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# Likes, Shares, and Sweat: Exploring the Effectiveness of Social Media Influencing in Online Fitness Coaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Henan Province, China

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## Abstract

*The utilization of social media platforms for fitness coaching has become increasingly popular among individuals who aspire to achieve their health and fitness goals. Within the context of Henan Province, China, a study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of social media influencers (SMIs) in providing online fitness coaching services and overcoming challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also explored their perspectives on challenges and overall strategies that can be employed to help clients achieve their fitness objectives. In terms of methodology, this research utilized qualitative methods to describe the SMIs' personal coaching that aims at enhancing personal knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The results of the study revealed that social media can be an effective tool for motivating clients and building community; however, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. There are several factors such as content-related challenges, process-related challenges, and context-related challenges that need to be addressed with relevant strategies so that these SMIs (social media influencers) can ensure the effectiveness of social media for online fitness coaching beyond the pandemic. This study provides significant insights into the role of social media in online fitness coaching while emphasizing the need for a more nuanced approach to this growing trend. By acknowledging these implications, coaches can better understand how important it is to tailor their approaches according to each client's unique needs and preferences while accounting for cultural differences within different regions or countries like Henan Province in China.*

**Keywords:** *social media, online fitness coaching, social media influencing, client engagement, fitness goals, adherence, coaching style, motivation, community*

## Introduction

The trend of using social media platforms for fitness coaching has gained momentum over time, especially among those who want to attain their health and fitness objectives. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has added impetus to the demand for online fitness coaching, making it imperative to assess the effectiveness of social media influencers in offering such services. This study focuses on Henan Province, China, aiming to delve into how social media influencers (SMIs) impact online fitness coaching and examine the obstacles that may constrain them from delivering

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efficient coaching services. By comprehensively investigating these aspects, readers can gain a better understanding of how social media platforms can be utilized to enhance our well-being and identify potential areas where improvements are needed.

## **Background of the Study**

Social media has revolutionized the way fitness influencers promote their services and connect with clients (Mention, Barlatier, & Josserand, 2019). With popular platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook at their disposal (Ellington et al., 2022), fitness gurus can showcase their personal journeys through inspiring stories, images, and experiences. Indeed, in this digital age, social media provides a cost-effective way for coaches to reach a wider audience while also growing their client base (Fernandez-Prados, Lozano-Diaz, Bernal-Bravo, Muyor-Rodriguez, & Ieee, 2021).

Fitness influencers have embraced social media as a powerful tool to connect with potential clients and promote their fitness services. Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook are some of the platforms where these fitness experts can showcase their personal experiences, inspiring stories, and captivating images to motivate and inspire individuals who may be seeking guidance on their fitness journey (Kim, 2022; Sokolova & Perez, 2021)

With a global reach and accessibility that extends beyond traditional marketing methods, social media provides an economical way for coaches to connect with a broader audience across various demographics (Pinto & Yagnik, 2017). This medium has become increasingly popular since it is relatively easy to create content that is informative, educational, or entertaining for followers.

Furthermore, social media allows for direct communication between coaches and clients which enables personalized feedback by assessing client performance through posts or direct messages sent by the coach (Athanasopoulou & Giovanis, 2019). The constant interaction ensures better progress monitoring in real-time leading to desirable results faster than traditional offline coaching methods.

Overall, social media has revolutionized the fitness industry by providing cost-effective marketing opportunities while also facilitating personalized communication between coaches and clients (Enke & Borchers, 2021). Fitness influencers can now leverage this technology to grow their brand awareness while helping clients achieve their desired health goals in ways not previously possible.

## **Research problem**

The use of social media in fitness coaching has been extensively studied (Ardianto, Sugiyanto, & Liskustyawati, 2021; Ariyarathna, 2015), but limited research exists on its effectiveness in online fitness coaching specifically in Henan Province, China. Prior studies have primarily focused on Western contexts (Callary, Gearity, & Kuklick, 2021; Heidorn & Huet, 2020), neglecting the nuances of cultural differences and social norms that may influence social media usage for fitness coaching in a Chinese context. To bridge this knowledge gap, this study aims to investigate the benefits and limitations of social media influencing for online fitness coaching within Henan

Province while exploring the challenges related to content, process, and context faced by social media influencers in this region. Additionally, it intends to identify strategies employed by these individuals to overcome obstacles and ensure effective use of social media beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. With these objectives laid out, this study can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social media is utilized in online fitness coaching within a Chinese cultural framework.

## **Purpose of Study**

This study is being conducted to examine the effectiveness of social media influencers who offer online fitness coaching services in Henan Province, China. Additionally, it aims to delve into the various strategies that can be utilized to tackle any obstacles encountered by these influencers. The goal of this research is to provide essential and valuable insights into how social media plays a significant role in online fitness coaching, highlighting the importance of taking a more refined and nuanced approach to this burgeoning phenomenon. By shedding light on these factors and analyzing them in detail, this study endeavors to furnish an overall comprehensive understanding of the subject matter at hand.

As mentioned above, there has been a surge in the popularity of online fitness coaching (Bicen, Uzunboylu, & Burgul, 2020; Harris & Metzler, 2019), and it has become imperative to explore ways to maximize social media's influence to support individuals in achieving their fitness objectives. Although there have been studies on the effectiveness of social media influencing in fitness coaching (Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani, & Dwivedi, 2019; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), there hasn't been much research done specifically in Henan Province, China. There are only a handful of studies in China that seeks to address that issue and delve into the advantages and drawbacks of using social media for online fitness coaching in this region (Xiaoli, 2022). Additionally, there is a lack of local studies to discover the hurdles faced by social media influencers when providing online fitness coaching services in Henan Province, China pertaining to content, process, and context of an investigation. Simultaneously, there is a practical gap to identify and link the strategies used by these influencers to overcome obstacles and ensure that social media remains an effective tool for online fitness coaching beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Xing Na, 2022). Corresponding to what is explained, the following lists the research questions for this study:

### **1. What is the effectiveness of social media influencing in online fitness coaching in Henan Province, China?**

2. What are the content-related, process-related, and context-related challenges faced by social media influencers in providing online fitness coaching services in Henan Province, China?

3. What strategies are utilized by social media influencers in Henan Province, China to overcome challenges and ensure the effectiveness of social media in online fitness coaching beyond the COVID-19 pandemic?

With this information, this study aims to gain a better understanding of how social media can be effectively utilized in online fitness coaching in Henan Province and make strides toward improving our approach to it. Understanding these challenges and effectively addressing them can be crucial for optimizing the effectiveness of online fitness coaching through social media platforms (Ronai, 2021).

### **Significance of the study**

The results of this analysis will have considerable implications for numerous stakeholders, including coaches, clients, and fitness enthusiasts (Coole et al., 2020). Coaches can greatly benefit from acquiring a more profound comprehension of how social media platforms can be optimally utilized to deliver top-notch online fitness coaching services. By doing so, they would be better equipped with effective strategies that could potentially improve their coaching outcomes (Zeng, Almquist, & Spiro, 2019), while also attracting a wider range of clients (Xiaoli, 2022). Conversely, clients and fitness enthusiasts may find the study's findings highly informative in terms of gaining insights into the advantages and disadvantages associated with online coaching services offered via social media platforms.

Furthermore, this investigation will shed light on the challenges experienced by social media influencers when providing quality coaching services through these mediums. In particular, it will identify specific obstacles they face while offering guidance to their followers and highlight potential techniques that could help them overcome these barriers effectively (Stragier, Vanden Abeele, Mechant, & De Marez, 2016). Ultimately, by understanding these challenges faced by influencers in delivering valuable content to their audience on social media platforms like Tiktok, Weibo, Keep, SUPERMONKENY, and Lefit can develop novel solutions that maximize opportunities for success in this field.

### **Literature Review**

In the present times, social media has brought about a significant revolution in the fitness industry (Hussain, Rashid, Haroon, & Saad, 2019). It has served as a platform for countless individuals to access online fitness coaching services, which was not possible before. The advent of social media influencing has also caused a major shift in promoting fitness products, services, and ideas (Mavrodiya, Rachman, Harahap, & Shaw, 2019). The literature review is aimed at providing an in-depth overview of how social media has impacted the realm of fitness coaching while focusing on its effectiveness, challenges, limitations, and strategies that can be employed to address any concerns.

The availability of online fitness coaching services through social media channels has been highly beneficial for people who previously struggled to find adequate resources and guidance to achieve their health goals (Anjum, Burki, & Jahangir, 2021). Social media platforms have allowed expert

trainers to reach out to a broader audience by sharing their knowledge through various mediums like live streams, videos, or blog posts (Gottfried & Shearer, 2019). In addition, social media influencers are now regarded as major players in the world of marketing where they leverage their popularity and credibility among followers to promote various products and services related to health and wellness (McHugh & Perrault, 2022).

### ***Overview of social media in fitness coaching in Henan Province, China***

Given the efforts of the local government to make Henan province a more active and healthy region, an increasing number of customers in this province of China (Y. Wang, Wang, & Li, 2019), which has the third-largest population of any province in China, are paying a great deal of attention to their physical fitness and health problems. The emergence of social media platforms such as Weibo and TikTok has contributed to an increase in the number of people who have a strong interest in physical activity and competitive sports (Le Han, 2019). Since 2018, the province of Henan's health-conscious populace has seen an 18.5% growth in the number of people participating in weekly physical activities that involve online exercise (Xing Na, 2022).

According to a report by the local media outlet Henan Daily News, members of Henan's burgeoning middle class, which currently numbers 25 million people, have moved their attention away from displaying their luxury items and wealth in favour of flaunting their health and fitness as the preferred way of life (Zhongxue, 2022). For the Henan Province, it has been responsive to the online fitness mode, which is a move that can be strongly ascribed to the high-tech industry that has been put up by the local government in the region (Z. Chen, Kong, & Zhang, 2022). In addition, during the Covid-10 pandemic, the province of Henan had been forced to endure five large-scale house quarantines (Tian, 2021). Additionally, an increasing number of people require some degree of incentive in order to maintain their efforts to improve their health and fitness. As a result of China's crackdowns in the wake of the Covid-19 epidemic, the popularity of online fitness coaching (together with other types of internet fitness services) has also increased in the province of Henan (Di Lan, 2020). The health and fitness sector has embraced online platforms that are designed for those who work out at home.

Nevertheless, for many Henan consumers, simply incorporating exercise into their daily routine because it's good for their health is not enough. There is also a strong desire to show it off, and the fitness sector is developing into a flourishing market in the Henan Province of China (K. Wang & Wang, 2020). For instance, they favour posting on social media about marathon training and shooting pictures at the gym to share with their other online buddies. Joining the trendiest new "online fitness community" is a means for customers in the province of Henan in China to demonstrate their lifestyle to others in their social circle as a benchmark or indicator of their level of success (Zeng, Almquist, & Spiro, 2018).

Users in the Henan Province of China are increasingly turning to online fitness coaching as an alternative to signing up for full-year gym subscriptions and making the substantial upfront

expenditures that come with them (Yuefeng & Darodjat, 2022). Some of these online coaching programmes entice users by providing in-depth tutorials and individualised training on a variety of different types of workouts, ranging from cardiovascular exercise to muscular growth, all of which can be performed without the need for specialised gym equipment (Mao, Zhu, Sun, Jia, & Liu, 2022). Some of them even include video tutorials that feature social media influencers demonstrating how to perform the dances.

### ***The effectiveness of social media for online fitness coaching***

In recent years, social media platforms have been found to be an exceptionally useful instrument for the provision of online fitness coaching services (Hu, Han, Zhou, & Liu, 2019). Through these channels, various health and wellness experts have succeeded in reaching out to clients all over the globe and helping them attain their fitness goals. The flexibility of social media platforms has made it easier for trainers to offer customized and tailored training plans that suit the specific needs of individual clients (Brough, Literat, & Ikin, 2020). Additionally, with features like direct messaging, live video calls, and chat rooms, trainers can communicate with their clients in real-time and provide them with prompt feedback on their progress. Social media also provides a platform for creating communities of like-minded individuals who share common goals such as weight loss or bodybuilding (Hemsley, Jacobson, Gruzd, & Mai, 2018). These communities serve as forums where members can interact with one another, share tips and experiences as well as provide much-needed support during challenging times.

In addition, social media has revolutionized the way fitness coaching is delivered by enabling trainers to offer personalized training plans (Sheth, 2018), while also creating supportive communities that help people achieve their health goals through encouragement and accountability (David, 2022). The prevalence of social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, has brought about unparalleled opportunities for fitness coaches to expand their reach (Ellington et al., 2022). With the sheer number of users on these platforms reaching millions in the aggregate, it has never been simpler for those in the fitness industry to extend their influence and connect with a larger audience. This is an enormous benefit not only for coaches but also for individuals seeking health-related guidance or motivation (Jenny, Krause, & Armstrong, 2020). As a result of this increased accessibility and exposure through social media channels, more people are able to receive support and develop healthier lifestyle habits than ever before.

Social media platforms have become an indispensable tools for fitness coaches to showcase their services and attract potential clients in a cost-effective manner (Stajer et al., 2022). These virtual spaces are usually accessible to anyone free of charge. As such, they provide an excellent opportunity for fitness coaches who may not have large budgets for advertising or promotional activities. Moreover, social media platforms offer various advertising tools that allow fitness coaches to target specific audiences based on demographics such as age, gender, location, interests, and behaviours (Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2020); this means that the coaches' promotions can be

personalized according to the clients they want to reach (Lou, 2022). With billions of users worldwide, social media offers fitness coaches access to a vast pool of potential clients. Fitness professionals can also connect with existing and past clients through these platforms and use them as brand ambassadors by encouraging them to share their experiences with others via reviews, ratings, or testimonials (AlMarzooqi, 2021).

In essence, social media is an effective marketing tool for fitness coaches that provides numerous benefits at no cost (Singh & Sharma, 2022). By leveraging its full potential, they can significantly expand their outreach and maximize their business growth opportunities while keeping expenses low. Social media has provided an enormous opportunity for fitness coaches to develop a network of people who share their interest in fitness (W. J. Li, Ding, Xu, & Yang, 2023). These online communities can be highly beneficial as they offer support, motivation, and accountability to clients, which can be a crucial factor in achieving their fitness goals. Through social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram, fitness coaches are able to connect with individuals who are seeking guidance and advice on how to improve their health and well-being (Cataldo et al., 2022). This creates a sense of belonging for those looking to become part of a community that shares similar values and beliefs about the importance of exercise and healthy living. With the help of these supportive groups, clients can stay focused on their workout routines and remain motivated even when faced with challenges or setbacks (Musat et al., 2021). Thus, building such communities on social media is proving to be a great way for fitness coaches to spread awareness about the significance of physical activity and promote healthy lifestyles amongst individuals across the world.

Also, social media platforms have become the go-to source for fitness coaches to share their knowledge and expertise (Gao, Wang, & Liu, 2021). These platforms enable fitness coaches to distribute a wealth of information that can help people enhance their physical well-being, such as workout routines, healthy recipes, motivational quotes, and various tips. With a growing number of individuals looking to improve their fitness levels, social media has become an indispensable tool for coaches to connect with a wider audience and inspire them towards healthier lifestyles (Plaisime et al., 2020). Sharing content on social media also provides an opportunity for fitness coaches to receive instant feedback from followers, allowing them to tailor their content according to their audience's preferences (Aggarwal et al., 2020). Overall, social media platforms have transformed the way coaches share information about health and wellness with the public.

Moreover, social media platforms offer numerous opportunities for fitness coaches to interact with their audience, fostering engagement by means such as comments, direct messages, and live broadcasts (Ahmad, 2020). This kind of interaction is crucial in building strong relationships and establishing trust between the coach and their potential clients. Fitness enthusiasts these days are not only looking for a knowledgeable coach but also someone who can empathize with them, understand their fitness goals, provide motivation when needed, and hold them accountable until they reach their desired objectives (W. J. Li et al., 2023). By actively engaging on social media, fitness coaches can create a sense of community among their followers as well as demonstrate their



expertise in the field while keeping up with new trends and developments in the industry. In turn, this strengthens the bond between coach and follower which can ultimately lead to more clients seeking out their services (AlMarzooqi, 2021).

For example, one of the advantages of social media platforms is their ability to assist coaches in tracking their clients' progress (F. Alam, Meng, Lahuerta-Otero, & Zhao, 2022). By leveraging photos and videos, coaches can easily observe and evaluate their clients' progress over time. With this visual evidence on hand, coaches are better equipped to provide constructive feedback that can help their clients continue to improve (Nathan & Nathan, 2020). By incorporating social media as a tool for tracking progress, coaches can not only make the coaching process more efficient but also create a sense of accountability for their clients. In addition, this approach allows coaches and clients to celebrate small wins along the way, which can be an excellent source of motivation and inspiration for continued progress toward long-term goals (Drummond, O'Toole, & McGrath, 2020).

Additionally, social media has been an instrumental platform for the online fitness coaching industry (Al-Qaysi, Mohamad-Nordin, & Al-Emran, 2020). It has proved its worthiness by providing a plethora of benefits such as expanding reach, cost-effectiveness, community building, content sharing, engagement, and progress tracking. With social media's extensive user base and global outreach, it is far easier to connect with people from all corners of the world compared to traditional methods (Gao et al., 2021). Online fitness coaches can use social media platforms to target audiences that they may not have otherwise reached through conventional means. Moreover, fitness coaches can create a strong and connected community around their brand where clients can share their success stories while motivating each other (W. J. Li et al., 2023). This sense of community helps in building trust between clients and coaches which is vital for long-term business associations.

Furthermore, social media allows the sharing of various types of content such as pictures/videos/gifs which enable coaches to showcase their expertise in a visually appealing way (Krljev & Lund, 2020). Coaches can also leverage interactive tools like quizzes and polls that facilitate client engagement while also creating more opportunities for them to grow their following. Lastly, being able to track progress on social media platforms makes keeping up with client performance data much simpler than any alternative method (Xie, Qiao, Shao, & Chen, 2017). Thus it aids both trainers and clients to evaluate progress easily without any physical constraints or restrictions that would otherwise hinder success (Jiang & Fu, 2018). Therefore engaging in online fitness coaching through social media provides numerous advantages over traditional offline coaching methods making it an excellent choice for those seeking professional guidance towards achieving their desired health goals.

### ***Challenges and limitations of social media in online fitness coaching***

Despite all these advantages, there remain several obstacles associated with using social media for



online fitness coaching services such as reliability issues concerning the information presented; lack of personalized attention given by trainers (Gabarron et al., 2020); doubts over quality control measures (Q. Q. Zhou & Zhang, 2018); difficulty maintaining user engagement levels on digital platforms (Weller, 2016); among others.

### ***Strategies to overcome challenges among SMIs in online fitness coaching***

However, there exist many strategies which can be employed by stakeholders within the industry to mitigate these challenges. One approach could be offering one-on-one consultations with trainers so that clients feel heard (Xiaoli, 2022), and their needs are better understood (Coole et al., 2020). Additionally, virtual communities could be built around shared interests or goals so that users can provide support and remain motivated throughout the process.

As a summary, this literature review highlights how social media has transformed the landscape of online fitness coaching while also emphasizing potential areas that need improvement. By exploring both sides of this phenomenon (the pros and cons), we hope that readers will gain insight into how best they can navigate this rapidly evolving field.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research design and approach***

In this qualitative study, the researchers examine SMIs who have accumulated and displayed social media power through online coaching in Henan Province, China since the Covid-19 epidemic. These individuals have a considerable following on numerous social media platforms. The case study was selected as the research design for this study because it is used to describe how a system functions and could be applied to test new theories or to support those which already exist (M. K. Alam, 2020; Flyvbjerg, 2011). In general terms, the main feature of a case study is that it reports on a specific occurrence or an example of deeper understanding (Gerring, 2006), rather than making generalizations about the population. The case study research design could also be used to pinpoint existing issues and offer contextualized solutions (Hancock, Algozzine, & Lim, 2021; Yin, 2009). The researchers, therefore, took a close look at each of these representative SMIs in Henan Province, China, which was chosen as a special instance based on proper parameters. Additionally, from a cross-sectional case study, the data presented would enable readers to comprehend the limitations and strategies employed by SMIs since the city lockdowns brought on by the Covid-19 outbreak, as well as the efficiency of social media influence.

### ***Participants And Sampling***

The researcher chose SMIs in Henan Province, China with the greatest followers and endorsements based on a set of criteria in this study. A high number of followers, experience with online fitness coaching, and management of a social media page dedicated to fitness instruction and training were among the five criteria. The research took place in November 2022, and relied on purposive and snowball sampling, with snowball sampling employed to increase the total

number of participants surveyed. As a result, 43 SMIs were asked to complete an online survey, while only 25 of them did so. 19 respondents to the online questionnaire survey with a 5-point Likert scale satisfied the criteria for follow-up interviews, and 15 of those respondents expressed interest in taking part. However, further dropouts happened during the procedure, thus a total of 12 participants were included in the analysis. Therefore, the study's primary goal was to shed light on the difficulties encountered by those 12 SMIs and their decision-making processes.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

Field trips, diaries, and checklists are not recommended for this study because they were simply not accessible during the time of Covid-19 (Cohen et al., 2020). The researchers first employed online surveys with closed-ended questions to screen participants (Feng, Duives, Daamen, & Hoogendoorn, 2021). The knowledge, skills, and perspectives of respondents on SMIs were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale given in the questionnaires. The researchers would follow up with the respondents who gave the most detailed answers after their responses have been verified for correctness (Blom et al., 2020).

For the following online interview, researchers used sub-research questions to dig deeper into the participant and elicit more detailed responses (Schneider, 2018). Researchers also established an interview protocol to facilitate open dialogue towards SMIs. Establishing a mutually agreeable protocol for conducting interviews is essential for a productive conversation between the interviewee and the interviewer (Baniyadi & Salehi, 2019). To ensure that everyone involved has a fair chance to share their thoughts and feelings, the researchers considered both interview methods and individual characteristics (Saddour, 2020). By using matrix tables to connect research topics, sub-questions, and types of questions to theory and empirical evidence, the researchers were able to more efficiently design questionnaires.

By evaluating the survey forms and interview protocol, two expert evaluations using a standardized evaluation form guarantee the trustworthiness of the specially created questionnaires. Expert reviews allowed researchers and questionnaire designers to interact and talk about the questionnaire's substance, cognitive capacity, and usability (Ikart, 2019).

### ***Data Analysis Procedures***

Different types of qualitative data were collected in this study, including survey responses, audio recordings from online interviews, and transcribing the audio into text for coding. Surveys are used to gather SMIs' viewpoints on online fitness coaching challenges and strategies related to contents, contexts, and processes, while audio recordings capture SMIs' voices and could be played back at another time or shared with others who possess varying biases and beliefs. Transcript interviews simply entail the recording of the SMIs conveying their thoughts and lived experiences, often through writing or a hand-held device. Researchers organized and presented the information in a format that suits them best, followed by coding data through analyzing concepts (Belotto, 2018). Creating codes for the sources of data through an evaluation process involved Pettigrew processual

analysis, combined with thematic analysis to make sense of collected data while address research objectives efficiently. Codes are utilized to create categories or themes in thematic analysis, allowing the researchers to identify patterns and offer explanations based on these patterns (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). The researchers were extremely selective about what information to include in a chart that combined statistical data with insightful commentary on the event's development (Peterson et al., 2022). In this study, researchers used the software package ATLAS.ti 22 to convert audio samples into text for coding, which represents one of several codable models available for qualitative research.

Moreover, the researchers guaranteed the themes used to code the data were consistent throughout the study period to minimize analysis bias. This method ensures that all relevant data collected during research projects are carefully considered, leading to more reliable findings (Mackieson, Shlonsky, & Connolly, 2019). In addition, the researcher kept in mind the cultural bias limitation when analyzing the findings (Sharp & Munly, 2022), as cultural bias posed its unique challenge within this study conducted in China due to differences in social norms and values.

**Findings**

*Overview of the participants and their perspectives*

There was a wide range of experiences and perspectives represented among the 12 SMIs who took part in this study. Each is motivated to succeed in their respective coaching niches for their own unique reasons. Everyone there clearly had a strong interest in and commitment to the field of fitness instruction and training. These fitness trainers, who have between five and eighteen years of combined experience, are experts at meeting the needs of both their individual clients and their business. Participants 2, 4, 5, and 7 all work in the realm of online fitness coaching, as evidenced by their individual histories detailed in the preceding chapter. Since they offer customized training programmes, the cost of their services varies depending on the specifics of each client's situation. In contrast to Participant 5, who preferred one-on-one coaching, Participants 2 and 4 provided a hybrid of online and in-person meetings. Member 3 is a local Pilate instructor who joined SUPERMONKEY to advance her career, while Member 6 is a world-famous professional bodybuilder whose approach to training is based on the principles of individualization, longevity, and safety. This context revealed that the sample was representative of the general population, particularly given the popularity of online fitness coaching at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1 and Table 2 below summarize the information on Participants' demographics.

**Table 1** Participants' Demographics

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female

Years of coaching	9	6	5	18	5	7
Full-time/Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
City	Zhengzhou	Luoyang	Zhengzhou	Xinxiang	Zhengzhou	Zhengzhou
How did he/she start	One-on-one workout session on Tencent Meetings	Online group training	Join the fitness company SUPER MONKEY	Start the hybrid training	Post fitness videos on the TikTok platform	Build an engaging learning group on WeChat
Push factor	The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic	Online training is on the boom	Better career development	Clients' desire	New online strategies to gain new clients	Better career development
Fees from clients	200RMB per one-on-one training	150RMB per one-group training	398 RMB per client in a one-month training	200RMB per one-on-one training	150-1000RMB depends on the charge mode	300RMB per one-on-one training
The strength	Confidence and intelligence	Flexibility	Good communication skills	Strong professional background	Like challenging himself as well as motivating others.	Training style

**Table 2** Participants' Demographics (continued)

Participant	7	8	9	10	11	12
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
Years of Coaching	5	8	9	9	6	8

Full-time/Part-time	Part-time	Part-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
City	Kaifeng	Zhengzhou	Luohe	Zhengzhou	Zhengzhou	Nanyang
How did he/she start	Join the Keep online fitness community	Being a part-time online fitness coach on the Lefit fitness platform	Make growth of the TikTok channel	Build the online courses from WeChat mini program	Build TikTok community	One-on-one workout session on ZOOM
Push Factor	Generate passive income	Schedule with flexibility	Income earnings	From the company's decision	Better career development	Grow more client base
Fees from Clients	150 RMB per one-on-one training	150RMB per one-group training	220RMB per one-on-one training	210RMB per one-group training	160RMB per one-group training	200RMB per one-on-one training
The Strength	Strong passion	Positive thinking	Nice physique	Leadership	Smart	Enthusiastic about learning and teaching

### 1. What is the effectiveness of social media influencing in online fitness coaching in Henan Province, China?

More than 80% of internet users in Henan province have more than one social media account, and their online activity mirrors that of people in China's top cities like Beijing and Shanghai (Di Lan, 2020). The usage of mobile devices to access social media is also on the rise, with the number of mobile social users expected to increase by around 30% yearly in Henan. Nowadays, social media may connect with consumers in a far more personal way than more conventional advertising

channels like television or print media (Lamba & Jain, 2021). It's a great way for businesses to increase their consumer base because they can contact individuals where they spend most of their time anyway: at the office, in class, or on the commuter train or bus. However, new celebrities and influencers have also emerged thanks to the popularity of social media in Henan Province, China, like Wang Yibo, who is regarded as an "Internet celebrity" (L. Chen, Jih-Syuan & Shan, 2021; Pan, Mu, & Tang, 2022).

In this province, the market for online fitness teaching on social media platforms is extremely competitive (Guohua, 2020). In addition to apps created by large gym chains like Super Monkey and Lefit, online fitness coaches have access to a wide variety of social media platforms, such as WeChat, TikTok, Weibo, and the Exercise App KEEP. Online fitness coaches can exploit the similarities between the two to their advantage when marketing themselves on social media. WeChat is a popular app in Henan Province for staying in touch with family and friends as well as making new connections (W. J. Wang et al., 2020). Instead, users of the social media app TikTok may create and share amusing one-minute-long films (Susilo, 2020). Weibo also has a micro-blogging functionality where users can post short updates that are rich in media (Le Han, 2019). Maintaining motivation in the pursuit of health can be difficult, but online fitness coaching can help by providing direction toward long-term goals, providing incentives through social media channels, and holding one accountable for one's workout schedule.

Influencers in Henan Province, China, are now able to support themselves by showing others how to utilize social media platforms more efficiently or how they generate income from them as a result of the growth in popularity of these platforms (Achen, 2020). These social media influencers may now increase their followings by purchasing likes and having their posts shared (Nouri, 2018; Nurhandayani, Syarief, & Najib, 2019). Given their significant influence over the opinions and purchase choices of their followers, SMIs can now make money and promote their personal brands by using the content they have posted on these platforms.

Certain prominent SMIs have already exhibited exemplary self-leadership on these platforms by assuming accountability for their triumphs and establishing targets for both their content and personal brand (Kornosenko et al., 2021; Niess & Woźniak, 2018). They set objectives for the type of content they desire to produce and the message they intend to convey to their audience, subsequently working towards attaining these aspirations. Pre-determining the quantity of posts per week, determining the preferred mediums for sharing content (such as videos, images, or written entries) as well as selecting topics for discussion are some examples of what they may consider beforehand (e.g. fitness, nutrition, wellness). And these influencers could also maintain their concentration and keep themselves motivated to produce high-quality material that resonates with their audience if they set these goals for themselves (Klochkov., 2022). In addition to this, SMIs exercise self-discipline and remain motivated in order to adhere to their content schedule and create content constantly. They rely on accountability partners and tools like editorial calendars and scheduling applications to keep them on track and ensure they achieve their objectives (Kercher et

al., 2022). They also make educated selections concerning the content of their website and their own brand. This requires keeping abreast with the latest news and trends in the industry, closely monitoring their analytics and engagement metrics, and keeping in mind the influence that their material has on their target audience (Karandikar, Deshpande, Lingayat, & Kulkarni, 2019). What's more, SMIs are resilient and persistent in the face of challenges or setbacks, such as negative comments or a decrease in engagement. According to Gatti, Brivio, and Galimberti (2013), individuals can enhance their content and personal brand by engaging in self-reflection and soliciting feedback from trustworthy sources.

However, social media influencers in Henan Province, China also face the challenge of gaining and retaining followers by creating content that resonates with their audience while adhering to strict posting guidelines on platforms such as Weibo, Douban, Sina Weibo, and Baidu (Jin, Lin, Zhao, Yu, & Su, 2021; Park et al., 2021). These requirements include leaving comments on other users' pages for self-promotion purposes, using relevant hashtags from the current year in posts, following specific formats for photo or video posts along with proper hashtags. As more and more trainers have entered this field, several new challenges have arisen. There's a higher demand for SMIs who can communicate well and make motivating videos for their followers all the time. While it can be tough to stay motivated when they are not in a gym, or studio every day, there are ways to cope with these challenges (Ardianto et al., 2021). Some of the challenges one can face during an online fitness coaching career include time management (van Coller-Peter & Manzini, 2020), distance (Burnett, 2018), communication (Larsen, 2019; Muralidharan et al., 2018), trust (Ardianto et al., 2021; Larsen, 2019), time to focus on professional practice (Larsen, 2019; van Coller-Peter & Manzini, 2020) and personal challenges (Burnett, 2018; Larsen, 2019).

## **2. What are the content-related, process-related, and context-related challenges faced by social media influencers in providing online fitness coaching services in Henan Province, China?**

To highlight the unique findings, fitness influencers in Henan province have been able to leverage social media to their advantage, but this new platform comes with its own set of difficulties. In addition to the advantages, several shortcomings come with navigating the world of social media as a fitness influencer. One major challenge is content creation. It takes a lot of effort and creativity to produce engaging and informative content that resonates with clients.

As mentioned by Participant 11:

I admit that occasionally I get completely struggled with producing fresh content for my audience every day. It is a complicated task because the contents need to align with the fresh trend and also my audiences' appetite. So I have to prepare and accumulate more attractive content. Those ideas may from an industry conference, professional training, or online news.

Quoted from Transcript 11, Line 44



As also mentioned by Participant 7:

And also it is crucial for me to take advantage of technology to the fullest extent possible in order to differentiate my content from the competitors as the market expands daily. While content is king, social media influencers who with a better grasp of technology are likely to engage their audiences more effectively than those who are less informed.

Quoted from Transcript 7, Line 61

Another challenge lies in managing an extensive client base effectively while still providing personalized coaching and feedback.

As mentioned by Participant 9:

For online coaches, it is challenging to lead their clients effectively. Some may appear to stand apart from their clients, which could make clients regard the coach as an arrogant person. Moreover, some even act without integrity or are dishonest in their communications, which can have a negative impact on their coaching period.

Quoted from Transcript P9, Line 42

Moreover, context-related challenges such as cultural differences and language barriers can also pose obstacles when using social media in different regions and countries. These factors can heavily influence the efficiency of social media platforms for fitness influencers trying to connect with audiences worldwide.

As mentioned by Participant 3

I realised at some point that only publishing content in one language would be limiting my audience and fan base. Therefore, I had the notion to add English to my YouTube video in order to raise the number of subscribers, but my English wasn't that great. It is incredibly difficult for me.

Quoted from Transcript P3, Line47

Consequently, fitness influencers need to develop strategies that consider these contextual issues while developing their online presence.

As mentioned by Participant 3 :

In truthfully, the local and national marketplaces are more crowded. As part of my long-term strategy, I need to make every effort to gain more foreign fans because there are still a lot of undiscovered markets with few to no competitors that have the potential to become household names. I must therefore overcome the cultural barrier and enhance my oral English in order to deepen the relationship between the consumer and the brand and foster trust.

Quoted from Transcript P3, Line 58

Overall, managing these challenges requires a unique skill set that comes with experience, creativity,

communication skills, and adequate knowledge of social media trends specific to various regions worldwide.

3. What strategies are utilized by social media influencers in Henan Province, China to overcome challenges and ensure the effectiveness of social media in online fitness coaching beyond the COVID-19 pandemic?

Refer to the thesis RQ3-refer to the findings and diagram to write.

To highlight the unique findings, Social media influencing has become a challenging task in the field of online fitness coaching. To overcome these challenges, social media influencers located in Henan Province have devised several strategies to ensure their success. One such strategy is creating content that is both appealing and informative for their target audience. In order to achieve this, they personalize their workout plans, nutritional advice, and wellness tips based on the unique needs and preferences of each client.

As mentioned by Participant 8:

To better conduct the online coaching, firstly, as the result of limited equipment, I have tried to arrange some freehand exercises, including mat exercises, and have used some elastic bands and elastic rings to assist; Secondly, I want to be able to modify workout routines so that they meet the individual needs of my clients and get the results they are looking for. Thirdly, I would demonstrate the movements from multiple angles to improve the client's understanding of the commands.

Quoted from Transcript P8, Line 63

By providing customized advice and guidance, social media influencers are able to increase client engagement, adherence, and motivation towards achieving their fitness goals. Through this approach, individuals feel more connected with the influencers as they cater specifically to the needs of each client, making them stand out from other generic trainers available on social media platforms.

As mentioned by Participant 2:

I encourage my followers to behave more like the driver of their fitness work rather than an implementer of tasks. And additionally, throughout the coaching, I make an effort to provide significant roles and objectives to my followers. Nevertheless, this has resulted in a very perfect dynamic, which has impeded the process of developing genuine relationships.

Quoted from Transcript P2, Line 73

Social media influencers are also known for their ability to connect with their followers and create a sense of community. They often utilize various strategies to establish a group of like-minded individuals who can support and motivate each other in achieving their fitness goals. For instance, social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo offer features that enable users to create groups

and communities. Social media influencers can leverage these features to build a network of clients who share their experiences and challenges related to fitness.

As mentioned by Participant 4:

Well, I have chosen to use the WeChat group to build communities, and my team could manage these communities by providing essential answers to my customer's questions. The online community has generated customer value and could be a platform for attracting potential customers to my business.

Quoted from Transcript P4, Line 67

By creating an inclusive environment where everyone can freely express themselves, influencers foster a supportive community where members can inspire each other on their fitness journey. In this way, social media has emerged as an effective tool for building supportive networks among people with similar interests.

As shared by Participant 5:

I built my online membership community, which is a supportive online community with hundreds of like-minded followers. It is an online platform filled with hundreds of hours of training programs sourced from my past coaching experiences. And the feedback about this community from some of my followers says that they have acquired much from the community, especially in the knowledge and inspiration area.

Quoted from Transcript P5, Line 69

With the help of social media influencers who use these platforms strategically, individuals from all walks of life can find motivation, guidance, and encouragement from others who are also striving towards better health and wellness.

As mentioned by Participant 10:

The fitness trend has risen to extreme popularity because of the internet. And as a social media influencer, I always try to impart health knowledge and content to my followers. Therefore, all my clients could find diversified fitness programs, consumption as well as the motivations and guidance from the online fitness community.

Quoted from Transcript P10, Line 22

Evidently, data has clearly shown that social media influencers in Henan Province play a crucial role in the world of online coaching. They employ a wide range of coaching styles to meet their clients' distinct needs and preferences. A one-size-fits-all approach is not effective because every client is unique, and everyone responds differently to various coaching styles. Therefore, social media influencers must possess the flexibility and versatility required to adapt their coaching style according to each client's individual needs.

As mentioned by Participant 8:

During the lockdowns, I developed different kinds of exercise program for my participants based on their fitness assessment results, personal goals and preferences of coaching style. I conducted hour-long full fitness assessments through WeChat questionnaires, including postural analysis, flexibility testing, body composition and also their personality and fitness background. And then I customized training sessions for individuals based on fitness level and available resources. Most of my clients are satisfied with my training design and execution.

Quoted from Transcript P8, Line 32

On the other hand, some clients may require an authoritative coach who provides clear direction and structure, while others may benefit more from a supportive coach who listens actively and offers encouragement. Thus, social media influencers must be well-versed in various coaching techniques that can help them tailor their services to each client's requirements.

As mentioned by Participant 7:

For followers, they trust me to create good coaching environments for them to stay with them online. I try to learn my clients' deep needs first and serve as a positive role model, inspire others with a compelling vision, and encourage and support followers' input. However, it is impossible to meet the requirements of every customer; that's something to keep in mind if you're thinking about opening an online fitness business. But I try my best to choose a niche and devote myself fully to that, and also cater to my clients as much as possible.

Quoted from Transcript P7, Line 28

In the overall summary, effective social media influencers understand that successful online coaching requires personalized attention, tailored plans, and customized support that caters to each client's specific goals and preferences. Consequently, they utilize diverse coaching styles based on what works best for each individual client's situation.

## Discussion

The findings from this study showed that online fitness coaching on social media has become increasingly popular in Henan Province, China, creating new opportunities for fitness professionals and social media influencers. Prior to conducting this study, it was posited that there has been little research regarding the effectiveness of social media influencing in online fitness coaching in this area (Ardianto et al., 2021). Moreover, the challenges encountered by social media influencers when providing online fitness coaching services in Henan Province - including content-related, process-related, and context-related issues - are not well understood. Also, there is a lack of knowledge about the strategies that social media influencers use to overcome these challenges to ensure effective online fitness coaching beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in Henan Province. To fill these knowledge gaps, this research has uncovered the findings above, and this would provide valuable

insights for those who want to develop effective strategies for online fitness coaching in Henan Province and beyond.

## **Discussion of the Results**

This investigation conducted in Henan Province, China has successfully answered the three research questions that were posed. The first question examined the effectiveness of social media influencing in online fitness coaching. The study analyzed the experiences of 12 social media influencers with a strong passion and dedication to fitness instruction and training and concluded that social media platforms can be utilized effectively for marketing and creating a community. At the time of writing, over 80% of internet users in Henan Province possess more than one social media account, which creates an intensely competitive market for online fitness teaching on these platforms (Liang, Kuang, Xu, & Xiao, 2020). Furthermore, the research indicates that SMIs who are adaptable, capable of producing content that resonates with their audience, and remain persistent in the face of challenges or setbacks are more likely to achieve success as online fitness coaches (Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk, & Jones, 2020).

Secondly, the challenges encountered by social media influencers in providing online fitness coaching services in Henan Province, China are explored through the second research question. According to the study, SMIs face significant obstacles due to content-related, process-related, and context-related challenges. Content-related challenges include tailoring workout plans based on individual client requirements, producing consistent content, and connecting with followers (Ying, Liu, Ai, Ding, & Shang, 2021). Evidently, time management and balancing content creation with professional practice and personal well-being are examples of process-related challenges (Ronai, 2021). Contextual challenges include language barriers, cultural disparities, geographical distance, communication hurdles along with building trust (Ma, Chutiyami, Zhang, & Nicoll, 2021).

Thirdly, the effectiveness of social media in online fitness coaching beyond the COVID-19 pandemic is the focus of the third research question. The study discovered that social media influencers (SMIs) in Henan Province, China implement a range of tactics to surmount challenges. Such strategies involve developing personalized workout plans, building a sense of community among fans, and using technology to boost communication and involvement (Li et al., 2021). SMIs exhibit self-control, sustain motivation, and demonstrate resilience when facing setbacks (Ma et al., 2021).

Ultimately, this study has addressed all its research questions by providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of social media influencing in online fitness coaching, the obstacles faced by social media influencers while offering online fitness coaching services, and the tactics employed by SMIs to overcome these hurdles and ensure the lasting success of social media beyond COVID-19. By investigating these concerns, this study provides a thorough understanding of the opportunities and challenges that arise from social media platforms for businesses and influencers in the fitness sector (Arora et al., 2019). The emphasis on personalization, resilience, and community building

highlights the significance of these factors in achieving triumph as an online fitness coach and in social media marketing more broadly (W. J. Li et al., 2023).

### ***Implications of the findings***

The analysis of the effectiveness of social media influencing in online fitness coaching in Henan Province, China, can be scrutinized from three perspectives: theory, practice, and policy. This study holds significant implications in terms of its impact on these aforementioned dimensions.

The research adds to the present body of knowledge on the impact of social media on fitness coaching in the digital realm and emphasizes the usefulness of social media platforms as a marketing tool for fitness coaches (S. Y. Guo, Lin, Akhtar, & Du, 2023). It also brings up significant inquiries for future investigation, such as how technology can enhance communication and involvement between fitness coaches and their clients (W. H. Zhou, Dai, Zhang, & Wen, 2022). Nonetheless, it is imperative to mention that this study is exclusively contextual in nature, and additional research is necessary to scrutinize the general applicability of these findings beyond Henan Province.

In terms of practicality, this research holds significance for social media influencers (SMIs) in Henan Province, China who are engaged in delivering online fitness training. The outcomes of the study emphasize the necessity for SMIs to possess adaptability and versatility when it comes to establishing their virtual presence in order to become effective trainers and build collaborative networks with like-minded individuals (Sindermann, Yang, Yang, Elhai, & Montag, 2022). Additionally, it cannot be overemphasized that tailoring workout plans according to each client's personal requirements is crucial for enhancing engagement and motivation levels (Joo, Lee, Joo, & Kim, 2021). Nonetheless, SMIs must also bear in mind that there is intense competition within the market of online fitness instruction on social media platforms in Henan Province. Thus, they need to consistently develop innovative content that can captivate and retain their audience (L. Guo et al., 2022).

The research report holds great importance for regulators and policymakers in China, as it sheds light on the policy implications of the findings. The report emphasizes how social media platforms can serve as a valuable resource for corporations seeking to expand their customer base (Athanasopoulou & Giovanis, 2019). However, given the intense competition among online fitness trainers, it is essential that policymakers maintain a fair playing field for all companies and influencers (Hussain et al., 2019). Additionally, policymakers ought to contemplate formulating guidelines or regulations to tackle the difficulties faced by online fitness coaches such as time management, distance, communication, and trustworthiness (Singh & Sharma, 2022).

Concluding the study on the efficacy of social media influencing in online fitness coaching in Henan Province, China, this research presents valuable perspectives for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. It is important to recognize that this study is limited to a specific context; therefore, additional research is needed to authenticate the results beyond Henan

Province. Nevertheless, the practical implications of the study underscore the importance for SMIs to be innovative and adaptable and for policymakers to address obstacles encountered by online fitness coaches (Zeng et al., 2018). This would promote a favorable business environment for influencers and businesses in this sector (Pinto & Yagnik, 2017).

### **Recommendations For Future Research**

The examination of the effectiveness of social media influencing as a means of online fitness coaching in Henan Province, China, is a worthwhile contribution that sheds light on the prospects and challenges that social media platforms present for enterprises and influencers in the fitness sector (Pinto & Yagnik, 2017). Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that this study's reach is restricted to its context and should serve only as an initial reference for further investigation in the field.

As mentioned earlier, the study primarily concentrates on Henan Province in China and may not necessarily reflect the experiences of social media influencers in other areas or countries. Furthermore, the sample size of 12 individuals who are social media influencers is relatively limited and might not be indicative of the larger population of online fitness trainers in Henan Province. Thus, it is important to exercise caution when attempting to apply the study's conclusions to different settings (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey, & McEvoy, 2021).

Moreover, the primary focus of the study on the efficacy of social media influencing in online fitness coaching should not be interpreted as a complete endorsement of this method (Milne-Ives, Lam, van Velthoven, & Meinert, 2020). Despite demonstrating the advantages of social media in marketing and community-building, the research also underscores difficulties encountered by SMIs who aim to deliver effective online fitness coaching services. These obstacles consist of personalization, time management, communication, and trust (Xu et al., 2021). Consequently, fitness coaches must consider social media platforms as one among several resources at their disposal and weigh their benefits and drawbacks before committing their efforts and investments to it.

Subsequently, the outcomes of this study should be seen as the foundation for future research endeavors. Although this investigation offers significant perceptions of the possibilities and hindrances offered by social media channels for businesses and influencers in the fitness sector, it also prompts numerous questions that necessitate further examination (Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2020). For instance, upcoming research could assess the efficiency of social media influencing in other nations or territories or examine the encounters of web-based fitness instructors who do not use social media platforms (Ahrens et al., 2022). Further studies could also probe the influence of technology on improving communication and engagement between fitness coaches and their clients.



As a summary of this section, the research conducted on the effectiveness of social media influencing in online fitness coaching in Henan Province, China offers valuable perspectives on the potential advantages and obstacles presented by social media platforms for businesses and influencers within the fitness sector (S. L. Chen et al., 2022). However, it is crucial to perceive these outcomes as solely contextual and as a launching point for additional exploration in future studies. More investigations are needed to comprehensively grasp the merits and demerits of social media influencing as an instrument for online fitness coaching (Zhang, Ming, Li, & Yang, 2022), as well as to discover innovative approaches to enhance communication and engagement between fitness coaches and their customers (W. J. Li et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

This study has investigated research questions related to China's social media context on online fitness coaching. It delved into various aspects of social media influence and comprehended its role in this field comprehensively. Furthermore, the study has also identified the hurdles that SMIs in Henan Province encountered while using social media for fitness coaching and recommended strategies that can be used to overcome these challenges. As research contribution, this research has provided a detailed analysis of how social media can be effectively used as a tool for fitness coaching and how coaches can leverage it for maximum benefits while overcoming its limitations. As social media influencer marketing has evolved considerably, the same can be said of online fitness coaching. The challenges that come with virtual fitness coaching are significant, but there are effective strategies for overcoming them. One such strategy is the development of a unique coaching style that suits the preferences and needs of clients - this helps to build trust and loyalty among clients. Social media analytics can also provide valuable insights into client engagement, including their levels of interaction and adherence to training programs. Creating a sense of community among clients is another way to help overcome these challenges; it fosters an environment where clients feel supported and motivated by one another. Additionally, social media influencers can collaborate with others in their field, sharing expertise and knowledge to enhance the effectiveness and impact of their coaching services. These collaborations ensure that clients receive more comprehensive support in achieving their fitness goals through online coaching platforms.

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