

Fitness industry embraces hybrid model post-pandemic

by AUFA MARDHIAH / pic by BLOOMBERG

SINCE the first nationwide Movement Control Order, industries were forced to provide virtual offerings to stay afloat.

Now even as the economy has reopened and the country recording high vaccination rates, businesses and consumers continue to include virtual ways of doing things as they embrace the convenience and benefits.

For Malaysia's fitness industry, virtual programmes were an exciting new discovery but after two years, the tantalising experiences are no longer the same as the first lockdown.

Celebrity Fitness instructor Kevin Zahri and Anusha Segaren Head of Marketing Celebrity Fitness, CHi Fitness, Fitness First & GoFit Malaysia, both agreed that the virtual workout trend in Malaysia had started earlier before the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

They said the pandemic dramatically accelerated the shift from physical to virtual to meet people's demands and needs, with 90% of people having been sticking to their fitness routine through a hybrid approach.

Anusha said as many corporations also looked to virtual wellness options for their employees, gyms were approached by many organisations to conduct webinars and workouts.

"This trend still continues even post-lockdown as the pandemic has shown how important it is to be healthy and fit," she told *The Malaysian Reserve (TMR)*.

However, virtual workout classes to some extents are affecting the gym and sport operator business.

According to Kevin, not all are impacted like tennis and badminton where the coaching cannot be replicated, but gyms and fitness classes like zumba, workout and personal training may be impacted in a way that gyms are still finding out due to the fluid situation.

"Currently, we can only know people's preference whether they want to go back to the gym or virtual class while trying to get the balance.

"Nevertheless, we still provide virtual classes while also focusing on physical classes to see market response," he said.

On the other hand, Anusha admitted that the reopening of gyms naturally decreases their participants on the virtual workout platform as more members return to the brick-and-mortar gym, but Evolution Wellness have been working hard to enhance their virtual studio offering to keep up with the hybrid workout trend.

"The number of people steadily returning to our group classes is testament that nothing beats an in-person experience, where participants work out under the watchful eyes of motivating instructors," she told TMR.

Despite the availability of physical and virtual workout classes nowadays, both agreed that the fitness industry will evolve into a hybrid approach as we learn to live with Covid-19.

Kevin said due to this, many gyms will likely downsize, close or reopen, depending on the supply and demand of the market.

However, because of this situation also, gym entrepreneurs contemplate whether to keep business physical or shift to virtual while arbitrating the revenue stream, competition and many more.

"Moving forward, I believe there will be a shift in big players offering very cost-effective virtual experience, but that could affect smaller local players," he said.

Through Evolution Wellness' growing class bookings, Anusha acknowledged that the physical gym experience cannot be 100% replicated in an online setting where physical classes enable live assessment by personal trainers and instructors.

"We must continuously evolve our offering in line with the times and be prepared to offer a variety of options for people to stay healthy and remain consistent with their workouts," she added.

Nonetheless, Kevin said despite the opportunities for the fitness industry through the virtual world, the revenues generated through virtual classes is not as much as the physical classes.

"Hence, many fitness instructors struggle with the situation. What helps us to survive is the number of scales which makes it economically viable," Kevin concluded.