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## **Peloton as a Positive Intervention: Using Values, Character Strengths, Language, and Agency to Promote Sustained Engagement**

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# Peloton as a Positive Intervention: Using Values, Character Strengths, Language, and Agency to Promote Sustained Engagement

## Abstract

In a world full of options of exercise platforms and modalities for individuals to choose from, what entices people to stick with a particular program? The exercise platform itself? The language the instructors use to motivate participants? Or is it the ability of a participant to choose from a menu of activities that keeps them engaged? To shed light on this topic, we analyzed physical activity as a positive intervention, using Peloton as an exemplar. Our capstone is divided into three parts. In Part I, we introduce positive psychology and the concept of positive interventions as a pathway to well-being and explain how Peloton is a positive intervention. In Part II, we examine the constructs of values, virtues, character strengths, agency, and their relationship to sustained engagement on the path to wellness. Pulling from the work of Lavy and Benish-Wiseman, we explore how character strengths are a pathway from values to positive social outcomes such as sustained engagement with an exercise platform. In Part III, we bring the concepts of Part I and Part II together and make three key observations: (1) Physical activity, with Peloton as an exemplar, is an undervalued yet effective positive intervention that deserves more research and application (2) Language portraying someone's values and strengths is a powerful tool in facilitating positive alignment in relationships (3) Empowering someone, a Peloton rider for example, with agency to determine how, when and with whom they align is an important part of voluntary sustained engagement.

## Keywords

Peloton, character strengths, PERMA, values, virtues, self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, self-efficacy, mindfulness, intention, agency, physical activity, positive intervention, language, engagement, movement, positive psychology

## Disciplines

Health and Physical Education | Health Communication | Health Psychology | Leisure Studies | Other  
Mental and Social Health | Recreation Business | Sports Sciences | Sports Studies

**Peloton as a Positive Intervention:  
Using Values, Character Strengths, Language, and Agency to Promote  
Sustained Engagement**

Heidi Kaufman and Pia Dalal

Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program, University of Pennsylvania

MAPP 800: Capstone Project

Advisor: Gloria H.M. Park

August 1, 2021

### Abstract

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## Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i> .....	<b>6</b>
<i>Why Peloton?</i> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Part I</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction to Positive Psychology</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<i>Eudaimonia and Hedonia</i> .....	10
<i>Subjective Well-being</i> .....	11
<i>PERMA</i> .....	13
<i>Character Strengths</i> .....	16
<b>Introduction to Positive Interventions</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Physical Activity as a Positive Intervention</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<i>Benefits of Physical Activity</i> .....	24
<b>Peloton as a Facilitator of Hope, Capstone by Lisa Richardson</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>A Little Bit About Peloton</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Peloton as a Positive Intervention</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<i>Self-awareness/Mindfulness</i> .....	34
<i>Self-regulation/Attention</i> .....	37
<i>Self-determination/Intention</i> .....	39
<i>Self-efficacy/Agency</i> .....	41
<b>Flow as a Product of Positive Interventions</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>Summary Part I; Look ahead to Parts II &amp; III</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>Part II</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>Values, Higher-Order Values, Virtue</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<i>Values</i> .....	48
<i>Higher-Order Values</i> .....	52
<i>Virtues</i> .....	56
<b>Values and Higher-Order Values Connected to Virtues and Character Strengths</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>Strengths Spotting</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<i>Labeling</i> .....	67
<i>Explaining</i> .....	68
<i>Appreciating</i> .....	68
<b>Part III</b> .....	<b>69</b>
<b>Future Directions</b> .....	<b>69</b>
<b>Our Observations</b> .....	<b>70</b>
<b>Our Observations as they relate to Peloton</b> .....	<b>71</b>
<i>Is Language a Mechanism for Engagement?</i> .....	72
<i>Is Agency a Mechanism for Engagement?</i> .....	76
<b>Limitations</b> .....	<b>79</b>
<b>Application</b> .....	<b>79</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>83</b>



## Preface

Welcome to our capstone! Thank you for showing up! Please allow us a quick introduction. We are both members of the sixteenth class of the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania. We are athletes. We love to study, discuss and apply psychology with the hope of making the world a better place. And we love the fitness platform of Peloton, particularly the Peloton bike. At the beginning of a Peloton ride, the instructor generally gives a roadmap for the class, which allows us to mentally prepare for the workout, pace ourselves, and, most importantly, be present. Here is your roadmap for our capstone, we hope you find it helpful!

Our capstone is split into three parts. In Part I, which you may consider the warm-up, we share a bit about who we are and why we find the tools that the Peloton platform offers to be so interesting and effective. The warm-up is over once we begin our introduction to positive psychology and some of the various constructs that define well-being, highlighting the concept of character strengths. Then, get ready for your brain to feel like it is climbing a hill as we delve into positive psychology and explore the concept of positive interventions. After that challenge, you may feel as though you are coasting down the hill as we share the findings of Lisa Richardson's capstone on Peloton and the history of Peloton itself. Next up is the interval training part of our capstone where we explain how Peloton delivers on many of the critical markers of positive interventions, making it an excellent tool for increasing well-being.

The last big climb of this capstone is in Part II. Now is the time to gear up as we ascend into the evolution and relevance of values, virtues, and character strengths on engagement. Here we build upon psychologists Lavy and Benish-Weisman's (2021) framework that links values to

character strengths to behavior outcomes and how that chain of connection plays out on the platform of Peloton.

All of the concepts we explore in Part I and II build a foundation for Part III. There is always a payoff for hard work! In Part III, with the challenge of conquering those complex concepts behind you, we excitedly share with you our findings of how Peloton is so effective in sustaining engagement with its members, and how these tools are applicable in other scenarios. We hope that as you ride down this path with us, we can illuminate for you our three key takeaways. First, we propose that physical activity, with Peloton used as an exemplar, is an undervalued yet very effective positive intervention that deserves more attention in both research and application. Second, we observe that language portraying someone's values and character strengths is a powerful tool in facilitating positive alignment in relationships, and such alignment can promote beneficial behaviors. Third, empowering someone, the Peloton rider in our example, with the agency to determine how, when and with whom they want to align is an important part of voluntary sustained engagement. As with many complex, nuanced topics, our observations lead us to more questions, and that is the beauty of it, there is always tomorrow's workout to look forward to.

We hope that with the check-ins this roadmap provides, we keep you on the path with us and that you find some of this information useful enough to bring with you into the world. Ok, are you ready? Here we go! Let's start that warm-up!

## **Why Peloton?**

As athletes, we know and embrace the power of movement and the benefits it has on both our mind and body. For both of us, the power of Peloton to create sustained engagement came during the pandemic. It surpassed expectations, and a year later, and almost a thousand rides collectively, we assert that there is something unique Peloton brings to the table. It is for this reason that we decided to examine, from the perspective of positive psychology, what makes this platform so compelling.

In our technology filled, post-COVID world, virtual exercise classes have a new and important role to play. The messages about how often and how much exercise we need are both ever-present and confusing. What is clear is that movement enhances well-being (Hyde et al., 2013). Even though the research about what leads humans to increased well-being has increased exponentially over the past two decades, primarily through the field of positive psychology, why are there not more studies on the role of exercise in flourishing? How does movement support well-being? What makes Peloton an exemplar for engaging people so effectively? Is there something we can learn from their platform that is applicable in other domains? The warm-up is now over, and we invite you to join us as we aim to “work-this-out” and address these questions.

## **Part I**

### **Introduction to Positive Psychology**

Searching for the meaning in life or figuring out how to attain happiness has been an endeavor that many have tried to pursue. Written in the Declaration of Independence, for instance, happiness is rooted in its principles, where “...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among those are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Declaration of Independence, 1776). Over time, many researchers,

scientists, and philosophers have embarked on such pursuits to identify what provides humanity with the ability to flourish, to define what happiness looks like, or how to attain it. Therefore, approximately two decades ago, Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, among other notable psychologists and researchers, embarked on a journey to expand upon the literature and trajectory of traditional clinical psychology: From one that was primarily focused on the pathologies of life to one focused on human flourishing. Positive psychology focuses on the things that are going well versus pathologizing what is going wrong. It puts well-being and flourishing at the forefront of enabling individuals to attain a life well-lived (Seligman, 2002). Positive psychology is more than self-help; it goes beyond a notion or idea of what a life well-lived looks like and differentiates itself from self-help pseudoscience with the evidence-based approach it endorses.

As one of the founders of positive psychology, Seligman, a clinical psychologist, researched and participated in creating the theories of learned helplessness and learned optimism (Maier & Seligman, 1976). Learned helplessness theory created a pivotal moment in the creation of positive psychology and the framework of well-being. Learned helplessness occurs when an organism is exposed to continuous negative stimuli over which it has no control (Maier & Seligman, 1976). The uncontrollable nature of the stimuli inhibits progress and diminishes motivation to change, leading to hopeless thinking styles and helpless behavior. Similar characteristics of helplessness are seen in depressive symptoms and patients. However, through extensive research and examination, Maier and Seligman (1976) discovered that just as one can learn to become helpless, one can learn to be optimistic and possess a more optimistic mindset through positive interventions (Seligman, 1990). Positive interventions, which will be explained in more detail later, are mechanisms that support individuals in making positive change through

action and intention (Pawelski, 2020) and (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013). The revelation that one can learn to be optimistic through positive interventions led to the birth of positive psychology. The pursuit of well-being takes many shapes, as cultivating optimism is just one pathway among many others that one can take to attain happiness or well-being. These pathways are not a cookie-cutter approach and may be dictated by the happiness or well-being one wants to pursue, as our individual needs differ from one another.

Seligman (2002) expanded upon his research and presented three paths towards happiness, the “pleasant life” which encompasses positive emotions and gratification, the “good life” which includes absorption, engagement, and “flow”, which will be discussed in more detail later, and the “meaningful life” that incorporates using one’s strengths for the service of others (Hefferon & Mutrie, 2012). Our paper focuses on the “good life” as it is most reflective of sustained engagement.

The following sections will uncover the various forms that happiness and well-being take, and how they intersect with one another.

### ***Eudaimonia and Hedonia***

Aristotle argued that happiness depends upon us; he often theorized on the purpose of human existence, suggesting that happiness or eudaimonia was achieved by living a virtuous life for the greater good and not out of hedonism or self-pleasure (Melchert, 2002). Eudaimonia is a form of happiness that dates back to Aristotle and his establishment of the Nicomachean ethics, an inquiry into the “good life”; however, eudaimonia and its many meanings and definitions were also experimented and examined by Socrates and Plato (Melchert, 2002). Socrates thought that a life well-lived was built on a foundation of virtues and ethics, the difference between right from wrong or good and evil. Socrates believed that individuals should act on virtues, such as

justice, courage, and piety to genuinely achieve the “good life” (Seligman, 2002). For example, an individual should do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, to act with integrity and honesty, not for himself but outside of himself, for others. Separately, Plato's account of Socrates argues that the unexamined life was not worth living (Melchert, 2002). For example, going through the motions of waking up, going to work, watching T.V., going to bed, and repeating the cycle day after day, would be a life with no reflection; no reflection of what the individual ought to be doing or reflecting on what they value (Melchert, 2002).

In contrast, hedonia or hedonism is defined as pleasure-seeking, where individuals are motivated to pursue actions that produce pleasure or cause instant gratification (Bentham, 2007). Aristotle contended that individuals who were motivated either to seek pleasure or to avoid pain were prone to unhappiness in the long-term when the novelty wears off and the subject or object no longer produces the same form of pleasure (Bentham, 2007). One could argue that individuals who pursue a more eudaimonic life, in the servitude of others or behaving with virtue for the greater good, experience greater well-being in the long term than individuals who pursue pleasure and instant self-gratification in the short term. However, how does one determine which path leads to individual well-being if well-being is defined differently from person to person? This next section illuminates the nuances and the individuality of well-being as happiness can be defined and interpreted differently from person to person.

### ***Subjective Well-being***

Well-being is subjective, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach (Diener et al., 2017). An individual's interpretation or experience of well-being can differ greatly from one person to the next which may at times be contrary to what society projects. Some may think that owning luxury vehicles, taking extravagant trips, or owning designer clothing leads to well-being, while

others may find well-being in close social connections, volunteering, or simply being content in nature. Diener et al. (2017) describe subjective well-being (SWB) as evaluating one's life and emotional experiences and feelings as though things are going relatively well, experiencing greater positive emotions. It includes assessing life satisfaction through individual experiences and reflections through an individualistic lens (Diener et al., 2017). One can increase their SWB by identifying which area of their life needs improvement. Additionally, SWB allows for understanding the relationships between positive emotions and the factors that affect them, internal and external (i.e. mood, basic physical and physiological needs, social interactions, etc.). For example, an individual who is more outgoing and social within their environment can experience more positive emotions based on raising their sociability (Diener et al., 2017). Similarly, negative emotions are influenced by the factors that affect them directly or indirectly. For example, negative emotions could be related to having low income and not having adequate resources for overall well-being (i.e., health insurance, food, shelter, etc.) (Diener et al., 2017). Positive and negative emotions are critical for SWB and are inversely related (Nozick, 1990). Nozick (1990) describes the relationship between life experiences and happiness as an upward-sloping curve with positive experiences and a downward curve with negative experiences. Most individuals would prefer to be on the curve's upward trajectory. However, they prefer to have “something” more than just experiencing mere happiness for the sake of experiencing pleasure but wanting to experience the action of the experience more than just the pleasure of the experience itself (Nozick, 1990). For example, an individual may choose to climb Mt. Everest or hike the Pacific Coast Trail, both physically demanding, popular, and beautiful. One may choose to do the climb or hike for the sake of the pleasure of the experience itself, to say “I climbed Mt. Everest” or “I hiked the Pacific Coast Trail”, or one may choose to experience the action of the

climb or hike itself to truly feel the rigor and difficulty in what it takes to accomplish such a challenge. One could argue that individuals choose to experience the action itself for the positive and negative emotions it can elicit, causing them to truly “feel” the experience. In essence, individuals would give up some happiness to obtain more “depth” and that happiness is not the only important thing in life, but to experience moods that are directed toward positive or negative emotions, prolonging the duration of the mood or emotion (Nozick, 1990).

Furthermore, Seligman (2011) proposed that positive emotions and individuals who report experiencing positive emotions are said to have the most engagement and meaning in life and are considered the happiest. Well-being is considered a construct where happiness is an object in the context of an emotional state brought about by positive relationships and positive experiences; therefore, emphasizing that positive emotions influence overall well-being (Seligman, 2011). Thus, overall well-being measures positive emotion, and the goal is to increase flourishing by increasing positive emotions, engagement, meaning, and positive relationships, also known as PERMA, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section (Seligman, 2011).

### ***PERMA***

Dr. Martin Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory of well-being focuses on the five elements of PERMA. PERMA consists of five building blocks that enable a life well-lived; they include positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). Each building block collectively or individually provides a framework for individuals to cultivate the best version of themselves (Seligman, 2011).

The first element of PERMA, positive emotion, is defined as attaining a “pleasant life” (p. 16). Fredrickson and Cohn (2008) describe emotions, both positive and negative, as a



multifaceted response to an external component or trigger. The multifaceted response can include muscle tension, hormone release, cardiovascular changes, facial expression, sensory changes, among others (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008). The external trigger can elicit subjective sensory changes that differ from person to person. For example, a positive emotional response to a stimulus can take shape in the form of gratitude, when a subject receives a gift or praise and feels appreciation for the stimuli, producing a positive emotion of gratitude.

The second element of PERMA, engagement, can be experienced through many forms, such as goal setting, engaging and “calling upon” one's greatest strengths, and through ‘flow’ (p. 9). Flow is achieved when an individual is lost in the action of doing something pleasurable (Seligman, 2011). Flow occurs when thought and feeling are usually absent and reflected retrospectively (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For example, one may experience flow while running, getting completely absorbed and lost in the action of running where time and external factors typically don't matter, producing positive emotions of wonder and pleasure after the fact.

The third element, relationships, could be summed in three words “...other people matter” (Seligman, 2011). Positive relationships enhance well-being as almost all things in life require other people to create positive emotions, from accomplishment, meaning, and potentially engagement. Seligman (2011) expressed that “the best antidote to the downs in life, and the single most reliable up, are the people we are surrounded by” (p. 20). The positive relationships one has, whether in the form of a dyad, between two people, or collectively in a group, can multiply joy and happiness (two positive emotions) increasing someone's overall well-being (Seligman, 2011). However, it is important to note that relationships that are not positive (i.e. not healthy, not balanced, not enriching, not reciprocal, etc.) can negatively impact an individual's

well-being. Therefore, positive relationships should be cultivated and tended to for an individual or dyad to flourish.

The fourth element, meaning, also viewed subjectively, is being part of something or doing something that one believes to be bigger than themselves (Seligman, 2011). For example, one may find meaning by volunteering for the Peace Corp or running a marathon to raise money for charity, doing something for others, for the greater good. Positive relationships and meaning can be viewed as interdependent with each other, as meaning is often derived from something outside of the self, while positive relationships may bring meaning to individuals (Seligman, 2011).

The fifth element, while not exhaustive, is an accomplishment. Accomplishment pursued for its own sake can promote well-being, since what it takes to accomplish something is what actually enhances well-being. The result of accomplishment, attaining more fame or more money, in and of itself, is not what enhances well-being (Seligman, 2011). The positive emotions, engagement, and meaning that come with trying to accomplish something are what enhances well-being (Seligman, 2011). For instance, in the example provided previously, if an individual accomplishes the grueling challenge of climbing Mt. Everest, the accomplishment itself is great. However, it was in the positive emotions, the joy of climbing and completing it, and the engagement, entering a state of flow with each step towards the summit, and the meaning, doing something larger than the self, added to the accomplishment.

While Seligman's (2011) five building blocks of PERMA provide a framework to attain well-being, Emiliya Zhivotovskaya (2016) introduced the sixth element of vitality, making it the PERMA-V model. Vitality is the capacity to live and develop as an individual, where someone who possesses vitality utilizes the resources necessary to achieve overall health. Vitality

encompasses physical activity and energy management (Zhivotovskaya, 2016). Seligman's PERMA model does not include the connection between the mind and body, or the importance of the connection between physical health and well-being. One could argue that engagement within PERMA can include physical activity as we can experience flow in movement, however, his model does not overtly identify that connection. Therefore Zhivotovskaya's (2016) PERMA-V model provides the connection between the physical and mental state, suggesting that physical activity is essential to attaining and maintaining well-being. For the purpose of this paper, we will be focusing on the physical activity component of vitality.

One can utilize techniques to increase each element of PERMA or PERMA-V to foster human flourishing. Focusing on what is going right in life takes conscious effort and a methodical approach through positive interventions (Seligman, 2018). Now that we have explored the concept of positive psychology and some of the theories that define well-being, we will shift to a different framework. Building upon the strengths of an individual's character is viewed as another way to attain greater well-being and is also thought to enhance engagement and cultivate other components to well-being such as meaning and positive emotions.

### ***Character Strengths***

Peterson once coined the phrase "character is plural," which means that character is multidimensional and not one-dimensional (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). He expressed (2004) that everyone contains a unique profile of varying degrees of traits or character strengths. Character strengths are "psychological mechanisms" or manifestations of moral values that are reflected in behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (Park & Peterson, 2006). Park and Peterson (2006) express that character strengths are the behaviors that lead to positive social outcomes, and in this way, they are often referred to as "values in action". However, Niemiec (2019) pointed out

that while character strengths lead to positive outcomes, the overuse or underuse of them can cause inverse effects on said outcomes. For example, if an individual over utilizes their strength of humor and cracks a joke at an inappropriate time or in bad taste, it can offend or potentially sever a relationship by not being sensitive to the context of the interaction. We do want to emphasize, however, the point that character strengths lead to positive social outcomes, as we believe this is one of the ways Peloton has succeeded in sustaining engagement with members. Much more needs to be unpacked, however, understanding the nuances of these constructs and how they intersect with one another will help to fully grasp the bigger picture.

The evolution of the modern construct of character strengths began when Peterson and Seligman along with 55 other distinguished scientists did an extensive literature review on the topic (Peterson, 2006)(VIA Institute on Character, 2021). This group reviewed religions and wisdom, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the work of philosophers, such as Aristotle, as a way to discover which virtues and strengths were valued historically (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). They considered lessons from the fields of law, psychology, and youth development, and they examined virtue catalogs from a wide range of sources including Benjamin Franklin and the Boy Scouts (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Upon completion of this most rigorous process to date for reviewing, assembling, researching, and classifying positive traits in human beings, they found that throughout time and across cultures, there were six core virtues: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). These virtues were then used as a framework for the more specific classifications of character strengths (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). They introduced 24-character strength profiles that fall under the six core virtues. For instance, character strengths such as bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest fall under the virtue of

courage (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The term signature strengths represent an individual's top five character strengths from the Values in Action (VIA) survey (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). When individuals harness and cultivate character strengths, it may contribute to strengthening relationships, accomplishing goals, managing problems, increasing happiness, reducing stress, and improving work performance, among other benefits (VIA Institute on Character, 2021).

Seligman (2011) calls character strengths the “building blocks” of flourishing. Much like words are tools for expressing our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, character strengths are a common language for describing what is best in human beings (Niemi, 2018). Strengths can create a language of power and optimism as well as promote a growth mindset. Carol Dweck (2006) defines a growth mindset as one in which there is room for positive growth and development, where a fixed mindset is resistant to change or positive growth. For example, an individual with a growth mindset sees no boundaries or time limit to challenge him or herself to run a marathon, whereas someone with a fixed mindset would generally think that running a marathon at 70 years old is far-fetched or a waste of time. Fun fact, the oldest individual to complete a marathon was 100 years old and started running at the age of 89 (Singh, 2020). Additionally, although character strengths are stable, they can be developed and are shown to contribute to the “good life” (Wagner et al., 2020). Character strengths also displayed strong associations with the different elements within PERMA and PERMA dimensions (Wagner et al., 2020). For instance, the authors (2020) explained that the accomplishment element of PERMA had a strong relationship with individuals who scored high in the areas of perspective, persistence, and zest. The results were based on self-report and informant report assessments measuring for character strengths and PERMA dimensions (Wagner et al., 2020). The findings

further reveal that the development of character strengths through positive interventions, within the framework of PERMA, leads to enhanced well-being (Wagner et al., 2020).

Lastly, it is valuable to point out that character strengths are like the New York Stock Exchange; where an individual's strengths may vary from day to day, depending on the context, situation, and variability of life's uncontrollable events (R. Niemiec, personal communication, February 5, 2022). For example, if an individual's top signature strength is humor, however, is experiencing low levels of positive affectivity, or sadness, may not want to go on a Peloton ride with Cody Rigsby who generally expresses humor throughout his rides. The context in the previous example does not fit the signature strength of the individual; however, if the individual is experiencing sadness, but wants to harness their signature strength of humor to experience higher levels of positive affectivity, or happiness, then it would be best to take a ride with Cody Rigsby to elevate the mood. Knowing this can explain how on certain days, an individual might be more or less engaged with a coach, instructor, or mentor than on other days, depending on the context of the situation and mood of the individuals.

What is the "so what" of it all? Why is it so important to understand the nuances of well-being and the different pathways to it? Understanding the subjectivity of attaining well-being, living the "good life", allows individuals to be architects of their own wellness. It allows individuals to understand that there is no prescriptive path that one can replicate to attain well-being as it varies from person to person. It diminishes the stress and false perception that flourishing looks the same for everyone. With that said, providing an empirically derived framework of the concept of well-being along with tools that can facilitate flourishing, positive psychology can help people to live their best lives, and become the best versions of themselves. While this provides some guidance and answers to the individual, there are still unanswered

questions on how individuals stay engaged in the path that they are on, in the pursuit of wellness. How do individuals stay engaged on the path to wellness for long-term sustained well-being? We intend to shed light on how individuals stay engaged in the upcoming sections.

Now that we have taken you through the timeline of the creation and evolution of positive psychology as well as some of the primary models guiding the research of well-being, let's explore positive interventions, mechanisms intended to "move the needle" of flourishing in individuals.

### **Introduction to Positive Interventions**

Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) would describe positive psychological interventions (PPI) as the how, why, what, when, and who of happiness; a construct that fosters and supports well-being to take shape through intentional action. Although there has not been consensus on a precise definition of PPIs, a broad definition includes having a goal to enhance well-being by using pathways consistent with positive psychology theory (Carr et al., 2020). Through either of these viewpoints, PPIs can be seen as a mechanism for transforming a desire to increase well-being into an action to do so. These skill-building activities, grounded in research and psychological theory, become tools through which people can curate their life and attend to their wellness. They are intended to be mechanisms through which people can move the needle higher on their well-being.

Some critically important skills honed during PPIs, creating a foundation from which to cultivate well-being, are self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy. Each of these cognitive constructs is valuable in its own way, and, when working synergistically, they demonstrate that we can be the producers of our own lived experience (Pawelski, personal

communication, October 2, 2020). There is an infinite number of combinations and manifestations of these constructs.

Pawelski (2020) defines PPIs as intentional activities, generally involving emotions, cognitions, or behaviors, that are designed to increase well-being. We propose that three critical components of effective positive interventions are attention, intention, and agency. These cognitive constructs are manifested through the skills of self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy, respectively. Each of these constructs is valuable in its own way, and, when working synergistically, they demonstrate that we can be the producers of our own lived experience (Pawelski, personal communication, October 2, 2020).

When self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy are utilized in the service of enhancing well-being, each of these mindsets is more potent when the person engaging in the positive intervention has the basic ability to be aware of her thoughts and feelings. Therefore, cultivating self-awareness enhances the effectiveness of all positive interventions. With that said, positive psychology is not seeking an unattainable ideal of well-being (Pawelski, personal communication, November 20, 2020). In the field of positive psychology, PPIs support people living their best life with the key being that each person's experience is unique to them.

Just as each individual has her own unique goals and aspirations, the means to increase well-being is as individualized as the people themselves. The field of psychology, up to and through the development of positive psychology, has long been interested in finding the best match between person and intervention (Schueller, 2014). Because interventions in positive psychology are generally briefer than therapies in a clinical setting, positive psychological interventions (PPIs) may more easily be personalized (Schueller, 2014).



Pawelski's (2020) Elements Model affords the flexibility to customize positive interventions taking into account strengths and weaknesses, personal context as well as cultural attributes. The five categories of elements are desired outcome, target system, target change, the active ingredient, and activity (Pawelski, 2020). The categories of Pawelski's (2020) Elements Model align with the three components of attention, intention, and agency as per our definition of positive interventions. Intention creates the desired outcome element. Attention is manifested through the target system element via a focus on cognition, relationships, or organization for example. Agency is required to affect the target change. The various components of this model can be combined in a multitude of ways that impact self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy. There is a seemingly limitless number of nuanced combinations creating new and diverse PPIs.

The basic ingredients of a PPI: attention, intention, and agency, can be supplemented with other strategies such as habit formation, intrinsic motivation, body-mind connection, that enhance the effectiveness of the PPI. For example, attention via self-regulation is maximized through the development of productive habits. Intention interfaces with self-determination which is fortified by intrinsic motivation. Personal agency reflected in self-efficacy benefits from a strong mind-body connection. To further support effectiveness in PPIs, supplemental components such as goal setting, community, individualization, and variation can be employed.

With its plethora of options, Pawelski's Elements Model supports the minimization of hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation is the theory that people will ultimately return to a baseline level of positive and negative affect after experiencing positive (or negative) emotions after something good (or bad) happens (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Because part of the aim of positive interventions is to raise a person's baseline of well-being, hedonic adaptation is a hurdle

to be overcome. By combining elements in unique ways, the variation moderates adaptation by increasing the number of positive events as well as the number of positive emotions (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Additional ways to sustain gains in well-being are to do multiple PPIs at once, or to carry out the same activity in a different way, or to cycle through a variety of PPIs (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Even the most exhilarating activity will become boring if done repeatedly.

The evidence for the effectiveness of methods in positive psychology is explored with theoretical study, empirical data, and evaluative experiential examples. A meta-analysis of PPIs looking at 347 studies encompassing over 72,000 participants found that PPIs have a significant small to medium effect on well-being (Carr et al., 2020). PPIs involving savoring and optimism and hope had the largest effects on well-being whereas PPIs using humor, goal setting and forgiveness had the most impact on increasing strengths (Carr et al., 2020). As the field develops, there is a significant opportunity to analyze PPIs in more detail so that researchers can test the components for effectiveness which can lead to the creation of more evidence-based PPIs (Pawelski, 2020).

Now that we have described the psychological components that explain how PPI's work as effective tools in enhancing well-being, we will drill down and take a closer look at one specific positive intervention, physical activity.

### **Physical Activity as a Positive Intervention**

In her book, *The Joy of Movement*, Kelly McGonigal (2019) pulls from both narratives and science to describe how exercise is deeply intertwined with our well-being. In essence, she is describing how physical activity is a positive intervention in and of itself. She goes beyond the physical benefits to describe how the neurological and physiological impact of exercise feeds the

primal human needs of joy, self-expression, social connection, mastery, and feeling part of something larger than ourselves (McGonigal, 2019). Additionally, she proposes that all the physical activities we keep coming back to through labor, ritual, or play remind us that movement is an integral part of what makes us human.

### ***Benefits of Physical Activity***

When making changes to enhance one's well-being, cognitive skills, such as goal setting and self-efficacy, along with physical activity, are required to manifest the desired result.

Traditional studies of the humanities and social sciences, including traditional psychology and positive psychology, have generally focused on the cognitive aspects of the human experience (Shusterman, 2006; Faulkner et al, 2015). However, even common-sense dictates that the body and the mind are inextricably linked, and are, in fact, parts of a whole. For thousands of years, there has been what Shusterman (2006) calls pragmatic somaesthetics, such as dance and meditation, through which people have sought self-improvement by seeking harmony of the entire person, body, and mind.

The movement of our physical bodies manifests in a positive-activated effect of our subjective mental state as well as reduced negative emotions of stress and anxiety (Faulkner et al, 2015). In addition to preventing depression, participating in physical activity can also increase positive emotion as a means to improve well-being. Exercise or physical activity can alleviate built-up stress and can further promote cell growth in the brain, which promotes greater speed of thought and efficacy (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). If, as Faulkner and colleagues (2015) assert, physical strength is included in the definition of strength-building within positive psychology, then increasing the power and proficiency of the body can have a positive impact on self-esteem and overall well-being. Physical activity boosts self-esteem by allowing individuals to feel more

confident in their abilities through strength-building, causing a positive shift in their perception of themselves and their physical ability. It is possible that self-efficacy is also increased as the obvious effort leads to visible progress in physical competence or goal attainment (Faulkner et al, 2015). Perhaps there is an enhanced sense of autonomy as one gains personal control over one's exercise schedule and/or one's body (Faulkner et al, 2015). A study by Oaten and Cheng (2006) found that when sedentary college undergraduates exercised 3-4 times a week for three months, they showed improvement in self-regulatory capacity. Physical activity increasing well-being is an example of the somatopsychic principle whereby a healthy body produces a healthy mind (Faulkner et al, 2015). The opposite would be a psychosomatic connection whereby consciousness impacts the physical body.

When looking at how the mind affects the body, cognition, the mental processes of gaining knowledge and understanding, is the first step. Once the information is taken in, it is followed by reflection and feelings which, in turn, influence how the body is functioning. For example, if an external event occurs that leads to thoughts that stimulate anger, the body's nervous system may have a stress response such as increased heart rate and more rapid breathing. Then, if the individual can use her cognition to understand that she is angry and desires to calm down, she can make a conscious choice to breathe slowly in order to take her nervous system out of the fight or flight stress response. This description of a psychosomatic connection demonstrates how consciousness leads and the physical reaction follows. First, the anger-provoking thoughts manifest in a bodily stress response. Then, the mind recognizes the heightened physical state and subsequently influences the functioning of the body with the mental decision to use breathwork, ultimately calming the nervous system. Without the body manifesting action, the goal, in this case of calming down, remains only an image in the mind.

From an evolutionary perspective, the repetitious routine of getting up, going to work, coming home, and living a sedentary life is a stark contrast to how our ancestors lived their lives, foraging and moving among the wild (Ratey et al., 2014). Movement plays a vital role in an individual's well-being, and, as humans, we have evolved to further disconnect ourselves from the way we were designed to live, in the moment and in movement (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008) and (Ratey et al., 2014). Stress is a "threat to the body's equilibrium", and sedentary living inhibits individuals from relieving themselves of everyday stressors (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). In the current day, it is not uncommon for people who work in offices to be sedentary for eight hours a day without taking time to go outside or move their bodies. They are missing out on physical activity which could provide them with the ability to cope with a stressful environment and even bounce back from adversity. Ratey and Hagerman (2008) explain that incorporating physical activity throughout the day can boost the immune system in addition to promoting sound judgment and cognitive function.

Another reason why the importance of movement has persisted throughout time is that it sets off an internal reward system, calling us, as a species, back to move again and again (McGonigal 2019). Many of the neurochemicals released during exercise, dopamine, noradrenaline, endocannabinoids, and endorphins, are the same as the reaction to addictive substances (McGonigal 2019). An important difference between addictive drugs and exercise is that it takes quite a bit longer to get to a point where one craves exercise, approximately six weeks of regular participation before the physical activity becomes enjoyable. McGonigal (2019) reframes the current notion of addiction to exercise, often known as a "runner's high", to what she calls a persistence high. She explains that all that is required to experience exercise-induced

euphoria is to sustain a moderately difficult movement for at least twenty minutes, it does not have to be running specifically.

The endocannabinoid cocktail served up by exercise doesn't just increase joy and combat stress and depression, it primes us for bonding with others, turning it into a "helper's high" as well (McGonigal 2019). Reminiscent of Peterson's quote that we shared above, "other people matter", McGonigal (2019) says that movement reminds us that we need one another to thrive. This echoes Faulkner et al.'s (2015) assertions that in addition to personal benefits, physical activity in a group setting can lead to improved social relatedness.

In her chapter on collective joy, McGonigal (2019) explains that the power of synchronized movement leads sports teams to feel like families and why walks, runs, and rides for a cure are so prevalent. The desire to move together is rooted in the human need to cooperate to survive and the movement itself sets up our brain chemistry to trust each other and feel a sense of belonging (McGonigal, 2019). The benefits of movement McGonigal describes align with PERMA as a route to flourishing as they increase positive emotion, keep us engaged, facilitate relationships, and, for some people, create meaning and lead to achievement.

As Faulkner et al. (2015) explained, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to implementing physical activity; the most effective dose is one that an individual will enjoy and sustain, and as long as individuals engage in activity versus sedentary behavior, their mental health is better off than before. Additionally, physical activity does not have to equate to rigorous exercise, instead, physical activity is any movement of the body that expends energy above normal levels (Faulkner et al., 2015).

We have discussed many of the physical, psychological, and evolutionary benefits of physical activity. In support of our proposal that physical activity is a positive intervention, we

note that it can be mapped onto Pawelski's (2020) Elements Model of positive interventions including all of the model's constituent parts: desired outcome, target system, target change, the active ingredient, and activity. For example, the desired outcome may be to lose weight with the target system being increased wellness. In order to achieve this goal, the target change may be to increase self-regulation. The active ingredient could be the self-regulatory task of getting on the bike and the activity would be biking. In some cases, the active ingredient may influence more than one target system, creating change in multiple target change areas. In this case, the increase in the active ingredient of getting on the bike could lead to a target change of increased self-esteem or positive emotion in addition to the initial target change of self-regulation.

At this point, we shift our focus from the topic of physical activity in general to the narrower lens of physical activity facilitated by the platform of Peloton. In her capstone, Lisa Richardson asserts that physical activity, specifically riding on a Peloton bike, is a positive intervention. We concur. In this next section, we discuss some of Richardson's key discoveries.

### **Peloton as a Facilitator of Hope, Capstone by Lisa Richardson**

In her capstone, Richardson (2020) defines Peloton as a positive intervention using Pawelski's (2020) Elements framework. She states that the target system is the mind and body, the activity is indoor cycling, the active ingredient is physical activity, and that the target change and outcome varies by the individual (Richardson, 2020). We agree with that assessment and would simply augment the activity to be any of the Peloton fitness classes.

Richardson's lens for viewing Peloton and how it creates initial and sustained engagement is through the lens of Snyder's (1994) hope theory. Richardson's (2020) study found evidence to support that in using the bike, most people demonstrated the goal-motivated action, pathway identification, and agentic thinking that are the markers of hope theory (Magyar-Moe &

Lopez, 2015. When analyzing the differences between initial engagement with Peloton with sustained engagement, Richardson found that 78 percent of respondents reported an initial motivator for buying the bike was convenience while only 18 percent of respondents said that convenience was a motivator for continued use of the bike. Instead, 76 percent identified exercise and health and 69 percent said that elements related to PERMA were their top motivators for sustained engagement. Richardson's (2020) findings suggest that wanting to improve one's health is not enough to take initial action to make that change. Moreover, the reasons for motivation shift after purchase, with convenience being a key driver to initiate behavior and PERMA being a pathway for sustained engagement (Richardson, 2020). When Richardson (2020) examined which aspects of PERMA were most relevant for sustained engagement, her word frequency analysis revealed an increase in words associated with positive emotion, engagement, and achievement, with positive emotion being a core driver for sustained motivation. This finding correlates with Fredrickson's (2013) theory of positive resonance which states that moments of in-person, shared connection are powerful in enhancing positive emotion.

One of the findings of Richardson (2020) that we found to be most compelling is that the top motivator for sustained use of the platform was the instructor. This dynamic was an affirmation of what co-founder of Peloton, John Foley, believed when he was developing the company. His premise was that the content, the way in which people interact with the bike and the platform, is more important than the hardware, the actual bike (Frieswick, 2016). Foley acted on this belief when he invested in hiring world-class instructors who are ultimately the conveyors of the Peloton content (Frieswick, 2016). Peloton describes its instructors as both relatable and inspirational, stating that before the COVID-19 lockdown, members traveled long distances to attend live classes to ride with the instructors in person (Peloton, 2020a). The Peloton annual



report goes as far as to say that the instructors “play a critical role in bringing the Peloton experience to life” (Peloton, 2020a, p.7) for their members. Additionally, by casting a diverse set of instructors, Peloton makes it more likely that riders will find classes that align with their interests and what they want to focus on (annual report 2020). Although Richardson’s (2020) study did not analyze which instructors were selected most often and why, she suggests that positive language use was a key component in the successful engagement of members, as was the ability for riders to have agency in choosing their instructor.

With a platform that contains thousands of classes ranging from biking and running to strength training to yoga and meditation, our view is that the members’ ability to choose their classes based on preferences for the instructor, music, class length, structure, and difficulty, in addition to the type of workout, is an essential part of Peloton’s ability to sustain engagement of their members. Peloton offers both live, synchronous rides as well as on-demand, asynchronous rides. Interestingly, Richardson (2020) found that a majority, 70 out of 104, respondents prefer on-demand rides over live rides. One might assume that the live aspect of the class would be more closely related to Fredrickson’s (2013) positivity resonance, and therefore contribute more powerfully to positive emotions. However, based on Richardson’s (2020) data, the top three themes for people who preferred live rides were connection, energy, and motivation, whereas the top themes for pre-recorded rides were convenience, variety, and metrics. This difference in priorities and choices again emphasizes the importance of agency in selecting workouts.

Lastly, Richardson (2020) proposes that character strengths are a lever that can be used to drive agency when making change. In the case of Peloton, riders could customize their experience with the platform in alignment with their strengths, for example using persistence to conquer longer rides or engaging gratitude by giving high-fives to other riders (Richardson,

2020). Richardson (2020) suggests that tapping into their strengths in this way can enhance motivation.

Before moving further into the narrative of how and why we believe Peloton is an effective positive psychological intervention, it is important to know a bit more about the company's strengths, history, finances, mission, and values.

### **A Little Bit About Peloton**

If companies have character strengths, some of the strengths we would highlight from Peloton would be perseverance, hope, teamwork, and love of learning. As with the origin story of many great companies, one of the co-founders, Foley, in this case, saw an opportunity based on his personal experience. He and his wife loved studio fitness classes such as SoulCycle and Flywheel, but with responsibilities at work and home, they were finding it increasingly difficult to get to the gym (Frieswick, 2016). From his role as president of e-commerce at Barnes & Noble, and his time in spinning classes, Foley realized that it is the content that drives participation, for example, people love the book they were reading on the Nook, not the hardware itself (Frieswick, 2016).

From that idea, Foley began the pursuit of figuring out how to deliver a studio cycling class experience in a home environment. Starting with this thought in 2011, he utilized his Harvard MBA colleagues and other contacts to build a team and raise capital. The team demonstrated their perseverance and overcame many challenges through trial and error, by paying close attention to what the competition was doing right, and sheer determination. Additionally, through all of their risk-taking, they maintained optimism, an indicator of the strength of hope. Some of the tasks they accomplished required that they use their strength of love of learning as they gained the knowledge that enabled them to figure out how to interface a

bike to tablet, build a prototype bike, recruit instructors, create a streaming studio, decide where to sell bikes, and how to deliver them (Frieswick, 2016). Fast forward to December 2015 when, just 24 months after their first bike was delivered, Peloton became profitable (Frieswick, 2016).

The COVID-19 lockdown forced humanity to take inventory of our gym equipment to figure out ways to stay mentally, emotionally, and physically well, facing the reality that there would be no access to personal trainers, gyms, or trendy group fitness classes for the foreseeable future. Searching feverishly on the internet, individuals searched high and low to find gym equipment for sale. Prices surged at the beginning of 2020, with sales going up 55 percent in a five-day period with individuals purchasing equipment ranging from kettlebells, dumbbells, to treadmills and stationary bikes (Gibson, 2020). At-home fitness equipment manufacturer and brand, Nordictrack, experienced a 200 percent increase in sales in March 2020. As of the end of their fiscal 2020 year-end on June 30, 2020, Peloton had over 3.1 million members, making it the largest interactive fitness platform in the world at that time (Peloton, 2020a). Exponential growth continued through the summer and fall of 2020 and into 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic worsened in the U.S., as total Peloton members grew to 5.4 million as of the end of the third quarter 2021, March 31, 2021 (Peloton, 2020b). Another financial marker that demonstrates the success of Peloton's business model is their very low turnover rate, what they call Average Net Monthly Connected Fitness Churn, which was at less than 1 percent for the year ending June 30, 2020 (Peloton, 2020a).

All you need to do is look at Peloton's 2020 Annual report to understand what their corporate values are. One of their stated missions is to "make fitness entertaining, approachable, effective, and convenient while fostering social connections that encourage our Members to be the best versions of themselves" (Peloton, 2020a, p. 5). Their identity as "an innovation company

at the nexus of fitness, technology, and media” is “driven by a Members-first mindset” that “ensures a best-in-class, end-to-end experience” (Peloton, 2020a, p.5).

In addition to their overall mission, on page 42 of their 2020 Annual Report, you will find “The Peloton Pledge” to “being an anti-racist organization” (Peloton, 2020a). This promise to do more to embrace inclusivity and diversity consists of three initiatives, one to substantially increase wages for their hourly employees, the second to invest in learning and development programs to create more opportunities for upward mobility for their hourly employees, and lastly to spend \$20 million with third party organizations to fight systemic inequities in the U.S. (Peloton, 2020a). One example of living out this value of social justice is when, in November 1, 2020, it gave Peloton digital memberships to students at 10 historically black colleges or universities (HBCUs) and determined that it would pursue long-term recruiting relationships with those schools (Peloton, 2020c). Another example was during Peloton’s 2021 Homecoming event when it held a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) panel conversation (Peloton, 2021). It may be that some people buy memberships and are motivated to ride because they see themselves represented in the instructors both aesthetically as well as from a strengths and values perspective.

We pause here for a reminder of where we are on our journey. The aim of our first key take-away is to propose that more attention be paid to physical activity as a positive intervention. We have defined positive interventions, explained how physical activity is a positive intervention, and introduced our exemplar, Peloton. Now, we bring together many of these concepts as we demonstrate how the Peloton platform includes the critical constructs that are part of positive interventions, making it an effective positive intervention. We do not want to spoil what these strengths and values mean quite yet and how they interact or manifest with Peloton

Instructors, therefore we want to go into the details behind the components of PPIs to gain a better understanding of how they apply to Peloton as a PPI.

### **Peloton as a Positive Intervention**

We propose that Peloton has all of the foundational markers of a very effective PPI: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy. Now we will take a look at each of these more closely.

#### ***Self-awareness/Mindfulness***

*“(We) get more out of ourselves if we enter a challenge calm and centered than fired up.”*

*~ Christine D’Ercole, Peloton instructor*

*“Whatever feeling or emotion comes up, we don’t judge it.”*

*~ Emma Lovewell, Peloton instructor*

Self-awareness and mindfulness have a close and complicated relationship. There is an argument to be made that mindfulness is a component of self-awareness. For example, although Sutton (2016) gives a broad definition of self-awareness as the extent to which people are consciously aware of their internal states and their interactions or relationships with others, she defines the narrower construct of dispositional self-awareness into four conceptualizations including insight, reflection, rumination, and mindfulness. Sutton’s (2016) study found that while insight and reflection predicted beneficial outcomes, mindfulness predicted increased proactivity but also increased emotional costs such as guilt, fear, and vulnerability. These are emotions that one would typically associate more with rumination. Sutton’s (2016) finding that mindfulness can increase emotional costs is interesting given that mindfulness is often defined as

self-awareness with the added component of non-judgment when observing one's physical, mental and emotional state.

A second viewpoint on the relationship between self-awareness and mindfulness is the S-ART (self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-transcendence) framework by Vago and Silbersweig (2012) in which self-awareness is an element of mindfulness. After an extensive comparison between historical and contemporary perspectives of mindfulness, they propose the S-ART theoretical framework and neurobiological model as a way to operationalize mindfulness and explore its underlying mechanisms. Vago and Silbersweig (2012) suggest that instead of viewing mindfulness as a singular unit, it can be broken processes that are perceptual, physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. In the S-ART framework, mindfulness is defined as systematic mental training that develops meta-awareness (self-awareness), the ability to control one's behavior (self-regulation), and a positive relationship between self and others that goes beyond self-focus and increase prosocial characteristics (self-transcendence) (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Further research on the complexity of the construct of mindfulness done by Peters et al. (2013) parsed apart two of the facets of mindfulness, the ability of a person to attend to present-moment activities from their ability to maintain a non-judgmental stance. For example, if one is practicing meditation and her mind is wandering, she would note her thoughts, but not start with negative self-talk or believe she is not able to meditate. Both of the skills underlying mindfulness, self-awareness, and non-judgment are of value independently, but some benefits of mindfulness may not be experienced until both skills are developed (Peters et al., 2013).

Regardless of one's perspective on the relationship between self-awareness and mindfulness, it is clear that the two constructs are very closely related and multifaceted.

Although more research needs to be done regarding the complexities of self-awareness and mindfulness and to explore which populations may be vulnerable to the costs of mindfulness, there is a growing base of data that is finding mindfulness interventions to be beneficial. For example, a systematic review by Chi et al. (2018) found that mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) has moderate effects in reducing depression in adolescents and young adults. Baime (2011) describes mindfulness as a buffer between action and reaction, allowing increased time for a more thoughtful response. Smalley and Winston (2010) contend that by being more present with their experiences, people can become more discerning with their thoughts, feelings, and actions, allowing for greater opportunities to make positive change. Similarly, Brown and Ryan (2015) discuss how awareness of thoughts allows for full consideration of options as well as bringing to consciousness someone's mental and emotional state when they are making a decision. Smalley and Winston (2010) draw a straight line from mindfulness to self-regulation when they liken mindfulness to a mental "seat belt" that guards against unhappiness, depression, anxiety, pain, and suffering in addition to improving self-regulation. In summary, both mindfulness and self-awareness allow people to live with intention and in alignment with their values.

Peloton builds self-awareness and mindfulness overtly with its yoga and meditation classes, and less obviously through its other workouts when people do things like track metrics as benchmarks of their fitness. For example, if one knows that she can usually hold a cadence of 80 pedal stroke revolutions per minute (RPM) with a resistance of 40, and on a specific day she cannot, with self-awareness, she may conclude that she needs a day off to recover. The instructors give riders constant reminders to tune in to their minds and bodies such as Alex Toussaint asking people to be "*present with yourself*" or Christine D'Ercole offering the

suggestion that people close their eyes for a couple of minutes while riding. Both of these prompts create space for riders to connect with their inner cognitive and emotional states and take a pause from the constant action in the mind. Ally Love touches upon the critical teaching of mindfulness when she states that “criticism is judgment”, and she suggests instead that letting go of judgment leads to gratitude. Dennis Morton brings self-awareness to the physiological impacts of exercise on the body when he talks about endorphins kicking in and when he says, “*You climb on this bike for the feeling of being alive.*”

### ***Self-regulation/Attention***

*“Keep leveling up. Keep showing up. Keep getting stronger. There is no failure.”*

*~ Tunde Oyenehin, Peloton instructor*

*“Negative, self-defeating thoughts? Keep your legs moving and heart pumping. Can’t control everything, but you can control your mindset.”*

*~ Matt Wilpers, Peloton instructor*

Self-regulation is the ability to control one’s thoughts, emotions, energy states, and impulses in order to align one’s responses and behaviors with moral values, social norms, laws, and goals. Baumeister et al. (2006) liken self-regulation to the trump card of personality; he proposes that self-regulation is the most important skill to cultivate when trying to bring about positive change because, with sufficient capacity, one can always do the right thing.

Additionally, self-regulation is connected with more health behaviors than any other character strength (Niemic, 2018). The awareness that exercising control in a specific arena of one’s life



improves one's capacity to change her behavior for the better is the crux on which self-regulation sits.

Research on self-regulation demonstrates that it can be improved by practice, much like exercising a muscle (Baumeister et al., 2006). Research supports the finding that not only can self-regulation be strengthened through regular usage, but that as control is strengthened in one realm, the person also becomes better at self-regulating in other areas of their life (Baumeister et al. 2006). In one study, people who were in a regulated exercise program became more successful at reducing their consumption of cigarette smoking, alcohol, and caffeine (Baumeister et al. 2006).

As attention is focused on a particular task, the self-regulation required to maintain such behavior change is maximized with healthy habit development. William James (1892/1984), one of the early experts on habit formation, proposed that habits are created one small act at a time and that repetition pays off with accomplishment. Oftentimes, the Peloton instructor opens class by reminding Members that they did the hard part, they showed up, making getting on the bike or treadmill, or pulling out the yoga mat, the first small step in habit formation.

On a neurological level, the habits, formed slowly, with purposeful, repeated experiences, create cognitive change thus demonstrating the plasticity of the human mind. When each new piece of information is engaged, it either needs to go through an old neural pathway or create a new one (James, 1892) and (James, 1984). The more times the same task is engaged, it economizes, becoming easier to do each time. It is through this process of neuroplasticity that the human brain develops. James (1984), believed that creating good habits allows routine tasks in life to become automated, and, as a result of minimizing frequent indecision, one's mind is free to consider other, more significant, matters. Dennis Morton promotes the small, routine habit of

good form when he says, *“Do the little things right, set an intention for your lower body, and let the big things take care of themselves.”*

By empowering people to create the habit of working out, Peloton instructors become partners with members in developing the habit formation that leads to self-regulation. Then, the continuous engagement with the platform allows members to keep using the “muscle” of self-regulation, growing it, and creating an upward spiral of growth between engagement and self-regulation. McGonigal (2019) says it takes approximately six weeks for someone to get hooked on an exercise plan. Therefore, if Peloton can utilize convenience as a lever to initiate behavior, as Richardson’s (2020) study demonstrates, and support people long enough to create a habit, it then increases the chances for sustained engagement.

In addition to being an effective tool to increase well-being on its own, self-regulation can also be a precursor for self-efficacy and self-determination. For example, with continued success in performing a task or maintaining a certain habit, one’s belief in one’s capacity to do so increases, leading to improved self-efficacy in that domain. Similarly, the regulation of one’s behavior allows one to effectively pursue a particular goal fostering self-determination.

### ***Self-determination/Intention***

*“You are responsible for your joy. No one is responsible for your joy except you.”*

*~ Cody Rigsby, Peloton instructor*

*“Have fun! If you’re not having fun, then why are you doing this?”*

*~ Alex Toussaint, Peloton instructor*

Self-determination answers the questions of what kind of goal someone would pursue and why they would pursue it. Self-determination theory is rooted in the concept that people have three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Peloton addresses each of these needs. A feeling of competence is achieved when Robin Arzon gives the reminder that with “*no challenge, (there’s) no change.*” One can also feel a sense of accomplishment when, after the ride, a message from Peloton pops up that says, “*You gave it your all in your 30-minute ride.*” The need for relatedness is easily met via the leaderboard where anywhere from one other person to a few thousand people are riding at the same time, even asynchronous rides. The leaderboard allows people to see their effort and outcome in relation to both people riding at the same time and/or any person who has ever taken the ride. In real-time, someone is either getting passed or passing by others, and, in some cases, riding alongside one another. There is the potential to relate collaboratively by giving people “high-fives” as if to say, “I see you!” or “Keep up the hard work!” or “You can do it!” The need for autonomy is met in several ways. One is with the riders’ ability to control her cadence and resistance. As Dennis Morton says, “*I make suggestions. You make decisions*”. Additionally, the rider chooses the length of the class they take, the instructor, the format (i.e. intervals vs low impact), and the type of music, all of which give a sense of autonomy. Finally, by offering special programs such as summer challenges, celebrations such as Black History Month or Pride, or a series aligned with musical artists, Peloton is always creating a new reason for the “why” behind the workout. Research has shown that acting with autonomy in decision-making is beneficial to well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2015).

The self-determination theory of self-regulation posits that as motivation progresses from external, extrinsic motivation towards internal, intrinsic motivation, behavior becomes more

autonomous (Brown & Ryan, 2015). Extrinsic motivation could be defined as being incentivized to act by things outside of oneself such as wealth, fame, or direction from someone else whereas intrinsic motivation is derived internally such as personal growth, deep relationships, or doing good in the world (Ryan et al., 2008). Intrinsic motivation leads to highly autonomous behavior which has been associated with positive outcomes such as increased creativity, enhanced task performance, and higher psychological well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2015). It is in this way, when intention interfaces with intrinsic motivation, self-determination is supported. Regardless of whether the motivation for doing something is extrinsic or intrinsic, having greater awareness and self-regulation will lead to more authentic action. In their study, Wood and Neal (2016) state that one needs to understand the mental and emotional factors behind our behaviors in order to change habits. Their protocol of an implementation plan is an example of placing attention, an operationalization of your self-regulation, on your intention which is a manifestation of your self-determination (Wood & Neal, 2016).

### ***Self-efficacy/Agency***

*“What we see in superheroes is our own potential.”*

*~ Robin Arzon, Peloton instructor*

*“Count the moments where you are about to quit and get back in...need to stay in the game for any of it to happen, count that metric.”*

*~ Christine D’Ercole, Peloton instructor*

Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to produce the desired effect from one’s own actions (Maddux, 2009). This confidence is not related to a commitment to actually do the behavior, nor is it tied to a certain outcome, it is simply believing that one is capable of producing the behavior that could create the results. Self-efficacy beliefs can impact

psychological well-being with a sense of control, leading to feelings of happiness whereas low self-efficacy can play a role in depression (Maddux, 2009). Rooted in social cognitive theory, an approach that assumes that we actively shape our environment, self-efficacy embraces the idea that people can be change agents in their own lives and the lives of others, and is concerned with human potential and possibilities (Maddux, 2009). If the goal set at some point seems out of reach, pathways can be opened up by either adjusting the goal to meet the person's capabilities, increasing the person's skills through training and experience, or changing the person's perspective regarding their capacity (Locke, 1996).

In Peloton, an example of the manifestation of self-efficacy is Christine D'Ercole's motto of, "*I am. I can. I will. I do.*" When she repeats this, almost as a mantra, during a ride, it empowers the rider to believe in herself. Christine D'Ercole tells the story of how she found success in biking late in life after having her own failures and then, even after winning bike races, at times she still has had to push through her negative self-talk. She embraces self-efficacy further when she asks riders to "*...decide that you have no idea what you are capable of*" as a way of opening people up to their potential.

As with many concepts in positive psychology, the relationship between self-efficacy and agency is complex and nuanced. Self-efficacy overlaps with the construct of agency (Rand & Cheavens, 2009, Oxford). Both concepts address someone's belief in their ability to carry out a particular course of action, however, agency is more global and intentional than self-efficacy (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Self-efficacy is the belief that one *can* manifest a specific action in pursuit of a particular goal, agency is a trait-like perception that one *will* produce the actions required to achieve a wide range of goals (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). In a sense, agency is self-efficacy and combined with intention. Seeking to make a positive difference in one's life is, by

definition, the agency component of hope (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). This agency, the determination that one is capable of effecting change, is often the first step towards making such improvements. Snyder's model of hope theory states that once one defines a goal, one needs to find the pathways to reach that goal as well as the motivation to use those pathways (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). The motivation component in hope theory is agency.

The Peloton platform participates in defining goals as well as laying out pathways to the goals with the accompanying motivation. For example, if one has a goal of running a marathon, Peloton offers a *Road To Your 26.2* which combines the components of warm-ups, strength training, and meditation for recovery and mental performance along with a variety of runs to keep the training purposeful and interesting.

Additionally, self-efficacy has a circular relationship with self-regulation. The discipline inherent in self-regulation can lead to self-efficacy when self-control leads to successful repeated action and thus an increased belief in one's ability to produce a desired behavior(s) under certain conditions. Peloton instructor Matt Wilpers gives us an example of this relationship between self-regulation and self-efficacy when he promotes controlling one's thoughts. Wilpers describes negativity bias, the concept that we are all predisposed to see the negative (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), when he says it's "*easier to feel negative*" and how this self-doubt can detract from self-efficacy. He then follows up by suggesting that the self-regulation of thoughts can promote self-efficacy with his statement, "*so choose positive.*"

Although self-regulation can impact self-efficacy, Maddux (2009) proposes the inverse, that self-efficacy influences self-regulation. First, Maddux (2009) suggests that self-efficacy impacts the difficulty of goals being set with loftier goals being set in areas in which one has higher self-efficacy. Second, he says that strong self-efficacy empowers one to be more resistant

to challenges or setbacks that could reduce self-regulation. And lastly, he states that high self-efficacy enables one to stay “on task”, even through difficulties, because of one’s belief that one can figure out a solution.

To summarize, effecting change is a multi-step process. First, one needs to have the self-awareness to know where one is currently. Next one needs to have the self-determination to know where one wants to go. Once the direction is chosen, one must have self-regulation to be in control of one’s impulses enough to produce the necessary actions to move forward. And, finally, it is very helpful to have self-efficacy, the belief that one can manifest those actions in the real world. Positive interventions are mechanisms intended to affect the change of increasing well-being. Effective positive interventions include the constructs of self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy.

Now that we have explored what makes up a positive intervention, there is one more important concept we would like to visit that is an important part of, particularly, physical activity positive interventions. The concept of flow.

### **Flow as a Product of Positive Interventions**

*“...Steady ride...get into a flow state with our bodies...stay in this moment with me.*

*Stay in this moment together.” ~ Sam Yo, Peloton instructor*

*“Stay in discomfort long enough to make a change.” ~ Robin Arzon, Peloton instructor*

Have you ever felt completely immersed in an activity, like running or biking, where time stood still and nothing else mattered, almost like you could go on and on with no end in sight? That is flow. Flow can be defined as becoming absorbed in an activity to the extent that all cognitive and emotional resources are being employed and there is a loss of self-consciousness (Seligman, 2011). In his book *Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that when in flow, people are

so engaged in the task at hand, they do not perceive time passing or have conscious thoughts about anything else. Flow requires that there must be enough novelty, challenge, and skill involved in order to allow improvement to keep one's interest (Peterson, 2006). To continue experiencing flow over time, the challenge must keep increasing to fend off boredom and promote skill-building, but not be too difficult so as to elicit anxiety or frustration (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In addition to the action matching capabilities, flow also includes setting goals and then continuing to increase the challenge based on feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

A flow activity can be as complex as the performance of an Olympic athlete, or it can be as short-term and simple as a conversation with a friend. It is less about achievement and more about absorption in the task. Another term for flow is an autotelic experience whereby the activity is intrinsically motivating and ultimately a reward unto itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). What brings about flow varies widely from person to person and depends upon the person's perception of the challenge being presented. For example, a novice rider may find flow in a 15-minute low-impact ride, but this ride would not necessarily provide the challenge needed to create flow for an expert rider.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that although the ability to concentrate with extreme focus and a flow state is related, the research to date is not clear which capacity causes the other. What is clear is that having a more focused and flexible capacity to control one's consciousness is a skill that can be honed with training and discipline (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Because this more flexible attention allows for restructuring experience more easily, with fewer external cues, this ability is closely related to developing intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When the goal attained is an intrinsic aspiration, the increase in well-being experienced is even greater



than when reaching an extrinsic goal (Ryan et al., 2008). Additionally, an upward spiral of success can ensue when learning basic skills leads to interest and engagement which leads to further effort and skill-building which promotes more interest and engagement (Peterson, 2006). Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) interpretation of this upward spiral is that after a flow experience, the person is not the same as they were prior to the flow experience because they have been enriched by the achievement of the flow state. The ability to create an experience that is neither too difficult nor too easy, matching action to capabilities while still proposing new goals is something that Peloton does extremely well, making it an excellent vehicle for attaining flow, and possibly leaving its members changed by the experience.

### **Summary Part I; Look ahead to Parts II & III**

Throughout Part I, we introduced and explored positive psychology and well-being. Our discussion about the various constructs that enhance well-being placed an extra emphasis on character strengths. We then examined the pathways that promote well-being through mechanisms of positive interventions and expanded this concept with Hefferon and Mutrie's (2012) assertion that physical activity is a "stellar" positive intervention. From there we focused specifically on physical activity and Peloton's platform, as we built upon Lisa Richardson's capstone, and laid out how it has many foundational markers, including self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy, that make Peloton a very effective positive intervention.

In Part II, we will review the history and concepts of values and virtues as we build upon Lavy and Benish-Weisman's (2021) framework that links values to character strengths to behavior outcomes. Our examination of these topics leads us to Part III where we set out for you two observations relating the concepts of, values, strengths, language, and agency in the context

of Peloton. The first observation considers that Peloton instructors display their own character strengths through the language they use. This then allows members to, consciously or unconsciously, use strength-spotting and align themselves with instructors based on values and character strengths. Our second observation explains that the agency inherent in the Peloton platform allows individuals the autonomy to choose, each time, their own adventure, thus facilitating sustained engagement.

### **Check-in**

Are you still with us? Great! If you feel like you need it, now is a good time to take a short break. May we offer this as an opportunity to reflect upon activities where you find flow. Perhaps you can also identify areas in which you already experience some of the components of PPIs such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy. As Cody Rigsby says, it may be a good time to “get your life together”, for example, hydrate, take a movement break, and prepare yourself to begin Part II of our capstone.

### **Part II**

It may feel as though we are taking a bit of a U-turn here. As we make this transition from Part I to Part II, we echo the words of Christine D’Ercole, please “*choose curiosity over judgment*”. Although the concept of positive interventions may not seem closely related to values and virtues, we contend that they are. And, much like a triathlete moving from swim to bike or bike to run, we aim to make our transitions as smooth as possible, knowing that some are more seamless than others.

### **Values, Higher-Order Values, Virtue**

Now we use a different framework to assess how individuals stay engaged on the path to wellness as we examine the concept of virtues, and how they align with values and higher-order

values that each individual possesses. To lay the groundwork, we must first define virtues, values, and higher-order values. As Peterson and Seligman (2004) laid the foundation for virtues and character strengths, Shalom Schwartz (1992) made a critical discovery with his sentinel values research, studying 20 countries and finding evidence that value types are shared across most groups.

### *Values*

Schwartz (1992) along with other psychologists and sociologists determined that values are what individuals possess and utilize to evaluate whether people or events fit as criteria that align with the self. His theory (1992, 2012) defines values as “representations of desirable goals and important broad motivators of behavior” (p. 3). For example, what an individual values will determine whether or not they will pursue a relationship or attend an event. The value is the motivator of the behavior which manifests in a certain action. Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) identified five features of values that communities across countries and cultures seem to possess.

The authors (1987, 1990) defined the five features of values as “(1) concepts and beliefs, (2) pertaining to desirable end states or behavioral outcomes, (3) transcend specific situations, (4) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and (5) events and are ordered by relative importance” (p. 4). For example, one who values wellness (concept or belief) and wants to see results, such as weight loss or an increase in physical performance metrics (desirable behavior outcome), might choose to purchase an at-home exercise platform such as Peloton (selection of behavior) as a tool in attaining the chosen end state of wellness.

In addition to the five primary components above, the authors (1987, 1990) specified that there are three universal requirements of values: the needs of the individual, the requisites of “coordinated social interaction” meaning to have congruent thoughts, feelings, and behavior

patterns among individuals in dyads or groups of people, and lastly the survival and welfare needs of a group (p. 4). The three universal requirements as mentioned above that come along with each value stem from the basic humanistic needs of the individual, as we are all “biological organisms” that have basic needs that need to be met (Schwartz, 2012). In addition to the five features and three universal requirements, the authors propose that the primary components of a value are rooted in the type of goal or motivational concerns that it demonstrates (Schwartz, 1992). There are ten distinct *motivational types* of values that are seen around the world: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity and tradition, spirituality, benevolence, and universalism (Schwartz, 1992) and (Schwartz, 2012). See Appendix A for the motivational type and specific value that coincides with each. An example of a value being rooted in a motivational type is if an individual values freedom, creativity, and independence, then *self-direction* would be the motivational type that aligns with those values.

Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) discovered that the ten motivational types of values spanned different cultures; however, the three values that had the highest levels of consensus across cultures were benevolence, universalism, and self-direction. The values of power, tradition, and stimulation were among the lowest. This data, they argued, reveals that human nature and social functioning are shared across all cultures (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990) and (Schwartz, 2012). It is important to note that although all values have features to them that are seen across continents, what distinguishes one value from another and varies from person to person, comes from the motivational type or goal that the value expresses (Schwartz, 2012).

To evaluate these values across cultures, Schwartz (2012) created an assessment called the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS). The survey contains two lists of value items, one with 30 items to express desirable end-states in the form of nouns, and another containing 27 items

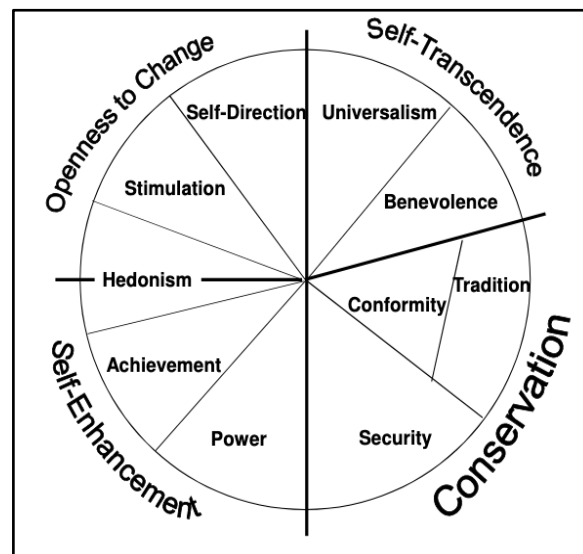
expressing desirable ways of acting in the form of adjectives (Schwartz, 2012). Respondents rate the importance of each value item according to their guiding principles on a 9-point scale (Schwartz, 2012). The Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) is an alternative to the SVS which was developed to measure the ten values in children ages 11 to 14 and for those who were educated in Western countries, taught to think abstractly and context-free (Schwartz, 2012). The questionnaire includes short verbal portraits of 40 people that are gender-matched to the individual taking the assessment (Schwartz, 2012). Each portrait describes a person's aspirations, goals, or wishes that exemplify a specific value. For example, if the person taking the survey identifies strongly with self-direction values, she might rate as highly important the portrait describing a goal of incorporating new exercise routines by splurging on a Peloton to reduce adaptation or boredom (Schwartz, 2012). In essence, the SVS measures desirable end states and desirable ways of acting in both nouns and adjectives, whereas the PVQ measures a person's values through a portrait of what is important to him or her without explicitly pointing out the value of investigation (Schwartz, 2012).

Furthermore, Schwartz (1992) notes that there can be similarities and intersections between motivation types and values. For example, someone who values influence, which falls under the achievement motivation type, can also be motivated by power and the values underneath it (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). Additionally, Schwartz (1992) explains that there is also compatibility between values from different motivational types. For instance, if an individual is motivated by *stimulation* (an exciting life, a varied life, daring) and *self-direction* (freedom, creativity, independence, autonomy, curiosity, self-respect) then both motivational types involve an intrinsic motivation towards mastery or openness to change. Let's layer some detail on this example. Say that an individual values what she determines to be an exciting life (stimulation

motivation) by wanting to complete a marathon, and she also values curiosity (self-direction motivation), then that individual might be intrinsically motivated to participate in a marathon for the excitement and challenge it brings, being curious to the challenge and emotions it can elicit, while also being open to change that mastering and completing a marathon can bring.

As you can see, there is a lot of complexity with the dynamics with Schwartz's features and universal requirements of values and with the way values interact with motivational types. Schwartz's (1992, 2012) framework is the way we chose to approach the messiness and overlap these constructs, there are others. In our opinion, Schwartz's structure is not only empirically backed, but it also effectively captures the nuances of these constructs by proposing that values and motivational types are not linear but more circular as a "motivational continuum" (p. 8) due to their compatible and interrelated nature as shown in Figure 1 (Schwartz, 2012).

Figure 1



Note Taken from Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–65).

Schwartz continued to develop and refine his value theory and construct which led to the introduction of higher-order values.

### ***Higher-Order Values***

As Schwartz (2016) worked through the inherent conflict, compatibility, and tradeoffs between competing values, as well as their relationship to motivational types, he continued to analyze and evolve his theory. As a review, in his 1992 paper, Schwartz proposed a working definition of values that incorporated five features that are prevalent in most psychological writings about values. As mentioned previously, these five features underlying values are: “(1) are concepts or beliefs (2) pertain to desirable end states or behaviors (3) transcend specific situations (4) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (5) are ordered by relative importance” (p. 4). In his 2016 paper, Schwartz edits the fourth and fifth features, turning the two items into three new ones. The first three features from the 1992 paper remain the same, the last three are: “(4) values serve as standards or criteria, (5) values are ordered by relative importance, (6) the relative importance of multiple values guides action” (p.3), making the new theory composed of six main features of values rather than five.

To help clarify the compatibility and interrelatedness within values, Schwartz (2012) augmented his theory with four higher order values. The higher-order values allow for the grouping of motivation types and values in a circular fashion, which clearly represents the continuum of related motivational values. In 2016, Schwartz conveys the complexities of competing values with an amended circular motivational continuum of ten values in his earlier model in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2



*Note.* Taken from Schwartz, S. H. (2016). Basic individual values: Sources and consequences. *Handbook of value: Perspectives from economics, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology and sociology*, 63-84.

It is critically important that the continuum is circular because that implies that values function as a part of an integrated and related whole (Schwartz 1992, 2012, 2016). The closer value types are to each other, the more similar they are, resulting in being grouped under a higher-order value. The four higher-order values are openness to change, self-enhancement, conservation, and self-transcendence. This new depiction clearly shows what Schwartz, Lavy, and Benish-Weisman (1992, 2021) explained, that the continuum of values is related to broad motivational goals. The value structure as a continuum has been identified across 70 countries and is associated with personality, attitudes, and behaviors (Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021).

In this updated visual model, Schwartz (2016) utilizes bipolar dimensions in three organizational principles in summarizing the oppositions between competing values. The second circle from the center represents the higher-order values from his 2012 figure (above). In this



section, there is the opposition of readiness for change (openness to change) vs resistance to change (conservation) and interest in others (self-transcendence) vs interest in self (self-enhancement). The second organizing principle looks at the interests the value attainment serves: personal focus vs social focus. The third organizing principle explores the relationship of values to anxiety, self-regulation, and motivation. The top of the figure contains values that have little anxiety, promote gain, and are intrinsically motivated while the bottom part shows values with the competing interests of avoiding anxiety, preventing loss, and are extrinsically motivated.

The circular bipolar oppositional construct of values is important for a couple of reasons. First, it allows the full set of values to be systematically related to other variables, attitudes, or behaviors (Schwartz, 2012). For example, if one values trying out a new type of working out, such as Peloton, that behavior aligns with the higher-order value of Openness to Change and the values of self-direction and stimulation such that the person has independent thought and enjoys novelty and challenge. Based on the diagram, one could then also infer that, in this particular realm of life, this person places a lower priority on conformity to social expectations and is more intrinsically motivated. Secondly, the circular formation suggests that the associations between values within the construct follow a predictable pattern with values next to each other being relatively congruent, and less so the further away they are from each other. For example, one who values power may be less likely to exhibit benevolence.

Schwartz (2016) goes on to consider the mechanisms that link values to behavior, acknowledging that although many factors influence any behavior, values are generally an important factor. The proposed mechanisms that determine how the values manifest in behavior are that: (1) values must be activated (2) values must be perceived as relevant to the behavior at hand (3) values must be seen as promoting or protecting valued goals (4) the personal

hierarchical rank of the value influence the extent to which there will be planning in alignment with the value (5) the way in which the value is perceived or interpreted determines the line of action (Schwartz, 2016).

These mechanisms, along with the interrelatedness of values, can help in understanding and predicting behavior. For example, the behavior of participation in sports was found to be positively correlated with the values of stimulation and hedonism and negatively correlated with security, conformity, and tradition (Schwartz, 2016). Many times in a single day we are in the position of having to choose between competing values, so we believe that having clarity on one's values can be of critical importance when making decisions. For example, if one values both tradition and achievement and have only limited time on a particular day, one would need to prioritize those values in determining if one is going to religious services or out on a training run for a race.

Schwartz continues to refine his theory into the current year. In his 2021 paper, co-written with Ciecich, the evolution of Schwartz's theory is evident in the intricacy and subtleties of the seven what he now calls characteristics: "(1) values are beliefs about the importance of desirable goals, (2) when activated, values elicit emotion, (3) values are basic goals that apply across specific situations, (4) values consciously or unconsciously motivate behavior, perception, and attitudes, (5) value effects occur through a process of trade-offs among the relevant values, (6) values serve as standards for evaluating actions, people, and events, (7) values are ordered by importance in a relatively enduring hierarchical system" (p. 2). These refinements to his theory demonstrate the complexity of the study of values.

Lavy and Benish-Weisman (2021) used Schwartz's higher-order values theory as a tool to explore if character strengths are a pathway for behavioral manifestations of values. They

(2021) hypothesized that Seligman and Peterson's constructs of character strengths and virtues overlap and interact with the values from Schwartz's theories. Before we can examine Lavy and Benish-Weisman's model further, we must first introduce and explain Seligman and Peterson's virtues construct.

### *Virtues*

In creating the classification of character strengths and virtues, Peterson and Seligman (2004) looked to distinguish the concept of character from related constructs. Considering the limitations at the time, in the literature and empirical studies on character and virtues, they looked to historians, philosophers, theologians, educators, parents, among many others, as a guide to the meaning of character, and how character could lead to a life well-lived. One may ask, what makes something a virtue? Virtues can be defined as positive ethical traits or identified as personal traits that, in practice, benefit both the individual and community for the greater good (McGrath & Brown, 2020; Fowers et al., 2021). For instance, the virtue of transcendence has mutually beneficial results. When someone experiences gratitude (a character strength under the virtue of transcendence) by showing appreciation to someone else who has done a good deed or been kind, the individual showing appreciation can experience transcendence, positively growing with gratitude. Additionally, the individual receiving the appreciation feels the gratitude, transcending in their own right, creating what one might call a reciprocity ring of transcendence. In this way, virtues are considered to produce prosocial behaviors, where actions are intended to help and show concern for the feelings and welfare of others (Fowers et al., 2021).

As part of their research, Peterson and Seligman looked to ancient cultures to guide them to identify character and virtues (Peterson & Seligman 2004). The authors (2004) were guided by a survey from the *World Philosophies* that nominated China, South Asia, and the West as the

most widely influential cultures throughout human history. These “Great Three” (p. 34) would be the blueprint to studying the culture among them to identify consistencies and similarities of virtues. Spiritual and philosophical traditions such as Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judeo-Christianity, Islam, and Greek mythology helped guide Seligman and Peterson to develop a catalog or classification of virtues such as those found in the Ten Commandments, the Holy Eightfold Path, and the Quran. From this research, they (2004) created a list of strengths and virtues they thought were most valued across cultures based on historical texts and representations. The following are the six virtues they ultimately proposed: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Cataloging the virtues did not come without its own set of obstacles as there were different interpretations and meanings to similar virtues across cultures. To alleviate the convoluted nature of virtues across cultures, Peterson and Seligman (2004) grouped together similar types of virtues under what they call core virtues. Virtues that had no similarities and were considered distinct were not included under a core virtue. They (2004) also contended that there was no “one-to-one” (p. 35) mapping of virtues across cultures. For example, a core virtue such as justice might mean different things and be interpreted differently across cultures. However, the similarities and compatibility of a core virtues’ subcomponents, for example, fairness, may be acceptable across cultures. By definition, virtues are meant to produce prosocial outcomes by way of the character strengths categorized under each virtue. Peterson and Seligman also intended virtues to be mechanisms utilized for the greater good (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

How then, do values and higher-order values intersect with virtues and character strengths? In this next section, we circle back to Lavy and Benish-Weisman’s (2021) study as a

way to explore how the connection between Schwartz's values and higher-order values and Seligman and Peterson's virtues and character strengths may lead to prosocial behavior such as sustained motivation or engagement in activities that are connected to wellness.

### **Values and Higher-Order Values Connected to Virtues and Character Strengths**

If Peterson and Seligman's "values in action" are, in essence, values demonstrated actionably through strengths (subcategories of virtues), it would then follow that the nature of the relationship between values/higher-order values with virtues/character strengths gives us clues as to how values-strengths alignment can support an individual's behavior in manifesting values-based actions. Does values-strengths alignment lead to sustained engagement in prosocial outcomes? Or conversely, is disengagement a product of value misalignment?

We introduced the basic premise of Lavy and Benish-Wiseman's model earlier, now, as we discuss the interrelatedness of all of these concepts, it is time to dive into the details. Lavy and Benish-Weisman (2021) propose a new theory for linking the VIA framework of Peterson and Seligman with the values theory of Schwartz. Whereas Peterson and Seligman (2004) took the approach of comparing character strengths (not virtues) to specific values (not higher-order values), Lavy and Benish-Wiseman (2021) are linking broader categories of higher-order values to virtues, and then ultimately the character strengths that manifest those virtues. Additionally, Lavy and Benish-Wiseman's (2021) work is groundbreaking because although character strengths have been widely empirically studied as sub-categories of virtues, there is limited research linking character strengths with values such as those delineated in Schwartz's (1992, 2016) framework.

Before moving forward, we think it is valuable to reiterate the definitions of values, higher-order values, virtues, and character strengths in order to delineate and differentiate

between them. An important distinction between the two models is that Peterson and Seligman's character strengths and virtues carry a moral valence, they are things people "should" appreciate and strive for, versus Schwartz's theory in which values are approached from an a-moral, descriptive, non-prescriptive, and non-judgemental perspective (Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021).

Schwartz's values theory elucidates that values are what individuals possess that guide them to people, places, things, or events that align with the self (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). For example, if an individual values freedom, they will likely align themselves with places, such as the United States, that allows and promotes the individual's value of freedom. Schwartz (1992) expanded his value theory to include four higher-order values to explain the relationship and compatibility that many values have with each other.

A definition of virtues is that they are positive ethical traits, whereas character strengths are the psychological mechanisms that promote positive outcomes for the greater good (Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, someone who has the virtue of wisdom may possess the underlying signature strength of perspective, enabling her to see the larger picture of a specific circumstance. In this case, the person has the psychological mechanism, perspective, and also the positive ethical trait of wisdom that produces the behavior of exercising perspective. This may mean that the person is less likely to overreact and will behave in a thoughtful, calm, virtuous manner, thus adding to the greater good in the world.

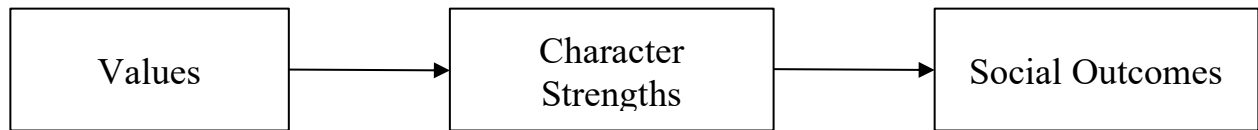
Understanding the nuances between these constructs led Lavy and Benish-Weisman to conduct a study linking Schwartz's higher-order values to character strengths to social outcomes (Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021). Their (2021) belief was that character strengths, each associated with a certain virtue, operate as pathways from higher-order values paralleling that

virtue, to the expected social outcome. In essence, the character strength mechanizes the value into a value-based behavior.

The researchers (2021) took Schwartz's values of self-transcendence and the character strength of gratitude and designed a study to see if gratitude is a pathway that may lead to prosocial behavior and peer acceptance. Lavy and Benish-Weisman (2021) designed the study to test Schwartz's higher-order values and its similarity to Peterson and Seligman's virtues in that they are both constructs that are reflective of desirable ideas and goals that lead to desirable behavior, thus leading to desirable social outcomes.

They chose gratitude, the awareness of being thankful for a good thing that has happened to someone, or time that was given, which falls under the virtues of transcendence since it enables an individual to be connected to something larger than the self, providing meaning to one's life and behaviors (Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021). Gratitude, they (2021) felt, tied most closely to Schwartz's self-transcendence higher order values. However, Seligman and Peterson purported that gratitude aligned with the value of security, not self-transcendence, because of the nurturing and strengthening of relationships that gratitude promotes that bring someone a sense of security. The researchers (2021) noted that gratitude could indeed fall under the value of security, however, based on the literature and definition of self-transcendence, they felt it was more aligned with gratitude. They (2021) purported that Schwartz's higher-order values of self-transcendence are more closely tied to the prosocial and positive social outcomes and behaviors which is what they were looking to examine. Lavy and Benish-Weisman (2021) created a framework that links Seligman and Peterson's VIA character strengths to Schwartz's higher-order values, suggesting that character strengths provide a path from values to producing behaviors and social outcomes depicted in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3



*Note.* Taken from Lavy, S., & Benish-Weisman, M. (2021). Character Strengths as “Values in Action”: Linking Character Strengths With Values Theory – An Exploratory Study of the Case of Gratitude and Self-Transcendence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 576189.

Their (2021) specific hypothesis was that “*Gratitude will provide a pathway from self-transcendence values to prosocial behavior*” (p.5). Prosocial behavior is when individuals help other people and are genuinely concerned for the overall welfare of others, such as showing empathy (Batson & Powell, 2003). Lavy and Benish-Weisman’s (2021) study focused on 9th and 10th graders with a sample size of approximately 161 participants. The participants’ self-transcendence values were measured by taking the PVQ which included descriptions of ten people of which some of the descriptions included “It’s very important for her to help the people around her” or “She wants to care for their well-being”. For each description, the participants rated their similarity to the description from the PVQ on a six-point scale with 1 being “not like me at all” to 6 “very much like me”. The participants then took a gratitude assessment where participants marked whether they agreed or disagreed with prompts such as “I have so much in life to be thankful for”, where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. The prosocial behavior was assessed based on peer nomination, where participants included the name of a classmate that most fit the description of “Who cooperates?”. Each participant's score was determined by dividing the number of nominations they received by the total number of classmates who could have nominated them for that particular item. The findings from the study



indicated that the pathways from gratitude to self-transcendence were relevant and significant to prosocial behavior.

The results of the study indicated that there was a direct effect of the higher-order value of self-transcendence on the character strength of gratitude, and of gratitude on the prosocial behavior of peer acceptance (Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021). These findings generally support Lavy and Benish-Weisman's (2021) model that gratitude may be a pathway from the value of self-transcendence to the prosocial behavior of peer acceptance.

Our observations regarding Peloton parallels this model of Lavy and Benish-Weisman (2021). We propose that the intersection between Schwartz's higher-order values and Peterson and Seligman's character strengths is the space in which individuals can be guided by their values to align themselves with people, places, and things and possess the character strengths they want to enhance or develop in order to produce favorable social outcomes. If Schwartz's (1992) value theory explains an individual's motivation to pursue or align themselves with something, and Seligman and Peterson's character strengths and virtues model identifies the character required to live the "good life", then perhaps the two combined may predict or explain how an individual stays engaged over time. For example, if an individual is motivated by the value types of self-direction and stimulation, both under the higher-order value of openness to change, and that person is in pursuit of wellness, either physical or mental, and possesses the character strength of perseverance to overcome obstacles, she might align herself with a platform or instructor such as Peloton that becomes the catalyst for their social outcome of sustained engagement over time.

As Lavy and Benish-Wiseman (2021) stated, their study is hopefully just the first of many to explore the use of character strengths as pathways from values to social outcomes. We

also believe that more research needs to be conducted to explore and explain the potential relationship between values theory and character strengths and virtues. Additionally, this connection between values and character strengths then leads us to more questions. For example, are people aware that they are aligning themselves with certain people, places, or things? If so, how do they determine what to align to? Are they, consciously or subconsciously, aligning with their values? Are they motivated to align through actions, words, or both? This next section aims to propose a framework to potentially answer some of these questions by exploring the skill of strength-spotting.

### **Strengths Spotting**

*“I am. I can. I will. I do.” ~*

*Christine E’ercole, Peloton instructor, exhibiting the strength of perseverance*

*“You are only as strong tomorrow as the recovery you are putting in today.” ~*

*Tunde Oyenein, Peloton instructor, exhibiting the strengths of self-regulation and perspective*

There are various ways to cultivate and harness one's character strengths and use them as an impetus to be the best version of oneself. However, there is one approach, in particular, strength spotting, that we believe is an effective mechanism for someone to recognize, acknowledge, and align themselves to people, places, and things that align with their values and strengths.

Taking a strengths-based approach suggests that an individuals’ greatest potential lies within her areas of strength and that strengths-use is also effective in addressing areas of weakness (Linley, 2008). It is talking about what is strong instead of what is wrong. However,

approximately two-thirds of people lack awareness of their strengths (Linley, 2008). The power of working with character strengths is that they support three fundamental human needs: self-expression, being recognized and valued by others, and feeling a part of something bigger than themselves (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). According to one study, people who use their strengths the most are eighteen times more likely to be flourishing than those who use their strengths the least (Hone et al., 2015).

The benefits of character strengths are enhanced by using signature strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Signature strengths are one's strengths that are essential, energizing, and used most often (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The strengths-based view maintains that one's character is multidimensional and complex. We all embody some constellation of the 24 VIA character strengths. However, the strengths that represent the best of who we are, the ones that are trait-like, positive parts of our personalities and make us feel authentic and engaged, are our signature strengths.

There are two different kinds of strengths-spotting, recognizing the strengths in oneself and acknowledging the strengths in others. The first step in a strengths intervention is generally recognizing strengths within ourselves (Niemic, 2017). By recognizing our strengths, we have the potential to increase our self-awareness and self-efficacy. For example, acknowledging that one has the strength of perseverance may be empowering to tap into when going through a challenge, or knowing that we have the strength of the love of learning may prompt someone to try a new fitness class or join a new club.

The second type of strengths-spotting, moving the perspective from internal to external, is being aware of strengths in others. Some people perceive that it is easier to see the strengths in others than it is in themselves (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). By creating a language and

culture of using character strengths, it shifts the conversation from a deficit-based one to an opportunity to see behavior in a positive way and demonstrate that the strengths we all have are valuable contributions to the world around us. As Niemiec (2017) notes, “It is important to have people in your life who affirm you and encourage you to be your true, best self” (p. 50).

Additionally, it is important to note that character strengths are “social” and that spotting strengths consists of taking notice of verbal and non-verbal cues (p. 50). The non-verbal cues are what character strengths look like in action; it can be within someone’s posture, increased use of hand gestures, and displaying positive emotions such as joy, and excitement through facial expressions (Niemiec, 2017). Then, there are the verbal cues. When an individual expresses their character strengths through words they exude a more assertive tone, with confidence, and use “strength words” (p. 51) while showing excitement (Niemiec, 2017). While Niemiec (2017) does not provide what “strength words” are, we assess that these words take on an interpretive alignment to their character strengths. For example, when on a ride with Peloton Instructor Alex Toussaint, who invariably pushes his members to the limit, breaking through challenges, expressing a character strength of perseverance, he will often choose words or phrases such as “*don’t quit*” or “*stay tall, stay proud, keep moving*” in addition to showing an infectious amount of energy through movement, fist-pumping, dancing and pedaling faster. As mentioned previously there is no dictionary or list of keywords for each character strength; however, a recent study conducted by Pang et al (2020) discovered that there were “face-valid language associations” of the 24 character strengths (p. 287). The researchers (2020), with the help of machine learning and language coding, were able to investigate the social media handle Twitter to discover the 24 character strengths through the language used on the platform. Pang and colleagues (2020) were also able to identify predictive factors of well-being associated with

certain language in character strengths. For example, if an individual posts on Twitter utilizing certain words such as creative, design, idea, editor, or artist, one could predict that individual possesses a character strength of creativity (Pang et al., 2020). However, we assess this as an area that would require more research to expand the literature on character strength language.

Another way to verbally demonstrate character strengths is through storytelling.

Everyone has their own narratives, and the way they display them is through story-telling via language (Niemic, 2017). Niemic (2017) contends that character strengths are evident in every story and can always be spotted.

Taking note of character strengths through the language someone chooses to use to share their story, brings us one step closer to understanding how Peloton instructors are so successful in engaging riders. In fact, it is this skill, the use of verbal cues for strengths, and the word choices the instructors make to tell their stories and provide narratives that inspire us, that led us to pursue this topic for our capstone. Because we do not know the instructors personally and, therefore are not able to do strength spotting on them in “real life”, for purposes of this paper we are going under the assumption that although there may be some artistry and marketing impacting their words and behavior, the strengths we are seeing in the various instructors are accurate representations of who they are off-screen.

Ally Love frequently uses storytelling as a way to flesh out a concept. For example, in a class with a gratitude theme, she used the story of King Midas, who, tragically and inadvertently, turned his daughter into gold in his pursuit of wealth, as a way to remind riders to be grateful for what they have in their lives, particularly those things of utmost importance (Peloton, 2021). In another ride, Love was working with the concept of letting go of things that do not serve us. She told a story of her engagement and how she is so excited that her fiancée is planning their

wedding. She had let go of that process, including the stress that can come with it, and asked her riders to reflect on what they could let go of.

In addition to storytelling, Love also is very effective in using the linguistic technique of metaphors to get across her point. As a way to point out that we all have strengths, and to play to those strengths, Love used the metaphor of different trees with oak trees being strong, pine trees being tall, grapevines bearing fruit, etc. To overtly state her implication, she observed that the plant was itself and thrived. The power of storytelling to engage is demonstrated by the popularity of Ally Love's "Sundays with Love" series, classes that each have a theme where a virtue is explored throughout the class with examples. The "Sunday with Love" class on January 24, 2021 had 99,449 people take the class to date.

In a Peloton class, strength spotting happens as a one-way street, the rider is spotting strengths in the instructor. It can also occur reciprocally with two or more people see strengths in each other. One technique used for strengths spotting in others is by *labeling*, *explaining*, and *appreciating* (Niemic, 2017). While *labeling*, *explaining*, and *appreciating* is intended to be shared between two people as a dialogue, we feel as though this method can be practiced as a reflection of one's character strengths that they aspire to embody and not necessarily have to be practiced in discourse.

### ***Labeling***

So, when we say that Alex Toussaint possesses perseverance, we are labeling a character strength we have spotted through his language and his behavior. Labeling is a method used to point out character strengths in ourselves or others; it allows us to give words to something or to behavior which makes it powerful (Niemic, 2017). We are noticing behaviors and actions in

other people all the time, and keeping an eye out for strengths makes that behavior more positive and purposeful. Hannah et al (2007) pointed out that labeling enhances character strengths.

Another example of labeling is Peloton instructor Cody Rigsby's words, "*don't run from joy, don't hide from it, don't feel shame for it*" or "*do not be afraid of your emotions*". This language along with his authentic fist pump had bravery written all over it. Bravery by definition means to have or show mental and moral strength to face danger, fear, or difficulty, which is how we interpret "*...don't run from*" and "*...do not be afraid*". It is possible for Rigsby's language and actions to ignite bravery to fight through fears, both on and off the bike. Was it in his language? Was it the character strength he embodied and we spotted? Let's keep going to get closer to understanding what it might be!

### ***Explaining***

Explaining character strengths offers individuals a rationale for the strength that was labeled. As Niemiec (2017) eloquently noted, explaining is the "...behavioral evidence for what was noticed." Labeling alone is not enough to cultivate and harness a character strength (Niemiec, 2017). For instance, if a user only points out, or labels, that Toussaint is expressing the character strength of perseverance, it becomes just that, a label and nothing more. However, if a user labels the character strength, and explains to themselves the how, why, and what about Toussaint is exuding perseverance, then it becomes more and unlocks the potential for the person to manifest it in themselves.

### ***Appreciating***

Appreciating the character strength observed takes strength spotting to a "deeper level" (p. 52). Appreciation is another form of gratitude and feeling, and expressing gratitude has been linked with an overall increase in well-being (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). The attitude of

gratitude enhances the relationship an individual has to what they are grateful for or appreciative of, thus showing appreciation of, for example, perseverance enhances that character strength for the individual.

While strength spotting can be subjective and open to interpretation when expressed in our thoughts and feelings, Niemiec (2017) explains that behaviors are “...observable expressions that come across in speech or action.” (p. 54). Therefore, character strength spotting via verbal and non-verbal cues, through body language and verbal language provides individuals with a mechanism to align themselves with certain people, places, or things.

Ok, time for one of those deep breaths! Way to keep your mind focused! Now you are well versed in the definitions of values, higher-order values, virtues, and character strengths, you have an idea of how these complex constructs intersect, and you understand how strengths spotting works. Well done! Since we have reviewed the literature and laid the groundwork to understand all the constructs, we now move forward and explain our observations along with some potential implications.

### **Part III**

#### **Future Directions**

You have made it to Part III! Have you learned anything new? Now may be a good time to take a breath and reflect on your progress. “*No challenge, no change*” as Robin Arzon would say.

In Part I, we laid out the reasons why we believe that Peloton, as a positive intervention, has the potential to enhance an individual’s skills of self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy. This corresponds to our first key takeaway, our proposal that physical activity should be taken more seriously as a positive intervention. In Part II, we



summarized the evolution of values and character strengths and how, as demonstrated in Lavy & Benish-Weisman's (2021) model, they can provide a way towards prosocial behavior. We then explained how strengths spotting, with some specific examples of strengths spotting in Peloton instructors, is a way to promote this type of behavior.

Now, in Part III, we hope that you find some flow with us as we bring all of these concepts together. We will share our observations about how values and character strengths are related to positive interventions, continuing to use Peloton as an exemplar. Then, please tap into your strength of curiosity as we posit two questions that encompass our second and third takeaways: Is language a mechanism for engagement? Is agency a mechanism for engagement? Our second takeaway is that language portraying someone's values and character strengths is a powerful tool in facilitating positive alignment in relationships, and such alignment can promote beneficial behaviors. And our third takeaway is that empowering people, the Peloton riders in our example, with the agency to determine how, when, and with whom they want to align, is an important part of voluntary sustained engagement. We bring this journey home with an exploration of the limitations of our analysis as well as applications for our observations in environments other than Peloton. Perhaps you can think of examples of these connections in your own life.

### **Our Observations**

We posit that values and character strengths are drivers that, through the mechanisms of language and agency, have a reciprocal relationship with positive interventions. Based on our observations, values and character strengths can be leveraged, via language and agency, to promote sustained engagement. This observation ultimately leads us to more questions than answers, and with that, we propose that there are some interesting opportunities for research in

exploring these connections further. Our observations are summarized by the depiction in the figure below:

### **Our Observations as they relate to Peloton**

*“Tap into motivation whenever you want it” ~ Peloton Website (2021)*

The above quote from the Peloton website demonstrates how language can convey both values and strengths. By highlighting that statement, Peloton shows that it values the construct of motivation and that Peloton is assuming that many people value it as well. The language used in the phrase invokes certain strengths such as hope, self-regulation, zest, and teamwork. Additionally, with the “whenever” part of the phrase, there is implied agency, the user gets to choose when to engage. Therefore, even this short quote embodies the concepts of values, strengths, language, and agency as a path to engagement.

When we use this quote as a lens for Peloton as a positive intervention, we see that it can also be interpreted to include some of the key components of a positive intervention. For example, “tap into” is offering the opportunity for self-awareness of one’s desires, the self-determination to choose what to tap into in order to motivate oneself, and support in the self-regulation to do so within the platform. As we know from our discussion above, the word “motivation” is deep and complex. It shows up in Schwartz’s seminal values model where he defines values as motivators of human behavior (Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021). Motivation in its various forms, internal vs external and intrinsic vs extrinsic, is the key component of the self-determination theory of self-regulation. Motivation is also a part of Snyder’s model of hope theory which is closely related to self-efficacy. In this one simple phrase, Peloton is offering up a positive intervention.

Our observation is that when the values and character strengths of the instructor and the member align using the mechanisms of language and agency, the positive intervention of Peloton is successful in establishing sustained engagement. We have identified that using the constructs of values and strengths can be useful in two ways, acknowledging that there are likely other applications we have not considered here. The first way is when an instructor makes a statement using values or strengths, it is exposing the rider to a new concept or mindset. For example, Ben Alldis introduces the concept of self-determination when he says, *“Each and every one of us is born to be an athlete in our own right.”* At other times, the cue may be a reminder to the rider to shift perspective and feel grounded in themselves. An example here is when Leanne Hainsby says during her “confidence” themed ride that she is creating space to *“allow you to focus on your strengths. They will elevate you.”*

Now we explore the two questions related to our second and third takeaways.

### ***Is Language a Mechanism for Engagement?***

As mentioned previously, we hypothesize that language is a mechanism by which values and character strengths drive social outcomes, like engagement. From what we have witnessed within our own experiences with Peloton, the instructor’s values and character strengths have been identified through strength spotting through their verbal cues, their language. To solidify this further we are taking Lavy and Benish-Weisman’s (2021) framework that focuses on the relationship of Schwartz’s higher-order value of self-transcendence, and Seligman and Peterson’s character strength of gratitude that illuminated its social outcome of peer acceptance and prosocial behavior. We will be discussing and providing examples of this framework with the higher-order value of openness to change with the character strength of perspective and its social outcome of engagement. We will also discuss the relationship between the higher-order

value of self-enhancement with the character strength of self-regulation and its social outcome of engagement as we feel that Peloton provides two higher-order value alignments through openness to change and self-enhancement. The idea behind taking this framework is to not only show the relationship of value and character strength alignment but most importantly to show how the use of language can help to produce the social outcome of engagement via strength spotting.

**Example #1:**

*Openness to Change (higher-order value) → Perspective (strength) → Engagement (social outcome)*

Before diving deeper into providing practical examples from Peloton on how this framework guided us to our hypothesis, we must take a look at openness to change, perspective and engagement. The higher-order value of openness to change emphasizes concern for independent thinking, action, feelings, and readiness for change, which fall under self-direction and stimulation values (Schwartz, 2012). The character strength of perspective explains when individuals can see the sum of all parts, the bigger picture, possessing the ability to weigh all options and potential outcomes to certain issues (Niemi, 2017). The behavior that is spotted with perspective is often evident when individuals are seen providing practical advice to others who share their issues with them or offer comments that reference the bigger picture or important issues that affect humanity (Niemi, 2017). Engagement in this context should not be confused with engagement, as in flow, in the context of PERMA. Rather, engagement in the context of Peloton is the action of coming back and staying committed to something, which would be coming back and staying committed to Peloton, or physical activity, as a positive intervention.

Engagement is what we believe to be the social outcome of utilizing Peloton as a positive intervention.

Choosing to participate in a physical activity, such as riding a bike or running for miles on end with Peloton takes an openness to change, to transform the self into something better than it started. Therefore, possessing a higher-order value of openness to change is imperative with aligning oneself to something that will create a transformation of some sort, in this case, a transformation of the self through Peloton. Possessing the character strength of perspective, knowing that it takes hard work and consistency to create positive changes of the self, is critical to identify what it takes for such transformation to take place; whether it is perspective within the self or a role-model, or in this context, a Peloton instructor, to identify what it takes to seek the transformation one desires. For example, Heidi and I both align with an openness to change higher order value, and in seeking perspective through strength spotting, we participated in a Peloton ride with Toussaint in the hopes that we could channel his perspective and transform ourselves through the ride. Throughout the workout, he attuned the riders to “*...be present with yourself and reflect on your journey*” which resonated with us deeply. Choosing to reflect on something as complex and vast as an individual’s journey, to look at life through a wider lens and see how far one has come to be where one is currently, takes perspective. Thus, a simple phrase propelled us to work harder, to move faster, to reflect on our journey and how far we have come, cultivating the perspective to know what it takes to see transformation in ourselves. Our values aligned with an openness to change, which Peloton provided for us, we sought out perspective from our instructor to cultivate our own and as a result, we became engaged with the positive intervention Peloton offered, causing us to continuously come back for more, to sustain our Peloton routine, essentially creating a sustained engagement loop.

**Example #2:**

*Self-enhancement (higher-order value) → Self-Regulation (strength) → Engagement (social outcome)*

Much like the previous explanation and example of openness to change, perspective and engagement, we feel as though Peloton illuminates a higher-order value alignment with self-enhancement. Self-enhancement is the higher-order value over the basic values of achievement, power, and hedonism (Schwartz, 1992, 2012, & 2016). Thus, self-enhancement in the context of physical activity, or Peloton, is focused on achievement and in some respects, hedonism. For example, the Peloton leaderboard allows individuals to feel a sense of achievement if they hit or exceed their metric of performance for a particular ride or run. Hedonism, or pleasure, comes in the form of feeling physically great, or euphoric from a ride or a run. Although it is fleeting and allows for instant gratification, we know that the benefits of physical activity are pervasive and long-lasting.

Self-regulation on the other hand is a character strength that is complex, however, it explains an individual's tendency to exercise or exert control, and to regulate emotions and impulses (Niemic, 2017). For example, if an individual decides to do a 30-minute high-intensity interval training (HIIT) ride, someone with self-regulation would have the awareness to not over-exert their effort within the first 5 minutes of the ride as there are still 25 minutes of intense riding left to do. However, on the other hand, if an individual does not possess self-regulation but wants to cultivate it by taking a ride or run with an instructor who does possess it, will find ways to do so through strength spotting via the instructor's language. In keeping with the Lavy and Benish-Weisman framework, we can assess that the higher-order value of self-enhancement aligns with Peloton as we seek achievement and pleasure through the positive intervention of the

physical activity it promotes. We sought out Toussaint again to cultivate or enhance the character strength of self-regulation through strength spotting from the verbal cues or language he used throughout the ride. During one of his intense rides, he advised the riders “...*don't go too crazy*”, “...*take your time*” and “...*find your rhythm*”. These three phrases stood out to us as self-regulatory “strength words” that would alert the rider to exercise control, conserve energy and find the right pace to continue staying engaged.

We want to reiterate the value alignment framework that we as riders, runners, and individuals seek. Peloton and their instructors align with our values for openness to change, and self-enhancement while also enhancing, cultivating, or strengthening character strengths of perspective and self-regulation through strength spotting. The value alignment is evident through the character strength language the instructor conveys resulting in our sustained engagement during and after the workout encouraging us to continue coming back for more. Our analysis has the potential to extend beyond the Peloton platform and provide teachers, mentors, coaches, politicians, leaders, etc., with a framework to positively affect their students, mentees, athletes, subordinates, etc., to stay positively engaged on their path to wellness, personal or professional growth and transformation.

### ***Is Agency a Mechanism for Engagement?***

Earlier we discussed the differences between self-efficacy and agency. Self-efficacy is the narrower concept that one believes that one can accomplish a specific task such as finishing a ride or getting a personal best. Agency is broader, a trait-like belief that one can, and will, take action to achieve a wide range of goals. Inherent in agency is a choice, and because of that, agency serves two purposes as a mechanism between values and character strengths and Peloton

as a positive intervention. First, the ability to choose between options helps to maximize person-activity fit. Second, the variety embedded in choice minimizes boredom.

At Peloton, people have the ability to choose, with a lot of specificities, the details of their workout. They can choose the type of workout (ie. bike, run, boot camp, pilates, strength training, etc.), the length of the workout, the instructor, the type of music, if they want it to be live or pre-recorded, if they want the leaderboard showing or not if they want to give out high-fives, etc. Additionally, people can, ahead of time, stack together any classes they want, in the order they want them in, to create a comprehensive workout. For example, one can start out with a warm-up ride, go into a HIIT and Hills ride, follow up with a cool-down ride and then some strength training, and end with a yoga class. The possibilities are endless. All of this autonomy allows for a more optimal person-activity fit in that allows people to choose a workout that would be most beneficial for them at any given time. When describing theories of person-activity fit to personalize PPIs, Schueller (2014), divides them into a category to either enhance strengths or shore up weaknesses. There are advantages to both types of PPIs. The PPIs that capitalize on strengths promote a flow experience and are more intrinsically motivated and self-sustaining than those designed to overcome deficits (Schueller, 2014). The upside of a deficit-building PPI is that it can help develop new skills and may lead to being more well-rounded (Schueller, 2014). However, studies have shown that people who engaged in the strengths-based PPIs felt more enjoyment during the intervention and were more likely to continue the activities, leading to longer-term effectiveness in boosting well-being (Schueller, 2014). Additionally, it is critical that the PPI introduces a new behavior or cognitive activity in order to effectively increase well-being (Schueller, 2014). In the case of Peloton, similar to how language works as a mechanism for engagement, people may be choosing workouts that play to their strengths and/or ones that look



to improve weaknesses, but the critical component is that they have agency to make that determination.

The second important way in which agency serves as a mechanism is that with the tremendous library of Peloton classes to choose from, the chances of getting bored with a workout are greatly reduced. A mechanism that leads to boredom, hedonic adaptation, is where after something good (or bad) happens, generating the associated positive (or negative) emotions, people will ultimately return to a baseline level of positive and negative affect (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). This is true for any activity from exercise to fashion to food. Although this function is adaptive in some ways, (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014) point out that there is not much benefit in hedonic adaptation to positive events. They proposed that adaptation can be deferred and possibly even avoided in four ways: participating in activities that create positive emotions or are more social in nature, having realistic expectations, including variety in activities, and maximizing the feeling of appreciation. Peloton, with its plethora of classes, the variety of challenges and special events, leaderboard and social media to foster relationship building, goal setting help through metrics, and guidance from instructors, many of whom demonstrate the character strength of gratitude regularly, addresses each of these ways to minimize hedonic adaptation.

Time for another pause, a chance to breathe, stretch and recognize what it has taken for you to get this far! As Christine D'Ercole says, "sometimes we get so attached to doing something perfectly, we forget the process." We hope that as you rode down this path with us, you enjoyed exploring with us our three key takeaways.

**Limitations**

We suggest that Peloton is a very effective positive intervention, however, we would be remiss not to mention the limitations of Peloton as being one of the most expensive at-home exercise platforms on the market. The Peloton exercise equipment comes at the hefty price tag of an entry-level bike at \$1,895 with an annual membership of \$39 per month, and an entry-level treadmill at \$2,495 with an annual membership of \$64 per month (Peloton, 2021). This equipment is marketed towards a higher socio-economic demographic, potentially hindering accessibility to broader consumers. With this significant economic outlay, this type of positive intervention is not as widely accessible as other positive interventions, such as gratitude journaling.

We also found that there is limited literature and empirical research examining the relationship between values and character strengths and how each may affect behavioral outcomes. Therefore, we believe that opportunities for future research exist for Peloton, or other similar platforms, to explore the correlations and possible causation between values, character strengths, and behavior. Such a study could measure both the members' and Peloton Instructors' values and character strengths utilizing Schwartz's SVS or PVQ to measure values, as well as identify their strengths with the VIA Character Strength's survey. It would also be interesting to examine the relationships in the data between members and instructors, specifically to see if members choose instructors with similar values and strengths, or if they want to align with inspirational values and strengths.

**Application**

If character strengths can be a pathway to manifest values in prosocial behavior as in the Lavy and Benish-Wiseman (2021) study and they can be a mechanism to promote values

alignment leading to sustained engagement in the platform of Peloton, we surmise that there are a multitude of other applications. How might what we observed apply outside of something that is centered around athletics and physical activity? We propose two potential scenarios, one in a professional environment and one in a school setting.

In our first scenario, a government agency, there is a Wellbeing and Resilience Workforce (WRW) group that provides resources from coaching, mentoring, nutrition, fitness, and mindfulness. In addition, employees are granted up to three hours of administrative leave, or time off, per week, to dedicate to these wellness initiatives. However, even despite an incentive to take time off to focus on well-being to utilize free resources, the organization still struggles to increase participation and boost the health and welfare of its workforce. Utilizing Lavy & Benish-Weisman's (2021) model, the agency may be able to increase participation and sustain engagement if they spend more time identifying and aligning a mentor's values and character strengths to their mentees to promote more engagement within the wellness initiatives. Providing the agency with an exemplar such as Peloton can potentially provide a practical approach to engage their workforce.

Although some principles of positive psychology, such as the power of relationships in PERMA or the role of relatedness in self-determination theory, would indicate that a mentors-mentee framework would be helpful, those partnerships are often not successful. Could it be that there is not an alignment of values and/or character strengths between the mentor and mentee? We propose that an assessment of the values and character strengths of each participant would shed some light on the potential misalignment between the mentor and mentee. A more detailed analysis, similar to that of Lavy and Benish-Wiseman (2021) that measures values and character strengths in relation to social outcomes, could explore if there is a correlation between

misalignment and a reduction or lack of sustained engagement of the mentee. The organization would greatly benefit if mentors and mentees alike had training in values and character strengths and then mentees had the agency to select their mentors based on the strengths they wanted to work on, potentially promoting more synergy and positivity resonance within the relationship producing positive and sustained engagement between both the mentor and mentee.

Our second scenario is a school setting. The participants in the Lavy and Benish-Wiseman study were 9th and 10th graders. Of course, any application of values and character strengths would need to be designed for the skills, knowledge base, and emotional development of any given age group. Presumably, the older the students, the more developed their sense of values and personal strengths.

With that said, it is an important first step regardless of the age group to introduce a strengths-based language. This can be done in many ways and each of these examples can be modified to suit the age group. One example is the Badge Project model used at Newark Boys Chorus School, where the teachers and students wore lanyards containing notecards with all of the strengths written on them (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). It was an exercise in strengths spotting where every time a student or teacher observed someone else demonstrating a strength, they would give them a card with that strength on it. This exercise is similar to the label, explain, appreciate model we discuss above as when the person was giving out the card, hopefully, they were explaining to the recipient the strength they spotted, and the act of giving the card, in and of itself, shows appreciation for the strength. Another way to build a culture of strengths is by having each person become familiar with their constellation of strengths. This can be accomplished through the VIA websites Survey for Kids (VIA Institute on Character, 2021). Once students understand what each of the 24 strengths is and know what their top five signature

strengths are, they can do reflection exercises to promote and engage their strengths. For example, they can pick one signature strength to use in a new way (Niemiec, 2017). They can pick a lower strength they would like to elevate (Niemiec, 2017). Each of these exercises in building personal strengths and strengths spotting have markers of positive interventions such as building self-awareness, self-determination, and self-efficacy.

In our earlier discussion, we proposed that physical activity is a positive intervention, this would hold true for children as well, and a strengths-based culture can also be part of that dynamic. For example,

Now we move from the construct of strengths to the one of values. Although values are a more abstract concept than strengths and perhaps a bit more difficult to understand, values are inherent in a school environment. Typically, at least in elementary and middle schools, there are posters that say something like, “Be Respectful. Be Responsible. Be Kind.” These are value statements. In the case of the example I have here, “Be Respectful” is aligned with the higher-order value of conservation and the value of tradition, “Be Responsible” aligns with the higher-order value of self-enhancement and the value of achievement, and “Be Kind” aligns with the higher-order value of self-transcendence and the value of benevolence. In each of these cases, these are alignments that I have proposed, there are certainly arguments to be made that each of these phrases aligns with a different set of values. Therein lies the complexity of values as we have discovered in our analysis.

The next step in an application in a school setting would be to create a method by which teachers and students are empowered to align along values and strengths. Creating a culture and conversation around values and strengths may be a catalyst for that happening naturally, and at the very least, it will create an awareness of those concepts, normalizing their use. There could

also be more concrete forums for alignment such as going on a run as a group as a way of promoting the higher-order value of openness to change and the strength of zest. Or, a group could come together to help a cause demonstrating the value of self-transcendence and the strength of love. There are already these types of activities happening in schools. It could be both enlightening and empowering to start having these conversations about them as a way of creating more meaning around them.

### **Conclusion**

Well done! You made it to the end. It is always helpful to look back at the road we have traveled to see how far we have come. In Part I, we explained the history of positive psychology and well-being, as well as the various constructs that enhance well-being, highlighting character strengths. We examined the pathways to promote well-being through the mechanism of positive interventions. Once we were grounded in how positive interventions work, we expanded upon Hefferon and Mutrie's (2012) assertion that physical activity is a "stellar" positive intervention. From there we looked specifically at Peloton as a physical activity platform as we built upon Lisa Richardson's capstone, and laid out how Peloton has many foundational markers that make it a very effective positive intervention.

In Part II of our capstone, we explored the history and concepts of values and virtues and then built upon Lavy and Benish-Weisman's (2021) framework that links values to character strengths to behavior outcomes. Our examination of these topics leads us to two observations in the context of Peloton. We proposed that Peloton instructors display their own character strengths through the language they use. This then allows members to strength spot and align themselves with instructors based on their own values and character strengths. Our second

observation was that the agency inherent in the Peloton platform allows individuals the autonomy to create their own experience which greatly enhances sustained engagement.

Our analysis led us to three key conclusions. First, we proposed that physical activity is an undervalued yet very effective positive intervention that deserves more attention in both research and application. Second, we observed that the language portraying someone's values and character strengths is a powerful tool in facilitating positive alignment in relationships that ultimately lead to beneficial behaviors. Third, having agency to determine how, when and with whom someone wants to align is important to voluntary sustained engagement.

Now that we have summarized our observations, we ask you to reflect.

- Is physical activity part of your life? If not, perhaps you have found some inspiration here to prioritize it.
- Do you pay close attention to the words you choose? Does the language you use reveal what you value?
- Do you know what your strengths are, and, if so, do you leverage them? Are you able to spot strengths in others? Now that you know more about the power of strengths, perhaps you can find new ways to use this knowledge.
- Who do you align yourself with and why? Are your behaviors in line with your values? Do you think it is important that they are in alignment?

We believe that each of these questions is important enough to give it some serious thought. We hope that you find some value in them as well.

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## Appendix A

### Postulated Associations of Single Values

#### With Motivational Types of Values

Primary Motivational Type and Value	Secondary Motivational Type
<b>Self-direction</b>	
Freedom	-
Creativity	-
Independent	-
Choosing own goals	-
Curious	-
Self-respect	-
<b>Stimulation</b>	

An exciting life	-
A varied life	-
Daring	-
<b>Hedonism</b>	
Pleasure	-
Enjoying life	-
<b>Achievement</b>	
Ambitious	-
Influential	Power
Capable	-
Successful	-
Intelligent	Self-direct, universalism

Self-respect	-
<b>Power</b>	
Social power	-
Wealth	-
Authority	-
Preserving my public image	Security
Social recognition	Achievement
<b>Security</b>	
National security	-
Reciprocation of favors	Conformity
Family security	-
Sense of belonging	-

Social order	-
Healthy	Hedonism
Clean	Conformity

(Continued)

<b>Primary Motivational Type and Value</b>	<b>Secondary Motivational Type</b>
<b>Conformity</b>	
Obedient	-
Self-discipline	-
Politeness	-
Honoring of parent's and elders	Tradition

<b>Tradition</b>	-
Respect for tradition	-
Devout	Spirituality
Accepting my portion in life	Spirituality
Humble	Conformity
Moderate	Security
<b>Spirituality</b>	
A spiritual life	-
Meaning in life	Universalism
Inner harmony	Universalism, Security
Detachment	-
<b>Benevolence</b>	

Helpful	-
Responsible	Conformity
Forgiving	-
Honest	-
Loyal	Conformity
Mature love	Universalism
True friendship	-
<b>Universalism</b>	
Equality	-
Unity with nature	Spirituality
Wisdom	-
A world of beauty	-
Social justice	-

Broad-minded	-
Protecting the environment	-
A world at peace	-

*Note.* Taken from Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–65). Elsevier. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60281-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6)