

Are Connected Fitness Machines the New Blue Ocean Marketing Strategy for Tourism Marketing (Red Ocean) or the Wellness Industry (Red Ocean)? An Exploration of Connected Signaling

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The question is centered around connected (Internet of Things) Fitness Machines which virtually transport the user of the machine to a destination (Spain, Italy, St. Lucia, Fiji, New Zealand to name a few) while the user is engaged in some form of fitness activity (running, walking, rowing, cycling, etc.). The intended idea or primary marketing message is that the user gets a 'personal' trainer to aid in their fitness journey while at the same time enjoying the 'outdoors' in the comfort of their home. The seemingly unintended consequence is that each 'outdoor' location is marketed uninterrupted for 15 to 30 minutes at least. This begs the question – will these connected machines encroach on traditional advertising expenditure for destination marketing? Can connected (internet of things) Fitness machines move two product categories from Red Ocean competitiveness to Blue Ocean Competitiveness? Does the signaling engagement positively affect customer choice/willingness to choose a destination?

Keywords: signaling theory, destination marketing, blue ocean strategy, red ocean strategy, internet of things, connected machines, internet of things marketing, wellness tourism, advertising, tourism marketing, fitness machines

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many bad and good consequences in the world of business and marketing on a global scale. As in all past cataclysmic type events ranging from recessions to depressions the pandemic has had a few unintended consequences which will be explored in this paper. While there have been unprecedented business closures during the lockdowns, the growth of connected fitness machines - as countless persons who were working from home sought ways to stay fit - exploded. This new and dynamic transformation of the gym business model allowed the manufacturers of the fitness machines to survive and thrive in a challenging environment. Increasingly, the fortunes of companies like Peloton, Mirror, Tonal and iFIT (NordicTrack) were making headlines in the business press.

The impressive performance of the market leaders of Peloton and iFIT (NordicTrack) was driven by the surge in demand for home fitness equipment during the pandemic. Both companies have a wide range of home fitness equipment including treadmills, stationary bikes, rowers and strength trainers. The range of equipment offered by Mirror and Tonal is less than iFIT (NordicTrack) and Peloton. The key driver in the success of the 4 players in the home gym fitness equipment market is the fact that they all offer streaming fitness classes. The popularity of the streaming fitness class and the popularity of certain trainers offer a convenient and affordable way to work out at home. The two top players, Peloton and iFIT (NordicTrack)

have the classes tied to the equipment – meaning that the streaming classes control the intensity of the workout for the user. It is marketed as having your own personal trainer. This personal trainer concept in the comfort of your own home grew in popularity during the lockdowns and has the potential to transform the home gym model into one that represents the age of Internet of Things. Case in point; iFIT sales in 2019 was \$1.1 billion and reached \$2.1 billion by 2021 - an increase of 91% (iFIT, 2021); while Peloton in 2020 had sales of \$1.8 billion and now in 2022 have reached \$5.4 billion - an increase of 194% (Peloton Annual Reports 2020 – 2022).

The streaming classes for some users may have been the initial pull towards the home gym equipment purchase. iFIT and Peloton also offer virtual outdoor experiences that simulate the terrain (incline/declines) on the connected machine while simultaneously showcasing the trainer navigating the actual location. This experience for some provides the motivation rather than using the machine screens (ranging in size from tablet-sized to 32 inches) to simply binge on Netflix. This has the effect of virtually transporting the user of the machine to a destination (Spain, Italy, St. Lucia, Fiji, New Zealand to name a few) while the user is engaged in some form of guided fitness activity (running, walking, rowing, cycling, etc.) for 20 mins to over an hour.

Previous iterations of home gym equipment have long been the running jokes of many a comedian – for its ultimate use as a clothes rack in many households. This new world of Internet of Things (IoT) connected equipment coupled with the human desire for connectivity in the social media space have seen the growth of each of the brands (iFIT and Peloton) social media presence via support groups or membership groups in that online social media space. Emerging simultaneously with that is the changing consumer attitudes towards online platforms and the role these platforms play in their daily lives. These social media platforms serve as an accountability platform, as well as in recent times - post pandemic - a travel bucket list and trip planning platform. This then begs the question – is this a marketing opportunity for the destinations around the world? After someone has engaged on their home equipment for the uninterrupted time of 20 mins to over an hour (longer than a home shopping advert and a marathon compared to the typical television advert), will that person be more compelled than before to consider that destination in their future travels?

The research on the topic of television advertising spans decades and has been examined in the context of effectiveness (Krugman, 1965; Leather, Mckechnie & Amirkhanian, 1994; Shachar & Anand, 1998; Tellis, Chandy, MacInnis & Thaivanich, 2005); sometimes including Reality Television as the new advertising medium (Tessitore, Pandelaere & Van Kerckhove, 2014); the audio visual as a replacement for reading about a destination (Butler, 1990); destination placement in movies and television leading to dissatisfaction of visitors due to the heavy editing of the visual media (Beeton, 2001; Connell, 2005; Connell & Meyer, 2009); to destination placement in movies having a pull factor for attracting visitors in the years that follow its release (Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Beeton, 2004; Hudson et al , 2011; Kim & Richardson, 2003); among other areas. The impact of the uninterrupted time on a fitness machine while viewing a destination is still largely unknown. The cursory view of the Peloton and iFIT social media platforms suggests a positive relationship between these virtual tours and the desire to visit. Followed by an actual visit and subsequential reporting on the authenticity of the visuals presented and difficulty navigating the actual real-life terrain versus on the machine in the comforts of home.

In this era of fragmentation of how consumers engage with media and advertising, it will come as no surprise that the Internet of Things (IoT) devices can present new challenges and opportunities for companies and destinations to interact with consumers. Emerging simultaneously with that is the changing consumer attitudes towards online platforms and the role these platforms play in their daily lives. On one hand, because of fragmented viewership, television advertising is making it difficult to reach a specific target audience. On the other hand, online advertising can almost be seen as oversaturated making it difficult to stand out from the competition. With these subtle but seismic shifts in consumer behavior, iFIT & Peloton and the various destinations tourism product survival now hinges on finding the right-sized consumer engagement to meet the needs of their consumers today and going forward. Hence the need to explore this concept of the familiar things the consumers already love (fitness equipment) with innovations (streaming virtual destinations) that the consumers can embrace going forward. In pre-pandemic times, general tourism

travel and the resulting tourist expenditure at destinations were at an all-time high. The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) tracks a subsector of the travel tourism sector namely wellness tourism which is defined as travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing personal well-being which the GWI (2021) further subcategorizes into primary and secondary wellness travel. In this study the focus will be on secondary wellness travel where the individual does not have a wellness activity (races, fitness events etc) as the reason for choosing the destination but simply maintenance of the fitness lifestyle as one of the goals in the destination choice. This results in new business models, new ways of sharing resources, new cooperative efforts with the destinations, new collaborations, new competitors (Mirror & Tonal possibly expanding), new winners, and new losers - basically, 'adapt or die.'

LITERATURE REVIEW

Signaling Theory

A key theory that will be used to explore this phenomenon Signaling Theory as the virtual platforms invariably project multi-layered marketing signals to the user. The iFIT and Peloton fitness machines are fitness equipment that are connected to the internet. iFIT and Peloton allow users to track their progress, compete with others, and get personalized feedback. Signaling theory examines how information is transmitted between individuals or groups. In the context of connected fitness machines, signaling theory can be used to understand how users interact with these machines and how this interaction affects their fitness habits and travel habits.

The term was introduced in the 1970s, and since then, the concept of signaling theory has gained ground in organizational theory and labor markets as a research paradigm (Spence, 1973). As a result, the concept of Signaling theory has been examined in depth in some areas. Nevertheless, there are still some areas where its study has been limited at best or ill-defined or non-existent at worst (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005), as well as some aspects of the constructs that are still debatable. However, the basic signaling environment premise of the signaler (person, product or destination) occurs at $t=0$; the signal is then sent to the receiver at $t=1$; followed by the receiver observing and interpreting the signal via choosing the person, product, or destination at $t=2$ and finally giving feedback to the signaler at $t=3$ (Connelly et al, 2011).

Signaling theory also refers to having multiple signalers, receivers and/or signals simultaneously. Signaling theory has been applied to disciplines ranging from anthropology to zoology (Bird & Smith, 2005). Marketing studies have pegged the customer as the receiver (Basuroy, Desai & Talukdar, 2006; Rao, Qu, & Ruehert, 1999). Some Marketing studies focused on how the product was to gain directly or shared with other signalers for decisions made on information contained in the signal (Kirmani & Rao, 2000).

One way that connected fitness machines use signaling theory is to provide users with feedback on their performance. This feedback can be in the form of real-time data on distance traveled, inclines/decline achieved, calories burned, or heart rate. It can also be in the form of leaderboards or social media challenges. This feedback can help users stay motivated and on track with their fitness goals. Another way that connected fitness machines use signaling theory is to create a sense of community. Users can connect with other users online and compete or work together to achieve common goals. This sense of community can help users stay motivated and accountable. Signaling theory can be a helpful tool for understanding how connected fitness machines can be used to improve fitness habits. More importantly, it influences travel habits as people may now experience virtual tours of cities and tourist destinations from their homes. By providing users with feedback and creating a sense of community, connected fitness machines can help users stay motivated and on track with their fitness goals and with new motivation to visit new areas of the world in real life.

Dunham (2011) suggests that signaling theory can help marketers craft more effective messaging – messages that can denote quality while overcoming the challenges faced by consumer skepticism and media messaging saturation. The world presented by iFIT and Peloton in their virtual walking and running outdoor series in various locations seems to dovetail into Dunham's (2011) three key elements of signaling – costly, linked to quality and conspicuous enough that it is not noticeable yet able to wow. So, picture this - walking on the treadmill seeing a first-person view of the streets of Paris in all its hustle and bustle – sidewalk cafes,

bakeries etc., getting little bits of local insider knowledge as well as historical information, listening to descriptions of the smells, hearing the sounds, and then hearing the guide say. Now we are turning right and there is front of the viewer is the Eiffel Tower in all its glory. This is costly videography – stable high quality (Hollywood worthy), the quality is signaled by details given (history, current events, local insider knowledge) and the conspicuous is in the big reveal of key sights in each location from a unique perspective and even some off the beaten paths locations that deliver the wow factor.

Dunham (2011) points to Apple’s ubiquitous earbuds as the perfect three-layered marketing signaling –the earbuds are white, costly, and conspicuous - no matter the accompanying product iPhone or iPod. Recent research in the field questioned and even proposed that for a firm to address simultaneously (and efficiently) online relationship marketing using signaling theory was an exercise in building trust and loyalty, such as the view of Boateng (2019). Boateng (2019) proposed that the three pillars in the online space revolve around personalization, engagement, and interactivity – crucial signals needed to build customer trust and loyalty.

Blue Ocean Strategy in Challenging Times: Consumer Fragmentation, and Attention

The very interactivity that iFIT and Peloton offer may be the accidental nosedive into the Blue Ocean strategy and marketing space for the tourism destinations while being a deliberate action for the Fitness machine manufacturers. Kim (2005) proposed that companies can achieve profitable growth by creating the Blue Ocean (new market spaces with little or no competition) rather than remaining in the Red Ocean of heavy competition and cut throat strategies. This concept was further refined into the four-actions framework of Eliminate, Reduce, Raise and Create which derives a new value curve: redefine the industry with a focus on the customer; eliminate the unnecessary features /services; raise or add features/services that the customer values and finally create that value innovation by combining the elimination and addition to give the customer something that is most attractive (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014).

The connectivity to wearables, interactivity, digital coaching, smart gym with biofeedback and use of artificial intelligence in creating the equipment manufactured and marketed by iFIT and Peloton is a deliberate attempt to differentiate in the fitness market. The unintended participant/beneficiary in this Blue Ocean space may be the destinations featured in these interactive location-based sessions with the brands. Mohamed & Abaza (2020) highlighted that Blue Ocean strategies can be applied to the development of cultural tourism products in Egypt utilizing the principles of unique and differentiated products and services, relationship with the customers, and localization of the experiences, while the same applied within Indonesia eco-friendly resorts (Utami, 2020).

Over the years, scholars have investigated how tourism destinations and resorts embrace and manage the Blue Ocean strategy (Eltobgy & Elmoaty, 2018; Utami et al., 2020; Utami et al., 2021; Li, 2018). Furthermore, the Eltobgy & Elmoaty (2018) study demonstrated via empirical data that the blue ocean strategy when implemented in the travel agency business in Egypt by focusing on unique and differentiated products and services (bundled cooking classes, etc.), building strong relationships with customers (personalized tours) and embracing sustainability (working with local charities) – the Egyptian travel agents were able to create a new profitable market space for tourism. The Li (2018) study focused on the Chinese Zhoushan Archipelago and the possible creation of unique customer experiences to achieve positive outcomes for the businesses in the Zhoushan Archipelago – more of a proposal for the implementation in that space. Utami et al. (2021) follows with a clarion call to have lesser-known destinations focus on the utilization of the blue ocean strategy to break through the noise of the already highly competitive tourism destination markets around the world.

The recent blue ocean work in the tourism destination marketing intersects perfectly with the challenges highlighted by Gretzel et al. (2006) which ranged from embracing technological change, recessions, increased competition, changing traveler demographics, the rise of experiential travel, the importance of social media and environmental concerns. This in turn dovetails with the role that the interactive fitness machines can play in marketing these destinations to the changing traveling demographic – the wellness traveler seeking new experiences. Social media plays an important role in travel planning today as it does in the accountability aspect of persons fitness journeys with their chosen brands of iFIT and Peloton.

Tourism and Wellness Travel Marketing

Tourism and destination marketing have long been the domain of the typical morning news cycle, prime time television advertising space, or billboards along the major highways. Today, the viewership of the traditional television media is increasingly fragmented with the rise of more streaming services and the concept of binge-watching everything. One challenge faced by tourism destinations is how to garner interest that is followed up by visitor numbers to your destination. Lange-Faria & Elliot (2012) identified four key ways that social media was to offer support for the traditional media in this regard by – creating awareness, informing decision-making, generating leads and building relationships. While recognizing that this medium is a powerful tool – in recent times it also has become over-saturated – a red ocean – with everything from destination-generated content, to user generated content and social media influencers and of course everything measured by the wealth of data analytics that can be applied to the platforms.

In light of changing demographics, Kyricos (2018) suggested that there are four key trends that are driving the growth of wellness communities, wellness travel and the general wellness lifestyle – the aging population who is looking stay healthy to avoid rising healthcare costs, higher numbers of chronic diseases which leads to the wellness lifestyle to manage these, greater demand for convenience to engage in the healthy lifestyle and the increasing popularity of the active lifestyle all underpinned by the importance of community and accountability. Gazzola et al. (2020) recognizes the rise of connected fitness devices and services, the importance of personalization which were identified as driving factors behind the success of Peloton as the clear market leader in the connected fitness devices market space. Peloton's level of adaptation and innovation is a demonstration of engaging with the blue ocean strategy in recognizing what values most to the customer in the growing wellness markets around the world.

The global wellness economy is a \$4.5 trillion market that is growing at a rate of 6% per year (Global Wellness Institute, 2021); while the pandemic hurt the traditional wellness sector of gyms, it gave meteoric rise to the at home connected fitness equipment directly benefiting the global market leaders Peloton and iFIT. Global Wellness Institute (2021) asserts that the at home fitness market benefits the companies with a strong digital infrastructure and those connected to the tech giants like Apple, Samsung, Amazon and Google as is the case of both Peloton and iFIT that allows users to enjoy the connectivity of their wearables to the fitness equipment for more biofeedback metrics. Global Wellness Institute (2021) estimates that the wellness tourism travel reached \$720.4 billion in 2019 and declined to \$435.7 billion in 2020, this subsector of the tourism travel industry had an annual growth rate of 8.1% in 2017-2019 greater than the overall tourism at 5.2% growth. Similarly, the pandemic induced declines showed that wellness tourism is a lesser drop at -39.5% compared to the overall tourism sector of -43%. The wellness economy is poised for a rebound given that more persons are aware of the importance of health and wellness. The key aspect that needs to be explored not only on the theoretical level but also on the practical and business implementation levels is the integration of wellness connected machines with other sectors such as healthcare, and tourism.

These connected machines fall into the Internet of Things (IoT) category and represent endless possibilities for end user experiences starting with their biofeedback data and health metrics. Tariq et al (2020) revealed that these IoT machines provide four key ways to generate marketing outcomes via data collection, customer tracking, personalized marketing and improved customer service for companies. A caution is balancing the need for data privacy and customers increasing need for personalization, which means some data sharing. Rabbi et al (2018) while proposing an actual virtual reality headset to aid in the personalization of wellness activities to suit the individual needs of the customer also conceded that immersive and interactive machine exercises do improve the user experience and make the machine exercises more effective. Wu (2022) showed that the IoT machine where there are three main components - the device itself, a server, and a mobile app – users were motivated to engage with the machine and other users on the app and social media to achieve their fitness goals. The connectedness of the ecosystem is crucial to the user engagement and satisfaction, in that the data collected and feedback is given in real time. But more importantly for the tourism destinations, the social media engagement allows for building community, goal setting and tracking amongst the users.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The exploration of the subsector of connected fitness machines intersection with wellness tourism destinations is highlighted by the Global Wellness Institute (2021) as a major growth sector in which the integration will yield new opportunities for businesses and entrepreneurs given the expected rebound from the pandemic years. The aim is to explore whether or not this concept of multi layered signaling in the immersive virtual experiences on the machines coupled with the online communities built up around each eco-system (iFIT and Peloton) will drive the wellness tourism sector.

To achieve this contribution, the following are considered the research questions to guide the process and subsequent research design and methodology:

- Will these connected machines encroach on traditional advertising expenditure for destination marketing?
- Can connected (Internet of Things) Fitness machines move the following two product categories from Red Ocean Competitiveness to Blue Ocean Competitiveness:
 - Fitness machines
 - Wellness tourism
- Does the signaling engagement (the immersive experience on the connected screen) positively affect customer choice/willingness to choose a destination?

This study will be qualitative in the exploratory stage leaning heavily on case study as there are multiple sources of evidence – ranging from but not limited to: 1. Comparison of the two analyzed companies and product / service offerings, 2. Comparison with coding of the user experiences (thematic) and feedback (content analysis) of the analyzed services; 3. Analysis of user online communities regarding the two companies selection of ‘outdoor’ destinations (thematic); 4. Analysis of user communities willingness/desire to travel to the selected ‘outdoor’ destinations; 5. The destinations level of involvement in the production of the ‘outdoor’ destinations for the virtual platforms. This can be later supported by survey data (quantitative) directly asking if representation (signaling) of the destination on the virtual platform influenced actual vacation travel plans.

These questions may provide answers and a rationale for wellness destinations interested in actively collaborating with these global market leaders of iFIT and Peloton in creating the immersive content for the user if it results in visits. Hence, by answering the overarching question, does the signaling engagement (the immersive experience on the connected screen) positively affect customer choice/willingness to choose a destination? - be understood, and active collaboration if proven to be a winning formula for both the firms and destinations to thrive.

CONCLUSION

The explosion of connected fitness machines on a global scale has driven iFIT and Peloton to sit at the top of a new subsector in the overall fitness industry. The innovations spearheaded by both companies with an immersive user experience in fantastic locations begs the question - can there be co-evolution with the destinations to survive and thrive? The exploration of challenges faced by destination marketers highlights the need for co-evolution or active collaboration with the connected fitness machines to ensure that the destination is shown in the most realistic manner but in a manner that garners interest beyond ‘nice location’ to ‘I will visit’ to ‘I have visited, and it is true to life.’ This leads to the question: Are connected fitness machines the new Blue Ocean marketing strategy for Tourism marketing (Red Ocean) or the wellness industry (Red Ocean)?

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