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The rhetorical construction of the third place in *Fitness first* magazines

Abstract:

Custom magazines are public relations publications that target a select customer base in order to foster loyalty to the brand. This article examines how the *Fitness first* custom magazine mimics the conventions of a glossy consumer magazine to sell a message about healthism. It also examines how the magazine facilitates the construction of a brand community and promotes the Fitness First gyms as third places (safe, accessible, neutral and social). It argues that custom magazines play an integral but under-researched role in advertising campaigns and in Australian print culture more generally.

Biographical note:

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A young woman wakes up early in inner-city Sydney, pulls on her Fitness First leggings, Fitness First crop top, Fitness First singlet and jacket, bundles her monogrammed Fitness First towel, yoga mat and water bottle into her Fitness First backpack and hurries out the door. Upon entering the Fitness First gym (one of five within walking distance), she is greeted by a sign that urges 'Be yourself … only better', and then by the receptionist wearing a blue Fitness First T-shirt and badge. A further array of Fitness First merchandise surrounds the desk along with a refrigerator filled with 'sports' drinks, water and protein shakes, and rows of dietary supplements. She heads for the change rooms where television monitors broadcast Fitness First advertisements on the FFTV channel and advertisements adorn hand-dryers and the backs of toilet doors. She meets her Fitness First personal trainer outside in the main weights area, she recognises his distinctive black and green Fitness First uniform, and he takes her through her weights program and they discuss whether she should join one of the Fitness First boot-camps or run in the local half marathon for the Fitness First 'family'. Between 'reps' (repetitions) they glance at the television monitor at music clips and sports programs featuring lean muscled bodies, while scrolled advertisements at the bottom of the screen offer 'special' deals for Fitness First members for cosmetic dentistry, fake-tans, waxing or laser hair removal. An hour later she trots out the door and grabs two copies of the free *Fitness first magazine* ('for guys & girls') and she flips through one while downing her protein bar and black coffee. She tags a recipe she will try for dinner and makes a note about the style of the runners that the featured exercise expert recommends for cross-training. She pulls out her mobile phone and logs the details of her breakfast consumption and her exercise routine at Fitness First online ('Your personalised training buddy') and makes sure that her mobile phone is charged so she can add entries throughout the day and check what her Fitness First friends are up to on Facebook. She puts her spare copy of the magazine in her handbag ready to leave in the lunchroom at work. She is now ready to leave her first place (home) for her second place (work), having already spent time at her third place (Fitness First).

This paper seeks to answer two research questions. Firstly, how does a custom publication like the *Fitness first magazine* (hereafter *FF*) mimic the conventions of a glossy magazine to create a brand community? Secondly, how does the magazine construct the Fitness First (hereafter FF) gyms as a third place (a safe, neutral, social space)? In attempting to answer these questions, I argue that Australasian magazine scholarship needs to branch out from purely title-based case studies and to be more mindful of the cross-promotional role that both consumer and custom magazines play as parts of multi-faceted trans-media marketing campaigns. In 2014, best-selling magazines are rarely stand-alone publications given that the majority of titles are either custom magazines or consumer magazines that are just one part of vast multi-national corporations that include varied media interests in publishing (print and digital), television and radio (like Bauer Media or Pacific Magazines). As data mining and marketing become more sophisticated, custom magazines, like the *FF magazine*, provide a way to engage in relationship building with a select customer base. Increasingly, as organisations shed journalists and recycle content, or encourage readers to generate it, magazines are public relations exercises; they are brand extensions reliant on the loyalty and productivity of brand communities.

Scholars like Celia Lury (1996), Adam Arvidsson (2005) and activist Naomi Klein (2002) suggest that brands help shape identities around pastimes, lifestyles, places and events; and contribute to perceptions of self and community. Recent scholarship also suggests that consumption is a productive activity and recognizes that commodity exchange has always influenced the way that humans interact and form social bonds. Consumers, readers and gym-goers are not passive dupes but rather engage in dialogic social constructions of meaning and self-hood. To that end, Muniz and O'Guinn argue that 'brand communities' arise when consumers of a brand form social relationships that share a consciousness of kind, shared rituals and moral responsibility (2001: 413). Their study, based in a small town in the Midwest, looked at a number of very meaningful group interactions that arose following the consumption of MacIntosh, Saab and Bronco products. Muniz and O'Guinn argue that although explicitly connected by commercial transactions – shared consumption of a commodity – these brand communities are not powerless or naïve but instead are 'quite self-aware and self-reflexive about issues of authenticity and identity' (2001: 415). I will argue that many of the points they make about members sharing a connection, shared values, shared consumption rituals and traditions, and shared stories, ring true of the discourse community constructed in the *FF magazine*.

In a similar vein to Muniz and O'Guinn, Arvidsson argues that people create what he calls an 'ethical surplus' – 'a social relation, a shared meaning, an emotional involvement that was not there before – around a brand [that] can be understood as the direct basis of its economic value' (2005: 237). Accordingly, products that are at face value no different to their competitors are successful in turning intangibles (the ethical surplus) into a tangible commercial advantage. As Nike executives would say, 'It's all about "brands" not "products"' (Klein 2002: 365). This enables 'premium' brands to charge premium prices when they are successful in creating and sustaining a brand community (or common) where consumers share the same values (Arvidsson 2005: 251). Given that FF membership fees are typically 30 to 50 per cent more expensive than their competitors (Callahan 2008), I will argue that FF is just this type of premium brand. As I will demonstrate, FF members purchase, and then embody, a positive self-identity that has significant cultural capital – a fit, healthy, strong, slim body is a significant cultural and commercial resource demonstrating status and character (Lury 1996; Sassatelli 2010). Rather than just purchasing the means to obtain such a body, FF members join a community of like-minded individuals. Whether they partake in classes, train with a personal trainer or friend, or choose to train alone, they have all paid to join the FF 'family' (brand community) of 'winners'. In doing so, their bodies embody the brand and consumption becomes a productive activity and, whether clad in FF attire or not, their bodies have a powerful symbolic force and promote the brand further.

The scholarship about brand communities clearly shares many similarities with rhetorical studies (crafting persuasive appeals to target audiences) and, of course, with magazine studies. Despite a body of work emerging in magazine scholarship in the last decade especially, to my knowledge, there is no comprehensive study of the way that Australian custom magazines court their audiences and mimic the affective pleasures and conventions of consumer magazines. Lynda Dyson's 2007 article about

custom (also called 'contract', 'customer' or 'public relations') magazines remains the most comprehensive international study to date. She explains that a contract publisher produces a custom magazine for a corporate client to act as a brand extension for a core customer base; thus they are not expected to turn a profit but ideally they attract enough paid advertising to cover production costs (Dyson 2007: 636). Dyson and Barbara Blakely's scholarship on magazines (2011) and Roberta Sasstelli's research on fitness cultures (2010) suggest that the ability to target a select market of (typically) middle-class gym-goers is very attractive to advertisers who are also keen to link their products with a premium client group's brand values (Dyson 2007; Blakely 2011; Sassatelli 2010). If FF founder Tony de Leede is correct, when people exercise they are in a 'heightened state' and particularly receptive to advertising and thus a custom magazine aimed at gym-goers appears to make good business sense (Callahan 2008: 3).

Some custom magazines are given away to customers (Woolworths' *Fresh* magazine is a market leader in Australia) or as a part of a membership package (the *FF magazine*, obviously). Other custom titles can be purchased for a relatively modest price and are available at newsagents and outlets alongside consumer magazines (Dyson 2007: 636). The *FF magazine* is published bi-monthly, is generally between 100 and 120 pages long, and is free for members or $7.95 per issue on subscription for non-members. I have never seen it for sale in a newsagent. Production values are high, paper stock is luxurious and it would take an attentive reader to differentiate the *FF magazine* from any other fitness glossy on the shelves like *Men's* or *Women's health*. As Dyson explains, 'customer magazines mimic the format and content of "glossies" with the object of positioning a particular brand in relation to a specifically targeted readership' (2007: 634). As she goes on to explain, 'It is the generic characteristics of magazines the representational codes and layout shared across all glossies … that enable readers to easily recognise and navigate such publications' (2007: 636). This is certainly the case with the *FF magazine*, which looks just like any other glossy magazine by mimicking the standard format: slick cover image surrounded by 'cover lines' and 'teasers', full-page expensive advertisements in the first few pages, the editorial(s), and then contents page, letters to the editor, and feature articles and cheaper advertising and advertorials towards the back. Just like a 'real' glossy, it is the type of magazine that one might keep on a coffee table, pass on to a friend, or tuck into a FF backpack, briefcase or handbag. As suggested in the introduction, a typical reader may pass on their magazine to work colleagues, friends or family, and so it needs to be portable, durable and attractive enough to warrant a change of hands.

Fig 1. A typical cover featuring male and female models (November/December 2009)

Charismatic editors of glossy magazines, and women's magazines in particular, urge readers to 'better themselves' and they specialise in dispensing instructions about how to perform femininity (Ferguson 1983: 2). It is assumed that women must be educated, via text and visual advertisements, how to be 'proper' women. Readers are offered aspirational role models, expert advice and a range of commodities to help facilitate their emotional, intellectual and physical rehabilitation. The magazines act as agents of socialisation where readers are sold the virtues of self-control and discipline and urged to be their 'best selves' and to take personal responsibility for their transformation. Or, in FF-speak, to 'be yourself … only better'. Similarly, discourses about healthism locate the responsibility (indeed, moral obligation) for health squarely with the individual (Crawford 1980). Individuals are charged with ensuring they exercise, eat and drink moderately, do not smoke or take illegal drugs, and educate themselves about health and wellbeing. A middle-class ethos of self-improvement is espoused along with the pursuit of happiness and a long life (Crawford 1980: 375). Individuals, then, need access to the sacred knowledge held by certain gatekeepers who have this knowledge about health, exercise and beauty (Ferguson 1983: 10). This is why fitness magazines can be marketed as compelling, indeed essential, reading for men ('guys') and women ('girls'). Tony de Leede cheerfully admits what FF is selling is 'life' and he says that 'If people improve their health they'll live longer' (Callahan 2008: 4). This is a message reinforced in the editorial of the most recent (November/December 2013) issue at the time of writing and it is a powerful and seductive message: members can buy extra years of life as long as they are vigilant and keep paying the membership fees and reading the magazine. If readers of the *FF magazine* want to construct their best selves, they look to the editor and to fitness experts for motivation and expert instruction, and for narratives that reinforce shared values and work-out rituals. Accordingly, even in custom magazines, editorial content is highly valued by both readers and advertisers as it has the status of knowledgeable and objective journalism (wisdom) rather than advertising copy (Dyson 2007: 635).

In this study of *FF magazines* from November/December 2007 until November/December 2013, paid advertising comprises approximately 50 per cent of the content, with obvious promotional or 'advertorial' material comprising another 30 per cent and the remaining 20 per cent more educational material written by 'experts'. In addition to the cover story, the discursive content of the magazine is divided into two main sections, labelled 'Health/fitness' and 'Nutrition/weight'. On the face of it, the cover stories and features are often the only articles not explicitly promoting a particular product but, of course, that is not the case as what the gyms and the magazine are selling is slim toned bodies and so the celebrities and models clad in swimsuits or work-out attire who talk about their fitness and beauty regimes *are* selling the brand. Moreover, every feature article or expert discourse is accompanied or accessorized by a relevant product. For example, an article about the health and calorific consequences of drinking alcohol during the festive season is followed by an advertisement for Nine Below low-calorie wine (November/December 2009, 8–11 of a special feature). These sections are more informative and slightly less obviously aimed at selling products but they form a crucial part of the healthism narrative and provide a forum for both experts and (occasional) amateurs to share their stories.

Sassatelli's scholarship on fitness culture stresses the importance of fitness magazines as vehicles to disseminate expert discourse through cultural intermediaries like magazine editors (2010: 12). In the *FF magazine*, this expert discourse often takes the form of step-by-step illustrated instructions about how to execute certain exercises which, of course, also promotes the authority of the brand and acts to instruct and motivate. In the November/December 2009 issue, an expert article entitled '3 workouts to make you nice when you've been naughty' (29–36) is just this type of step-by-step illustrated guide where two FF instructors perform a series of 'zone' exercises. (From 2013, the digital version of the magazine includes videos of such exercises.) The contact details for the instructors are included (presumably so clients can book personal training sessions) and advertisements immediately before and after the article promote personal trainer courses (part of the FF Career Program or the Australian Fitness Network), special credit card deals for FF members, and the inevitable protein bars and footwear. Other regular sections located further back in the magazine riff on the word 'First' and include: 'Technology first' (phones, watches, shavers, sex aids, coffee machines, and cameras aimed at both men and women), 'Drive first' (electric cars), 'Look & listen first' (including recommended books about health, diet, vitamins, stress), 'Finance first' (hints for a 'financially fit future') and 'Beauty first' (cosmetics and hair products). They are themed product promotions that blur the line between advertising and informative (expert) content.

Unsurprisingly, the products advertised are chiefly for sports wear, sports drinks or protein supplements, fitness courses, adventure holidays and even police and army recruitment campaigns aimed at potential recruits who like to be active. Moreover, many of the advertisements have obviously been created specifically for the readership. For example, one brand of a two-minute meal has an image of a curry packet on a treadmill, which signals that this is food for people 'on the run' (March/April 2009: 53). Similarly, in November/December 2007 there is an advertisement for pre-packaged individual servings of cereal tagged with 'Longer

workout? Faster breakfast!' (34) but, as the cereal appears to be full of chocolate chips, sugar and fat, the 'health' benefit is debatable. In the same issue, a credit provider advises 'It doesn't have to be this hard … ' with a rather patronizing image of a group of hapless middle-aged women struggling to complete a fitness class (65). (In subsequent issues, the butt of the joke is a weedy pale young man wearing a towelling headband.) The success of the *FF* editor and the magazine's creators in attracting advertisers and shaping the brand is demonstrated in the number of high-end brands keen to align themselves with the FF brand by advertising in the magazine. Moreover, given the membership base, a focus on diet, nutrition, sportswear, cosmetics and cosmetic procedures, and a close relationship between paid advertisements and editorial is to be expected. In fact, we should expect many readers to *welcome* this advertising as helpful information for a busy professional who enjoys the cachet of being associated with, indeed a component of, the FF brand. Presumably, readers want to know where their fellow members are shopping and what they are consuming. It would be a mistake to assume that readers of any magazines are not expert readers who are fully aware that they are being courted by advertisers.

As Megan Le Masurier elucidates in this special edition, magazine content is 'filtered through an editor via an editorial philosophy that speaks and responds to the specific needs of a niche readership' (2014: 13). Just like an editor of a consumer magazine, the editor of a custom magazine conveys authority and expertise and these traits are employed to promote the brand and embed its values. FF magazine editor Analee Matthews, in conjunction with the Managing Director of FF and staff from Active Media Group, craft this free custom magazine into a cohesive publication promoting the FF brand. As embodiments of the brand, editors are increasingly expected to be the magazine's public face and Matthews was that youthful smiling face for seven years from the time the magazine was launched in early 2007. She outlasted several managing directors and this present study focuses primarily but not exclusively on the period 2007–2009 when she and de Leede were the 'faces' of the magazine. Curiously, a middle-aged Walkley award-winning journalist named Tony Sarno (who sports spectacles, a jacket and bow-tie) has recently replaced her in September/October 2013.

Mirroring the practices of glossy consumer magazines, free custom magazines feature personalised messages from the editor, which are usually accompanied by a photograph and a signature. Interestingly, one of the few non-white faces in the *FF magazine* is that of Matthews, whose photograph accompanies her letter from the editor. Matthews personifies the magazine and her construction of a cheerful welcoming voice that permeates the publication is critical to the magazine's success. Her assignment is to motivate readers to remain club members and her editorials act as a kind of mission statement. Typically, her editorial greeting delivers an inspirational message for the season and announces the theme of the issue. (In recent iPad digital editions of the magazine, she voices her greeting with a cheerful audio message.) She alerts readers to changes in the format of the magazine and directs readers to particular features, such as a competition or special offer. For example, in the November/December 2007 edition, she asks readers 'Is it fun to be you?' and urges readers to live 'authentic' lives (10). In the first themed edition in March/April 2009, she explains how to create SMART goals. In the May/June 2013 issue, she

alerts readers that they have a 'new in-house design team' and that 'we have taken a new direction with our covers, which now feature gorgeous men and women' who she claims are 'more often than not' FF members (8). This is a significant acknowledgement that the magazine is aimed at men and women and a shift away from their usual celebrity covers. It marks a move foreshadowed by de Leede in an interview as far back as 2008, where he signalled that 'We're trying to move away from "beautiful people" marketing – to be a little less intimidating' (Callahan 2008: 3). Occasional autobiographical material appears in Matthews' editorials (such as the fact that she had just returned from her honeymoon in the May/June 2009 issue). Matthews regularly asks readers to send in suggestions and feedback. In every column, she also reinforces the message that the magazine is available for purchase and provides information about subscriptions.

Fig 2. Analee Matthew's message in the SMART issue (March/April 2009: 10)

The letters to the editor page, known as 'First word', provides a forum for readers to engage in a conversation with Matthews and fellow readers and the types of strategies she employs, identified above, have clearly been extremely effective. Letters that appear in the November/December 2009 issue speak to the deep connection that readers have with Matthews and the magazine. One reader (Rash) enthuses: 'The "Fast" issue struck a deep chord with me … Thank goodness we have one magazine that actually understands the value of slowing down and cherishing every moment. The words of the magazine gave me motivation' (12). Jessie writes: 'Wow! I've been a FF member for a few months now and have only just discovered your magazine … Thank you for being a REAL magazine and one that inspires readers' (12). Jenny writes: 'Not only do you guys offer fantastic facilities, staff and support but your most

recent magazine offered some very wise and thought-provoking articles … I hold my head up proudly when I tell people that I am a member of such an innovative and caring team. Thanks FF!' (12). Leigh, is similarly effusive:

> I rarely notice the editor's letter. But my eyes scanned the sentences, 'Now go. Get fit. And fast. Time is short', … I had to read the column above and was instantly motivated to read the rest … I found myself understanding those words better and was stuck on how this issue lived by those statements. I really understood the value of the magazine (12).

This is powerful evidence of a discourse community involved in dialogic two-way communication about the brand and one where the magazine very clearly prompts them to reflect about their connection to the brand. Clearly, the authenticity of letters supposedly from readers always needs to be questioned but letters from the readers are generally recognised as testimonials and provide 'solid proof' of the magazine's value and relevance (Williamson 2008: 164). To the magazine's credit, letters that include negative feedback are included along with the usual sycophancy and readers regularly request changes or point out errors (see the November/December 2007 issue, for example) but what we witness in just one page of letters to the editor sampled above is a very meaningful attachment to the *FF* magazine.

With Matthews and the Managing Director (hereafter MD) as the faces of the publication the other contributors working behind the scenes are relatively anonymous. Unlike similar magazines such as *Women's health* (part of the Pacific stable), there is no regular staff of journalists and stylists comprising Editor, Deputy Editor, Art Director, Features Editor, Associate Editor, Staff Writer, Beauty Editor, Sub Editors and others all working together from a central office. Instead, disparate contract employees work to give the impression that the magazine is a hub at the centre of the FF empire. Matthews employs the editor's letter to create the impression of a *FF* team of journalists working on the magazine. Examples include the January/February 2008 edition when she announces the arrival of designer Rebecca Buttrose and the May/June 2008 edition when she notes that David Hutton of SoDUS will 'share his extensive experience and engaging talent with clients who seek innovative publishing, branding and design solutions' (8). Presumably that means that he will attract companies to purchase advertising space in the magazine. In more recent issues, staff are primarily listed as 'Creative Direction/Design' or 'Production/Creative'. Experts (physiotherapists, nutritionists, exercise scientists) are cited in attribution boxes at the end of longer articles but the information is clearly shaped into an article by an unnamed writer (presumably Matthews herself or public relations staff working behind the scenes in the 'Creative' division). The mediating role that Matthews plays by connecting experts with readers highlights her authority. In the case of the *FF* magazine, as would be expected in a custom magazine, many (but not all) of the experts cited are also commercial sponsors or directly linked with the parent company.

One factor that potentially complicates the relationship between Matthews and her readership is the regular missive written by the MD. The MD has the luxury of a whole page whereas Matthews is restricted to a single column. In 2007 the MD was the founder of the company, de Leede. The success of the FF health clubs and

recognition of the FF brand are chiefly due to de Leede's innovations and leadership; he came up with a successful backpack giveaway, cycling studios and dozens of other business innovations (see Callahan 2008; Steffens 2011). De Leede is no longer the MD of the Australian arm of FF but he retains a seat on the board and he still heads Active Media Group, which is the driving force behind the magazine. His current projects include the FitnFast gyms (aimed at the other end of the market) and Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat (usually cross-promoted with a full-page advertisement in most issues of the magazine). He penned 'Tony talk' until 2009 when the next MD, Peter Stirling Benson, took over with 'Pete speak'. The current MD is Pete Manuel and his message is flagged as 'A personal note'. Typically, 'Tony talk' appeared shortly after Matthew's editorial but subsequent MD pages typically appear before the editorial and announce the theme of the issue. Matthews and the MDs are clearly selling the same message – promoting the brand, building the community.

How is it that the *FF* magazine performs as a forum to promote the brand via the rhetorical construction of the clubs as a 'third place'? Although he does not name Ray Oldenburg or Robert D Putman, it is clear that de Leede is familiar with their well-known findings that were extraordinarily successful in the American popular non-fiction market in the 1990s and early 2000s. Oldenburg, an urban sociologist, published *The great good place* in 1989 and a second edition in 1997. In it, he states that home is traditionally people's first place, work their second one, and he goes on to promote the value of what he calls 'third places'. He lists eight traits for these third places, including factors like neutrality, inclusivity and accessibility, and that they should be casual, playful spaces where conversation and social interaction are privileged. Perhaps a café, bookshop, barbershop, pub (hotel) or town square, they are the kind of places where locals and regulars congregate and people can drift in at all hours and be assured that there will be someone to talk to or somewhere they can sit and read or work on their laptops or tablets in the company of others.

Given that Oldenberg's third places privilege the local, it is ironic that the North American coffee chain Starbucks has been spectacularly successful internationally by promoting their outlets as third places. As masters of glocalisation, they have become a hegemonic brandscape by cultivating a welcoming 'arty' ambience that simultaneously affects the local (unique) and international (ubiquitous). Their familiarity offers comfort and reliability, not exactly a home away from home, but a *number* of third places to offer shelter when people are away from their first place (home). Attractions like free wifi and spacious seating make them ideal for meetings and informal workspaces and thus also blur the distinctions between the workplace (second place) and Starbucks as third place. Marketing and communication scholars, such as Thompson and Arsel (2004) and others have examined their success and glocalisation case studies appear regularly in publications like the *Harvard business review* and it is clear that de Leede and others at FF are abreast of that research. Indeed, as I go on to note, de Leede directly references Starbucks and hopes to emulate their success in promoting his chain of gyms as third places both in Australia and overseas.

In Oldenburg's 2001 follow-up entitled *Celebrating the third place*, a clinical psychologist named James F Smith, who specializes in consulting to gyms,

contributes a chapter about a gym in Atlanta, Georgia. His thesis is that gyms are ideal third places as they are great levellers where exercisers mingle with 'a broad array of people we may not ordinary meet' (2001: 138). He waxes lyrical about the possibility that: 'Exercise bridges age, status, occupational, economic, educational, ethnic, racial, and gender barriers as we work out side by side and share the frustrations, strains, injuries, and triumphs … we are all equal' (2001: 138). Clearly, this is a romantic position but it illustrates the connective bonds of a brand community where consumption generates community. In a classic healthism statement, he goes on to extol that gyms are places that promote good health and increase levels of physical and emotional well-being and that people are generally happy to be there (2001: 138). Smith goes on to suggest that social conviviality is the most important element of any gym and it is the one factor most often ignored by management. It's in this area, however, that de Leede excels. In addition to the consumption rituals shared by gym members who habitually attend the same classes or exercise at the same time, I argue that the *FF* magazine is an important vehicle for the brand to enhance social conviviality and foster a community. The magazine assists the brand community to expand beyond the geographical confines of the gyms themselves and out into the wider population. The magazine is a tangible reminder of a socially constructed community that needs to be reinforced with every edition.

It is clear that de Leede, Matthews and the marketing staff at FF see the *FF magazine* as a key part of their strategy to increase brand loyalty and promote ethical surplus. In the November/December 2007 edition of the *FF magazine*, in his 'Tony talk' missive, de Leede asks readers to make FF their 'third place' (14). In his missive entitled 'At Fitness First, you belong', he explains that in the United States, traditionally churches were third places but now Starbucks takes on that secular status. This speaks to the magnitude of Starbucks' success and de Leede's familiarity with their marketing strategy. He understands that social capital and fostering a shared knowledge of belonging is key to building a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001: 413). De Leede suggests that pubs have traditionally been Australia's third place but that FF clubs are a healthier alternative. After explaining the concept of the third place and assuring readers that they are part of a 'community' and that they 'belong', he states:

> In Australia, we want your third-place to be a healthy destination; we want your third place to be Fitness First. It is critical to us that you feel great about being part of our third-place … But in the world we live in, people are vigilant about who they associate themselves with based on what they sell, who they are, what they stand for, and the causes they stand behind. We want everyone to know that we are serious about supporting our local communities (14).

He could be reading from Dyson's description of successful custom magazines that are attractive 'to advertisers who wish to associate their products and services with brand values espoused by the client company' (2007: 636). These values are not just implied but are clearly stated in the messages from the MD and they are much more palatable when consumed in a glossy custom magazine.

Fig 3. Tony de Leede's message about the third place (November/December 2007: 14)

Secondly, as a good rhetorician and brand manager, he is making an affective appeal to garner trust. De Leede then goes on to outline the ways that the organisation provides that backing by supporting local charities, green initiatives, sponsorships and school programs. Popular 'nice guy' swimmer Geoff Huegill is the face of many of these charitable campaigns. The magazine provides a forum for de Leedes to promote these good works, which would otherwise be unknown to most gym-goers. Outside of the editorial space, however, there is little mention of these initiatives in the rest of the magazine, as the space needs to pay for itself. If we look at the individuals and brands promoted in that issue, we find that it is the usual mix of sports brands (Nike, Puma, Brooks, Saucony), cosmetics (Biotherm, Versace, Mitchum, Proactiv), holiday destinations (Tahiti), food/supplements (Uncle Tobys, Aussie Bodies, Musashi, Nature's Own) and alcohol (Gage Roads) that are seen in comparable consumer magazines. The implication is that these products and messages are inherently reliable and trustworthy by virtue of the fact that *FF* is such a discerning host brand. As Barbara Blakely argues, advertisements that appear in a trusted magazine have enormous power as the products are imbued with the trusted qualities that readers associate with the host publication (2011: 689). De Leede closes with the assurance that:

> Fitness First takes its position to help improve the health and wellbeing of Australians across the country very seriously. We are constantly finding new ways to encourage and support Australians from all ages and walks of life, ensuring we provide fitness for everyone … everywhere (14).

It is easy to be cynical about such messages but de Leede does sound sincere about civic engagement and according to one journalist, in addition to sharing profits with

key employees, de Leede tries to be 'a "good corporate citizen" by liaising with governments and educators to create an "adopt a school" system, where kids have cheap or free access to gym facilities … to [help] "combat childhood obesity"' (Callahan 2008: 4). Of course, just because he may be a good corporate citizen does not mean that he is any less an aggressive business operator and savvy marketer. The magazine offers readers, who are not affluent inner-city workers or residents, imagined entry into another realm.

De Leede reinforces the third place message in the January/February 2008 edition and argues that a health club is now more than a place to 'improve your fitness and enhance your health' (14). In adopting FF as a third place, members are putting themselves 'in a position to learn precious skills that will seamlessly transfer into [their] work, home and social life' (14). He then lists such benefits as goal setting, motivation, concentration, visualisation and mental stamina. It seems that FF membership is not only a community service but also a means to climb the corporate ladder. The feature articles in this issue promote the benefits of yoga, weights programs, laughing, a positive outlook and good posture in the workplace. Mindful that the magazine is aimed at men and women, it is gender neutral and careful to include inclusive content. There is also a special feature entitled '4 Steps to a Successful 2008', which emphasizes the benefits of persistence, planning, goal setting and surrounding yourself with 'winners.' Another emphasizes rituals and traditions associated with New Year resolutions like going on diets, cutting back on alcohol consumption, giving up smoking, setting work-out goals and the other usual suspects seen in all fitness and health magazines at that time of year. Membership of the brand community is marked by these shared rituals and traditions and the moral responsibility to stay fit and trim. The magazine reinforces the value of their expensive membership fees and reminds readers that they must be vigilant and commit to the brand values in order to be 'successful'.

It seems likely that de Leede and Matthews have also read political scientist Robert D Putnam's popular essay (1995) or book (2000) entitled *Bowling alone*, which laments what Putnam believes is the decline of civic engagement in America. Enormously popular at the time, although criticized by some scholars, Putman makes an argument similar to Oldenburg's and argues that readers should foster civic and social engagement and break down what he sees as increased levels of social isolation. Putnam stresses the importance of seemingly innocuous forms of phatic communication: the nods, waves and hellos that actually translate into valuable social capital (2000: 93). Putman also devotes a section of the book to the value of communal sport and exercise and he posits that the move away from team sports (bowling in a team) to more solitary sporting pursuits (bowling alone) is emblematic of social breakdown (2000: 109–11).

Remembering that Oldenberg stresses that third places are places where conversation and easy social interaction should be privileged, it's not surprising then that in the May/June 2008 edition themed 'Investing in you', de Leede urges members to break down isolation and loneliness and to converse with strangers (12). De Leede's editorial is entitled 'Be the change' and in it he suggests that gaining 'wisdom' (conflated with attracting a partner and then later in the piece, friends) requires taking

chances (talking to strangers). The text is accompanied by a black and white shot of de Leede clad in a casual polo shirt and another colour image of a happy young couple smiling and looking into each other's eyes. He urges readers to be daring (to 'flip the switch') and to look for possible mates in everyday locations and situations, such as engaging in conversations with staff and customers in local shops and cafés and making new friends. Surprisingly, he misses this opportunity to encourage readers to talk to other people at the gym; after all, gyms are not just places that people go to get fit; they also pay to mix socially with others like themselves (Sassatelli 2010: 4). Indeed, a conversation about the magazine content could be another avenue for social interaction. Perhaps a slick communicator like de Leede feels confident the message is implied and the magazine itself is a dialogue between management and members.

What we see here is a rallying cry to invest in the self and self-improvement; FF members have a moral obligation to share their healthism narratives and the magazine provides the perfect vehicle for readers to 'be the change'. Aspirational role models adorn the covers and advertisements, expert guest columnists offer advice, and the editor and MD offer encouragement and wise counsel. Who would not want to 'flip the switch' and power-walk to their local FF gym when so much is on offer for those who can afford the membership fees. It is my hope that this article starts a conversation about the way that custom publications facilitate the construction of brand communities who bond through the consumption and production of an Australian custom magazine. Custom magazines, like the *FF magazine*, are an integral part of Australian magazine and print culture and they deserve more scholarly attention.

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