

Fitness Frenzy: Inside the College Workout Studio Craze

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The day after my first ever Solidcore pilates class I could not walk. Or raise my arms. Or laugh without wincing in pain. I texted my friend who shepherded me the day prior and asked her if this level of excruciating soreness was normal. She told me everyone feels that way after their first class but that I would get used to it the more classes I attended.

I couldn't imagine myself going back to another class, and yet I did. My peers and classmates who swore that this workout would "change my life" hooked me and reeled me back in, until before I knew it I was signing the dotted line for a membership of several hundred dollars a month.

Workout studios like Solidcore have become an epidemic across the country. Women in their early twenties have become the target demographic for studios, allowing them to thrive in college towns. Pilates, indoor cycling, hot yoga, HIIT cardio, kickboxing. You name it, the nearby college town has it.

These studios may be beneficial for people's physical health, but they can begin to feel like cults with the tactics they use to lure and maintain their customer base. Studios drain the pockets of people with their high subscription and class rates and limit people's flexibility with how and when they can workout. So why are women in college so obsessed?

Lily Gristina is a cycling instructor at Purvelo, a boutique cycling studio with locations in Charlottesville, Auburn, Chapel Hill, and Athens. She said one reason people become so infatuated with certain workout studios is the people they meet and connect with.

"There's a really big community aspect," Gristina said. "You begin to form friend groups around attending classes and doing the workout together, which is something I think girls struggle to find just working out at a normal gym."

Purvelo hosts weekly post-ride events such as cocktail parties and rooftop DJs for riders to attend with one another. Gristina says the community and social component of the studio is what makes being an instructor worth it, despite the low pay rate of \$30 for every 1-hour class she teaches. Purvelo charges riders \$25 per individual class and \$130 a month for 8 classes, which Gristina says is too much for the quality of the workout and for the amount they pay their staff.

UVA student Emmie Halter has experimented with several workout studios in Charlottesville over the last three years, including Purvelo, Solidcore, and Orange Theory. Though she attends classes with friends, Halter said her main focus on picking a workout studio is the long term physical results it will have for her strength and physique. She says she is guilty of convincing herself each studio is better than the last and falling for the same tactics repeatedly.

"They each feel so new and exciting, like this one might have finally cracked the code for what is the best workout," Halter said.

She said it's difficult to switch from studio to studio due to the high prices that almost require you to lock into an exclusive membership at one place. For example, an 8-class monthly pack at Solidcore costs \$210, unless you commit to paying for 6 months or a year which can decrease the monthly cost to as low as \$160.

Halter said this price tactic backs people into a corner of trading off flexibility with saving money, but that she still thinks it's a better alternative to a gym.

"If I go try and run on the treadmill or do a mat workout by myself at the gym, there's no telling how good my workout is going to turn out," Halter said. "At least with a class, there's a teacher yelling at me to do the move correctly."

Maggie Welch studies psychology at the University of Virginia, and she said sometimes girls keep going to workout classes even when they don't like the type of workout or price due to the phenomenon called "groupthink". The physiological term refers to when a group of people make a decision they otherwise wouldn't due to the desire to conform to others.

Though often used for more extreme cases of literal cults, Welch said the underlying concept of the phenomenon can apply to girls' addiction to workout studio memberships. She said living in a college town of other females your age, it's tempting for girls to conform to the same workout regimen and commitment in order to conform to them socially and physically.

"When really thin and pretty girls tell you they go to a certain workout studio, you convince yourself you need to go there to look like her," Welch said, "when in reality, that studio is not why she looks the way she does."

Welch said she tried a couple different types of workout classes herself, but wasn't sold that it was worth the price and effort compared to going to a gym.

"I think it's great if someone truly loves the workout she gets from these overpriced and overhyped memberships," Welch said, "but I don't think that's the case for a lot of people and they don't even realize it."