

Work(out) from home: Pandemic fuels online exercise boom

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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 pandemic'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."

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