
The Ethical Qualms Of The Fitness Industry

Throughout the past couple of decades, America has been stricken with an epidemic of worsening health outcomes. Obesity is considered by the Center of Disease Control (CDC) as America's health crisis with most states ranging within the 18.7% to 32% obesity rate (as cited by Ward-Smith, 2010). The CDC (2020) also states that the leading cause of death in the United States is heart disease with about 655,000 Americans dying each year. Along with these underlying conditions, Americans are also getting less physical activity and are becoming more and more sedentary which is linked to elevated risk of mortality from all causes independent from other comorbidities (Schmid et al., 2015). Americans are getting unhealthier and producing poorer health outcomes over time. The intuition is to get exercise and to make healthier food options over time, however, these initiatives are easier said than done. There are multitude of factors that play into long term health: time, cost, lifestyle changes, etc. Many people simply do not have the time or energy to dedicate to their longevity, as grim as it may be. This leads many to focus on the fringe aspects of health and fitness: supplements and online programs.

The Fitness Industry and Ethical Issues

The struggle to achieve one's health and fitness goals has become a dominant issue in many people's lives throughout the past couple of decades. The prospects of being healthy and active are simple in nature but extremely hard to commit to and act on long term. This is where the commercial components of the health promotion industry tend to come in. The growing interest and attention surrounding physical health and fitness has caused an entire industry of fitness supplements to rise along with it. At some point, everyone has seen the fitness infomercial offering training programs based on body types, nutrition plans, expensive supplements, and other expensive "quick-fixes" to health. These adverts usually appeal to the ordinary person, promising ease of use and quick results.

Fat burners, protein supplements, weight loss pills, and shakes are just a few examples to name that predicate on the buyer's desire to lose weight or get fit. While limited research has shown that nutritional supplements do have an acute benefit to reaching specific sports-oriented goals, their use generally is not needed for recreational health and fitness (Dreher et al., 2018). Normal people outside of specific sport do not need to consume these supplements if they have adequate diets. Most supplements are placebo at best or are harmful to the user at worst. Many that are unaware of these facts fall into the rabbit hole of spending large sums of money on supplements that have little to no effectiveness, only to be discouraged and be led astray from their goals. Despite this, behind every new product or revolutionary program, there is an individual proclaiming the benefits and health implications of said product. Self-proclaimed "health-experts" are the ones selling snake oil supplements and health programs to unsuspecting patrons, in lieu of practical and legitimate advice. There are a multitude of different ethical qualms and implications that these actions have on the industry at large, which will be discussed as well as practical application of theory in this field.

Ethical Theories in the Fitness Industry

Desire Satisfaction Theory

Desire satisfaction theory posits that actions are intrinsically good if they satisfy your desires, only if they satisfy your desires, and because they satisfy your desires (Shafer-Landau, 2017, pp. 44-45). This theory essentializes our subjective desires and puts them at the forefront of our actions. From the perspective of an average person, they may be motivated to purchase fat burning supplements and other training modalities because they desire to be more fit and healthy. They fall for these scams and marketing in the hopes that the products will be the “cure” they need to reach their goals. Desire satisfaction theory is so appealing in its application because it does not rely on any objective ethical theory or application. Desire satisfaction theory relies heavily on the use of welfare by the person in question (Lin, 2016). All that is simply needed to a justification as to why a person wants to pursue something, if this requirement is filled, the action is intrinsically good. If a person feels that buying a certain product or supplement would lead them to being better off with their health, then their actions are intrinsically good.

Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism is an ethical theory that asserts actions that maximizes one’s own wellbeing are the morally right things to do (Burgess-Jackson, 2012). Essentially, every person has a duty to promote their own pursuit of self-interests. From the viewpoint of the marketeer, they are marketing a product for the prospect of turning a profit, which benefits them. The monetary incentive and the notoriety are in their own self-interest to pursue, which is supported by ethical egoism. A big misconception with ethical egoism is that ethical egoists would only be interested in actions that solely benefit themselves. Ethical egoism does not necessitate an action that would benefit themselves alone; rather, when weighing their actions based on self-interest, it would be preferable to perform one action over another (Chong, 1992). For example, in a scenario where a fitness entrepreneur was to genuinely sell a product that helped others reach their goals and they feel fulfilled from that, their actions would still be reasonably explained by ethical egoism. Same thing goes for the previous scenario, if a person improves their wellbeing or feels fulfilled by scamming other people purely for profit, then their actions are moral under ethical egoism independent of what happens to the other party. Ethical egoism basically fits our actions under the moral framework by stating that our fulfillment and wellbeing should be at the forefront of our moral decisions. Whether the fulfillment could be from helping other people reach their health goals or purely for the pursuit of profit or notoriety, both motivations are valid because they provide a net positive effect on wellbeing.

Consequentialism

Consequentialist theory is a moral theory that posits an action is moral or immoral based on the effects of the outcome (Portmore, 2014). If the outcome provides the most positive effects when weighed against other alternatives, the action is deemed a moral imperative. In the case of the person that is purchasing the products, they believe that it is the right thing to do because it would allow them to be healthier and more fit in the long run. This is guided by consequentialist thought because all the other alternatives are less preferable (the comorbidities linked to poorer health outcomes). They are trying to justify the purchases as an “investment in their health”. It is required to produce the best results, i.e. better health outcomes. A way of framing decisions along the consequentialist perspective is through graded dimensions. Martin Peterson framed it in a way that describes each moral action has degrees of moral rightness or wrongness. Actions are partially right and partially wrong and they are weighed on the axes of risk, wellbeing, and

outcome (as cited by Andri? & Tanyi, 2015). Going back to the scenario, a person that is looking to improve their health would weight their decisions based on the axes of risk, wellbeing, and outcome. There are risks with being overweight and sedentary, wellbeing is crippled when self-esteem is low, and financial costs for bad health with work to the detriment of the customer. By this reasoning, it is a moral duty to pursue whatever avenues necessary to produce the most favorable outcomes, even if they are victims of advertising and poor products.

Conclusion

“Health is wealth” is a sentiment that that reflects the situation of many in modern times. The struggle to achieve certain health outcomes and lifestyle changes are becoming increasingly difficult to attain, and the price of being unhealthy has serious economic and lifestyle burdens. With this struggle comes the desperation to feel better and to live healthier, which causes many to fall down a rabbit hole of false promises and disappointment. On the other end are businessmen and women that are there to make a quick buck, selling lies and goals that ultimately will not be reached. They are in it for themselves and their own self-interests supersede the interests of their clientele. The health promotion industry needs a reform; one that prioritizes the health of the general and athletic population. People that are struggling need to hear that losing weight and being healthy are hard goals. They do take time and effort over the span of a lifetime. To promote health sustainably, it is a professional’s duty to promote long-term methods and practices that help people improve their health over time, not to popularize quick fixes and short cuts. There are no shortcuts to good health and that should not stop a person from veering away from their goals.

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