

## **Master's Thesis**

*MSc in Organizational Innovation & Entrepreneurship*

### **Boutique Fitness Studios and Group Cohesion: What makes people stick longer to their exercise routine and turn them into recurring customers?**

*A Qualitative Case Study on Boutique Fitness Studios and their tools to impact group cohesion.*

*by*

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**FITNESS BOUTIQUE**

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## Abstract

Group cohesion is a vital element in the concept of boutique fitness studios, as it contributes to overall class participants satisfaction, motivation, and ultimately retention. Over the past six months, extensively research has been done in exploring the factors that influence group cohesion within the context of boutique fitness.

**Purpose** - This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of certain interventions by group fitness instructors and studio owners to enhance group cohesion within exercise classes. The primary objective of this research is to identify the most effective strategies for promoting group cohesion in boutique fitness studios, with secondary objectives being to provide evidence-based recommendations for fitness professionals and studio owners, and to contribute to the literature on group dynamics in exercise settings. The findings of this study will have crucial implications for the design and management of boutique fitness studios, offering insights into how they can create a cohesive and thriving community.

**Methodology** – Building on the extensive research conducted over the past six months, the paper employs a mixed-methods approach, focusing on the theoretical foundation of group cohesion as well as employing participant observations as a qualitative research method of 10 fitness boutique studios, in order to comprehensively explore the factors that contribute to group cohesiveness in exercise classes. The paper focuses primarily on the tools and gimmicks used to facilitate user interaction in order to be fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie among class participants.

**Findings** - The findings reveal that instructor engagement, informal conversations, and the availability of lounge areas serve as pivotal elements in enhancing group cohesion. Moreover, the study underscores the significance of creating a supportive and inclusive atmosphere, which bolsters participants' motivation to attend classes regularly and maintain the commitment to a healthy lifestyle.

The results provide valuable insights for fitness professionals and studio owners, emphasizing the need for proper strategies to foster group cohesion and improve long-term adherence in boutique fitness settings.

**Key words:** Group cohesion, Group fitness classes, Group Fitness instructors, Customer retention, User interaction, Instructor engagement.

## Introduction

Group cohesion plays a pivotal role in the success and effectiveness of exercise classes, as it fosters a sense of belonging, encourages adherence to group dynamic principles, and facilitates social interaction among participants. Several researchers have examined the factors contributing to group cohesion, with M. Yoke (2014) and others identifying instructor engagement and informal conversations as key determinants of a supportive and collaborative environment in exercise classes. Despite the existing body of literature, little research has investigated the impact of user interaction in the specific industry of boutique fitness studios, which have gained significant popularity in recent years.

Given this research gap, the purpose of the present study is to explore the factors influencing group cohesion in boutique fitness studios, with a focus on user interaction, instructor engagement and the role of lounge areas as potential facilitators of group cohesion. The main objective of this research is to identify the most effective strategies for fostering group cohesion in these settings, while the secondary objective is to assess the impact of group cohesion on participants' long-term adherence with the exercise classes.

To address these objectives, qualitative research method approach by the means of participant observations was employed on top of a theoretical analysis of present literature. Ten different boutique fitness studios have been visited and various group fitness concepts been observed. Based on literature, it was expected that the findings would confirm the importance of instructor engagement, informal conversations, and lounge areas in enhancing group cohesiveness, leading to increased satisfaction and long-term adherence to exercise classes in boutique fitness studios.

Drawing from insights gathered over the past six months, this research paper aims to contribute to the understanding of group cohesion in boutique fitness studios by examining the role of user interaction, instructor engagement, and physical space in fostering a supportive and collaborative environment. Through the investigation of these factors, the study seeks to provide valuable insights for fitness professionals and studio owners seeking to create more engaging and cohesive group exercise experiences. Therefore, the overall research question investigates:

*RQ: What tools and gimmicks can boutique fitness studio owners and instructors imply to foster group cohesion and therefore lead to a higher customer retention?*

This research revealed three core dimensions of group cohesion in boutique fitness studios: 1) group belonging, 2) instructor-facilitated social interaction, and 3) adherence to group dynamic principles. The findings also highlighted the significance of lounge areas as potential facilitators of group cohesion. These findings have important implications for fitness professionals and studio owners hoping to increase group cohesion in their exercise classes, ultimately leading to increased participant satisfaction and long-term adherence.

### Contextual Background

Physical exercise has been widely and commonly recognized as one of the most important aspects of a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise not only keeps the body in good shape but also provides numerous benefits to the overall well-being of an individual. One of the most significant benefits of working out is that it helps to improve physical health. Regular exercise helps to maintain a healthy weight, reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes, and strengthen bones and muscles. It also helps to boost the immune system, which can help to ward off illness and disease (Guo & Fussell, 2022). Another important benefit of working out is that it can improve mental health. Exercise has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, increase self-esteem and confidence, and improve cognitive function and memory. Furthermore, physical activity can be a great way to reduce stress, as it provides an outlet for build-up tension and frustration, allowing individuals to relax and feel more refreshed (Gui et al., 2017). Exercise can also have a positive impact on overall quality of life. It can improve sleep patterns, reduce feelings of fatigue and increase energy levels, making it easier to complete daily tasks and pursue hobbies and interests. Furthermore, exercise can also have a positive impact on relationships and social interactions. This is where the concept of group exercise comes into play.

### Group Exercise

Group exercise refers to any physical activity performed in the presence of others, including both structured and unstructured forms of physical activity (Guo & Fussell, 2022). Participating in group exercise activities such as team sports or fitness classes can provide an opportunity for individuals to connect with others and form new friendships. This can help to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation and improve overall social well-being. Furthermore,

as researched by Guo & Fussell (2022), social support can play a crucial role in enhancing adherence to exercise programs.

According to a survey conducted by Les Mills, approximately 46% of regular exercisers participate in fitness class activities (Guo & Fussell, 2022). Research has demonstrated that individuals who exercise in a group or with a partner tend to engage in longer and more intense workouts than those who exercise alone (X. Gui et al., 2017). Moreover, engaging in group exercise can have positive effects on physical and mental wellbeing, including stress relief. In addition, the sense of overall groupness experienced and the individual level of group belonging during group exercise has been found to predict exercisers' perceptions of exertion, enjoyment, and affective valence (Harden et al., 2015). Other benefits of group exercise include a socially engaging and enjoyable environment, a workout that is safe and effectively designed, a consistent exercise schedule, and a workout that generally does not require prior knowledge or experience in exercise. Despite these benefits, group fitness classes have some disadvantages. Because classes are scheduled, exercisers need to go to the gym or studio at a certain time. They may miss a class offered by their favourite instructor due to event conflicts or emergencies. In large fitness centres, exercisers need to share the facilities with others, which may cause problems such as a shortage of equipment (Guo & Fussell, 2022).

Adherence to a workout routine is a major challenge faced by many people who try to maintain a physically active lifestyle. Inactivity and lack of motivation are two common reasons for the failure of individuals to stick to their workout routine (Harden et al., 2015). Group exercise provides an environment where people can work out together, which helps to overcome these barriers. The presence of others who are working towards a common goal creates a sense of accountability and encourages people to show up for their workouts. Moreover, group exercise can provide an enjoyable and social experience that makes physical activity more appealing and less monotonous. In addition to the motivational benefits of group exercise, there are also physiological benefits that can contribute to increased adherence to a workout routine. For example, group exercise can lead to increased intensity and effort, which can result in greater physiological adaptations and improved health outcomes (Fraser & Spink, 2002).

As shown by Virginia Tech & Tech (2005), when working out in groups, individual participants tend to run and cycle 21% further and work out 10% longer. Group exercise can also provide

a supportive and inclusive environment that can enhance feelings of self-efficacy and confidence.

Another mechanism that contributes to the effectiveness of group exercise is social comparison. Social comparison refers to the process of evaluating oneself in relation to others and adjusting one's behaviour based on the social comparison (Guo & Fussell, 2022). In group exercise, individuals are often exposed to others who are physically active and have similar goals, which can serve as a source of motivation and inspiration. Moreover, group exercise provides opportunities for individuals to receive feedback and support from others, which can enhance feelings of competence and increase self-esteem. Furthermore, research by Burke et al. (2008), suggests that forming meaningful relationships within a workout group can significantly increase an individual's likelihood of sticking to their exercise routine. Social support is a crucial factor in predicting and maintaining physical activity behaviors. It has been shown that people are more likely to stick to their exercise routine when they have a supportive network, whether it be friends, family, or a workout group (Guo & Fussell, 2022). This social support provides individuals with a sense of belonging and accountability, which can serve as a motivator to continue exercising. In group fitness settings, individuals can engage in a shared physical activity experience, which can strengthen the bond and increase the level of social support within the group. Meaningful relationships refer to connections that go beyond surface-level interactions and involve a deeper level of emotional and social support. Having connections with peers is a factor that furthermore positively influences the retention level (F. Gui et al., 2022).

These relationships provide individuals with a sense of connection, belonging, and accountability that can act as a strong motivator for continued exercise. In addition, the shared experience of working out together can serve as a bonding opportunity and provide a source of social support that can last outside of the gym environment. Group exercise classes offer a unique opportunity for individuals to form meaningful relationships and engage in physical activity with others. These classes provide a structured environment that promotes accountability, as individuals are expected to attend regularly and participate in the workout. Group exercise classes also offer a variety of workout options, which can help individuals find a type of physical activity that they enjoy and are more likely to stick to.

## History of Group Fitness

In general, group fitness refers to any type of exercise or physical activity that is performed in a group setting, typically led by an instructor. This type of fitness has a rich history that can be traced back to ancient civilizations, but it has only become a popular form of exercise in the last few decades. The earliest forms of group fitness can be traced back to ancient civilizations, such as ancient Greece, where physical fitness was considered an essential aspect of a healthy and well-rounded life (Guo & Fussell, 2022). The Greeks believed that exercise was crucial for both physical and mental health, and they developed various forms of group fitness activities, such as calisthenics and military drills, to promote this. These group fitness activities were performed in public spaces, such as the gymnasiums, and were often accompanied by music and rhythmic chanting, adding an element of fun and social interaction to the workout. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, group fitness continued to evolve and grow, with the development of new physical education programs and the establishment of community organizations that offered fitness classes. The first recorded instance of an organized fitness class in modern history was in 1932, when Jack LaLanne, a fitness pioneer, started offering a group fitness class in Oakland, California. These early group fitness classes were often led by trained instructors who demonstrated the exercises and provided guidance and motivation to the class participants. The 1960s and 1970s saw a surge in popularity of group fitness, with the advent of aerobic dance and other forms of exercise that emphasized the social and fun aspects of fitness. Aerobic dance was introduced by a dance instructor named Jacki Sorensen, who developed a program that combined dance moves with high-energy music, creating an enjoyable and effective workout. This type of group fitness quickly gained popularity, and other forms of group fitness, such as Yoga and Pilates, also became popular during this time (Cary Wing, 2014). The 1980s and 1990s were a time of significant growth and expansion for the group fitness industry, with the introduction of new technologies and the rise of health clubs and big commercial fitness centres. The development of audio and video equipment made it easier for instructors to provide demonstrations and guidance to participants, while the growth of health clubs and fitness centres created a new market for group fitness classes. This period also saw the introduction of new forms of group fitness, such as spinning and step aerobics, which continued to emphasize the fun and social aspects of fitness. Today, group fitness is an integral part of the modern fitness industry, with millions of people participating in group fitness classes each



year. The variety and diversity of group fitness classes have increased significantly, with options ranging from High-Intensity Interval Training to Yoga and Pilates, and new forms of group fitness, such as functional training and dance fitness, continue to emerge. The group fitness industry continues to evolve and grow, with new innovations and technologies, such as virtual fitness classes, providing new and convenient ways for people to participate in group fitness activities.

In those classes, exercisers follow the guidance of instructors and exercise in a synchronized manner. Fitness franchises such as CrossFit, Orange Theory Fitness, Barr, and Yoga, offer group fitness classes as main services (Gui et al., 2022).

### Boutique Fitness Studios

These activities typically take place in a boutique fitness studio. These studios are designed to cater to one specific fitness offering, allowing them to be small in size and located in convenient, central locations within a city. These studios are known for their high-end atmosphere, often providing luxurious amenities such as beauty and shower products, towels, and blow-dryers. The cost of attending a class at a boutique fitness studio is often much higher than at a traditional gym, ranging from 11€ to 40€ per class. The classes at boutique gyms are led by experienced instructors and typically consist of between 20-60 people. Participants are required to make a reservation in advance and sign in at the studio's reception area upon arrival. They then proceed to the locker rooms to store their belongings and socialize with other participants before the class begins. The energetic instructor will then lead the group into the studio, where they will set up their station and get ready for the workout. Many group classes, most famously Barry's and SoulCycle classes, are often held in a nightclub-like setting, with dim lighting and loud music, allowing participants to party while they exercise. Classes last approximately 45-60 minutes and are designed to be both challenging and entertaining. At the end of the class, participants will cool down and then leave the room, praising the instructor and thanking them for their guidance. The cycle then repeats itself, with a 5-15 minute break before the next class begins. After their workout, participants are encouraged to relax in the locker rooms, where they can chat with friends, enjoy high-end shower products, and get ready using the movie star-like selfie mirrors. Overall, boutique fitness studios provides a convenient and efficient way for people to complete both their workout and beauty routine in less than an hour and a half.



Photo 1: Locker room Saints & Stars Amsterdam

Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 2: Lobby area of BeCycle Berlin

Source: taken by the researcher

Boutique fitness studios are widely recognized for fostering a sense of community and social interaction among members, as opposed to the anonymity commonly experienced at large chain gyms. As previously mentioned, the development of meaningful relationships within a fitness group has been shown to increase adherence to a fitness routine and result in higher retention rates for boutique fitness studios (X. Gui et al., 2017). As a result, these studios place a high priority on facilitating connections among as many members as possible. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the strategies that boutique fitness studios around the world (can) employ to maximize member engagement by fostering group coherency using participant observations.

## Theoretical framework

### Participant Observation

Participant observation is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher(s) actively participating in the social setting they are studying, while observing and recording the behaviour and interactions of the participants within the setting (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). As laid out by the authors, this method is commonly used in the social sciences, such as Sociology and Anthropology, and it allows to gather in-depth data about the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a particular group or community (research subjects). The biggest advantages of participant observation include the ability to gather rich, detailed data about the social setting(s) being studied. This particular research method allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants, as well as the cultural norms and values of the overall group. Additionally, because the researcher is an active participant in the setting, she/he is able to build trust and rapport with the participants, which can result in a more open and honest data collection than can be achieved with alternative data collection methods. Another advantage of participant observation is its flexibility. Unlike other research methods, such as surveys or interviews, participant observation allows the researcher to collect data in a natural, unstructured way. This allows the researcher to respond to the needs of the participants and the evolving situation in real-time, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the social setting being studied. However, participant observation also has several disadvantages. One major disadvantage of the research method (as laid out by DeWalt & DeWalt (2002)), is the subjectivity of the collected data. Considering that the researcher is an active participant in the research setting, her/his own biases and perspectives can influence the data they collect as well as the interpretation of that data. Additionally, the researcher may become emotionally invested in the setting, leading to a lack of objectivity in the data collection and the consecutive data analysis. Another disadvantage of participant observation is that this research method can be very time-consuming as well as resource intensive. Researchers may have to spend extended periods of time in the research setting, sometimes months or even years, to gather sufficient data. Furthermore, the method can also be physically and emotionally demanding, as the researcher must actively participate in the social setting and engage with the participants. Participant observation is a valuable research method for collecting rich, in-depth data about social settings and the experiences of participants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). However, its

subjective nature and resource-intensive requirements mean that it should be used in combination with other research methods, such as surveys and questionnaires, to provide a well-rounded understanding of the research topic.

Overall, there are various forms of participant observation, including overt and covert participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

In overt participant observation, the researcher fully participates in the activities of the researched group and makes their role as a researcher fully known to the participants and is transparent about the research intentions. This allows for greater access to the group and its activities, but also raises the potential for researcher bias or certain behavior alterations of the participants.

In the covert participant observation, the researcher does not reveal their role as a researcher to the participants and instead remains concealed in the observations. This allows for a more objective view of the group and its activities, however, it raises ethical concerns about the researcher's deceiving behavior and can also limit their deeper access to the group. Overall, participant observation is recognized by the researchers actively taking part in the events or activities being studied, while also observing and recording data. In this research approach, the researcher is therefore both a participant and an observer. This method allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the culture, group, or phenomenon being studied by experiencing it firsthand, while still maintaining objectivity and the ability to analyze the data collected. This type of observation is commonly used in the social sciences and is particularly useful in studying informal or hidden aspects of a group or culture and has therefore been chosen as the preferred observation method for this research present project. Kathleen and Billie DeWalt in their book *Participant Observation. A guide for fieldworker's* (2002) dissects the entire topic of participant observations from the initial design of the upcoming study to the data analysis and reporting of results. The authors provide practical advice on how to conduct participant observation, including the development of a research plan, the choice of field sites, and the selection of research participants. The authors characterize and describe participant observation as the process of becoming a member of a group and actively observing and participating in their activities, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the group's norms, values, and beliefs. The authors cover various important aspects of participant observation, including preparing for the field, establishing

rapport with participants, and collecting and analyzing data. The authors provide guidance on the various tools and techniques used in participant observation, such as note-taking, audio and video recording, and reflective journaling.

According to DeWalt (2002), a properly executed participant observation needs to follow several steps, including planning, preparing, executing and debriefing.

For the planning, DeWalt advice starting with defining the research question, the population being studying, and the social setting of where the observation(s) will take place. The authors suggest determining the length of time spend observing as well as the exact role the researcher will play.

As a "full participant" the researcher actively and fully participates in the daily activities and cultural norms of the community being studied. This involves the researcher becoming a member of the community, adopting its ways of life, and participating in its activities, such as eating its food, participating in its ceremonies and events, and living its daily life. The aim of full participant observation is to gain a deep and intimate understanding of the community from the inside out.

On the other hand, a "partial participant" refers to a researcher who participates in some aspects of the community's life but remains somewhat removed. This type of participant observation involves the researcher maintaining a level of distance and observing the community from the outside while still participating in certain activities and events. The aim of partial participant observation is to gain a less intimate but still insightful understanding of the community while avoiding potential ethical or safety issues that can arise from full immersion.

After the planning of the participant observation, the researcher needs to prepare to go into the field: Getting familiar with the culture, language, and norms of the community that will be observed and researched. Gathering of any necessary permissions or consent forms from the participants and ensure to have the necessary equipment, such as a field notes notebook, audio recorder, and or camera.

After these preparations are made, the researcher is ready to enter the setting. The observation begins by entering the chosen social setting and establishing rapport with the participants. The researcher needs to be mindful of the role as a researcher and try not to influence the social dynamics. It is important to take detailed notes on the made observations and consider the cultural context when interpreting what is being seen and heard. DeWalt

(2002), explain the best process for the data collection is to be engaged in the social activities and take detailed field notes on the made observations, including nonverbal behavior and cultural nuances. The authors also recommend the use of audio or video recording to supplement observation notes. For the write up of the findings, DeWalt recommend doing it in a clear and concise manner, adhering to academic writing conventions and ethical standards.

### Group Cohesion

In the last few decades, several studies have investigated the impact of group cohesion on exercise adherence, with Spink and Carron being the most prominent researchers in this area. Their research suggests that group cohesion has a positive effect on adherence and a negative effect on dropout behavior (Spink & Carron, 1993). Additionally, their findings reveal that the percentage of fellow group members known to the other class participants has a positive impact on the perceived cohesion.

Group cohesion has been defined differently in the scientific literature, with Carron's definition being the most widely cited. Carron defines group cohesion as "a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs" (Maher et al., 2015 p.32). Other scientific definitions of group cohesion are also available, such as "an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in groups" (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990 p.148). Overall, as Turman (2003) summarized, group cohesion is about everyone working together towards the same goal, with cohesion describing the overall force that causes individuals to continue membership in the group.

Carron and Spink (1993) have suggested that increasing opportunities for social interaction can be one way to enhance perceptions of cohesion. Gui et al., (2022) have identified several types of social interactions, such as indirect interactions among exercisers and interactions between instructors and exercisers. Research has shown that the cohesiveness of exercise groups can be improved through a psychological intervention program that utilizes team-building components. Spink and Carron (1993) utilized the actual dynamics of exercise groups to explain why individuals remain or withdraw from exercise classes. In their research, they assessed the perceptions of former and current participants of exercise programs regarding

the group's cohesiveness. They found that people who dropped out had lower perceptions of their exercise class's task and social cohesiveness than the current participants (Spink & Carron, 1993). Furthermore, the authors used the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) to assess perceived cohesion and found that exercise participants exposed to the team-building intervention condition expressed more individual attraction to the group task. According to Burke (2008), the original operational definitions that emanated from the conceptual model of the Group Environment Questionnaire were developed to measure cohesion dimensions, such as Individual Attractions to the Group-Task, Individual Attractions to the Group-Social, Group Integration-Task, and Group Integration-Social.

Spink and Carron's research found that a greater sense of cohesion in a group of exercisers was associated with increased adherence behavior. Specifically, they found that those class participants who attended more classes were more likely to perceive the group as more cohesive. Therefore, enhancing group cohesion through various interventions may prove to be beneficial in improving exercise adherence, and researchers can utilize the GEQ to measure perceived cohesion dimensions.

One topic of high importance for group cohesion that has been heavily under-researched in the group fitness class setting is the coach's style of leadership. Research has shown that regular team sports coaches, such as those in football or rugby, could enhance task cohesion through democratic behavior, social support, and positive feedback styles (Turman, 2003). On the other hand, coaches should avoid using autocratic coaching strategies as they are shown to be detrimental to group cohesion. In group/team sport settings, motivational speeches have been shown to promote team cohesion (Turman, 2003). Additionally, other elements that led to higher levels of cohesion include bragging, which refers to a coach talking up or bragging about the abilities of other athletes. This approach can make teammates feel more connected to each other, as they can learn from each other. Athlete-directed techniques, such as using team goals and establishing a unity council, have also been found to be effective in enhancing group cohesion. Dedication and enthusiasm can also create a special bond between teammates, such as when they see their coach pumping them up, as they are motivated to pump each other up as well, as Turman (2003) suggests.

Despite the existing research into the coach's leadership style in team sports, there is a gap in the literature regarding the coach's leadership style in a fitness/exercise group class and its impact on group cohesion within the group class fitness setting. This research gap will, as

previously mentioned, be addressed in this paper. By examining the coach's leadership style and its impact on group cohesion in the context of group fitness, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature and provide insights for fitness instructors and trainers to enhance group cohesion in their classes.

#### Group cohesion in group exercise context:

Research has shown that creating a sense of distinctiveness within the group contributes to a group's identity, unity, and cohesiveness (Burke et al., 2008). In the context of group fitness, researchers have investigated how fitness instructors can generate protocols to emphasize distinctiveness in their classes, such as creating a group name, designing a group T-shirts, and providing neon headbands or shoelaces, and so on (Kennedy-Armbruster et al., 2014). When exercisers perceive their class as unique and clearly identifiably distinct to others, they are more likely to feel united.

However, it is essential to note that the amount of cohesion present in an exercise class can function as an important barometer. For instance, it is possible for all members present to agree that everyone is a virtual stranger, despite perfect consensus (Burke et al., 2008).

According to the authors, in order to foster enhanced cohesiveness among group members, many exercise instructors have incorporated a variety of group dynamics principles, such as partner work, group goal setting, and strategies to enhance communication and interaction. These principles aim to increase task and/or social cohesion, ultimately leading to program adherence. However, due to the pure nature of the group fitness setting, it can be challenging to introduce these principles in boutique fitness classes, highlighting the relevance of the present research paper.

From the previously outlined theories, it has been established that a feeling of belongingness and being part of a community enhances the member experience in a group fitness setting. Exercise has the potential to bring people together and strengthen relationships, and introducing oneself to group members can increase social cohesion (Burke et al., 2008). Therefore, building a fitness community is essential in creating an environment where members feel comfortable. This can be achieved by organizing community-building events, both online and offline, to engage members, leading to increased member experience and retention. Such events can include celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, or other special happenings (Kennedy-Armbruster et al., 2014).



As in depth outlined by Kennedy-Armbruster (2014), group instructors play a crucial role in fostering this required sense of community and the therefrom resulting group cohesion. It is their responsibility to create an interactive environment and promote a sense of community in the fitness class. The instructor's approach to teaching can significantly impact the opportunity for group cohesion, such as for example the imposing of a no-talking rule or instead encouraging members to introduce themselves to their neighbors and share their origins. Creating social opportunities in fitness classes enables members to build cohesion, leading to improved attendance. Generally, the current model in fitness or health clubs is not designed to foster group cohesion, except in organized group exercise classes, demonstrating the big difference between big commercial chain vs. smaller, more intimate boutique studio gyms. This disparity between big corporate gyms and boutique gyms highlights the relevance of this specific topic for research. According to M. Yoke (2014), there are several practical ways to facilitate cohesion in group exercise classes, including, but not limited to, learning participants' names and having them learn each other's names, scheduling social outings together, creating a Facebook page for sharing information, sharing participant success stories on the website/in studio for all to read, sharing personal stories and being human with participants, incorporating partner exercises and having participants introduce themselves, counting down or up together when performing exercises, naming exercises after participants, celebrating birthdays and other anniversaries with the group, and using holiday or themed props for classes.

Another important factor contributing to group cohesion within boutique fitness group classes, as indicated by Kennedy-Armbruster (2014), is small talk before and after the class. Small talk serves as another way for people to build rapport and personal connections. This includes communicating with others, such as cheering each other on or sharing reactions to the current motion. In a study by Guo & Fussell (2022), participants of group fitness classes reported engaging in small talk with other participants before and after the class, especially amongst those who regularly attended the same class. Some participants asked the instructors questions or chatted with them if they had a good rapport. Participants reported enjoying arriving early to the class to have time to talk beforehand, and also staying after class to chat, as this kind of small talk helps to build connections.

Guo & Fussell (2022), reported that participants in fitness classes often engage in private conversations, socializing with others both before and after the workout. Some participants

may ask the instructor questions about specific execution forms of exercises, or the instructor might inquire about their exercise progress, while others engage in personal conversations with friends or acquaintances. Despite this chitchat, the instructor typically speaks the most during the class, and participants communicate with each other through facial expressions and body language.

This scientific overview highlights the importance of group cohesion in achieving successful participant retention and outlines ways in which both instructors and group members can foster such cohesion.

Building on this knowledge, the present research utilizes participant observations as a research tool to explore the practical implications and execution of the theoretical framework of group cohesion. By examining the ways in which group cohesion can be and is at present fostered in boutique fitness classes, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of how to enhance the fitness experience for participants, by instructors as well as studio owners.

## Methodology

### Subjects

This study investigated ten boutique studios belonging to different brands across several countries. The selection of these studios was based on purposive and convenience sampling to ensure rich data for the research project. The purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that the selected studios were representative of the population of boutique studios in the field, while convenience sampling facilitated easy access to the selected studios. To ensure that the selected studios for the present research were representative of the population of boutique studios and workout concepts in the field, careful consideration was given to the selection of research subjects. This involved including studios that offered workout sessions where a station is shared with another participant, such as High Studios or Saints & Stars, as well as studios where each station is occupied by only one participant, such as Platform Studios or BlackBike. The present research has been designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the boutique fitness industry, with special attention given to covering the most common concepts. This includes the popular HIT and Run workouts offered by studios such as Barry's, indoor group cycling classes provided by brands such as

1Rebel, as well as yoga sessions offered by for example Kailo. The research also aims to explore new and emerging concepts in the boutique fitness industry, such as Nordic Strong and Tribe NL. By examining a diverse range of boutique fitness concepts, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to group cohesion in different types of workouts and therefore irrespective of the workout style, which could be useful in developing strategies to promote a sense of community among participants in the boutique fitness industry.

## Procedure

Before delving into the specifics of each studio, it is important to provide some general information. The research question and title have been revised based on the data gathered throughout the research project, serving as a foundation for future research with the aid of interviews and other data collection methods. Participant observation has been chosen as the method for this research project, as it is believed to yield the most relevant results in the research environment, especially for qualitative research, which focuses on the implications of a phenomenon rather than quantifying it.

Participant observation is a complex research method that presents unique challenges to researchers. Given the inherent difficulties in articulating certain observations and the lack of control over the research situation, researchers must react and interact with others in ways that cannot be predicted beforehand. As such, discussing how to conduct participant observation is often abstract, and it can be challenging to articulate observations due to their personal nature. However, this does not mean that frameworks and guidelines cannot be applied, as outlined in the theoretical section above.

For a researcher, learning to participate in a new context means acquiring a set of understandings and reactions that may not be fully appreciated and understood until the analysis begins. As previously discussed, the degree of participation can range from passive observation to active engagement. A passive participant merely observes without actively participating, while a moderately involved participant is present and identifiable as a researcher but does not actively participate. An actively involved participant engages in everything that other people do. The researcher must carefully consider the level of participation and its potential impact on the data collected. Ultimately, the researcher's

ability to strike a balance between participation and detachment will determine the success of the participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

Despite the benefits of participant observation, it presents its own set of challenges. For instance, it is difficult to articulate certain observations and the emotional involvement can lead to a loss of analytical interest. In the case of this research project, the researcher has been heavily involved in the industry for the past seven years, which inevitably influences the collected data (See more under "Limitations"). To balance emotional involvement and scientific detachment, the researcher must learn to be both an observer and a participant by fitting in, actively seeing and listening, conducting informal interviews (in the present case with fellow participants and instructors), and recording field notes.

While participant observation requires the researcher to be going native, leading to a loss of analytical interest, it is a necessary process to gain a deeper understanding of the research environment. In the case of this research project, the researcher is not entirely going native, as the observation only focuses on a temporary event, namely the group classes, rather than the entire process. Nonetheless, the researcher's background as a participant in the industry must be acknowledged and taken into account during the analysis.

In participant observation, the researcher must "fit" into the environment being observed, taking into account personal characteristics such as age and gender, as these factors influence how individual researcher interact with those they are studying. In the present study, the researcher is well-suited to the environment being observed, as it is a location where he works, has friends, and spends a significant amount of time. However, this familiarity with the environment may also lead to a loss of objectivity, an issue that will be further addressed in the limitations section.

To conduct the study, the researcher created an account with each studio and attended the offered workout classes as a regular participant. Upon arrival, the front desk staff asked for the researchers last name, and the researcher had his spot assigned and received any necessary equipment, such as shoes or towels. In the locker room, the researcher was able to engage in as well as overhear small talk with fellow participants before the class began. The researcher employed a full participant observation approach, fully immersing himself in the studio's offerings to document the atmosphere, interactions between customers and staff, and the physical and emotional experiences of customers during the workout. However, due to the nature of the study, which involved booking drop-in classes at various studios, the

researcher could only be considered a partial participant, as he was not fully integrated into the community, making him a partial participant, participating in certain aspects of the community's life while still remaining removed to a certain extent (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). To establish trust, rapport, and a sense of community, the researcher utilized the local language and fitness-specific jargon. While the lack of time spent in each studio could have presented a challenge to establishing cohesion, the shared goal of the workout itself facilitated this process. Overall, the researcher's ability to balance participation and observation, as well as his past experience in the field, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the group cohesion within the boutique fitness industry.

Based on DeWalt's (2002) practical advice on conducting participant observation, a research plan was developed to identify which boutique fitness studios would best be selected, as well as the rationale behind each choice. DeWalt (2002) also provide guidance on the various tools and techniques used in participant observation, such as note-taking, audio and video recording, as well as reflective journaling. However, due to the nature of the subject matter, namely group fitness classes, it was not possible to use traditional research methods such as note-taking during class. Many studios have a strict no-phone policy, making post-class note-taking and photo/video documentation of the empty studio, as well as recorded and disclosed interviews with participants and instructors the only viable options.

Another important theme highlighted by DeWalt (2002) that became highly relevant during the studio visits, predominantly those in the Middle East, was the need to respect and understand cultural differences. For instance, the researcher encountered workouts where participants would leave class midway to attend prayer sessions, or classes that were exclusively for female participants. While these cultural differences may have limited the researcher's freedom to participate fully in certain classes or communities, they provided valuable insights into group coherency in different cultural settings.

As a participant observer, the researcher also had to be aware of power dynamics between instructors and class participants, as outlined by DeWalt (2002). Given that the researcher is normally in a position of authority as an instructor himself, being treated as a first timer by instructors again made him highly aware of these dynamics. Overall, the researcher's ability to navigate cultural differences and power dynamics allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the various group cohesions within the boutique fitness industry.

Finally, it is important to note that the researcher operated as an overt participant observer during all observations. This means that the researcher did not disclose his research purpose to class participants, allowing him to fully immerse himself in the present environment and culture of each studio. While this approach may be ethically questionable, as furthered outlined and discussed in the limitations section, it allowed the researcher to be treated like a fellow participant rather than altering the behavior of fellow class participants who may have acted differently had they known they were being observed for research purposes.

By blending in with the other class participants, the researcher was able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the studio culture and environment, as he was not treated differently due to his research role. This approach allowed for a more authentic representation of the behavior of the fellow class participants, providing valuable insights into the boutique fitness industry. Nonetheless, the ethical considerations of covert research must be acknowledged, and alternative approaches, such as gaining informed consent from participants, should be considered in future research, despite being difficult to implement due to the nature of the research environment.

## Findings

It is essential to acknowledge the unique presentation of findings in this study, which incorporates both first-person and third-person perspectives. This approach is adopted to emphasize the personal significance and involvement of the researcher as an individual, while still maintaining a degree of academic rigor. Although the use of the first-person perspective might not adhere entirely to conventional academic standards, the researcher has deemed it necessary to include this personal viewpoint due to the employment of participant observation as a research method. By blending these perspectives, the study aims to strike a balance between the researcher's subjective experiences and the objective assessment of boutique fitness studios, thereby providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

### Studio 1

#### Tribe NL

Tribe NL is a UK boutique fitness franchise that has established locations in the Netherlands, thanks to the efforts of the Urban Gym Group in 2023. The brand prides itself on providing a distinctive workout experience that seamlessly combines high-intensity interval training (HIIT) with heart rate monitoring technology. This aspect sets Tribe NL apart from other studios that are emerging in the fitness industry. In fact, it is the only studio visited that has implemented the usage of heart rate monitors, which illustrates its uniqueness within this research project. The lobby area is designed with cozy lounge chairs and sofas, providing a comfortable space for individuals to relax before class commences. The walls are adorned with milestone T-shirts displaying numbers such as 50, 100, and 500, which serve as a motivation for participants who have achieved certain class milestones. Moving upstairs to the locker room, one can observe that the setup is basic, with an open space and a bench in the middle. This type of locker room is typical for most boutique fitness studios and preferred as it allows for post-workout chit-chatting, providing ample space instead of being interspersed with lockers. Upon reaching the locker room and discovering that it was empty, I promptly stored my belongings in the locker and proceeded downstairs. Here, people were sitting and waiting, making use of the waiting area facilities, and one could observe certain individuals using their phones while others stood by themselves without talking. However, there were also people chatting with each other, creating a friendly and supportive environment that encourages participants to enjoy

themselves. As it was an open space, it was easy to observe the people entering the studio for the first time and receiving an introduction from the front desk staff, especially regarding how to use the heart rate monitor. At some point, the instructor emerged from the downstairs area and inquired if the group was ready, to which people nodded in agreement before following him downstairs. The studio downstairs consisted of three stations, starting with a treadmill, a floor space, and an air bike. All stations were numbered, indicating that participants would move from the treadmill to the floor to the assault bike using the same number and, therefore, share the station with other participants. In my case, I shared the station with unfamiliar individuals since my workout buddies were situated on the opposite side of the room, despite us being at liberty to choose our stations ourselves. The instructor asked for any first-timer class participants, and 95% of the participants raised their hands. This was not unusual or unexpected considering that the Amsterdam studio had just opened. The instructor provided a detailed explanation of the workout setup, which involved starting on the treadmill, then moving to the floor, and finally proceeding to the bike in distinct time intervals. He also pointed out the heart rate monitors, of which the results were attached to a screen that everyone in the room could access and look at, leading to a high level of social comparison. The heart rate monitoring technology utilized during the workout provided real-time feedback on participants' performance, enabling them to set and achieve milestones during the workout. However, despite sharing stations with unknown participants, there was no option given by the instructor to introduce oneself to the other participants, which would have been needed to be done privately. The workout proceeded in different intervals, and I remained at my station for about six minutes before switching to the next one. When switching stations, there was no interaction between participants, especially not those who did not know each other. I came with a group of friends and shared the station with one of them. I could see the other friends around myself on other stations, so I was able to have eye contact and nonverbal communication with them between rounds. However, there was no interaction with the other participants throughout the entire workout. The only point of interaction was when I could see the other participants' names on the screen together with their displayed heart rate, sweat points, and effort level. Sweat points were credits earned for burning a certain number of calories. The class lasted for 45 minutes, during which the instructor read out what was on the screen, indicating and announcing the next exercise. He walked around between the stations and provided instructions such as "use only the arms or



legs or both together” on the bike, increasing the speed or incline on the treadmill, and indicating the next exercise on the floor. However, this information was also visible on the screens placed throughout the studio. Once the class was over, the instructor introduced a cool-down phase where participants could stretch at their own pace and station. The instructor then asked everyone to put their hands together and clap, which felt like the first point of interaction and group cohesion with other members. Afterward, he walked around handing out wet towels to wipe off the sweat and collected the heart rate monitors.

After completing the workout session, all participants left the room and proceeded to the upper floor where they discarded their towels and embarked on their individual journeys towards either the locker rooms or the lockers in the welcoming area to collect their belongings and promptly depart the studio. Only those who attended class together lingered around and engaged in conversations, such as myself and my friends. During this period, I sat in the lobby and observed other participants to take my field notes. As DeWald (2002) suggested, my observations, class notes, informal interviews, and other research methods were employed to obtain the insights presented in this research paper.

While sitting in the lobby, I noticed that when new participants arrived, they were given an introduction to the heart rate monitors at the front desk and checked in. The place became somewhat crowded, but there was still no interaction between different class participants. Individuals would enter the facility, place their belongings in a locker, and either keep their headphones on or sit quietly on one of the lounge chairs while waiting for the class to begin. Alternatively, they would leave the facility promptly after class without engaging with anyone around them. In general, the lobby area is conducive to fostering group cohesion and small talk among class participants. It is not too big, so people are not too far away from each other, increasing the likelihood of them interacting. During the workout, there were technically enough opportunities for participants to interact with each other, especially since stations were shared, and people had to work together with two other individuals per station. They had to interact with each other roughly every six minutes when stations were changed. However, this did not happen, potentially due to cultural differences, and the group instructor not actively encouraging group coherence or participant interaction with each other.

After completing my observation, I entered the locker rooms, and only two people were left, who had already taken a shower. Despite having taken classes with some of the individuals

present, no one reacted when I entered the locker room, indicating that they did not feel connected enough with me to engage in any interaction after class. Since I did not reveal that I was a researcher, no one was aware that the pictures, video documentation, and field notes that I had been gathering after class were being used for this research project, something that will be addressed in the limitations section.

To summarize, the most significant moment of group cohesion felt by participants of Tribe NL was when the instructor asked for any first-timers, and 95% of the room raised their hands. This was the point when most people felt accepted by the individuals around them because they were all doing something for the first time, which is always intimidating. However, after that moment, no real effort was made by other group participants or the instructor to foster interaction between class participants or to promote group cohesion.



Photo 3: Waiting area TribeNL  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 4: Milestone T-shirts at TribeNL  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 2

### Barry's Dubai

Barry's holds special significance for this research project, as it is one of the most successful fitness franchise brands in the world, given its status as one of the only globally operating fitness boutique studios. This has contributed to the brand's widespread recognition within the industry. A notable aspect of Barry's global branding is the purchase of T-shirts by loyal customers featuring their home studios/countries, such as Barry's Denmark, Barry's LA, and Barry's New York, among others. This practice has become a recognizable symbol of belonging to the Barry's community, particularly when visiting a new Barry's studio in a different location. Barry's Dubai, which opened around three years ago with two studios, holds a unique position in this study due to the cultural differences present. However, it is important to acknowledge the author's personal bias as an employee of Barry's in Copenhagen. Upon arrival at Barry's Dubai, the author was immediately recognized as the guest instructor for the following day's class due to the studio's advertising efforts on social media and inside the studio. The author's merchandise from Barry's Copenhagen and Barry's LA further solidified his status as an integral part of the Barry's community, thereby enhancing the research environment. One notable feature upon entering the Barry's Dubai studio is the success wall, which is adorned with polaroid's of participants who have taken a certain number of classes. This is similar to the milestones accomplishments implemented by Tribe with their milestone T-shirts. The Polaroid wall fosters a sense of group cohesion as participants cheer on their peers who have achieved milestones during class, thereby creating a supportive atmosphere. This allows participants to easily congratulate and initiate friendly conversations after class, as demonstrated by the milestone wall implemented in Barry's Dubai studio.

Overall, the Dubai boutique fitness studios investigated for this research project have been observed to display prominent cultural differences, which provided the researcher with unique insights into group cohesion within group fitness studios that could not have been gained in a European-only setting. In Arab countries for example, it is common for people to practice their daily prayer, which can coincide with class schedules, resulting in some participants leaving the class midway to pray. The studios in the Middle East are well-equipped to cater to this requirement, with lockers filled with prayer mats and an arrow in the ceiling pointing towards Mecca, indicating the direction to pray. Despite merely accommodating cultural requirements, this practice fosters group cohesion too, as religion

has been shown to allow for connectivity between believers of the same religion. Participants who leave the class to pray can bond over their shared religious beliefs.

Barry's infamous Red Room workout concept is another example of fostering group cohesion. Participants alternate between different intervals on the treadmill and floor and engage in bodyweight and dumbbell exercises. Originating in West Hollywood in 1998, Barry's is now one of the most recognized and popular group fitness class concepts globally, with over 300 studios in 10 countries, attracting millions of people. The workout concept is described as a sort of fitness cult that makes it easy for participants to strike up a conversation with each other, leading to a higher level of group cohesion than in a less-known gym chain. Participants entering Barry's generally know what to expect, what they are supposed to do, and what awaits them during the workout, leading to a common understanding of the brand and its values. This makes it easier for people to identify with each other and their common class participants, as they share the same values and admiration for the same brand.

Barry's instructors stand out in their ability to have the treadmill and floor groups work together, which is unique compared to other boutique fitness studio concepts. Instructors encourage participants to high-five their neighbors during transitions or cheer on the other group. During a full class with around 45 participants, the instructor prompts the floor group to cheer on the treadmill group before a 30 second sprint, leading to a sense of group cohesion, as people start to support one another and give their energy to help each other through the challenging tasks. Barry's Dubai cultivates a strong sense of community among its members through various methods, which can also be mostly observed in the polaroid wall. During classes, the instructors lead participants in a synchronized workout routine, with each participant allotted approximately 10-12 square feet of space facing the instructor at the front of the studio. Instructors may customize instructions based on their observation of individual participants' body language and facial expressions, providing corrections and variations as needed. Additionally, instructors may offer tactile feedback through physical touch, providing non-verbal communication to augment the verbal instructions. Closer proximity to participants energizes instructors and enhances the overall workout experience. As indicated above, the lack of interaction between participants in Tribe NL's lobby is a concern for the overall level or perceived group cohesion, and this may be due to the instructor's inability to foster group cohesion and cultural differences. Conversely, Barry's Dubai has established a successful Polaroid wall that encourages a sense of community

among participants, allowing them to easily initiate friendly conversations and congratulate each other after class. Additionally, participants in Barry's have a shared understanding of the brand and its values, making it easier for them to identify with one another. The instructors at Barry's stand out for their ability to unify the treadmill and floor groups, promoting a sense of group cohesion as people support each other through challenging tasks. At Barry's, people who share a station have the opportunity to share weights, leading to a high level of interaction and group cohesion. After the workout, the group instructor asks the class to applaud each other, further cementing the sense of community. Participants then proceed to the Fuel Bar, where they pick up pre-ordered shakes and engage in small talk with their neighbors. The luxurious changing rooms at Barry's offer yet another opportunity for interaction, as members chat with each other about their workout routines and upcoming classes. These small interactions contribute to an overall higher level of group cohesion as members recognize each other and return to the studio for the same classes.

Barry's successful sense of community is further reinforced through milestone classes, where instructors call out and cheer on participants. This creates a supportive environment that helps participants to succeed and feel a sense of belonging. Overall, Barry's Dubai stands out for its ability to foster group cohesion, creating a thriving community that supports and encourages each other.



Photo 5: Community Wall at Barry's Dubai  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 5: Trainer promotion at Barry's Dubai  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 3

### Platform Studios Dubai

Platform Studios Dubai is the first indoor group cycling studio that was observed as part of this research project. The studio has four operating studios in Dubai, offering different concepts such as boxing, hit and run, and group cycling. The participant observation was used for the indoor group cycling concept, as other similar concepts had already been visited as part of the research. Upon entering the studio, it was observed that the class was nearly full, and there was a possibility of not getting a spot in the class. The studio was small, which made it cramped, and all participants had to interact with each other while changing into their workout gear or getting their workout shoes on, allowing for mingling amongst members.

The indoor group cycling room was located upstairs, and in front of the room, everyone gathered to collect their shoes and put them on before entering the studio. The friendly instructor individually welcomed every single person that entered the room, and staff members attended to those who needed help setting up their bike at the right height. Familiar participants had already set up their bikes and started pedaling while the instructor walked around, asking for first-timers and introducing them to the concept. Once the instructor was back on the podium bike, she asked if there were any first-timers in the house, which raised their hand followed by a big group welcoming clap of the whole classroom. This created a sense of community and made first-timers feel instantly welcome.

The class started with the best pop hits of the last years, and throughout the workout, people screamed and cheered. The sense of community could be felt throughout the workout, and rapport was built with fellow class participants through screaming and cheering. At one point, the instructor asked everyone to cheer with their neighbor with the water bottles, which fostered group coherency by creating another interaction opportunity between the class participants. The instructor kept a paper with all the class participants' names, calling them out throughout the class, making everyone feel special and seen, which also helped participants remember each other's names. At one point during the workout, the instructor told everyone to team up with their neighbor, and every time one added one turn on the resistance, the other had to follow, fostering group coherency between partners, making sure that they both had the same workout experience together. At one point, the instructor asked everyone to take the towels, wave them above their heads and then casually smash their neighbors' back with the towel, which was a gradual build-up for group coherency, making

sure that no one was overwhelmed when it got too personal too quickly. The instructor engaged with the group by cheering people on, calling out their names, and having the participants clap for each other. For example, one participant had a whistle with her, and the instructor said every time that person blew the whistle, everyone added one or two turns on their resistance, making sure that everybody in the group felt together.

At the end of the class, the instructor stood at the door, giving a high five to everyone and giving personalized comments and positive feedback to each class participant. The researcher had an engaging conversation/informal interview (please find in the hand-in attachments) with the instructor after the class, which provided valuable insights and data for the research. The success of the instructor's skills and the level of group coherency was evident, as the researcher was invited to the instructor's birthday party the very same day, and four people recognized and complimented the researcher on his performance in the class.

Platform Studios Dubai provided important insights into group coherency and the practice of boutique fitness studios. It showed that the type of workout or facilities the studio offers is not as crucial as the instructor's ability to create group coherency. The instructor in Platform Studios Dubai was highly aware of the necessity of having group coherency between class participants and focused on allowing as many points of interaction as possible during the class period. Other instructors, despite having the best studios and facilities, may not manage to bring that level of interaction across and therefore will have a lower impact on group coherency felt by comparison to when the instructor is motivating and engaging. The instructor at Platform Studios Dubai made it very easy for the researcher to be a first-timer, which is sometimes a quite daunting endeavor.



Photo 6: Locker Room at Platform Studios Dubai  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 7: Ride Room at Platform Studios Dubai  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 4

### 1Rebel Dubai

1Rebel Dubai presents a compelling case for investigation within the context of this research project, given its prominence as one of the most renowned boutique fitness brands in the industry. With its origins in the United Kingdom, 1Rebel has expanded its operations to include over six studios in London and has recently inaugurated a brand-new studio in Dubai. The diverse range of offerings provided by the studio brand encompasses various boutique concepts, such as high-intensity interval training (HIIT) and running classes akin to Barry's, boxing, ride and open gym facilities. This makes the comparison between 1Rebel and Saints & Stars Amsterdam strikingly evident as will become apparent later, with 1Rebel operating a more extensive network of studios across multiple countries.

As one of the most prestigious boutique fitness concepts globally, 1Rebel's presence in Dubai bolsters the brand's international recognition and facilitates its expansion into other markets. Upon entering the Dubai studio, it becomes immediately apparent that the studio is staffed by highly trained and well-educated personnel. Consistent with fitness aggregator 'ClassPass's recommendations, 1Rebel demonstrates exceptional front desk service and the instructors are well adept at welcoming first-time visitors while fostering a great atmosphere throughout their stay. The £5 million investment in the Dubai studio is unmistakable, with its opulent TechnoGym-equipped open gym, state-of-the-art HIIT and running room, and luxurious ride room, clearly surpassing rival offerings in the market. Mirroring the status symbol of Saints & Stars in Amsterdam, 1Rebel caters not exclusively to the affluent and renowned but also to individuals who prioritize the quality of their workout environment and view it as a reflection of their lifestyle. The front desk staff demonstrate exceptional helpfulness, and their dedication and expertise contribute significantly to making first timers feel welcomed and integrated into the community, surpassing the level of service experienced at comparable boutique studios.

A guided tour of the studio started with the open gym area, where individuals were observed engaging in personal workouts while using headphones and their smartphones. Initially, 1Rebel solely offered group-based classes in the UK, but subsequently incorporated an open gym concept into its range of services. The guided studio tour proceeded to the locker rooms, which were relatively vacant, particularly for a Friday afternoon - a peak period for boutique



fitness establishments in Europe. Arriving only five minutes before the scheduled class, I found myself slightly late for the introductory session and hurried to the ride studio.

Upon entering the Ride studio, the four other participants were already adjusting their bikes and starting their warm-up exercises. I got a bike in the second row, almost directly in front of the instructor, while the other participants occupied the front row. It was immediately noticeable that the other attendees were acquaintances, by the way that they engaged in animated, positive, and enjoyable interactions with one another. Upon the arrival in the studio, the instructor extended a warm welcome, provided detailed information regarding the operation of the bikes, and on the various handlebar positions. However, the instructor did not actively facilitate interaction between the existing class participants and myself, a newcomer. As the class commenced, the instructor barely acknowledged my presence by only calling my name once or twice during the exercise. However, the predominant focus of the attention and energy was directed toward the four regular attendees. These participants demonstrated exuberant enthusiasm characterized by cheering and the apparent confidence, which seemed to stem from their familiarity with the environment and the accompanying music.

Throughout the class, the instructor did not create opportunities for meaningful interaction, resulting in the only moment of perceived group cohesion occurring at the end of the workout. This instance was marked by a round of applause where everyone congratulated themselves and their peers. Subsequently, the other participants exited as a cohesive unit, leaving me alone with the instructor for a brief conversation about the studio's setup.

Following our conversation, I proceeded to the locker rooms, swiftly collected my belongings, and made my way to the front area. The staff at the front desk graciously congratulated me on completing my first class and extended their well-wishes as I departed the studio. Overall, by comparison to the other visited boutique studios as outlined in this section, 1Rebel was amongst the least group coherent studios within this research project. What can be felt, is that 1Rebel is such a big, known brand, that everybody automatically feels part of the team, just by going to the prestigious gym, therefore seemingly not requiring much effort of the brand itself.



Photo 8: Lobby area at 1Rebel Dubai  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 9: Ride Room at Platform Studios Dubai  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 5

### Nordic Strong Copenhagen

Nordic Strong, a brand-new boutique fitness studio in Copenhagen, represents a compelling case study in this research project, primarily due to its recent establishment approximately four months ago. One distinguishing feature of Nordic Strong is its adept use of social media, particularly Instagram, to achieve a high level of brand recognition and attract visitors to the studio. This innovative boutique fitness concept must establish its credibility among potential clientele while introducing the Nordic trainer, a standing skiing machine integrated into a workout regimen that alternates between the skiing machine and floor exercises in pre-determined intervals. This approach bears similarities to Barry's treadmill method.

Remarkably, Nordic Strong's Instagram channel has already garnered substantial popularity within a short period of operation, fostering a new fitness community. Situated in Norhavn, Copenhagen, the studio has two saunas, an open gym, and the indoor skiing studio, echoing the financial resourcefulness of Saints & Stars Amsterdam. Upon arrival, the researcher was greeted by a receptionist acquaintance before being given a comprehensive tour of the studio. Contrary to its portrayal on Instagram, the physical studio seemed more compact and initially underwhelming. Arriving early granted the researcher ample time to observe

participant interactions and engagement with the space. The studio's collaboration with Soho House Copenhagen, of which the researcher is also a member, facilitated rapport-building with some familiar class participants. After changing in the locker room and congregating in the lobby, the researcher observed camaraderie among participants, many of whom appeared to be acquainted. Upon entering the workout area, participants' eagerness to secure preferred positions and join friends led to considerable commotion, as Nordic Strong lacks a formal class booking system. Assembling workout equipment and partnering with fellow participants, regardless of prior acquaintance, further contributed to the lively atmosphere. The obvious sociability and engagement among class members enhanced the sense of community cultivated by Nordic Strong. Given the fully occupied class of 36 participants, a substantial amount of social interaction was observed even without any direct encouragement from the instructor. The instructor proceeded to introduce the Nordic skier and explain the overall class concept, including the proper use of the machine and rotation between stations. Despite the perfect opportunity to promote further interaction by asking participants to introduce themselves or provide a warm welcome for first-time attendees, no such encouragement was given. As the lights dimmed and the music intensified, the workout started, alternating between the Nordic trainer and floor exercises in intervals of five to six minutes. Spontaneous cheers and shouts could be heard throughout the session, but the instructor did not initiate any formal interaction. Instead, he focused on guiding participants through the exercises and counting down the intervals. The class concluded after 45 minutes, followed by a five-minute cooldown during which lively conversations and a positive atmosphere were evident. Upon leaving the room, participants returned their individual equipment, but no overall group interaction was observed. The absence of interaction continued in the locker rooms, with only acquaintances engaging in small talk. After a brief shower, the researcher had an engaging conversation with the founder, who revealed that Friday afternoon drinks took place in the studio, generally fostering a high level of group cohesion and familiarity among attendees. In essence, the participant observation revealed a remarkable degree of group cohesion at Nordic Strong, with minimal intervention from the instructor. First-time participants found it effortless to assimilate into the community, and engaging with unfamiliar individuals at shared stations was not an uncomfortable experience. Notably, a substantial degree of social interaction was present before the workout commenced, even in the absence of active encouragement from the instructor, suggesting a

natural camaraderie among members. Furthermore, the gym's unique position within the neighborhood as one of the few available options attracts a consistent clientele, creating an environment that facilitates easy interaction. Consequently, for shared station workouts and first-time attendees, Nordic Strong stands out as an exemplary case in the boutique fitness sector, characterized by a high perceived level of group cohesion.



Photo 10: Waiting area at Nordic Strong  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 10: Ski Room at Nordic Strong  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 6

### Saints & Stars Amsterdam (Holy Shred)

Saints & Stars, located in Amsterdam, is considered one of the most luxurious boutique fitness studio concepts in the Netherlands. The founder, Roberto, son of the commercial gym giant Basic Fit, has ensured that money is never an issue for this boutique fitness studio. This is evident in the leverage outline of the locker rooms, reception, lounge, and waiting areas. Since its opening 5 years ago, Saints & Stars has attracted the rich and famous of the Netherlands to become part of the workout cult that the studio has built over the span of this time. Despite having only two studios in Amsterdam, Saints & Stars offers a multi-concept boutique studio, with more than four concepts within one location. These concepts range from Holy Ride an indoor group cycling concept to Holy Shred, a Barry's-like hit and run concept, to Holy Build, a workout focusing on strength, and Holy Booty, a pure booty class workout on the Stairmaster, as well as Holy Box, a New York-style Rumble-inspired boxing cardio workout. This multi-studio offering is one of the biggest success factors of Saints & Stars, leading to a high level of return customers, more than can be observed at other boutique fitness studios that offer only one particular type of workout. The studio has become a status symbol in Amsterdam, leading to a cult-like identification within the city towards the brand, and a high level of group identification and group coherency amongst members. Upon entering Saints & Stars, one is not sure whether they have entered a gym or a five-star luxury hotel, as the lobby could be easily misjudged as being the one of the latter, covered in marble and expensive equipment. After giving the name of the class participants to the front desk, one receives the spot at which one joins the Holy Shred workout and proceeds to the lavish and large locker rooms in which all the participants for the different classes change. Structurally placed within 10 minutes of each other, Saints & Stars ensures that there are always enough people in the locker room taking different classes without having too much of an overlap between classes leading to a congested waiting or changing room area. Every 10 minutes, an instructor can be heard through the speaker system calling for their group to enter the studio: "Holy Ride, we begin in 10 minutes". The lavish interior design of the locker rooms and waiting area is a noticeable feature, which invites people to stick around and spend as much time within the studio as possible. This buzzing environment, in which something is always happening, never allows for a dull moment within the studio. After a workout, individuals take a shower and utilize the extensively equipped beauty bar. The high-end

waiting area seems more like an interior design studio for furniture, where members can enjoy coffee or a protein shake. Despite different areas for Holy Ride, Holy Build, or Holy Shred, the waiting area becomes quite full before class, resulting in mingling between participants of different workout concepts. The studio combines the best of international fitness boutique brands, offering multiple concepts under one roof. The Holy Shred room looks like a copy of Barry's Red Room, with the only difference being that it is covered in blue light instead of red. However, the workout itself is identical, with participants transitioning between the treadmill and the floor in different intervals as instructed. For first-timers, it may not be easy to enter the existing cult that Saints & Stars has established. Participants seem to be required to join a certain number of workouts before being recognized as part of the community. Nonetheless, the studio is known for throwing lavish events for their community members, such as workouts in an old church or having fire breathers present during class. This creates immense affection towards the brand, though less group coherency is observed within the class setting itself. The studio's positioning as the most high-end gym in Amsterdam entices people to be part of the group and identify themselves as members of Saints & Stars. During the Holy Shred concept, less cheering and screaming can be observed, with a moment of good group cohesion felt only at the end of the class when participants clap to support each other and thank the instructor. After the workout, the instructor is treated like a celebrity, with many people approaching them for pictures, chats, and musical inspiration/feedback. This highlights the significance of an instructor in bonding between class participants who show up for their favorite instructor and ultimately bond with each other. The waiting area after class provides a space for reflection, taking notes, and observing what is happening at Saints & Stars. Members utilize the waiting area for short socializing, more so than at other boutique studios, indicating the level of comfort required to enter the space and feel part of the group. Urban Heroes in Frankfurt is an example of a studio that follows a similar pattern (as outlined further below).

Saints & Stars is an exemplary case that illustrates how both brand power and financial resources can drive cohesiveness. Despite being around for only five years, as opposed to Barry's two-decade tenure, Saints & Stars has established a strong brand loyalty and an obsession with branded city merchandise among Amsterdam's residents, akin to the cult following that Barry's enjoys. The studio's lavish spending on locker rooms and waiting/reception areas has a positive effect on group cohesiveness, enabling members and

class participants to bond before and after class, especially across different class types like Holy Ride or Holy Shred. However, not much coherence was detected within individual classes, which could be attributed to a lack of effort by the instructor. The studio's lavish events stand out as one of the most prominent indicators of good coherency, drawing people in and providing them with a perfect opportunity to feel united in pursuing the same goal of having an amazing experience while working out together.



Photo 12: Lobby at Saints & Stars Amsterdam.  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 13: Holy Shred room at Saints & Stars Amsterdam  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 7

### Urban Heroes Frankfurt

Urban Heroes presents an intriguing case study in this research project as it is owned by a woman (Jill Braun) who initially attempted to secure the franchise rights for Barry's Germany but was unsuccessful, leading her to open her own studio. The interior of Urban Heroes mirrors that of Barry's Red Room, and the workout routine is almost identical, with the treadmills and the way classes are conducted between the treadmill and floor being the same. Although the equipment chosen for the floor and benches differ slightly, the similarities between the two studios are evident, making Urban Heroes a compelling research subject. The case of Urban Heroes sheds light on how a concept without the brand power of Barry's can still be successful in introducing the same concept to the market, without relying on the

international community and brand power that Barry's has established over the past two decades.

As a first-time visitor to Urban Heroes, I received a comprehensive tour of the entire studio, including the Green Zone for yoga, the Blue Zone for cryo, and the Red Zone for the workout itself. Additionally, I was offered a free shake and a cryo session due to my personal network with the instructor after. The first-time introduction and tour of the studio with another first-timer facilitated an immediate connection between us. After preordering the shake and using the locker rooms to change, we waited between the locker rooms and the studio space in the waiting area for the Red Zone with other class participants.

Initially, the waiting area appeared poorly positioned, as those leaving the changing rooms had to cross through the participants waiting for the next class to enter the changing rooms, resulting in a crowded and cramped space. However, upon observation of other participants leaving class, it became clear that this placement was a smart decision, as it facilitated interaction between group members. Participants were loud and open to striking up conversations with one another. Although this made it difficult for new people to walk into the changing rooms, it also forced people to make eye contact and exchange smiles while politely asking to pass, thereby breaking the ice between them and making it less intimidating to have or initiate a conversation. Additionally, the waiting area featured a board on the wall where the "Heroes of the week" were listed, indicating the top one to three participants and how many classes they had taken that week. This allowed other participants to see the number of classes these winners had taken, fostering social interaction and providing a basis for compliments and conversation starters.

The absence of spot booking at Urban Heroes was striking, which generally allows people to book a particular spot that they would like to start on, either the treadmill or the floor. This absence led to people rushing into the room in a somewhat selfish manner to ensure they got their preferred spot, causing latecomers to awkwardly walk around the room trying to find a spot, not being able to potentially be next to their friends and for sure ending up next to people they did not know beforehand. The instructor asked for first-timers, but it was not met by a round of applause and led to an individual explanation of how the workout, as well as the different stations, work at Urban Heroes. After a very short introduction, the workout started, going through various rounds on the treadmill and on the floor.



At Urban Heroes, it was me as a participant starting with the cheering, which gradually flowed over to the other participants as well, so that by the end of the workout, many more people felt comfortable screaming and cheering. Generally within the boutique fitness industry, some instructors call out the whole group to high five each other, while others do not. If the instructor does not do it, it is very hard for individual participants to get to do it themselves. Therefore, it always proves most efficient if there's one person starting it. Despite Urban Heroes being a concept where participants share stations, there was no real interaction between group participants as they switched stations. This might also be attributed to the transition being very quick, usually less than 90 seconds, as well as no real handover of dumbbells or anything. After the class, the instructor initiated a group cooldown, at the end of which participants got encouraged to take a deep breath together, bring their hands together in front of their heart, and follow it with clapping, initiated by the instructor. Upon leaving the room, the instructor gave everyone a high five and a compliment on their workout performance, which was a nice touch. Despite there being two participants from the same class in the locker room, there was no interaction between the people taking the class in the locker room. Reflecting again on group coherency within Urban Heroes, what has proven very valuable is the group introduction for first-timers, especially giving them a tour through the studio. Furthermore, the biggest group cohesion moment has been waiting together outside of the classroom, which was a fairly cramped space, requiring participants to engage with each other. Overall, Urban Heroes' waiting area and rewards wall promotes interaction among participants and facilitate group cohesion.



Photo 14: Waiting area at Urban Heroes  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 15: Hero wall at Urban Heroes  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 8

### High Studios Amsterdam

High Studios Amsterdam was selected for this study because it was the first boutique fitness studio in Amsterdam with a concept of having three stations and five different locations throughout the city. Furthermore, it was the first boutique fitness studio where the researcher started working as a group instructor around six years ago. High Studios offers the well-known Technogym Skill X format, which includes a Technogym Skill Mill, followed by a Technogym Plyo Box, and a floor space where dumbbells and medicine balls are used. Class participants transition between the treadmill, box, and floor in different intervals and rounds, leading to a 45-minute total body HIIT workout. High Studios has well-maintained, bright reception and waiting areas, always located right next to the classroom itself. However, the locker rooms are typically located on another level, such as in the basement or the first floor. This leads to a nicely spread-out flow of people, avoiding overcrowding at one place. Upon arrival and checking in at the front desk, participants either went upstairs to the locker rooms or put their belongings into the lockers next to the reception and then proceeded to the waiting area. Here class participants were observed engaging in various activities such as sitting around, pre-ordering shakes, using their phones, or interacting with other individuals. Much more social connections could be observed by comparison to other visited studios. Prior to the start of the class, the doors opened, and the group instructor enquired if any attendees were first-timers. As a researcher, interested in exploring opportunities for group coherency within boutique fitness, I raised my hand and was welcomed into the studio with two other newbies for an introduction. It was noted that after the instructor's introduction, the newbies exchanged shy smiles, initiating their first interaction with fellow class participants. High Studios did not employ a spot booking system, and hence, once the introduction was complete, the door opened, and the remaining participants entered, rushing to secure their preferred spot against the wall, indicating their desired starting point for the workout. While some individuals seemed to be taking the class together, others stood alone. The instructor provided an overview of the workout and instructed the participants to form groups of three, with one person starting on the treadmill, another on the box, and the third on the floor. This led to a group cohesion process within the larger group, as those three attendees sharing a station became a smaller group within the larger group. Some participants introduced

themselves to others right away, while others silently joined their new group and started to divide the stations amongst themselves.

The workout commenced with participants rotating between the treadmill, box, and floor stations. Notably, individuals sharing a treadmill, box and a floor station exhibited group cohesion, with no to little interaction with those who started on the adjacent station. The instructor did not encourage to engage participants with one another until the end of the class, where a challenge was initiated, requiring participants to alternate between sprinting on the treadmill and switching with other participants on their station for three minutes, aiming to run as fast as possible as a team of three. The challenge necessitated cheering on team members, leading to intergroup coherency. Following the challenge, participants congratulated their team members, followed by a cool down and small stretches. Class attendees left the room, high fiving the instructor and leaving to their respective lockers. It was notable to observe the significant amount of merchandise that participants brought with them to the fitness class, ranging from tote bags to key chains to water bottles. These items were all rewards earned by completing challenges, one of which was currently taking place, namely the "Christmas Challenge". The challenge was presented in the form of a Bingo card, where individuals had to accomplish specific milestones, such as attending 15 classes or trying a new trainer, to receive branded gifts. These challenges are a crucial and successful retention strategy, and are visibly displayed on the cards, which are then hung up on the wall for all to see. This approach is a significant introduction to group coherency, as individuals actively go to their challenge cards after class to mark off the challenges they have completed, share their achievements on social media, and facilitate conversations with others. Observing one's card hanging next to other individuals' cards in the gym fosters a sense of belonging to the group and results in group coherency.

Overall, High Studios effectively utilized the waiting area to facilitate interaction, and the lack of a spot booking system allowed participants to form groups at their discretion. The individual group challenge resulted in a higher level of group coherency than similar concepts such as Barry's or Saints & Stars.



Photo 16: Challenge scorecard at High Studios  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 17: Studio entrance at High Studios  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 9

### Kailo Yoga Copenhagen

Kailo Yoga is the sole yoga studio under consideration in this research project. Yoga, as a boutique fitness studio concept, is widely known and popular, with studios existing worldwide. Such studios are typically small and have a group of loyal followers who frequent one studio and one instructor. It is interesting to note that, despite the abundance of yoga studios in Copenhagen, most people tend to stick to one studio out of convenience. Upon entering Kailo Yoga, visitors are welcomed by a sweet receptionist in a quiet and calming atmosphere, with a minimally decorated white studio. Upon checking in, it becomes apparent that only a few individuals make use of the locker rooms, instead hanging their jackets in the lobby and proceeding to store their shoes in the studio before entering the yoga room. While Kailo Yoga offers a small tea station and lounge sitting area, most people do not interact with each other before or after class. The studio only has one bathroom, leading to a queue, but no real conversations take place in this area. The TV station in the lounge area seems to be a great meeting point for class participants.

Upon the yoga instructor's entrance into the room, she/he take their position at the front of the class and begin guiding the participants through the session. Throughout the entirety of

the class, individuals remain primarily focused on their own breathing and movements, as directed by the teacher. Unlike other boutique fitness concepts, the instructor does not prompt any interaction among first-time attendees. Yoga, as a form of exercise, does not create many opportunities for group coherency, given that it is primarily an individual workout that necessitates minimal interaction. This lack of interaction also makes it challenging for the instructor to encourage group coherency as each participant is responsible for their own practice. At the end of the class, however, when the group chants "Ohmm" together, a sense of group coherency is established as each person chants in unison. This is the only moment where participants feel connected to one another. Regular customers who store their mats in the studio can be identified as such and seem to know other class attendees. They typically socialize in the lounge area after class, while those who attend only a single session often leave immediately after packing their equipment. Therefore, it can be concluded that Kailo Yoga is one of the least group coherent workouts in the research project. The chanting of "Ohmm" is the only moment where group coherency is established, and this is not due to the instructor's efforts but rather the nature of yoga as a quiet and individualistic form of exercise. Yoga class attendees typically prefer to focus on their practice rather than interact with others, as this can be disruptive to the peace and tranquility sought through yoga. Kailo Yoga does provide an opportunity for individual interaction between participants, particularly in the lounge area, where individuals bring their snacks and engage in conversations. However, this does not contribute to group coherency for the entire group but rather fosters individual interaction. In summary, the chanting of "Ohmm" is the only instance of group coherency, equivalent to the screaming and cheering in other fitness classes within the yoga industry.



Photo 18: Reception of Kailo Yoga  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 19: Lounge area at Kailo Yoga  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Studio 10

### BlackBike Munich

BlackBike Munich, the first operating indoor group cycling studio concept in the Bavarian capital, presents an intriguing case study, much like platform studios in Dubai, where cultural differences have an impact on group coherency. Generally speaking, Germans are known to be a little colder and more reserved in their nature, especially outside of Berlin, making it quite challenging to make connections and meet new people in the city. Upon arriving at the BlackBike studio in Munich, which now has two locations with a third one in the pipeline, the researcher observed a bright and tiny waiting area with direct access to the studio and the cramped locker rooms. Due to the limited space available, interaction with fellow class attendees was necessary to navigate the locker room. Upon checking in at the front desk, the researcher was asked if he was joining for the first time, leading to a small introduction to the studio and a quick tour. Unlike other boutique studios, the instructor at BlackBike Munich introduced themselves outside the workout room and provided basic information about the upcoming class. Upon entering the dark red lit room, the staff assisted in locating and setting up the bike. The instructor then asked for first-time attendees, and the researcher and two others raised their hands, receiving a decent amount of applause from fellow class attendees. The instructor provided a quick introduction for first timers regarding the different positions on the handlebar and how the resistance works on the bike. However, no further interaction between class participants was encouraged, leading to a fairly individualized workout. The only time that people felt a certain level of group cohesion was when they started to cheer and their favorite song by their favorite artist came on. This bonding was mainly based on them liking the same music. At the end of almost every song, people would sit back into their saddle and clap together, indicating a level of support for each other and fellow class attendees. After leaving the class, most people again went into the locker rooms, picked up their bags, and left the studios without much interaction between other class participants. Despite not putting much effort into group coherency at large, the instructor was seen putting a lot of energy into the individual class participant. The front desk staff was also very engaging with new participants. However, the overall experience at Blackjack Munich was an example of pay as you go individual boutique workout, leading to an overall low level of group coherency. Nonetheless, themed classes such as a Taylor Swift ride or a Beyoncé ride, which attract people that are a fan of the same artist, can be seen as leading to a big level of group

coherency. The instructor's importance in facilitating, initiating, and fostering group coherency cannot be overstated, as seen in similar concepts such as platform studios.

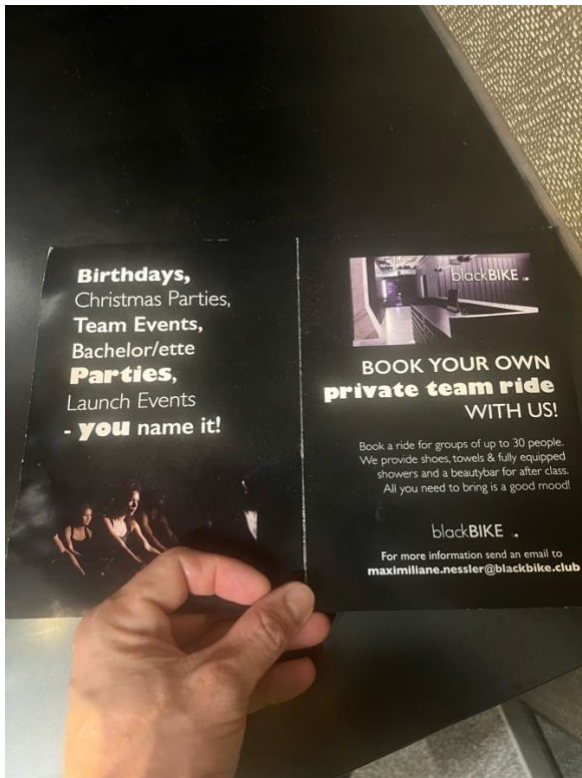


Photo 20: Team ride flyer at BlackBike  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 21: Ride Room at BlackBike  
Source: taken by the researcher

### Practical application: Top 5

To summarize, what has been successfully observed and identified by the researcher to lead to high level of group coherency amongst all the investigated studios are:

1. Photowalls and "Heroes of the Week" displays: Photowalls and the recognition of individual achievements, such as the "Heroes of the Week" concept, facilitate interpersonal connections and conversations among participants who have reached specific milestones or completed a certain number of classes. This visibility not only encourages social interaction but also serves as motivation for individuals to remain engaged within the community, aspiring to similarly be acknowledged on the photowall or "Heroes of the Week" display.

2. **Group Challenges:** As evidenced by High Studios Amsterdam, group challenges foster small-scale group coherence within the larger class setting. While establishing coherence for the entire class may be challenging, these small group exercises facilitate bonding among smaller subsets of participants who work together to achieve specific goals, particularly if they were previously unfamiliar with one another.
3. **Incremental Social Interaction:** Platform Studios Dubai exemplifies the effectiveness of gradually increasing the level of interaction between class participants to cultivate social coherence. By first introducing themselves to one another and then progressively engaging in activities such as cheering, exchanging supportive gestures such as clapping, and racing together, individuals can develop connections at a comfortable pace.
4. **Merchandise:** Branded merchandise plays a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging and group affiliation. The global Barry's community, for example, excels in this regard, with participants wearing branded apparel from various locations feeling instantly connected to the community when entering any Barry's studio worldwide.
5. **Events:** Organizing special events, such as themed classes or activities promoting community engagement, can enhance group coherency among class participants. These events provide a common ground for individuals to bond over shared interests, such as a favorite artist, song, or activity. Consequently, this shared experience serves to strengthen group coherency as individuals engage in the same event and develop connections based on their mutual appreciation for the featured activity.

These strategies, when implemented effectively, contribute to fostering a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and group coherence within boutique fitness studios, creating an environment that encourages continued engagement and participation in the community.



## Discussion

Returning to the theoretical framework and drawing upon the findings of Spink and Carron (1992), which highlight the positive impact of the percentage of known fellow group members to class participants on the level of group cohesion, it becomes evident that facilitating networking among members is crucial for boutique gyms in order to achieve high levels of group cohesion and therefore retention. Overall, three main dimensions were emerging from the literature and were observed in practice through participant observation encompass: the sense of group belonging fostered by identification with merchandise, opportunities for social interactions provided by the instructor, and the application of group dynamic principles. These dimensions will be thoroughly discussed in the following paragraphs.

Utilizing the definition of group cohesion employed in this research project, which refers to "an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in groups" (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 482), this study has explored and demonstrated various strategies employed by boutique fitness studio brands to enhance group cohesion and encourage members to feel morally and emotionally connected to their membership.

One highly effective tactic observed to fulfill the need for belonging, as described by Bollen & Hoyle (1990), is the use of branded merchandise by the studio. Barry's in particular has excelled in this regard by ensuring that every studio worldwide has a recognizable branded T-shirt featuring the name of the city. This global branding strategy enables individuals to identify and engage with one another, fostering a sense of belonging to the larger Barry's community. As previously mentioned, wearing a branded T-shirt from another Barry's studio provides an ideal conversation starter when discussing the city featured on the shirt.

Similar effects can be observed with other merchandise, such as branded keychains and water bottles offered by various studios such as High Studios Amsterdam. While these items may be less obvious than branded T-shirts, they still enable individuals to identify with and feel connected to their workout group when encountering others with the same keychain or water bottle. This strategy is particularly effective when a brand operates multiple studios within a single city, facilitating cross-studio interactions among participants. Encountering someone on the street with the same keychain, even if they attend a different studio, still provides an opportunity for networking and potentially meeting that person at a shared studio location. Another notable example includes the milestone T-shirts found at TribeNL, which not only

allow for identification among wearers but also serve as a status symbol, indicating a certain level of achievement and credibility. In the case of TribeNL, bonding occurs not only through shared studio experiences but also through the number of classes taken.

In summary, the analysis reveals that daily items, such as workout T-shirts and water bottles, possess the capacity to significantly increase the group cohesion. These objects enable individuals to experience a profound sense of belonging to their respective fitness collectives, while simultaneously fostering a shared sense of identity with others who own the identical apparel or accessories. This fairly simple yet powerful connection tool serves to strengthen the bonds between group members, thereby enhancing overall group coherence and fostering a communal atmosphere within the fitness studio context.

Moreover, Carron and Spink (1992) have researched that increasing the prospects for social engagement can effectively bolster the perceived degree of group cohesion. Gui et al., (2022) has identified various forms of social interactions, encompassing indirect exchanges among exercise participants and those between instructors and exercisers. An important aspect related to the second identified dimension of social interaction, is its dependence on the persona of the instructor. As evidenced in the current sections of this research project, fitness studios have implemented specific strategies to foster social interactions among participants, thereby aiming to promote heightened group cohesion and customer retention. Barry's Polaroid wall or Urban Heroes Frankfurt's Heroes Wall serve as good example for a conversation starter, enabling participants to easily engage with one another by acknowledging their achievements or sharing their experiences. Despite these measures being in the hand of the studio operator, most of the success regarding social interactions largely depends on the quality and efforts of the instructor. A comprehensive approach to fostering social interaction should include multiple aspects, such as introducing new participants to the existing workout group or encouraging participants to interact with each other. Some boutique studios, predominantly in the indoor group cycling section, welcome first-time class attendees with applause, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere. This practice, however, is less common in other concepts, such as Barry's or Saints & Stars. Another effective method applied in order to promote social interaction is having participants introduce themselves by their names, as observed especially in Platform Studios Dubai. This simple act of introduction significantly contributes to group cohesion by breaking the ice and

paving the way for future interactions. Participants may then continue to support each other by celebrating completed challenges, cheering each other on, or even engaging in collective chants, as seen in Kailo Yoga's workout classes. Furthermore, instructors play a crucial role in facilitating interaction, not only among class participants, but also between themselves and the participants. This can be achieved by calling participants out by their names or asking them about their preferences for upcoming workout tracks. Although these interactions primarily involve the instructor and the participant, they can also provide opportunities for participants to engage with each other after the class, discussing their choices or sharing their experiences.

The final dimension discerned from existing literature and observed in practice through participant observation research are the principles of group dynamics. Numerous group exercise instructors have employed an array of group dynamics principles, such as collaborative exercises, collective goal-setting, and techniques to increase communication and interaction among members.

An exceptionally effective approach to promoting increased group dynamics and participant interaction, and consequently, increased group cohesion, is the implementation of shared stations and team challenges that require collaboration among participants, mostly involving individuals who have not previously met. This collaborative process and especially the introduced team challenges encourage class members to work together to attain a shared objective, leading to the optimal level of group cohesion.

Nonetheless, this method has not been adopted by every observed fitness studios, which can be attributed to the inherent nature of certain workout concepts that preclude the possibility of sharing stations or introducing team challenges. Consequently, the boutique fitness concepts that have most successfully incorporated this strategy are Platform Studios Dubai, where participants race alongside their partners, and High Studios Amsterdam, where team challenges are emphasized. Observations from concepts such as Saints & Stars or Barry's, reveal that the instructor plays a pivotal role in fostering interaction between participants as they share and alternate stations. The degree of interaction can vary significantly, ranging from minimal to extensive, depending on the initiation and facilitation provided by the instructor. Ultimately, the instructor's role is crucial in fostering a collaborative and cohesive atmosphere in the fitness studio setting, leading to higher member engagement and therefore group cohesion.

Summarizing, based on the research of M. Yoke (2014) and the findings through participant observations, it has been found that three principal dimensions and numerous practical approaches exist to foster cohesion within group exercise classes in boutique fitness studios. These dimensions include the cultivation of a sense of group belonging via the identification of distinctive wearables, the provision of social interaction opportunities initiated by the studio and the group instructor, as well as the employment of group dynamic principles.

The practical implications of these dimensions are not fully exhaustive, but rather encompass a range of techniques such as familiarizing oneself with the names of participants and facilitating the learning of each other's names, publicizing success stories of participants within the studio and the digital platforms for collective appreciation and inspiration, as well as the integration of partner exercises to promote cooperative engagement.

Moreover, the scientific literature emphasizes the significance of small talk before and after group exercise sessions in boutique fitness studios, particularly in fostering group cohesion. Such interactions are facilitated by the presence of lounge areas within these studios, with Urban Heroes Frankfurt providing the best example of this practice. These designated spaces encourage informal dialogues and, consequently, contribute to the enhancement of the overall group exercise experience.



Photo 22: Key Chain from High Studios Amsterdam.  
Source: taken by the researcher



Photo 23: Researcher wearing a Barry's Long Beach shirt at another Barry's in LA  
Source: taken by the researcher

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the extensive exploration and investigation of group cohesion in exercise classes, by combining important scholarly work as well data gathered from the researchers own participant observations, has shed light on the multifaceted nature of fostering a unified group experience within the context of boutique fitness studios. Through a comprehensive inquiry spanning the last month, several countries and various forms of boutique offerings, the researcher has identified three core dimensions, emerging from literature as well as participant observations, that underpin the promotion of cohesion in such settings: the establishment of a sense of group belonging, the facilitation of social interaction by instructors, and the adherence to group dynamic principles.

The outlined analysis in this paper has highlighted the important role played by wearable identification, such as branded clothing or accessories, which fosters a shared identity and facilitates the creation of an inclusive group atmosphere. Furthermore, the instructor's engagement with the group through practices like learning participants' names, sharing success stories, and incorporating partner exercises has turned out to be central piece in the creation of a supportive and collaborative environment. These practical strategies not only enhance the overall class experience but also contribute to the development of lasting bonds among group members and a therefore lead to a higher client retention for the operators. Moreover, the present research has highlighted the significance of casual conversations occurring in the time before and after classes. By providing lounge areas, especially such as the kind of those found in boutique fitness studios such as Urban Heroes Frankfurt, a relaxed setting emerges that encourages informal interactions and fortifies connections amongst class participants. These spaces within the studio are instrumental in fostering a sense of community and group cohesion, which in turn improves the cohesiveness of the group exercise experience.

Throughout the months-long investigation as part of this research paper, the complex interplay of factors that contribute to promoting cohesion in group exercise classes has been meticulously examined. By combining the insights from the scientific literature and participant observations work executed by the researcher, a nuanced understanding of the practical approaches to enhancing group cohesion in the settings of boutique fitness studios

has been developed, leading to a successful answering of the research question. As such, fitness professionals and studio owners can draw on these findings to create more engaging, supportive, and ultimately, cohesive group exercise experiences for their members, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and community that is integral to the success of any fitness studio or class.

## Limitations

As discussed by authors DeWalt (2002), participant observations come with a certain level of challenges and limitations, amongst which is the issue of observer bias and the potential for harm to participants. In order to combat these threats, the researchers emphasize the need for reflexivity, including but not being limited to the awareness of the researchers own experiences and biases, in the fieldwork process. This has not been successfully achieved to the full degree needed to result in full objectivity in this research project. Instead, due to the personal relationship and experience within the field of research, the researcher has, despite all efforts to remain impartial, been biased and influenced by his own perception of the studios and perceived level of group coherence. Because the researcher is an active participant in the research setting, his own biases and perspectives can influence the data he collects and his interpretation of the data. Additionally, considering that the researcher has already been very emotionally invested in the setting prior to the research, this might have led to a lack of objectivity in the data collection process as well as the following analysis. Especially his background as an instructor puts him in a position where he is very able to put himself in the shoe of the other instructors and support them with screams and cheers, which only then is being picked up by other class participants, therefore leading to a different level of group coherence than would be achieved if the researcher would have stayed fully impartial. This high level of engagement by the research therefore could be considered as influencing the objective statements of the findings and render them invalid. Most prominent this can be seen in the case of Platform Studios Dubai, which the researcher had a very good connection to the instructor, resulting in the highest perceived level of group cohesion amongst all studios. Therefore, one of the main limitations of this research project is the results being heavily influenced by the personal background of the researcher. Furthermore, as continuously outlined by DeWald (2002), generally speaking, a researcher ideally needs to

spend extended time periods in the research setting, sometimes resulting in months or even years of engagement, to gather sufficient data that can yield a high scientific return. This was not present in this research project, as the researcher was only present during the 45-60 min of class and was not able to investigate the research subjects beyond that. No community events were observed, neither did the researcher have the chance to be included in a hero wall or get a milestone shoutout, which as stated above, have a high impact on perceived group coherence. Therefore, despite the excessive participants observations executed, they still merely scratch the surface of what is properly required by the scientific community in order to yield scientific valid results.

Participant Observation in its pure nature is a very subjective and resource-intensive research method, therefore having the requirements of it ideally being used in conjunction with other research methods such as interviews or surveys in order to provide a well-rounded and scientifically proof understanding of the topic being studied. As part of this research project, this was only briefly executed at Platform Studios where one informal interview has been conducted with the instructor, however besides this instance, no other form of scientific research methods have been applied. This is a big limitation of this paper, as it shows that the perception of group coherence is only proven by the subjective opinion of the researcher, rather than fully tested/investigated with a questionnaire or other measurement tool, leaving to question how accurate and scientifically valid the measured levels of group cohesion actually are. Another present limitation is the one of the data collection processes. During a classic participant observation, the researcher actively takes part in the events or activities being studied, while at the same time also taking the role of observer and as that is recording data. Due to the inability to record data during class, as phones are not allowed in the group setting during the workout, it was impossible for the researcher to take accurate notes during the observations. Every field note had to be done after the workout and therefore the recording of the observations was conducted after rather than during the class, leading to a potential of inaccurate reporting and/or the forgetting of certain critical features, due to the inability to take notes during the observation but instead having to rely purely on the memory of the researcher. Furthermore, generally necessary deemed equipment, such as a cameras, audio/sound recorders and field notes notebooks could not be used live but only after class, at which most moments for sound or video recording had passed, therefore limiting the

recording options to field notes, leading to a limitation related to the variety and quality in field notes.

Lastly, from an ethical point of view, the largest limitation of this present research project is the lack of necessary permissions or consent forms from the participants. Since the researcher did not disclose his role as such, no official consent has been asked from the participants to be researched/observed. Despite being able to argue that the observations were conducted with good intentions in mind, it is ethically questionable to conduct the research without a signed consensus form from the participants first. This however was deemed impossible in terms of practical implication and therefore not done. Throughout every studio visit/observation the researcher maintained an overt role, therefore not making clear that he was operating as a researcher and actively conducting research, which regarding the ethics of this practice is a big limitation.

### Future Research

Based on the limitations and challenges outlined in the above section, a clear necessity for further research on participant observation in the field of group coherence in boutique fitness classes can be identified. In order to combat the issue of observer bias and potential harm to participants, future research should prioritize reflexivity and awareness of the researchers' personal biases and experiences in the research process of conducting field work. One option to achieve this would be through training and self-reflection prior to and during the observation process for the researcher. Moreover, future research studies should seek to use a multitude of research methods in combination together, such as interviews or surveys, to provide a well-rounded and scientifically valid understanding of the research topic. This will allow for a more thorough investigation of group coherence beyond pure subjective opinions of the researcher and will help to address the limitations of this current study.

Another area for future research is to explore and apply alternative means of recording data during participant observations. The inability to take notes during class and the lack of equipment for recording audio or video inside the studio, posed significant limitations to the quality and variety of field notes. Therefore, innovative approaches to data collection in these settings should be explored, such as the use of wearable technology or real-time audio and video recording through the studio operator. Lastly, future studies need to prioritize ethical considerations, particularly regarding the consent and participation of research subjects such



as obtaining informed consent from participants before conducting research, as this is a crucial ethical consideration. Researchers furthermore should ensure that participants are aware of their role and intentions, and that the research is conducted with respect and consideration for their rights and well-being.

In conclusion, this research project highlights several limitations and challenges that are inherent to participant observation research in the context of group coherence in fitness classes. Addressing these limitations through further research and innovation will help to strengthen the scientific validity and ethical justification of this research method and will ultimately lead to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of group coherence in fitness settings.

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