



Selected Papers of #AoIR2018:
The 19th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Montréal, Canada / 10-13 October 2018

REMOVING THE PHYSICAL BODY FROM INTERACTION - A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO LAYPEOPLE SHARING SELF-TRACKED EXERCISE DATA ON SOCIAL NETWORK SITES WHEN THEY FEEL UNEASY EXERCISING WITH PEOPLE

Joeb Høfdinghoff Grønborg
Aarhus University

Introduction

Self-tracking applications (apps) like *Endomondo*, *Runkeeper* and *Strava* have made it effortless for laypeople to measure their exercise activity and turn it into detailed data on running time, distance, average pace, calories burned etc. The users can share the exercise data with personal networks of users (often named *friends*) on the apps' internal *social network sites* (Ellison & boyd, 2013) or external social network sites such as *Facebook* or *Twitter*.

Few studies, however, have shed light on how people use self-tracking in their everyday lives (Lupton, 2016) – e.g. why people share exercise data on social network sites. Recreational athletes seem to share workouts to grow bonds with likeminded people, to receive positive feedback on their workouts and to update networks on their comings and goings (Stragier & Mechant, 2013). When sharing data, people can feel more motivated to exercise if they receive *social support* from friends (e.g. textual responses à la »good job« in comment fields) or if they feel *social pressure* – e.g. to comply with uttered exercise goals or to beat their friends' activity-levels (Consolvo, Everitt, Smith, & Landay, 2006).

Thus, sharing behavior is described in general terms. But understandings of the detailed, behavioral contexts that make laypeople's sharing practices meaningful to research readers are currently not pursued so that the descriptions become what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, following Gilbert Ryle, calls *thick* (Geertz, 1973).

Some people feel uneasy when exercising with – or in the presence of – people. In this paper, I provide a thick description of people that bypass their struggle with social exercise by sharing exercise data on social network sites. I utilize the lived experience

Suggested Citation (APA): Grønborg, J. H. (2018, October 10-13). *Removing the physical body from interaction – A phenomenological investigation into laypeople sharing self-tracked exercise data on social networking sites when they feel uneasy exercising with people*. Paper presented at AoIR 2018: The 19th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Montréal, Canada: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

of two female newcomers to exercise, Amanda and Dorte, to illustrate this. Firstly, using the philosopher and medical doctor Drew Leder's phenomenological investigations into embodiment, I analyze how the females' bodies *dys-appear* (Leder, 1990) when they exercise near/with people. Secondly, I examine how their networks of friends function as a beneficial form of exercise sociality that encourages Amanda and Dorte's exercise activity.

My empirical data originates from an exploratory, interview study of 12 Danish, recreational athletes' experiences with exercise-related self-tracking apps.

Dys-appearing bodies: feeling uneasy when exercising with/near people

When a body dys-appears, it means that the body feels bad, hard or ill – it becomes the center of negative, sensorial attention for the individual (Leder, 1990). Amanda and Dorte's bodies dys-appear when they exercise with – or in the presence of – people, respectively.

Amanda feels uneasy when she runs with people. She uses the expression »I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying« to account for a constant and diffuse pain that sieges her dys-appearing body during exercise. Pain can, namely, both have a »(...) definite location and/or be diffused, a generalized place in which we dwell as when we simply say "I am *in pain*."« (Leder, 2016, p. 11). A few times, Dorte felt forced to run with her sister. Her sister enjoys the *mutual incorporation* (Leder, 1990) in discussing and negotiating the everyday life during exercise. But because of the sister being more fit, Amanda is worried that finding a common (possibly faster) running pace will escalate her dys-appearance. Accordingly, she avoids being physically active with people.

Somewhat similarly, overweight Dorte avoids exercising in the presence of people. She used to go to the gym. During workouts, she imagined that fit gym-goers observed her and thought: »Who is that weird, fat fool over there?«. If the gaze of other people is experienced as hostile or objectifying, the individual getting negative attention can start to experience their body as problematic, alien and/or wrong (Leder, 1990). Dorte's body dys-appeared at the gym because she believed the fit gym-goers monitored her workout execution and judged the execution as faulty. Initially, Dorte got too self-conscious to successfully perform workouts: Her body became dysfunctional. Subsequently, she shortened workouts to escape what she perceived of as a situation full of negative assessments of her body and physical abilities. Finally, she quit the gym.

Removing the physical body from interaction

Today, Amanda and Dorte track and perform running and aerobic in solitude. They share the tracking data with networks of friends on Endomondo and Runkeeper. In line with findings from (Consolvo et al., 2006), the sharing creates a social pressure: »It feels like constantly having pairs of eyes focused upon you«, Dorte explains. Alternately, the two newcomers to exercise and their friends serve as audiences to each other's exercise data. They are engaged in *participatory surveillance* (Albrechtslund, 2008). Because of the participatory surveillance, Amanda and Dorte are more likely to exercise as well as »keep up the spirit« (perform better) during exercise. Mutual and

somewhat systematic practices of liking tracking data within the networks refresh the feeling of a present audience.

When sharing the exercise data on social network sites, the physical body is removed from interaction. In contrast to exercising with/near people, the bodyless exercise interaction encourages physical activity for the researched newcomers.

Amanda does not have to worry about a common running pace affecting her dys-appearance, while she benefits from the social pressure generated by mediated running partners.

In the case of Dorte, her network consists of 10 family members and friends. Unlike in the gym, she controls who is monitoring her activity: She customizes an audience that creates social pressure but whose attention is experienced as friendly. Thus, dys-appearance is less likely to occur than in the gym. Furthermore, the object of people's gaze is the mediated, datafied performance (the tracking) rather than the corporeal performance (the exercising, overweight body) which also reduces the risk of experiencing dys-appearance.

Conclusion

My research shows that some individuals are able to bypass their social exercise struggle and encourage physical activity by sharing tracking data on social network sites. However, many questions arise – e.g. in what cases are tracking data shared internally/externally of the apps? What attitudes toward sharing exercise data on social network sites are held by friends? When does the visibility of tracking data have negative effects for the individual athlete?

References

Albrechtslund, A. (2008). Online social networking as participatory surveillance. *First Monday*, 13(3).

Consolvo, S., Everitt, K., Smith, I., & Landay, J. A. (2006). Design Requirements for Technologies that Encourage Physical Activity. In CHI '06 Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 457–466). Presented at CHI 2006.

Ellison, N. B., & boyd, d. (2013). Sociality through Social Network Sites. In W. H. Dutton (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies* (pp. 151–172). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Leder, D. (1990). The Dys-appearing Body. In *The Absent Body* (pp. 69–99). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Leder, D. (2016). The Experiential Paradoxes of Pain. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 1–17.

Lupton, D. (2016). *The Quantified Self: A Sociology of Self-tracking*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Stragier, J., & Mechant, P. (2013). Mobile fitness apps for promoting physical activity on Twitter: the #RunKeeper case. In *Etmaal van de communicatiewetenschappen, Proceedings*. Presented at the Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap.