

WORK(OUT) FROM HOME: COVID FUELS ONLINE EXERCISE BOOM



An attendee rides an Echelon exercise bike while an instructor is displayed on screen during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada. —AFP photos



An attendee uses a Liteboxer interactive boxing home workout during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Interactive comment sections and virtual reality headsets: internet-connected fitness gear and services have boomed during the pandemic as at-home athletes seek a proxy for gym life. While home workouts long predate the coronavirus, they have taken on a social aspect that looks set to become the standard in a world reshaped by the pandemic.

"A big part of going to the gym together is sort of suffering together... you build a camaraderie around that," Jeremy Needham, who does customer education for US boxing fitness company Liteboxer, told AFP at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. "And now that we don't share that space, at least in real time, we have to do it virtually," he added.

Like other companies that sell internet-connected fitness gear, Liteboxer offers customers access to workouts, competitions and other features for a monthly charge on top of the roughly \$1,200 wall-mounted machine. The market for fitness tech has been growing for years, but the industry has gotten a boost in the last couple of years, similarly to how the pandemic accelerated e-commerce and remote working trends.

"Connected equipment exploded onto the scene in a big way as consumers had to shift the way to work out during the pandemic," CES organizer Consumer Technology Association (CTA) noted in an industry forecast. Internet-connected exercise equipment was a nearly \$3.8 billion market in 2021, and double-digit percentage growth is expected this year, CTA's forecast said. "(Customers) want connectivity," said Richard Kowalski, an analyst with CTA. "They want to engage with other people online."

Need for pandemic release

Connected rowing machine maker Hydrow allows customers to comment and like others' workouts, and users have developed their own social media groups. "You start talking to each other and then all of a sudden, you have a group of maybe six guys, you know, from all over the world," Aquil Abdullah, who leads workouts on the system, told AFP. "A guy is in London, a guy is out in California, a guy is down in Florida, and you have this community." The machines, which sell for \$2,295, have the usual rowing bar and seat, but also a screen that allows clients to exercise

along with instructors on the water, in locales from Miami to London.

"We do these workouts, and so that's part of building community and building those connections," said Abdullah, who rowed for the US at the 2004 Olympics in Athens. But the connected fitness industry has shown some sensitivity to the changing conditions of the pandemic and the way it affects equipment users' lives. Fitness firm Peloton's shares have been under pressure since early November, when the company cut its forecast as more consumers returned to reopening gyms.

Credit Suisse downgraded the firm in December, saying the market shifts have forced Peloton to increase advertising and discounting. However, as cases of COVID's Omicron variant break records around the world, many are again hunkering down at home. That shift could work in favor of home fitness tech companies. CTA took a bullish perspective, saying "the growth trajectory suggests that health-conscious consumers are finding practicality and convenience in exercising at home, even as gyms and workout classes reopen."

And exercise of any kind has offered some people a relief from the pandem-

ic's impacts—as work, school and travel disruptions and simmering health worries offer plenty to stress about. "The pandemic locked us inside... we couldn't do the things that we loved," said

Needham. "But the human body still needs cardiovascular activity, it's quite simple. You just need a really engaging way... to release that energy that builds up in you." —AFP



An attendee uses a Liteboxer interactive boxing home workout during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.



Yang Kaiyuan (right), a cosmetic doctor at beauty clinic PhiSkin, performs an operation at the clinic in Shanghai.



Yang Kaiyuan (right), a cosmetic doctor at beauty clinic PhiSkin, performs an operation at the clinic in Shanghai.

BEAUTY IS ONLY SKIN DEEP IN CHINA 'MICRO-PROCEDURE' CRAZE

Midday queues snake out to the street in an upmarket Shanghai neighborhood, but it's not lunch at the city's hottest restaurant that people are lining up for—it's cosmetic "micro-procedures", which are surging in popularity in China. The "lunchtime facelift" and other "medical aesthetics" procedures are booming as a new generation of Chinese consumers grapple with the pressure to look good on social media as well as in person.

Kayla Zhang has never actually gone under the knife for cosmetic reasons, but she's had laser treatments, injections and a thread lift—a barbed string inserted under the skin and pulled up to "lift" the face. "I'm not changing my nose or my eyes, which would be an extreme change in my looks," the 27-year-old told AFP, adding that she's seeking a "better version" of herself rather than "a totally new face."

Already popular in the West because they are less invasive and more affordable than traditional cosmetic surgery, micro-procedures—from laser facials and fillers to thread lifts—are fast becoming the norm in China's cities where disposable incomes have jumped in the past decade. The Chinese Association of Plastics and Aesthetics estimates, overall, the cosmetic industry will grow to \$46 billion this year compared to around \$6.5 billion in 2013. Micro-procedures are now an expanding segment of that market, while traditional surgery's growth rates slow, according to data from consulting firm Frost and Sullivan.

Changing values

But a government crackdown looms over the boom. The ruling Communist Party is pushing a broad campaign to "purify" social values, which includes taking aim at mounting youth pressure to go under

the knife. The government has banned industry advertising practices that contribute to "appearance anxiety" such as before-and-after images, and has levied tens of millions of dollars in fines this year over various infractions.

Model Li Li already gets monthly laser treatments to correct skin blemishes but admits she feels social pressure to continually fix her appearance. After friends said her face was out of proportion she opted for a "chin filler," which makes the chin more prominent. "I went to get it immediately," the 27-year-old confessed.

But Li and Zhang insist that micro-procedures—which can cost on average a third of the price of cosmetic surgery, according to research by Deloitte—are a less-invasive alternative to traditional surgery and are being unfairly stigmatized. "Everyone had the



A cosmetic doctor at beauty clinic PhiSkin checks an equipment at the clinic in Shanghai.

same standard of beauty before, but now it feels like this norm is being tipped over," added Zhang, who likens micro-procedures to skincare, but faster. A decade ago, cosmetic doctor Yang Kaiyuan said customers often came to him with a picture of a celebrity, telling him: "I want to look like this." "Nowadays, people just hope to make slight improvements on what they already have," Yang explained.

Unrestrained growth

But the government is concerned by the rise in unlicensed, unregulated providers. In 2019, 15 percent of the 13,000 licensed beauty clinics in China were operating outside of their business scope and only 28 percent of doctors in the industry were certified, according to iResearch. Its report added that for every up-to-standard needle used, two unapproved ones were in circulation.

Earlier this year, a Chinese actress shared cautionary photos online of a botched operation that left her nose badly infected. But Ken Huang, CEO at beauty clinic PhiSkin, says the societal factors pushing young Chinese to seek cosmetic adjustments to advance their careers or to boost social media popularity remain strong.

"Good-looking people will have more opportunities than others," Huang said. "If you don't look good on the outside, even if you have an interesting personality, people might not get the chance to see it." Still in her twenties, Zhang already opts for monthly micro-procedures and will keep this routine until she feels her appearance leaves her "no choice but to go under the knife". She explained: "Then I may need stronger methods to be able to return to a younger state." —AFP

Philippine literary giant F Sionil Jose dies aged 97

Philippine novelist Francisco Sionil Jose, whose widely translated works delved into the Southeast Asian country's painful colonial past and social injustices, died Thursday, according to a literary guild he had founded. He was 97. In a prolific writing career spanning seven decades, Jose penned more than a dozen novels, several short story collections, essays and a regular newspaper column. He also owned a bookshop.

He died at a Manila hospital one day before he was to undergo an angioplasty, the Philippine Center of International PEN said in a statement on its Facebook page. His death was also announced by The Varsitarian, the student paper which he had edited at the Manila university where he studied. A self-declared "agnostic", the writer took to Facebook earlier Thursday in what would effectively be his last words, thanking God as well as his "brave heart" for "this most precious gift" as he waited for his blood vessel procedure.

"Now, that I am here in waiting for an angioplasty, I hope that you will survive it and I with it, so that I will be able to continue what I have been doing with so much energy that only you have been able to give," he wrote. The son of a church minister and a dressmaker, Jose grew up in a poor rural village in the northern province of Pangasinan - where he developed an early love for reading and later set many of his novels.

His writing was deeply influenced by the Philippine national hero Jose Rizal and he was best known for his "Rosales Saga". The five-novel series follows several generations of two families over 100 years from the Spanish colonial period to martial law under former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, exploring issues such as social inequalities, land rights and insurgencies. "One of the greatest tasks of Filipino writers is how to make Filipinos remember. Not only to remember but to love this country," Jose said in a 2011 interview.

Jose was born on December 3, 1924, when the Philippines was an American colony. After working in the US Army Medical Corps during World War II, he studied literature and edited The Varsitarian, the student publication at the University of Santo Tomas in the capital Manila. He quit college before finishing his degree. After a stint at the now-defunct United States Information Agency at the US embassy in Manila, Jose joined the Manila Times newspaper where he worked for a decade. In the early 1960s, he moved to Hong Kong to edit Asia magazine. He later returned to the Philippines, where he opened the Solidaridad bookshop in 1965 in what was then a middle-class neighborhood of the capital. —AFP