagion risks involved, by disqualifying specific groups as “afraid” or “negative”. It also serves the purpose of strengthening the belief in the perpetual character of group fitness, with the support of people who are willing to take risks.

5. Conclusion

The present study is based on two rounds of focus group discussions with LM instructors. We are, naturally, aware of the limitations of this study: although we succeeded in including

LM instructors from a wide variety of countries in our focus group discussions, participants are certainly not representative of the community of LM instructors, and even less so of group fitness instructors or fitness professionals in general. Nevertheless, the conversations between the LM instructors in our study allowed, on the one hand, a deeper understanding of their personal views on the crisis, as representatives of a very specific subgroup of fitness professionals. Moreover, the study revealed more generalizable characteristics of how we communicate in and about times of crisis.

The first goal of our study generated exploring how the LM instructors' relationships with customers, fellow instructors, and the global 'LM family' changed as a consequence of rules of social distancing and closure of gyms during the first wave of the COVID-19 health crisis.

On the one hand, we conclude that the sense of belonging to the global LM community remains strong throughout the crisis. Many instructors openly embrace their bonds with LM. It becomes clear that the LM United campaigns resonated well with them and that they feel supported by the global LM family. On the other hand, however, through the debates, one can notice a shift from a hegemonic "for a fitter planet" ideology toward a growing diversification of perspectives as the pandemic proceeds. This diversification can be ascribed to diverging local conditions (e.g. different measures in different countries) as well as different individual beliefs (e.g. about the virus).

Another goal was to investigate how LM instructors make sense of the imperative of staying fit and keeping their customers fit during a pandemic. More specifically, we analyzed how they justify their roles discursively, when talking to fellow instructors. It appeared that all instructors in our study apply a set of discursive strategies to conceal the tensions arising between their two roles: the global instructor collaborating on making the planet a fitter place, and the local gym employee who has to abide by national measures as well as the safety rules of the gym. Strategies of continuation and perpetuation, used to stress that there is an intrinsic need for LM group fitness, i.e. classes will continue to be taught because customers are relying on them, are found repetitively. However, as the pandemic continues, instructors cannot deny the potential danger of contagion in the gym, therefore they resort to strategies of redefinition, for example by construing group fitness classes as an essential need for their customers (instead of a lifestyle choice), as a scientifically controllable event (by applying safety measures), or a locally manageable context (by contrasting their own context with other regions that are more affected). As a further step, some instructors redefine their ingroup through strategies of dissimulation: they distinguish their own group of instructors and customers who are not afraid and stay positive from 'the others' who are scared and therefore stop going to the gym. This strategy serves the purpose of upholding the image of the determined LM member who chooses to stay fit. Moreover, discussions are characterized by a set of recurring topoi or argumentation schemes, e.g. the topos of appeal to authority ("statistics say"), the topos of nature (claims about how people generally are) or the topos of island of bliss ("bad things never happen here").

A third goal was to uncover the impact of the ideology of healthism on LM instructors' ways of dealing with the crisis. In general, throughout the focus groups, irrespective of specific national or local perspectives on the crisis, the ideology of healthism prevails and instructors' debates reveal an underlying neoliberal core. First, there is a consensus regarding the importance and the personal responsibility to stay fit in order to stay healthy: those who

chose to be part of the LM family have a better chance not to fall seriously ill. Secondly, the first lockdown phase was perceived by the majority of instructors as an opportunity to become better and fitter instructors in the future. Thirdly, instructors are ready to make all the necessary sacrifices of following the safety measures to be able to keep training and teaching. The last two examples in particular demonstrate some instructors' neoliberal attitude towards health and fitness as they are convinced that it is in their own hands to achieve the best possible results, even during a crisis. However, there are instances in the discussions when instructors acknowledge that it is not always easy to stay fit (and positive) in the face of the pandemic: some instructors admit that they quit training for some time; others stress the importance of showing solidarity with people who are at risk by being especially careful; furthermore, instructor Glen, when asked who, according to him, is in charge of the crisis answers: "the virus".

On a more general level, our study demonstrates how members of a global profession, i.e. LM instructors, cope with their professional roles in a health crisis that threatens global connectedness – e.g. through travel restrictions and quarantine regulations. As the pandemic lasts, instructors increasingly redefine their roles from a local perspective, focusing on their specific working contexts and trying to tune out global developments that could threaten their self-concepts as fitness leaders as well as their livelihood as fitness workers.

Moreover, our study provides an example of how ideological tensions come to the fore in a crisis: how can one choose to stay fit in a health crisis that threatens people's lives? In our focus groups this tension is, for example, countered by strategies of dissimulation, i.e. by zooming in on a very restricted group of fearless and fit LM group fitness supporters. Issues of security are construed as being pertinent mainly for people "outside" the world of fitness. In the in-group, a neoliberal approach can be upheld more easily: one can choose to stay fit in a world that threatens other (types of) people's lives.

Both more general observations need to be explored in further research. With regard to our study object, LM instructors, we set up follow-up focus groups in February and March 2021, to investigate possible changes to their discursive strategies as the health crisis continues and more groups of people are affected.

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