

Joe Wicks, lifestyle capitalism and the social construction of PE (with Joe)

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In Spring 2020, the UK Government announced the cessation of in-person teaching for the vast majority of school-aged children in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Prompting an accelerated shift towards digital learning across the curriculum, this announcement was accompanied by a rise in market-based solutions to address the problem of keeping young people active, ‘healthy’ and ‘positive’ whilst at home. The most prominent of these was offered by Joe Wicks, who broadcasted *PE with Joe* live globally via *YouTube* for five days per week for eighteen weeks. The aim of this paper is to critically explore some of the contextual factors that enabled Joe Wicks to create and legitimise a public health intervention under the title of physical education, and henceforth position himself (whether intentionally or not) as an authoritative agent for change within the discipline. After outlining who Joe Wicks is, we unpack the discursive framing of *PE with Joe* in order to locate Wicks’ intervention amid the perennial politics of physical education. We then consider the meaning of *PE with Joe* and why Joe Wicks’ involvement in physical education matters, reflecting upon the effects of Joe Wicks on the future of physical education practice and research. Among our conclusions is that the Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for Joe Wicks – here positioned and understood as a branded, celebrity lifestyle enterprise – to manoeuvre himself (and his products) from the periphery to the centre of physical education’s public imagery and discourse. Furthermore, we argue that exploring the ways in which Wicks’ presence in the physical education space has been received, embraced, modified, challenged and resisted is vital in discerning *PE with Joe*’s actual or perceived effects on the social construction of physical education, and the educational engagements of young people in physical activity in the post-Covid-19 landscape.

Keywords: Joe Wicks; Covid-19; physical education; discourse; health; crisis; public pedagogy; entrepreneurialism; late-capitalism; celebrity

Word count: 8293

Introduction

The disruption caused by UK Government lockdown measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic affected the lives of people in many interrelated ways, including the closure of essential public services and institutions like schools. For the education sector the government's response to the pandemic presented a significant challenge to re-organise customary educational practices to meet the demands of the crisis (Daniel, 2020). Cessation of in-person teaching for the vast majority of school-aged children occurred almost overnight given the haste in which schools were required to adapt to UK lockdown restrictions. With little time to prepare for a sudden shift to a regime of remote learning, school leaders and teachers were left to grapple with how to reinstate the routine of the school day online, deliver the school curriculum and mitigate the deleterious effects of the pandemic on young people's learning and development.

Among the many educational concerns that arose from children being unable to attend school in-person, the question of how to keep children (and families) physically active loomed large in light of expert mediated, public discourse on the harmful consequences of inactivity on young people's psychological as well as physical wellbeing during lockdown. Subsequently, the pandemic brought renewed emphasis on the place of school-based physical activity in young people's lives. However, adapting to school closures presented a heightened challenge to the physical education profession in translating practical, movement-based learning – often performed outdoors or in specialist indoor environments comprising group activity, social interaction and collaboration between peers – to the online learning space.

The accelerated change towards digital learning saw a rise in market-based solutions to address the problem of keeping young people active, 'healthy' and

‘positive’ whilst at home without essential opportunities to exercise they would otherwise receive (it is assumed) at school. The most prominent of these was Joe Wicks; a personal trainer, fitness coach, author and lifestyle instructor who offered a prompt and decisive response to the dilemma (Malcolm and Velija, 2020). For eighteen weeks from March to July 2020, Joe Wicks offered *PE with Joe* five days per week, a programme comprised of High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT)-inspired workouts intended for school-aged children and families that was broadcast live globally via YouTube, and freely available for those with internet access.

Joe Wicks’ involvement in physical education during the Covid-19 pandemic has not gone without controversy, sparking discussion among practitioners and academics who have voiced support as well as concern. For example, Stirrup et al. (2020) warned of the risks associated with the rise of celebrity ‘PE teachers’ undermining the professional status of the physical educationalists. They claim that the holistic educative intent of high-quality physical education risks becoming overshadowed by the narrow, one-size-fits-all approach adopted by Joe Wicks and other celebrity trainers. Conversely, Windsor (2020) argued the Wicks movement has led to ritualised family-centred engagements with exercise and the realisation that PE does not necessarily mean sport and the learning of sport specific games and techniques – a prominent feature of the English National Curriculum (see Herold, 2020) and post-war history of PE in Britain (Kirk, 1992). Instead, Windsor (2020) believes P.E. with Joe presents a ‘novel’ vision for a more ‘inclusive’ and ‘fitness’ orientated PE curriculum that should be lauded.

More recently, Lambert et al. (2021, p.17) asserted that ‘any disciplinary support for Joe Wicks as PE is both problematic and offensive.’ Arguing from a poststructuralist feminist position, their auto-ethnographic examination of ‘Joe Wicks as PE’ concluded

‘PE is stuck, shackled and reproduced by limiting heteronormative, classist, ableist and racist assumptions about movement, bodies, knowledge and even what it means to be physically educated.’ This overtly provocative view demonstrates existing tensions within the physical education field that Joe Wicks’ appropriation of the discipline has amplified. Of note is what *PE with Joe* symbolises in light of physical education’s contested identity, relationship with child and public health, and the rapid growth of the educational market and external expertise populating the delivery of physical education (Macdonald, 2011; Sperka, 2020).

Following the notable success of *PE with Joe*, arguably Joe Wicks now represents an eminent if not the public face for physical education in the UK and the most notorious celebrity advocate for the promotion of physical activity and exercise among children and in schools. Given his position of power, Wicks’ involvement in physical education warrants further investigation. Indeed, through the phenomenon of *PE with Joe*, Wicks’ influence on the social construction of physical education has started to take effect. While discussions so far have focused on the threats and opportunities Joe Wicks poses to the concept and professional practice of physical education, less attention has been given to the circumstances that enabled *PE with Joe* to flourish.

Our aim in this paper, therefore, is to critically explore some of the contextual factors that enabled Joe Wicks to create and legitimise a public health intervention under the title of physical education, and henceforth position himself (whether intentionally or not) as an authoritative agent for change within the discipline. In section one, we scrutinise the cultural production of Joe Wicks as *The Nation’s PE Teacher* by offering a reframing of him and his ‘expertise’ as a celebrity lifestyle enterprise. The purpose of the section is to examine the question ‘who is Joe Wicks?’ in relation to the

powerful cultural, political, economic, and technological arrangements that elevated Wicks' entrepreneurial status to that of a health and physical education expert. In section two, we unpack the discursive framing of *PE with Joe* in order to locate Wicks' intervention amid the perennial politics of physical education. In doing so, we analyse how Joe Wicks was able to enter and validate himself in the PE space. The final section considers the meaning and significance of *PE with Joe*, or why Joe Wicks' involvement in PE matters. Here, we reflect upon the effects of Joe Wicks on the future of physical education and identify important avenues for research.

Who is Joe Wicks?

Within five days of the announcement that schools would be closed in the UK (March 18th, 2020), Joe Wicks stepped in to fill the at-home physical education void with *PE with Joe*. Launched via Joe Wicks' free *YouTube* channel, *The Body Coach TV*, the programme offered a series of daily 'workouts' aimed at children (and their parents), streamed live Monday to Friday at 9am for an 18-week period¹. The popularity and global reach of these sessions saw Joe Wicks dubbed by the media *The Nation's PE Teacher* (Bakare, 2020), and even the world's (Prideaux, 2020), to significant public and political acclaim. Joe Wicks provided a quick response to how people, and especially children and families, might become more physically active, positive and optimistic during national lockdowns in the UK and elsewhere. Evidently, his modified High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) programme in *PE with Joe*, combined with an affable, humorous, at times silly, and child-and family-friendly self-representation, resonated with many.

His first *PE with Joe* session saw an estimated 800,000 to 900,000 households around the world tune in, with total viewing growing to more than 6 million views. On 24th March 2020, the show set a Guinness World Record (2020) for the most viewers

for a fitness workout live stream on *YouTube*. Across the 78 *PE with Joe* workouts during the first UK lockdown there were 80 million views, as reported on the final *PE with Joe* session on 22nd July, 2020. Further evidencing the programme's impact in the UK, a mid-April survey of adults by Sport England (2020) identified that even as online exercise began to decline more than a month into lockdown, a quarter of those who exercised via online platforms found Joe Wicks as the 'most useful instructor or influencer' (p. 15).

Yet, Joe Wicks is not a PE teacher, nor are his activities equivalent to the broad range of learning experiences representative of physical education in the round, focusing instead on a much narrower set of movement and fitness practices (Carse and Gray, 2020). Wicks confessed only to have once aspired to be a PE teacher during his interview with Lauren Laverne on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* (2020) in the wake of his lockdown-era recognition. In fact, becoming a physical educator is a career Wicks eschewed after discontinuing his training as a PE teacher assistant in favour of adult personal training (Williams, 2020). His early days as a personal trainer saw him handing out flyers at train stations (Heritage, 2016) or, as he revealed in his *Desert Island Discs* radio appearance, offering free fitness sessions in the park to drum up interest for his personal training business. Relying on social media tools presented via *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *Facebook*, he expanded his offering with 15-second cooking videos before publishing a health-conscious cookbook, *Lean in 15*². It is at this point that Joe Wicks began to transition from a reasonably successful personal trainer to someone standing at the helm of a celebrity lifestyle guru enterprise, a self-marketing individual engaging with broader late-capitalist logics (Jameson, 1984).

In contrast to his common media representation as an individual, healthy eating author, physical educator, or fitness instructor, Joe Wicks, we suggest is better seen and

understood as a branded, celebrity lifestyle enterprise. Far more than one person conducting, recording, and publishing health and fitness programming, Joe Wicks is the brand of a multi-mediated persona and commercial enterprise. He and his companies are prime examples of the cultural production of popular lifestyle experts or gurus that engage audiences through optimising everyday life. Lewis (2010; 2008) suggests that the rise of the celebrity expert is one outgrowth of media culture, one growing from democratic capitalist forms (Marshall, 1997) that reconfigures distinctions between expert and ordinary discourse through a process of celebritisation. The celebrity-expert carries a kind of cultural authority characterised by a tension between ‘a claim to exceptional or elite status and a kind of public representativeness’ (Lewis, 2010, p. 582).

Implicating dynamics of power, social status and democratisation, Lewis (2010) suggested that with growing mediatisation and commercialisation, it is the authority of traditional experts or intellectuals that has waned as ‘more fashionable figures of authority such as the celebrity take centre stage’ (ibid.). Within this process, media culture, and increasingly via social media, lifestyle experts, influencers, and expertise have diversified. Joe Wicks, like Jane Fonda (e.g., Jane Fonda Workout videos), Richard Simmons (e.g., Jane Fonda Workout videos), Jillian Michaels (e.g., Ripped in 30 diet and exercise plan), Billy Blanks (e.g., Tae Bo workouts and Billy’s Boot Camp programme) and others before him, represents a ‘living brand’ (Lury, 2004). In Lewis’s (2010) terms, he represents a cultural authority that, on the one hand, mobilises his name and celebrity into an ontologically-mixed, commodified, multi-mediated, and merchandised entity, while simultaneously on the other hand displaces experts or intellectuals in health, fitness, or physical education.

Initially developed for marketing executives, the idea of ‘self-marketing’ to

foster a living brand as a career strategy has become entangled with lifestyle aspiration, a brand of celebrity-expertise that is tied principally to cultural associations of the everyday and ordinary (Lewis, 2010). Banet-Weiser (2012) argued that in selling an image, the branding of a product applies also to the branding of the self. In such arrangements, the self is forged in concert with economic principles, like brand management strategies, self-promotion, and advertising techniques. Joe Wicks' affable, energetic, generous, and positive conduct become products and producers of business practices, expertise, celebrity status, and ordinariness. As early as 2016, *The Guardian's* Stuart Heritage found out that delving beyond the positive, motivational, promotional persona is difficult with Joe Wicks. After having been enthusiastically taken through a HIIT session with Wicks, Heritage wrote:

After we finish, I realise that Wicks talks like this all the time, endlessly peppering his sentences with words like “positive” and “inspirational”. His monomania can seem impossible to penetrate. “It’s the power of social media, the power of a good message,” he tells me at one point. “I’m so ambitious. I’m just at the start. A hundred thousand people have done my plan, but my goal is millions and millions. Instead of Weight Watchers and Slimming World and Juice Plus, they’re all going to come to me.”

Joe's ‘endlessly peppering’ persona of positive and inspirational messaging form the basis upon which his lifestyle products/activities/presences (e.g., nutrition, cooking, and physical training) and those of his companies are based. His 90-day meal and workout plan catchphrase encapsulates this monomaniacal sentiment concisely: ‘Go from 90 days to a way of life you’ll love,’ as his website advertises (2021) promising that you, too, can live a healthy, nutritious, and active lifestyle if you do what Joe says and does. Joe's words are notable in speaking about his brand's ambitions to reach and put

millions onto his pathway to the proverbial good life: they are the words of a market-based enterprise positioning itself against competitors while attempting to resonate with ordinary and everyday people/consumers. His rhetoric from the start of his business through to its current practices resonates far more with advertising and self-promotion than someone looking to provide youth physical educational experiences.

From his early personal training endeavours through game show appearances and then his catalysing engagement with social media, Joe Wicks strove to develop his own “living brand” for more than ten years. As of 2021, the Joe Wicks brand and entrepreneurial network is vast. Comprised of three companies, the financial benefits of his enterprise are sizeable and indeed thrived during Covid-19, according to the UK government’s registrar of companies (Companies House, 2021): *Joe Wicks Limited*, established in 2015, saw its revenues move from £3.19 million to £3.48 million between 2019 and 2020; *The Bodycoach Online Nutrition Limited*, established in 2014, increased from £2.3 million to £3.6 million during 2020; and *Joe Wicks Group Limited*, a holding company established in 2018, of which Joe Wicks is the sole shareholder and director that classifies £3.25 million in assets as investments. The latter of these, a holding company, is notable because it lays a foundation for a corporate organisational and governance structure of and for Joe Wicks companies, which enables several forms of tax exemption, asset protection, distributed risk and costs across companies, and guards against external acquisition. It would appear, then, that the Joe Wicks brand is embracing the fiscally fine-tuned, financially motivated, legal, and tax-efficient mode of operation common to corporate entities.

As a self-promoted and packaged consumer product, Joe and his products disguise a business/persona as motivated partially, if not overwhelmingly, for financial gain and the construction of a financially robust market base through a carefully curated

image of doing something ‘good’ for the health of the population. In an interview with Zoe Williams from *The Guardian* in March 2020, for example, he played down his affluence (“it’s a very modest house”) and plays up his good intentions (“I want to be the person who completely transformed the health of the nation”), even if this is phrased in a slightly egotistical way. It is therefore a rather uncomfortable experience observing Wicks simultaneously declaring that he is more motivated by public health than personal wealth while also expanding his financial portfolio and product range with such speed and zeal. Indeed, while Wicks’ decision to donate his *YouTube* advert revenue from *PE with Joe* to charity is admirable to the casual onlooker, what can follow is the same sense of cynicism that one feels when seeing large companies engage in hollow corporate social responsibility activities. Perhaps Wicks weaves two distinct intentions into his mission: a genuine desire to be of service to others and a desire to avoid risking the long-term brand damage that would arise from being the UK’s most recent famous disaster-capitalist.

What we are left with, then, is an understanding of Joe Wicks as a living brand and corporate enterprise consisting of a carefully curated public self-image that is expressive of broader cultural, economic, political, and technological arrangements, which helps to explain his positioning as a celebrity-expert and cultural authority capable of (re)asserting himself as ‘the PE teacher for the nation’ (Bakare, 2020) and launching an entrepreneurially response to an interrelated health and (physical) education crisis. Having established his name/brand into a thriving health and fitness business prior to the creation of *PE with Joe*, our analysis turns to how the Joe Wicks brand first entered the sphere of physical education and the subsequent role of the Covid-19 pandemic in catapulting his influence on the social construction of a school subject.

How did Joe Wicks enter the PE space?

Joe Wicks' arrival on the physical education landscape dates back to September 2017 and his first live, online broadcast aimed at children and schools. His *Schools Fitness Week* marked Wicks' first strategic encroachment into the physical education domain as a public pedagogue and agent for change. Following a repeat of his online venture the subsequent year, Wicks then embarked on *The Body Coach UK Schools HIIT Tour* in May 2019 with the explicit aim of finding out "what was really happening with fitness in our schools and to promote the incredible benefits of regular exercise." A promotional film published on his *YouTube* channel (July, 2019) documents his experience delivering free workout sessions in 17 UK primary schools over five days and offers insight into the ideas informing Wicks' intentions.

Over the course of the film, Wicks portrays a common-sense 'truth' about the state of child health and physical education and the relationship between the two.

Parroting a familiar storyline, the film opens with the following words acting as a framework for Wicks' motivation and intentions:

Childhood obesity in the UK is at an all-time high, with numbers rising...Physical activity is being squeezed out of schools as pressure to achieve academic results increases. Health and fitness needs to be a priority in our schools. Not only for our children to live happier and healthier lives, but evidence proves the positive link between physical activity and improved academic achievement.

The film's audience is graced with a series of school-based scenes capturing smiling children and happy teachers engaged in synchronous, Wicks-led workout routines are punctuated by regular monologues where Joe ties himself and his methodology to a societal problem that needs fixing, namely: the diminishing health and happiness of school children coupled with the diminishing place of exercise and PE in schools. The

promise of transforming the lives of children through physical education promoted in the film is based on Wicks' endorsement of his product (HIIT), celebrity-expert status and henceforth responsibility to use his influence to change PE and re-establish its presence as a form of physical training that is cheap, simple, fun and proven to achieve results.

In essence, the film reveals the genesis of *PE with Joe*, presenting Wicks as 'the face' and provider of a possible physical education future in light of a constructed set of issues and a ready-made solution. Indeed, the film lays witness to Wicks' discursive construction of PE as a precarious curriculum subject failing in its overriding purpose. The act of defining physical education discursively through what is said, done and written in its name is a deliberate and value-laden process, argues Kirk (1992, p.25), involving the selection and drawing together of 'particular sets of ideas' into a meaningful arrangement. This process is neither culturally nor politically neutral but aimed at communicating something about the subject's essential guise and function in order to achieve certain ends (Kirk, 2010). Notions of 'crisis' and 'health' that Joe Wicks uses as access points are neither challenging nor new to the concept of PE. Rather, they tap into discourses that remain prominent, unresolved and woven into the complex discursive terrain that frames PE's historic socio-cultural configuration, acting to legitimise the truth Wicks portrays about PE and the form it subsequently takes through his actions and words.

Indeed, crisis has formed part of a common physical education vernacular that has encircled the subject since the 1990s, encompassing a multitude of criticism and concerns related to the subject's aims, content and pedagogy, and state of disrepair (see Casey and Larson, 2018). Originally mobilised by the 'socially critical left' in order to problematise PE for the purpose of reform (p.134), crisis talk, according to Thorpe

(2003), has a destabilising effect by drawing attention to a perceived need for change. For Kirk (1998), crisis pertains to a disruption in the normal way of making sense of PE reflecting not only the need for change, but an opportunity to do so. To this end, Thorpe (2003) warned, PE's politicised portrayal as a subject in crisis runs the risk of being usurped by powerful agents (like Wicks) seeking to subvert the imperative for change for their own interests.

Wicks' exploitation of PE's discursive history also draws up a series of dominant health discourses around which physical education's role as an instrument for child and public health enhancement has been conceived both in policy and practice (Kirk, 2018). The first pertains to physical education's assumed remedial purpose in providing young people with health-enhancing physical activity to combat health risks associated with childhood obesity and inactivity, underpinned by a biomedical framing of exercise as 'medicine', and a pathogenic perspective on health as the opposite to disease (Gard and Wright, 2001; Kirk, 2006; Quennerstedt, 2019). The second relates to PE's neoliberal function as a means of acculturating young people to take ownership of their health-related behaviours by instilling knowledge and exercise habits that propel them towards leading physically active lives, adding a moral and individualised dimension to PE's contemporary role in health promotion and maintenance (Evans, 2003). Combined, these health-based messages have orientated PE's *modus operandi* towards the regulation of children's bodies as a proxy of health and fitness, and the effectiveness of PE within a neoliberal public health context (Cale and Harris, 2001; Cale et al., 2014). This position is supplemented by another neoliberal rationality that in responsibilising health at an individual level, private enterprise is an efficient and cost-effective way of helping schools and PE teachers respond to shifting and increasingly demanding health-related imperatives, out of which a profitable health and physical

education marketplace has emerged (Enright et al., 2020; Evans and Davies, 2015; Macdonald et al., 2008).

Within this context, Wicks' efforts to define and shape the future of PE through his *Schools Fitness* movement appear to be built on a monoculture of the subject that not only facilitated his entrance but validated his presence in the PE space from his starting position as a prominent figure and brand in the health and fitness industry. Nevertheless, it could be argued, the reach of Joe Wicks' discursive influence at the time of his pre-pandemic foray(s) into PE was tempered by the contingent nature of PE's social construction and the regulative discourses of 'sport' as a dominant physical cultural practice from which PE, in the UK and elsewhere, derives much of its meaning and subject matter (Kirk, 1998). Indeed, sport is a mainstay feature of PE's discursive formation that runs in conjunction with, and counter to, PE's health-related role (Jung et al., 2016, Waddington et al., 1997). Furthermore, schools play a decisive role in sanctioning what constitutes PE on a day-to-day basis (Kirk, 2010). The school environment is both a material and relational space in which the meaning of PE is enacted, with PE teachers mediating which aspects of PE's complex socio-political make-up are prioritised and reproduced within their lessons (Kirk, 1998). In other words, Wicks' framing of PE prior to the pandemic was contained within, and constrained by, the social context in which it was embedded.

We argue, therefore, that in the absence of school-based physical education, organised sport and other forms of physical recreation, the Covid-19 pandemic provided a framework of opportunity that enabled Joe Wicks to manoeuvre himself (and his products) from the periphery to the centre of PE's public imagery and discourse.

Interestingly, this was partly achieved by championing the very subject and profession he rejected within the context of a competitive education system while also arguing for

the prioritisation of children's health. Nevertheless, several other contextual factors and facilitators must have existed in order for Wicks to turn his rhetorical endorsement of PE-as-exercise into *PE with Joe*. The legislative measures that prevented children from going to school and participating in organised sport and recreation required a reorganisation of PE's subject matter for it to form part of young people's remote learning experiences, signalling a (new) crisis event for the PE profession. In response, the meaning of physical education became dis-embedded from its material, relational and symbolic context allowing alternative forms of structured physical activity performed at home, through digital platforms, and involving no specialist or sport-based equipment, to be configured and act as legitimate replacements to address the problem.

Accompanying Government lockdown measures, the importance of exercise for population health was elevated in order to encourage people to remain active and 'healthy' throughout the pandemic (Malcolm and Velija, 2020). In many ways, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated a number of public health related issues and transpired into an opportunity for renewed Government emphasis on a number of established health agendas connecting exercise, body management, self-regulation, personal choice and private enterprise with the creation and maintenance of a healthy and active nation (Malcolm and Velija, 2020). Among them, were replenished concerns for the harmful consequences of (enforced) inactivity on children's physical (and psychological) wellbeing and subsequently the role and value of PE-as-exercise in young people's lives. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic not only provided a discursive and material space for the realisation of *PE with Joe*, by dislocating PE's identity from the influence of PE teachers and schools, it also provided an additional set of discursive resources for Joe Wicks to align and enhance the meaning of his HIIT workouts under the explicit guise of an interventionist, child and public health-centred, PE.

As our analysis suggests, *PE with Joe* represents an extension of Wicks' pre-pandemic enterprise to construct PE in his own self-image and an assemblage of ideas that form orthodox parts of physical education discourse. Amid a climate of heightened health messaging, crisis and concern, Joe Wicks successfully leveraged his role and epistemic authority as a public 'expert' to intervene as the creator and supplier of a health and physical education solution. Of course, his leverage was made stronger by the absence of direction and leadership offered by established governmental and non-governmental bodies responsible for supporting the PE profession. By the time that resources for online physical teaching were developed – such as those provided by the Department of Education-backed 'Oak National Academy' and circulated by the *#ThisIsPE* movement supported by the Association for Physical Education – *PE with Joe* was already well-embedded into many families' pandemic routines. However, while all of these circumstances contributed to the creation and success of *PE with Joe*, providing Wicks with a context and the additional means to take command of, and tie himself into, PE's discursive space, we contend that his influence is far from circumstantial.

Why does Joe Wicks' presence in the PE space matter?

So far, this paper has analysed the phenomenon of *PE with Joe* from two standpoints. The first critically positions Joe Wicks' relationship to the subject and practice of physical education as a leading entrepreneur, brand and business within the commercial health and fitness sector. The second examines *PE with Joe*'s discursive connection with the field of physical education and the Covid-19 pandemic. Together, our arguments locate the emergence of *PE with Joe* and Wicks' positionality in the (re)configuration of physical education. Accepting Kirk's view (1992; 2010) that the act of defining is profound and consequential, it is incumbent on researchers of physical

education to take the actions and words of Joe Wicks seriously. To simply dismiss Joe Wicks as an unqualified, celebrity outsider, whose intervention during the Covid-19 pandemic was circumstantial and thus fleeting, would be to gravely underestimate Joe Wicks as a powerful public figure and burgeoning voice in the politics of physical education.

Far from being transitory in nature, the legacy of *PE with Joe* is both material and artefactual. A catalogue of *PE with Joe* workouts resides on Wicks' YouTube channel as a readily available resource for teachers, parents and pupils. They exist within a digital library of exercise and fitness material targeted at different age groups and populations. Following the success of *PE with Joe*, Wicks has grown his business and diversified his products across multiple medias and platforms. In December 2020, Wicks launched *The Body Coach App* as a digital host for a range of Wicks' lifestyle products and services including recipes, workouts, daily eating and exercise plans and live events accessible exclusively to subscription paying customers. Alongside the expansion of his business and revenue streams within the adult health and fitness market, Wicks has further amplified his presence in the PE space through endorsements such as 'Joe Wicks' exercise cards produced by the British educational publisher and supplier *Twinkl*. In addition, a *PE with Joe Tour* in August 2021 preceded a line of new child and family-orientated exercise and entertainment products such as *The Burpee Bears* picture book (September, 2021) and a *YouTube* collaboration with the children's television programme *Hey Duggee* (October, 2021). His charitable giving under the banner of PE has continued too with *The Joe Wicks 24 Hour PE Challenge* which raised a further £1.5million in aid of the *BBC's Children in Need* (November, 2020). Indeed, despite the conclusion of the *PE with Joe* live workouts, Joe Wicks' involvement in PE

has not gone away, with *PE with Joe* occupying a position along a carefully crafted pipeline of consumer entry points that span the life-course.

Joe Wicks' entrepreneurial response to the Covid-19 pandemic evokes several relevant tensions and disconnects between a celebrity lifestyle guru helming a multi-faceted corporate enterprise and physical educators steeped in the field of education. His embodiment of PE matters because it elicits critical reflection about the nature of physical education **and who should be responsible for teaching it** and reignites the types of debate that Kirk (1992, p.156) proclaims are an 'entirely healthy feature of social life' and a normal part of the evolution of school subjects. These debates are multi-faceted offering both support and opposition for Joe Wicks and his contribution to the present and future of physical education.

Windsor's (2020) advocacy of Joe Wicks, for example, is premised on the idea that *PE with Joe* offers an image of reform by challenging the subject's reliance on sport as a mechanism of delivery and presenting a 'different kind of PE'. Lambert et al. (2021) however, strongly oppose this view. For Lambert et al. (2021, p. 2) *PE with Joe* represents nothing other than a 'lingering storyline' and a symbol of 'the ways things have been and are.' They argue the type of physical education promoted by Joe Wicks is merely another manifestation of PE's narrow, performative culture that continues to offer 'remarkably meaningless movement experiences for young people' whether sport-related or otherwise. **Furthermore, Randall and Belsey (2021) bring into question both the health and educational validity of HIIT as a suitable and indeed advantageous form of health-related exercise that can transfer safely and accessibly into PE for (all) children and adolescents. Of note, here, is Fitzgerald et al.'s (2022, p. 35) reproach that *PE with Joe* is 'designed and delivered in a way that does not reflect the diversity of young people who we might expect to be included in mainstream PE'.**

As Stirrup et al. (2020) put it, Wicks poses ‘something of a quandary’ for physical education with his actions engendering multiple readings and interpretations. In recognising the potential of Joe Wicks to ‘inspire young people (and their families) to be active,’ Stirrup et al. (2020) caution that ‘we must acknowledge the risks of such individuals taking centre stage’ and overshadowing the role of qualified PE teachers as gatekeepers to high-quality physical education. Their assessment foregrounds and defends the conventional distinction between teacher experts and non-experts which they suggest the rise of celebrity ‘PE teachers’ threatens. Others, however, have asserted the need to reconceptualise educational expertise as a ‘network or assemblage, rather than an attribute or a possession’ in order to acknowledge and connect a much wider set of knowledges and actors that exist within the health and physical educational arena (Enright, et al., 2020, p.219). From this perspective, Wicks can be seen as part-and-parcel of a constellation of expertise that is potentially advantageous for the development of physical education. Irrespective of their perceived effects, Williams and Macdonald (2015, p.70) take the view that practices which trouble conventional boundaries have value for what they reveal about how concepts like PE or categories like experts and non-experts, ‘are created, maintained or changed’ by educational stakeholders both inside and outside the teaching profession. Wicks’ appropriation of the idea of physical education thus provokes us to take stock of the governance of the concept and practice of physical education and re(evaluate) the way ‘truths’ about physical education are wielded, and whose needs, expectations and perspectives are being attended to in the process (Casey and Larsson, 2018).

Beyond presenting a challenge to the concept of physical education and the expert status of PE teachers, Joe Wicks’ presence in the PE space matters for the exercise of power that lies behind *PE with Joe* the product, and Joe Wicks the

commercial entity. We argued in section one that Joe Wicks represents a living brand and corporate enterprise that utilises digital and social media technology to connect with audiences and expand its consumer reach. Wicks' acquisition of physical education discourse, therefore, cannot be easily disassociated with his strategic and commercial interest in schools and childhood as profit-driven ventures. Giroux's (1998) analysis of *Disney* provides a canon for interpreting Wicks' appeal to childhood health and physical education. Giroux (1998) depicts *Disney* as a 'substantive educational force' whose pedagogical practices are designed to promote particular childhood identifications and desires and socialise young people into life-time consumers of the 'Disney fantasy machine.' According to Giroux (1998), moments of pleasure and escape that *Disney* provides its audiences and uses as part of a 'pristine public image' mask the issue of corporate influence, politics, ideology and power that are integral to *Disney's* involvement in the production and regulation of (childhood) culture. For Giroux (1998), interrogating the public pedagogy of private corporations is all the more important at a time when the bounds of formal education are becoming increasingly porous to the influence of media and consumer culture, and the commercial interest of businesses engaged in the commodification of childhood identities. This is not to deny the good intentions of Joe Wicks, or reject his products' widescale appeal, but rather to demystify his 'free' and altruistic involvement in physical education as a mechanism of building brand awareness and loyalty.

Analysing Wicks' public pedagogical practices forms part of a broader level of inquiry advocated by Giroux (1998) aimed at developing critical awareness of the place of popular culture in the classroom, and unpacking the ideological work performed by commercial entities as means of holding them to account. Supplementing this line of investigation is the need to engage the voices of those responsible for mediating the

reproduction of PE in schools to understand teachers' personal and professional identifications with Wicks and his products. The same applies to the voices of pupils, parents, and other physical educational stakeholders whose reactions to, interpretations of and engagements with *PE with Joe* are critical to our understanding of the relations of power between Wicks and the wider practice community. To invoke Giroux (1998, p. 262), there is little value in 'simply pronouncing' what cultural products like *PE with Joe* mean 'as if that is all there is to do.' Instead, examining how cultural formations are experienced and construed by diverse audiences helps to reveal their variable influence on public life. Exploring the ways in which Wicks' presence in the physical education space has been received, embraced, modified, challenged and resisted is thus vital in discerning *PE with Joe*'s actual or perceived effects on the social construction of physical education, and the educational engagements of young people in physical activity both in and outside of school in a post-Covid-19 landscape.

Conclusion

The disruption caused by UK school closures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge to the delivery of physical education. Difficulties in translating practical, movement-based learning online saw renewed debates about the place and importance of school-based physical education as a form of regular exercise in young people's lives, and a reinvigoration of digital and market-based solutions targeted at young people (and their families) to remain active whilst at home. The most prominent of these came from Joe Wicks, the celebrity *Body Coach* and fitness guru, whose HIIT-inspired workouts, *PE with Joe*, were widely received as a legitimate physical education replacement and broader public health intervention. To date, Wicks' appropriation of the concept and related practices of physical education has received limited research attention. Yet, as we have argued in this paper, Joe Wicks' involvement

in, and influence on, the social construction of PE is significant and not merely circumstantial. To further critical dialogue, our paper analysed who Joe Wicks is in relation to physical education, how he entered the physical education space, and why his involvement in physical education matters.

Contrary to his public recognition as *The Nation's PE Teacher*, we argue that Joe Wicks should not be viewed as a physical educator, personal trainer, nor fitness instructor alone, but rather as the multi-media persona of a branded celebrity lifestyle enterprise. As a “living brand,” he is expressive of the broader cultural, economic, political, and technological arrangements that enable him to mobilise a celebrity-expertise and cultural authority on health and physical education. We traced Joe Wicks’ arrival on the physical education landscape back to his pre-pandemic exploitation of common physical education discourse. Having positioned himself as a public ‘expert’ who can create and supply a solution to a physical education and childhood health ‘crisis’, we contend that in the absence of school-based physical education, organised sport and other forms of physical recreation, the Covid-19 pandemic provided a framework of opportunity that enabled Joe Wicks to manoeuvre himself (and his products) from the periphery to the centre of PE’s public imagery and configuration.

For physical education scholars and practitioners, this paper also calls attention to several considerations brought about by Joe Wicks’ constructed presence in the PE space, and why it is important therefore to take Joe Wicks seriously. Indeed, *PE with Joe* challenges us to take stock of how physical education is defined and regulated through discourse, the kinds of activities promoted under the umbrella of physical education and the boundaries between experts and non-experts. Furthermore, by recognising Joe Wicks’ commercial interest in physical education both inside and outside of the ‘classroom’, we raise questions over the commodification of childhood

identities by popular cultural figures like Joe Wicks and public pedagogical practices like *PE with Joe*.

In attending to several dimensions of Joe Wicks relevance for physical education writ large, we suggest at least two further avenues of study specific to the Joe Wicks enterprise. Lines of inquiry that focus upon how Joe Wicks has been received amongst a diversity of physical education stakeholders (e.g., teachers, parents, pupils, administrators, and policy makers) is essential for understanding Joe Wicks' ongoing and future impact on the social construction of PE, and the variety of ways cultural products are interpreted and experienced by different audience groups. Another and related line of inquiry should rigorously examine the public pedagogy of Joe Wicks' products and practices oriented towards children and parents, including his *PE with Joe* televisual content and tour, *Hey Duggee* programming, and *Burpee Bears* children's book and tour, for their health-related assumptions, production of knowledge, underpinning identifications, inspirational messaging and socialising tactics as strategic entry-points into a lifestyle capitalist agenda.

There also exists several issues raised by Joe Wicks' expanding presence in the PE space and across the life-course worthy of future consideration, but that in this article we did not have space to attend to sufficiently. This includes the inexorable creep of digital technologies into physical education activities (see Gard, 2014) and accompanying issues of, for example, digital access and equality, (bio)pedagogy, surveillance, datafication, or security (see, Casey et al., 2016; Lupton, 2015; Williamson, 2015). Finally, the formation of *PE with Joe* encourages further exploration of the relationship between physical education and popular physical culture and the extent to which physical education should correspond with broader trends in attempts to provide youth the ability to engage in meaningful physical activity whilst

guarding against passive consumption amongst teachers, pupils, and parents (Kirk, 1998; 2010). Accepting that Joe Wicks is here to stay, deciding on what role he and his products should take in imparting knowledge, providing opportunity and shaping young people's ideas on how to be active and lead 'healthy' and 'happy' lives calls for collective action among researchers, policymakers and practitioners to shape Joe Wicks' part in the future of PE.

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¹ After a period of hiatus, PE with Joe returned on Monday January 11th, 2021 ‘to support parents and teachers’ whilst children were off school through the third national lockdown period, though the regularity of the sessions were reduced.

² Joe Wicks’ cookbook, *Lean in 15*, quickly sold more than 700,000 copies, shattering his publishers expectations of 70,000 (Williams, 2020).