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Building Strength Versus Getting Lean: An Analysis of the Gendered Nature of Fitness in Crossfit, Barre, and Personal Training

Margaret M. Jones

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

BUILDING STRENGTH VERSUS GETTING LEAN:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE GENDERED NATURE OF FITNESS IN
CROSSFIT, BARRE, AND PERSONAL TRAINING

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY
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CHICAGO, IL

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ABSTRACT

Like many industries in contemporary society, the fitness sector is heavily gendered, and thus needs to be examined as a sector that both creates and reinforces gendered bodies. Building on previous single-method studies, I utilized a multi-methods approach of ethnography and interviews to analyze organizational and individual experiences with gender and fitness. Using West and Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender," I analyzed fitness organizations as a setting where gender and inequality are actively reproduced. By analyzing three fitness organizations with different gendered audiences (a barre studio, a CrossFit gym, and a personal training facility) I looked at how gender and fitness were understood in organizations historically associated with femininity or masculinity. At a time when feminist and body positivity movements continue to challenge the gendered body and the binary, this study analyzed whether the fitness industry continues to reflect binary gender relations and societal body ideals. I found that different fitness facilities, because of their gendered audiences, developed distinct cultures that sent disparate messages about gender, fitness, and health to their clients. Thus, fitness facilities continue to act as sites where we do gender, albeit in different ways depending on the type of exercise being done.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I once sat in a yoga class where the instructor guided us through a 100-second boat pose to work our core (a notoriously difficult yoga pose). Because of the difficulty of the exercise, the instructor could tell the class was confused as to why we would be holding it for so long. To motivate us, she expressed her disappointment in us for not being able to hold the pose for that duration. She revealed she could hold the pose with ease, even though she was many months pregnant. I felt guilty for not meeting the expectations of the instructor, and almost ashamed for my athletic abilities. There was also the time, in a kickboxing class, when the man instructor yelled at me like a drill sergeant for not working hard enough. And finally, there's current social media content, bringing up new insecurities for women, from hip dips, to muffin tops, to bat wings. From these experiences, I have continually wondered, are all fitness sites similar in their messaging? Is fitness supposed to make us feel bad about ourselves?

There is a growing movement toward body positivity and women-focused exercise in the fitness world. The Health At Any Size movement, the reclaiming of the word fat, and groups like Girl Gains have popped up, seemingly replacing our old culture of men-dominated fitness and diet culture. Yet, women are still subject to the media expressing that to be thin is to be desirable. Kim Kardashian dieting to lose enough weight to fit into Marilyn Monroe's dress for the MET Gala, the popularity of articles on ways to avoid the Quarantine 15, and videos on what celebrities eat in a day all demonstrate the persistence of the thin ideal and diet culture.

Thus, our culture is divided between slamming gendered forms of diet culture while also embracing parts of it. Fitness continues to become more specialized, with seemingly endless options on the market -- from aerial yoga to UFC gyms. Even as we hear about anomalies like women making strides in men-dominated sports, the gendered nature of fitness facilities persists. Thus, there is a need to examine how current fitness studios produce messages about health, fitness, and gender during this particular cultural moment.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Doing Gender Through Fitness

The main theoretical framework used in this study is West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender." Rather than being a natural, objective phenomenon, West and Zimmerman examine gender as something we actively create during our interactions in the social world (1987:125). Within the fitness world, we act in ways seen as consistent with society's perceptions of our gender identities, participating in particular physical activities to maintain expectations of femininity and masculinity. Within the fitness world, the idea of embodiment closely aligns with our gender expression. Our bodies and the ways we change them through diet and exercise serve as an area of gender construction where we convey societal beliefs about gender, beauty, and health (Douglas 1996; Cregan 2012). This study utilizes the framework of West and Zimmerman and embodiment theorists to analyze fitness facilities and our bodies as a setting where we do gender. Importantly, the concept of doing gender through fitness must be understood at this particular cultural moment: within the lens of 21st-century U.S. Western cultural standards.

Scholarship has long established that women spend less time exercising than men, not just within the US, but around the world (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017; Hickey and Mason 2017; Azevedo et al. 2007; Guthold 2018). Regular physical exercise decreases one's chances of developing multiple chronic diseases while also improving one's mental well-being.

(Warburton, Nicol, and Bredin 2006). Thus, if women are consistently exercising less than men and missing out on the positive effects of exercise, gendered barriers to exercise must be addressed (Segar et al. 2002).

Some scholars have looked at broader societal phenomena to explain women's decreased levels of exercise, like parenting and generational barriers. For example, women's disproportionate participation in caretaking tasks may leave less time to engage in traditional exercise (Hochschild 1989; Johansson 1996:42; Verhoef and Love 1992). Some scholars examine generational and socialization barriers to women's exercise, as women who grew up before the passage of Title IX may not engage in some physical activities because they were not socialized to do so (Segar et al. 2012). At-home exercise videos, including the iconic aerobic videos of Jane Fonda and today's fitness influencers, have helped bring fitness to women's homes and reduce these barriers (Mankys 2019; Yuskel 2021). Despite these adaptations, exercise and its barriers continue to be gendered and reinforced through societal beauty standards and the fitness industry itself.

Societal Beauty Standards

Societal perceptions of the ideal body mark a gendered area of fitness, with men and women engaging in particular exercises to obtain gendered bodies (Johansson 1996). Men are expected to be muscular and perform exercises that lead to increased muscularity, while body ideals seem ever-changing for women (Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes, and Larose 2011). Throughout recent years, society has demanded that women be skinny and toned at some times and curvy in the right areas at other times (Segar et al. 2002). Thus, rather than fitness being solely focused on health, some researchers have pointed out how the fitness industry idealizes particular gendered body types (Fisher, Barbary, and Misener 2018:486).

Though women's body ideals are ever-changing, it appears that the thin ideal persists throughout generations. Much of this is rooted in diet culture which places value on thin bodies through the use of dieting and exercise (Daryanani 2021; Segar et al. 2002). Our culture often equates health to being thin, and thus fitness facilities frequently possess a "weight stigma" (Chastain 2019). This negatively impacts those who are deemed overweight, but especially women who are disproportionately encouraged to be thin (Chastain 2019).

Even if body standards have adapted to make room for the "slim-thick" body that has curves or the "aerobic body" of Jane Fonda that is strong and toned, societal expectations of being thin continue to impact women (Woitas 2018:149-150; McComb and Mills 2022). Markula (1995) finds that "the media ideal [for women's bodies] is a contradiction: firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin" (p. 424). These contradictory standards may negatively impact women's body image more than just the thin ideal, as the contradiction seem impossible to obtain (McComb and Mills 2022). Society's ideal feminine body can also lead to disordered eating, low self-esteem, and the avoidance of exercise for the fear of being judged in a fitness facility for not possessing the ideal body (Markula 1995; McComb and Mills 2022; Sepúlveda and Calado 2012; Vartanian and Novak 2012).

Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson (2017) point out how "femininities also presented a double liability...where women were policed both for breaking with and conforming to normative gendered practices" (p. 32). Women may be criticized for obtaining muscles, but they may also be criticized for acting too feminine by not breaking a sweat during their workouts or for working out for appearance-based goals (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017:32-33). Thus, women face a double bind when navigating fitness: they must maintain their femininity while not being too feminine, marking another contradiction in society's expectations for women's bodies.

Clothing also plays a large role in gender expression, especially when it comes to fitness, as we dress in ways that convey messages about our bodies and gender (Fisher, Barbary, and Misener 2018:485). Fisher, Barbary, and Misener (2018) find that women plan their outfits in ways that support societal ideas of femininity to ensure they feel “comfortable and confident” in the gym (p. 485). For women, this often includes wearing minimal, form-fitting clothing (Webb et al. 2017). This form of distinction is class and race-based too, with wealthier women being able to afford trendy workout gear that meets current cultural trends (Fisher, Barbary, and Misener 2018:486). Woitas (2018) suggests that society’s focus on what women wear when they workout reproduces controlling notions of femininity: “By putting so much emphasis on what women wear for training, the traditional image of women having to look appealing in the first place, even in sweaty situations, is reproduced” (p. 155).

It is critical to mention that though these body ideals may be emphasized more for women, men are not immune to them (Gough 2006). Society’s ideal masculine body emphasizes hegemonic masculinity through visibly large muscles, particularly in a man’s chest, arms, and torso. This standard may negatively impact men’s mental health by leaving men who do not meet this ideal out of the conversation (Gough 2006). However, even if women and men are subject to societal body standards, scholars have demonstrated that women disproportionately bear the burden of maintaining their fitness and beauty standards (Waggoner 2017).

Scholars have pointed out the lack of racial and body diversity in the fitness world, as our culture often perpetuates white, Western ideals of gendered beauty (Sepúlveda and Calado 2012). Black women experience a specific type of discrimination in the fitness world due to the intersection of their racial and gender identities (Bailey 2021; Strings 2019). As Bailey (2021) explains, “In a culture that equates thinness with good health and desirability, fat Black women

are demonized for their bodies” (p. 4). These standards can negatively impact folks who do not find their body to be a part of the representation of fitness (Ojebuoboh 2020). And because the fitness world is mostly white and of the Western ideal, this usually means people of color and people who are deemed overweight. Thus, fitness and beauty standards are not just gendered, but racialized too, impacting what an ideal woman of color and an ideal man of color should look like.

The Media's Role

The media plays a critical role in distributing messages about the ideal gendered and racialized body. We strive for the body types portrayed to us in the media and advertisements — from the aerobic body of Jane Fonda’s days to the thin and slim-thick bodies of today. Social media is a large source of today’s fitness content, with hashtags like #fitspiration (fitness inspiration) being readily recognizable to social media users (Stollfuß 2020). Despite the potential positive influence of the content encouraging “healthy” lifestyle changes, fitness influencers may also spread unhealthy messages about diet and fitness that perpetuate body ideals and appearance-based goals through potentially harmful means (Ratwatte and Mattacola 2019). Though fitness media more often acts as a benevolent force for men, men fitness influencers are not immune to this, often perpetuating the idea that to be a healthy man is to be muscular (Ratwatte and Mattacola 2019; McNeil and Firman 2014).

Gendered Exercises

Because of gendered body standards, men and women engage in particular exercises to meet these standards, marking another gendered element of fitness. Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson (2017) found that gendered body desires like gaining strength for men and losing weight and getting toned for women were directly tied to the types of exercises they performed

(p. 31). Men are associated with high-intensity, weight-bearing exercises that target the whole body, including weightlifting, CrossFit, bootcamp-style workouts, and organized sports (Tentleff-Dunn, Barnes, and Larose 2011; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017; Gough 2006; Johansson 1996). Women are associated with less-intense exercises that focus on cardio or toning specific areas of the body including yoga and group fitness classes (Webb et al. 2017; Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes, and Larose 2001; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017, Vogel 2018; Woitas 2018:161; Johansson 1996). Women may also engage in more exercises deemed more feminine due to societal constructions that to work out as a woman is to work out in a distinctly feminine way, with phrases like “You throw like a girl” being an insult readily used until about the 2010s (Hively and Alayli 2014). Within fitness facilities, women tend to engage in shared activities like aerobics classes where music and community are emphasized (Johansson 1996:36). Men’s activities in these facilities are more individualized, such as weight lifting (Johansson 1996:36). Race additionally plays a role in the types of exercise one engages in. Saint Onge and Krueger found that white people primarily visited fitness facilities, while people of color participated more in team-based exercise (2011:197). Additionally, white communities may engage in more exercise than communities of color, a finding deeply tied to socioeconomic status and the time one can dedicate to exercise (Saint Onge and Kruger 2011).

Gendered Fitness Goals

The idealized body types discussed above may also impact individuals’ reasons for fitness. Women are more likely to view fitness as a necessary burden, chore, or a way to build discipline, while men are more likely to view exercise as a form of fun (Segar et al. 2002; Craft, Carroll, and Lustyk 2014; Azevedo et al. 2007). Segar et al. (2012) suggest that society’s message that women must be thin may impact women’s desire to exercise, as working out is seen

as a burden rather than a joyful activity. Men are not immune to these body ideals and their impact on exercise, but it seems to be conditional by age (Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes, and Larose 2011; McNeill and Fiman 2014). Older men point to familial and health concerns for their exercise levels, while younger men point to body ideals of being lean and muscular as reasons to exercise (McNeill and Firman 2014). Despite younger men exercising to gain muscle, Craft, Carroll, and Lustyk (2014) find that exercising for the goal of losing weight, which women disproportionately do, leads to a lower quality of life. Possessing positive views toward exercise leads to future engagement in positive health behaviors (Boles et al. 2021). Thus, if primarily women are conditioned to believe that exercise and diet should be practiced for the sole intent of losing weight and toning one's body, and men exercise more for enjoyment, this could be another explanation for why women have lower rates of exercise (Craft, Carroll, and Lustyk 2014).

Breaking Gendered Expectations?

Just because these gendered patterns exist does not mean that they are not broken. Men do engage in traditionally feminine exercise, and women lift weights and perform strenuous exercise to build strength. The ways in which they do so, however, are still gendered and often uphold notions of masculinity and femininity (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). Like the glass ceiling phenomenon in the workplace, Dworkin (2001) argues a similar spectacle exists in the fitness world, as women are held back from pursuing muscular strength. Men-dominated weight rooms and societal expectations of femininity that discourage strength create this glass ceiling, preventing women from pursuing weight-bearing exercise (Dworkin 2001).

Women who lift may intentionally avoid certain exercises to ensure they do not develop muscles that would defy notions of femininity, constituting a form of self-policing (Johansson

1996; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). Women may also engage in cardiovascular exercises to ensure they are able to maintain the desired feminine body type, as only weight lifting may lead to too much muscle gain (Dworkin 2001). Others suggest that women may use cardio equipment more not only because of gendered associations, but because it allows women with limited time due to childcare, labor, and household responsibilities to get a more intense workout in less time (Dworkin 2001:340). Like self-policing, Dworkin (2001) suggests that women play an active role in recreating society's gender and body expectations, as women make "strategic fitness choices" to achieve a particular body type. Dworkin (2001) writes, "The glass ceiling on muscular size is not simply imposed on women. Rather, they actively define it, wrestle with it, nudge it up and down, and shape its current and future placement" (p. 346). This displays that societal beliefs about gender and fitness do not just exist in an outside world. Rather, like West and Zimmerman's concept of doing gender, we interact with gender and continually reproduce it in our actions.

Gendered Spaces

It is not just the ways we act and interact within fitness spaces that are gendered, but fitness facilities themselves. Often, the settings we navigate implicitly discriminate against women and gender-non-conforming people by assuming the typical actor is a man. Fitness is no exception, with many facilities being men-dominated or seemingly gender-neutral but implicitly catering to men. For Acker (1990), organizations assume a gender-neutral body, but actually create a system built for men within our patriarchal society. Similarly, gender architecture scholars reveal that physical spaces may be gendered in their design and purpose, as architecture is an object produced in the social world (Rendell, Penner, and Borden 2000; Weisman 1981). Like Acker (1990) and gender architecture scholars, I reject the idea that organizations are

gender-neutral and that gender is subsequently “brought into” organizations by people (p. 142). My study operates with the understanding that organizations are innately gendered, especially in ways that assume men as the typical actor or fitness client.

Thus, another reason for women’s lower levels of exercise has been attributed to the gendered nature of fitness facilities. Both the physical characteristics of facilities and the gendered relations that play out in the spaces may lead to an uncomfortable environment for women and gender-non-conforming people (Turnock 2021; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). All of this has set us up for the study at hand: analyzing how individuals of disparate gender identities navigate fitness facilities. To do so, I am operating with the understanding that fitness facilities are gendered spaces and reproduce inequality. As Johansson (1996) put it:

The gym is not only a place where you exercise after a day’s work, it is also the venue for the construction of particular gender identities. The gender order is materialized in clothes, body techniques, magazines, facilities and pictures on the walls. The gym is a gendered space, where certain body techniques and locations are related to the female body and others with the male body. (p. 32)

Thus, if we are analyzing the gendered components of fitness, fitness facilities must naturally be studied too.

Spatial Segregation

The understanding that the types of exercise are gendered manifests in the spatial segregation of feminine and masculine areas of fitness facilities. Within gyms, there are implicit understandings of where men and women exercise, drawing off of how men and women are expected to engage in disparate exercises to obtain the ideal gendered body. Turnock (2021) finds that facilities often segregate their weight rooms and cardio rooms, with the weight room being seen as a male space that implicitly prevents women from entering it. The entire weight room does not seem to be men-centric, however, as Johansson (1996) finds that while men are

more likely to utilize free weights and perform bodyweight exercises, women are more likely to use machines. Scholars have pointed out that even if women do use these machines or lift weights, the settings are often adjusted for a man's body, implicitly conveying that the equipment is not meant for women and must be accommodated to fit their needs (Turnock 2021:4). While men dominate the weight room, women can be found in the cardio and group fitness areas (Turnock 2021; Vogel 2018). In order to get to these women-centric spaces, however, women may have to walk through the "men's areas," resulting in potentially inappropriate interactions (Johansson 1996:38).

Gymtimidation

These physical barriers also manifest as emotional barriers to exercise. Scholars thus make a point to not only focus on the spatial barriers but the "emotional barriers to access" or "gymtimidation" that prevents women from entering hypermasculine spaces (Turnock 2021:2; Lange 2014). Thus, women are often confined to the cardio room both spatially and emotionally, partly explaining their lower weight-bearing exercise levels (Turnock 2021; Norris 2019). Others explain that beyond gender, gyms have their own set of norms and culture, dictating what is seen as proper behavior (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017:30; Johansson 1996). Because of this subculture, gyms can be depersonalized and unwelcoming, with little communication occurring between participants (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018; Johansson 1996).

Hegemonic Masculinity in Fitness

The "subculture" of the gym is also highly gendered, but specifically hypermasculine, with hegemonic masculinity being rewarded (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017:33). Though many studies focus on how hegemonic masculinity impacts women, Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson (2017) find that men who do not meet this standard of masculinity experience

discomfort as the gym prioritizes those with hegemonically masculine traits (p. 33). Hegemonic masculinity is treated as the gym norm, and anyone who does not meet this standard feels out of place. While both men and women may leave hegemonically masculine spaces because of discomfort, women experience “being crowded out of spaces by masculine performances” more often, displaying how hypermasculine facilities disproportionately impact women (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017:33).

Public displays of masculinity to demonstrate strength and ability may be present at the gym, contributing to this hypermasculine environment (Frederick et al. 2017). These displays include groaning, not sharing equipment, spitting, and not wiping down equipment (Johansson 1996; Turnock 2021). Turnock (2021) explains that these masculine characteristics are associated with “intimidation and harassment” in what she refers to as the “increasingly (hetero)sexualized gym space” which leads to “intra-male competition” (pp. 1-5). Therefore, gyms are not only hypergendered or hypermasculine, but they also reproduce heterosexuality and heteronormativity where men are treated as the alphas competing for women’s attention (Turnock 2021:5).

Women also face harassment in these hypermasculine environments, marking another gendered barrier to exercise (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017; Exercise Bike Editorial Team 2022, Norris 2019; Turnock 2021; Johansson 1996). Harassment in a fitness facility can take numerous forms: staring, being followed, nonconsensual photos, and inappropriate comments (Exercise Bike Editorial Team 2022; Johansson 1996; Turnock 2021). Unsurprisingly, harassment of any form is found to happen twice as often to women (Exercise Bike Editorial Team 2022). Further, harassment also occurs in the cardio room, suggesting that it is not just the men-dominated weight room where women may experience discomfort (Exercise Bike Editorial

Team 2019; Norris 2019). To mitigate harassment, women may wear different clothing, alter which exercises they engage in, or change gyms altogether (Exercise Bike Editorial Team 2019).

Even though most researchers recognize the unique barriers women face in exercise, some have pointed out that women may have more flexibility in breaking gender norms (Johansson 1996). Scholars argue that men may actually receive more pushback when entering feminine spaces, even if women do experience discomfort in masculine spaces (Johansson 1996; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). Fear of being labeled as gay may prevent men from engaging in particular exercises or forming relationships at the gym with other patrons and fitness instructors (Johansson 1996).

Employees

Disparities in fitness also persist with the gendered connotations of professional positions (Vogel 2018). Group fitness instructors are associated with femininity, while personal training is associated with masculinity, as it is seen as a more “serious, business-oriented aspect of fitness” (Vogel 2018). These associations do not add up with the actual gender breakdowns in the fitness industry though, where women are more likely to be both group fitness instructors and personal trainers (Vogel 2018). Because personal training is associated with masculinity, women personal trainers may experience discrimination when attracting clients. For example, clients may perceive men trainers’ fitness techniques as more challenging and thus better for results (Vogel 2018). Other sources suggest gendered exercise disparities run deeper, connecting to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within the fitness industry (Debas 2022). This suggests that the ownership of a gym facility, and the fact that the vast majority of facilities are owned by men, may contribute to gendered fitness disparities (Debas 2022).

Comparison

The gym is also a place where comparison thrives, especially through open spaces and mirrors (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:483; Johansson 1996; Norris 2019). Fisher, Berbary, and Misener (2018) refer to the gym as “an arena of constant evaluation,” demonstrating the persistence of comparison in the gym (p. 484). Women especially may feel self-conscious when engaging in activities associated with masculinity that they have not been socialized to participate in, like weight lifting (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:4784; Segar et al. 2002). To get around these negative feelings, women may choose to isolate themselves in spaces where the other members do not appear threatening or stick to exercises they are familiar with (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:484).

Women-Only Spaces As A Solution

As a way to mitigate the discomfort of a traditional gym, some have proposed women-only spaces as a solution (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:484). This can be especially crucial for women whose religion does not allow them to exercise in mixed-gender facilities (Collins 2021). However, others point out how concerns about body image and social comparison may be heightened in women-only spaces, as women have only each other to compare themselves to, heightening gendered expectations for the feminine body (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:485). Further, others view women-only gyms as an incomplete solution, as it does not address the root issue of gender inequality (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:485; Turnock 2021).

The Experiences of Gender-Non-Conforming Individuals

Others have pointed out that while women-only spaces may help cis-women feel more comfortable, gender-non-conforming people still face difficulty in finding a truly gender-neutral

fitness experience (Bell 2018). Gyms may exaggerate forms of masculinity and femininity to such an extent that the ideals depart from traditional societal standards, becoming hypergendered within the binary (Duncan 2021). Even supposedly gender-neutral gyms often rely on “gendered cultural norms as a way to prescribe and measure wellness” (Duncan 2021). In-take questions about one’s binary gender, locker rooms operating under the binary, and gendered fitness equipment all contribute to the difficulty in navigating a hypergendered, hyperbinary space as a gender-non-conforming person (Duncan 2021).

Even supposedly gender-neutral or affirming gyms may experience these downfalls. Gender-neutral gyms may rely on notions of masculinity to become less gendered, encouraging clients to gain more muscle and embrace notions of masculinity (Duncan 2021). But masculinity is still gendered. Rather than finding “a totally genderless fitness experience,” gender-non-conforming people may continue to struggle with gender in spaces that are supposedly affirming (Duncan 2021).

Have We Made Progress?

To give credit where it is surely due, steps have been taken to make the fitness industry more inclusive. Movements to address the industry’s weight stigma, like the “Health at Every Size” and body positivity initiatives, encourage folks of any size to become healthier in ways outside of losing weight while simultaneously developing affirming beliefs toward one’s current body (Chastain 2019). Fitness spaces for gender-non-conforming folks have also expanded, especially online, marking a departure from the traditionally binary facility of the gym (Dockray 2017). The types of physical activities people engage in have also diversified, with more women engaging in traditionally masculine activities like weight lifting. However, despite these positive

changes, the literature makes it clear that further work needs to be done to improve fitness facilities.

It seems that even if gender barriers in fitness are breaking, they are only breaking to a point. Some people do break gender barriers or at least recognize the harm of them, but overall gendered elements persist in fitness (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). As Johansson (1996) explains, “What makes the gym [and fitness overall] interesting is the fact that it is a social space in which young people are occupied with maintaining gender stereotypes, while at the same time new gender and body identities are developed” (p. 34). Women continue to make their way into the weight room, and men utilize cardio equipment, but it is still at disproportionate rates (Johansson 1996; Norris 2019). Women may engage in traditionally masculine activities like weight lifting, but the impact of feminine body ideals still pervades women’s fitness habits (Dworkin 2001; Johansson 1996). Thus, while fitness facilities are spaces where folks may feel empowered to take charge of their health, they are also spaces where gender, racial, and class inequality are reproduced.

The Current Study

Many non-academic and non-sociological sources have studied topics including harassment in fitness facilities, diet culture, gymtimidation, and binary fitness spaces. There is a need, however, to utilize sociological methods and theory to discuss these topics. Due to the rise of social media, more scholars have focused on the online aspects of fitness, like influencers and online videos. In a post-COVID world that is moving back in person, we must analyze how physical facilities have changed, if at all, after the pandemic. With a growing movement in literature critiquing gyms, and a time when feminism and body positivity movements are

growing, we must also analyze whether and how gyms continue to reflect binary gender relations.

This study attempted to fill in some of these gaps. First, I returned to physical fitness facilities to perform ethnographic observation and coupled this with interviews to analyze gendered fitness at the organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels. Rather than focusing on traditional gyms or anomalies like women in weightlifting, this study focused on how folks of different gender identities utilized specialized fitness facilities. Further, rather than analyzing three gender-neutral gyms, by analyzing a gender-neutral personal training facility, a barre facility marketed toward women, and a CrossFit gym historically associated with masculinity, this study analyzed how gendered barriers continued to be broken and reproduced as folks of all gender identities engaged in traditionally masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral activities. To date, barre and CrossFit have been understudied, especially in the sociological literature, marking a gap in our knowledge as these forms of fitness grow in popularity.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

I aimed to answer three research questions through a multi-methods study of ethnographic observation and interviews. Through ethnographic observation, I aimed to answer (1) How do different fitness organizations with different gendered audiences produce messages about gender, fitness, and the body? To understand personal experiences at fitness facilities, I aimed to answer the following question through interviews (2) How do individuals of different gender identities conceptualize fitness and health within these organizations? Lastly, I wanted to see how fitness and gender are understood at this cultural moment. This led to my final question (3) In the age of body positivity, anti-diet culture, and feminism, do fitness organizations continue to perpetuate gendered ideas about fitness and the body?

Field Sites and Case Selection

To answer these questions, I gained access to three fitness facilities to observe their fitness classes, analyze their physical spaces, and recruit interview participants. I contacted sites with disparate gendered connotations, as I wanted to see how gender and fitness were understood in more masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral spaces. I received approval to conduct my research from the owners of each facility in conjunction with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university. A CrossFit gym served as my masculine space, due to the workout's connections with the military and heavy weightlifting. A barre studio served as my feminine comparison, being a women-dominated exercise with connections to ballet. A personal

training gym that also hosted group fitness classes served as my gender-neutral site, as personal training is advertised as a workout that is customizable to every person, regardless of gender identity. In talking with my respondents and the owners of these sites, the estimate was that the CrossFit studio was 60% men and 40% women, the barre studio 95% women and 5% men, and the personal training gym was approximately 50% men and 50% women.

Each site was located in a predominately white neighborhood in a large midwestern city. The CrossFit and personal training gyms were located in predominately white neighborhoods, where single-family homes and condo buildings could be found. The barre studio was located in the city's downtown area.¹ Thus, while the personal training and CrossFit gyms were locations close to where people lived, the barre studios were located closer to where people worked. The CrossFit gym was a local business with a single location. The personal training gym was a regional chain with approximately 10 locations across the Midwest. The barre studio was a national chain, but the sites I observed were locally owned and operated. Connecting with their locations and clientele, each of the facilities ranged from approximately \$200-\$250 a month for unlimited group fitness classes. The personal training gym charged about \$50 per session or approximately \$200 per month for unlimited group fitness classes.

In contacting sites for this project, I encountered a few obstacles. I found that with the majority of my inquiries, I did not receive a response. Occasionally, sites did reply, asking for more information, but they ultimately declined. The most common reason for rejection was the site's space was too small or that exercise was too vulnerable of an activity to have a researcher

¹ I observed two barre studios owned by the same person in the same city. The clientele and the location of each studio provided enough consistency for the purposes of this study, while providing more opportunities for observation. Thus, when I refer to the barre studio, I am referring to a mixture of my observations at each site.

observing the space. To gain access to the CrossFit gym, I looked up CrossFit gyms around the area and “cold-emailed” the owners. For the barre and personal training studios, I relied on connections from previous academic and professional experiences who connected me with the owners of both facilities.

Ethnographic Observation

Observation Guide

My ethnographic observation allowed me to observe workout classes, interactions between participants and instructors, the decor of the spaces, and the overall culture of each location. Observing the physical spaces and classes within these facilities allowed me to see first-hand what my respondents had conveyed to me during the interviews. The entire observation guide I used throughout this process can be found in Appendix B. While I used this guide to analyze broader themes, I quickly found that each studio had its own dynamics and deserved attention outside of this list. Importantly, during observation, I was required to make snap judgments on people, at times assuming their gender identity based on external gender characteristics like clothing, body, and hairstyle.

For each location, I observed approximately five hours of group fitness classes and/or personal training sessions. In scheduling these observations, I aimed to observe a variety of times to see what a typical day in the space looked like. This was also important for my focus on gender, as different times may lead to different genders occupying the space. At the CrossFit and personal training locations, there were opportunities to observe the spaces as participants arrived and exited their group fitness classes. For the barre studio, there was not an open-gym period or consecutive classes, so I arrived shortly before and stayed briefly after each class.

Role of the Researcher

I announced my presence before each workout class, providing participants the opportunity to opt out of being observed. There were times, however, that my presence was not announced, such as between classes, with the assumption being that these spaces were semi-public. While observing the workout classes, I decided to “dress the part” by wearing workout gear. Normally, this took the form of leggings and an athletic sweatshirt/quarter zip. Interestingly, I found myself dressing more feminine and trendy when I attended the barre classes, subtly acknowledging the differences between the three studios. Though I wore workout clothing during my observations to blend in, I did carry around a notebook and a pen and answered any questions if anybody was confused about my presence in the space.

While I did interact with participants, the goal was to observe classes and interactions from an unobtrusive spot within the space. I occasionally chatted with members, though I rarely initiated the conversation and instead acted as a fly on the wall, trying not to disturb the normal dynamics of the space. If an extended conversation occurred between me and a participant, I asked for permission to record the interaction. Two of my interview participants were from interactions like this, as I talked with two men (Simon and Jackson) after they completed their workouts. Though the instructors occasionally asked if I wanted to participate in the workouts, I chose to observe rather than participate. This allowed me to take more comprehensive notes and get direct quotations from participants and instructors.

Limited Online Analysis

I also engaged in limited online analysis of each site’s marketing through their websites and social media platforms. This allowed me to analyze how each site marketed itself to potential clients, using the official words of the organizations rather than their instructors and participants.

With these sources, I was looking for themes including: the bodies presented in the marketing, the language used, and the prices and services of each studio. This did not take on the form of a comprehensive content analysis using a coding scheme. Rather, this provided me with basic relevant information before I observed my sites and interviewed participants so I could have background information on the sites.

Interviews

To triangulate the data from my ethnographic observation, I engaged in semi-structured interviews. This allowed me to compare my findings from my ethnographic observation with the individual experiences of clients within these spaces. Interviews also allowed me to draw broader understanding of gender and fitness, as topics including body image, nutrition, and beauty standards came up in these conversations.

Recruitment

After gaining access to each site, I created a recruitment flyer to advertise the interviews. I dropped these flyers off at each site, and they were advertised throughout the studio at the check-in desks and bulletin boards. The sites also offered to advertise my research in their newsletters and on their social media pages, but I did not have access to these platforms. Eligibility for the interviews required that participants had been a member of the facility for at least one month and were over 18. If someone met these requirements, they were encouraged to contact me through my university email. While most participants found out about my study from my flyers, some participants revealed they were interested after hearing another member had participated. Thus, while I did not intentionally engage in snowball sampling, it appears this inevitably occurred as word about my study spread.

In total, I interviewed 20 people for this study. Please see Appendix C for demographic details on each participant. The initial plan was to conduct six interviews at each location, ideally gaining gender diversity that reflected the sites' demographics. Because I did not turn people away from the interviews, I did ultimately have breakdowns that didn't fully match each site's demographics. For CrossFit, I interviewed eight people in total (five men and three women). For the barre studio, I interviewed six people (five women and one man). At the personal training gym, I interviewed six people (four women, one man, and one non-binary individual). The vast majority of participants were white and straight. All participants were cis-gender except for one who felt comfortable identifying as a woman or non-binary.

The goal was to complete all interviews prior to the ethnographic observation, but this only occurred at the personal training gym. For the CrossFit gym, I conducted four interviews prior to observation, two during observation, and two after observation. For barre, I only completed two interviews prior to observation and recruited all others after I had observed. Like with the unintentional snowball sampling, it appeared people were more interested in talking with me once they had met me in person.

Questions

The interviews consisted of the following themes: demographic data, experiences at the specific fitness facility, fitness history, current fitness habits, body image, and how gender had affected one's experience with fitness. The complete interview schedule can be found in Appendix A. Though these general patterns were covered in each interview, because of the semi-structured nature of the conversations, interview content varied from person to person. Thus, each interview differed slightly depending on the participants' interests and experiences.

Most interviews occurred over Zoom, though participants were given the option of meeting in person. One interview occurred in person at a coffee shop (with Alex), and two occurred during my observation at the CrossFit gym (with Simon and Jackson). Each interview lasted around an hour. After the interviews, participants were compensated with a gift card. During the interviews, I took written notes to help me keep track of the conversation, write down findings, and jot down follow-up questions.

Coding

Field Notes and Coding

For the ethnographic observation, I created initial jottings during the observation. Shortly after observation, I turned these jottings into more detailed field notes. These field notes were analyzed through an initial round of coding as I created them. I then transferred the field notes to NVivo where they went through a second round of coding. These were then organized once again to create the final product.

Coding of Interviews

Regardless of the setting, the interviews were recorded and transcribed using an online transcription service. The transcripts were then transferred into NVivo where the interviews were edited and analyzed for a first round of coding. These initial codes were then analyzed and organized to ensure emerging codes were covered from previous interviews. Codes were then further organized, leading to the final findings section of this piece.

In coding my field notes and interview transcripts, I began with a semi-open coding scheme that had some key themes from the literature but also allowed for emerging findings as the analysis continued. Importantly, once the field notes and transcripts were analyzed, all

identifying information was eliminated, including the facilities' and participants' names which were replaced with pseudonyms. I made minor edits to respondents' quotations for clarity.

Positionality

It is important that I discuss my positionality as a researcher, as it could have potentially affected the data I gathered. I am a cis-gender white woman in her early 20s who is able-bodied and possesses a body that would fall within the current societal standard of the feminine body. These characteristics may have impacted my conversations, especially with people who fall outside of these identities. Though I am not a member of any of these facilities or facilities that engage in these types of fitness, I am familiar with the fitness world in general, perhaps leading to a shared understanding between me and my participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS: THE CULTURE OF EACH FIELD SITE

Because of the gendered audience¹ and gendered connotations² of each fitness facility, each workout had a distinct culture that sent disparate messages about gender, fitness, and health to its clients. Within each facility, a specific type of gendered and racialized body was assumed and desired. Through language, decor, and displays of gender, each site communicated messages about what this ideal body was.

CrossFit

Description of the Workout

Through the workout, CrossFitters built strength and demonstrated their power through high-intensity interval training and lifting heavy weights. Mary (a straight white woman in her 50s, CrossFit) explained the purpose of CrossFit and strength training, saying: “The goal of the dstrength [training] is to move load...Increasing load usually...You want to get stronger.” Athletes, the term for a CrossFit participant, were guided through power-heavy exercises like the snatch to demonstrate this goal of gaining strength. The snatch involved a barbell, normally with weighted plates to increase the difficulty, being thrust into the air over one’s head while squatting. Other exercises included medicine ball throws, pull-ups, and handstand push-ups.

¹ By gendered audience, I mean the gender breakdown of each facility’s clientele (i.e., if the space was women-dominated, men-dominated, or had a more equal gender distribution).

² By gendered connotations, I mean the general public’s perception of the exercise and what gender the exercise is associated with. For example, the CrossFit gym I studied may have had a more equal gender distribution than the average CrossFit gym, but CrossFit is still associated with men and masculinity.

Through these high-intensity, heavy-weight exercises, athletes built muscles and increased their endurance. The workouts seemed especially focused on building athletes' arm and chest regions, aligning with traits of the ideal masculine body.

Once a week the gym hosted Olympic weightlifting and yoga classes. Interestingly, rather than yoga being framed as a workout to increase one's mindfulness and flexibility, it was often framed as a mobility exercise or a way to recover from the regular high-intensity workouts. In addition to the weightlifting and cardio-heavy exercises, participants revealed gymnastics often played a large role in the workouts. But even when workouts with feminine connotations like yoga and gymnastics were presented, they took on a masculine energy, being more about power or recovery rather than the flowy and performance-oriented movements associated with femininity. Rather than focusing on forms of gymnastics associated with women (uneven bars, vault, balance beam) the gymnastics of CrossFit was associated with building strength and forms of gymnastics historically practiced by men (rings, single bars). For example, rather than participants doing handstands to gain balance, they would do handstand push-ups to increase their heart rate and arm strength. Thus, the exercises within CrossFit often aligned with notions of a masculine workout, being focused on building muscles and strength through high-power moves.

The Space

The physical space of the gym also revealed the workout's masculine nature. This particular CrossFit box (the word for a CrossFit gym) was an open space with an industrial feel, marked by raw materials like steel and unfinished wood. The decor of the space consequently aligned with CrossFit's masculine energy, demonstrating the gritty and rugged nature of the workout.

The facility's choice of music was also masculine, with high-energy rock and heavy metal music being played throughout the space. During my first observation period, only songs by men singers were played. Interestingly, the music seemed to be of genres associated with white people, rather than historically Black genres like hip hop or rap. Depending on the instructor, more pop music was played, but the songs were often remixed to make them more appropriate for the masculine and high-energy space. Songs with motivational lyrics, like "Let's go," "I'm the man around here," and "Can't stop me now" were frequently heard, demonstrating the high-intensity nature of the facility (December 2022).

Gender

At any given time, the CrossFit gym appeared to be roughly 60% men and 40% women (December 2022). Though there were more athletes who were men, there was an equal gender split among the trainers according to the site's website (December 2022). The vast majority of the participants and trainers were white and of the ideal CrossFit body -- one that is muscular and fit (December 2022). This body was true of both men and women in the space. The age range of participants was wide, seemingly ranging from participants being in their mid-twenties to their mid-sixties (December 2022). Importantly, the people on the older end of the spectrum all appeared to be men. The women in CrossFit differed from the women in barre and personal training, with many women CrossFitters possessing visible muscles in their arms and backs.

Interestingly, when I asked my respondents about how gender played a role in CrossFit, the responses varied by gender. While interviewing Jackson and Simon in the facility while a class of six men and one woman happened in the background, they both revealed they saw CrossFit as breaking gender barriers rather than enforcing them. Simon stated:

You don't often have in sports men and women working out together at the same time

doing the same things. Whereas in CrossFit, that's part of the norm... The workout is written for everyone, and then you're working out and you're competing with a woman next to you that's super fit. (Straight white man in his early 50s, CrossFit)

During the same conversation, Jackson (a gay man in his 30s, CrossFit) echoed a similar sentiment, saying: “CrossFit gyms in general tend to be, I think, one of the most accepting and inclusive spaces, period. Because everyone's just there to be fit and build community.” In contrast, during this same observation period, one of the women CrossFitters made a joke to me about how I was observing an “all-men class” (December 2022). Thus, the same class (of six men and one woman) was perceived differently depending on one’s gender identity. Men viewed the space as inclusive because women had successfully entered it, while women still viewed it as men dominated, as indicated in the interviews below.

While the majority of my interviewees initially felt intimidated by CrossFit due to the difficulty of the workout, women pointed out particularly gendered reasons for their discomfort. Multiple women revealed they had never touched weight lifting equipment before starting CrossFit, while the majority of men had previous experiences with weight lifting. Mary explained of her experience:

It was literally terrifying. I walked out of there (her first class) thinking, “I really want to do that, but I am really scared of doing that.” I had never used a barbell before, ever. I had used free weights like dumbbells, [but] I had never touched a kettlebell before. I had no idea what that was or how to use it. (Straight white woman in her 50s, CrossFit)

This same sentiment was not echoed by the men I interviewed. While one respondent, Paul (a straight white man with a Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit) did bring up his initial thoughts about CrossFit was that it was “A bunch of meathead [men]...just in an intimidating, not fun environment,” he did not experience the same intimidation as the women athletes. Thus, while women felt intimidation when entering CrossFit because of its masculine connotations and

witnessed the men-dominated nature of the workout every day, men CrossFitters did not experience this gendered intimidation as their bodies were seen as the norm.

A Focus On Competition

Within CrossFit, competition thrived, as athletes compared themselves to one another daily. PRs, or personal records, formed a type of currency in the space, as participants exchanged their PRs on particular moves. As Mary (a straight white woman in her 50s, CrossFit) described to me, “There's a lot of discussion in the CrossFit world about your PRs, right? ‘What's your highest lift? What can you bench? What can you squat? What can you snatch?’”

Athletes kept track of their accomplishments on an app where they could compare their abilities to others in the gym. Jackson (a gay man in his mid-30s, CrossFit) described it as a way to “constantly know how you stack up” to others. Through quantification, athletes were scored and could see how they ranked on the “leaderboard.” For many CrossFitters, this app did not constitute a form of surveillance or negative comparison, but rather a form of positive social engagement and accountability. Joe (a straight white man in his early 30s, CrossFit) put it this way, “You can interact with people's scores, add comments...It's really fun...It's like the visibility factor. It's the accountability factor. There's encouragement when others know about it.”

Competition was not specific to this field site, but was seen in CrossFit as an organization. Multiple participants described their desire to compete in the [CrossFit Games](#), an international contest where athletes compete to see how quickly they can complete a series of exercises. For many CrossFitters, a history of competitive sports led to their desire to compete in the high-intensity sport in adulthood. As Joe (a straight white man in his early 30s, CrossFit) said: “That background in hockey and soccer now translates into CrossFit which I get to do every

single day. It has that competitive piece to it.” Others mentioned having a background in collegiate swimming or gymnastics, demonstrating the history of competition in athletes’ exercise routines. Thus, in CrossFit, rather than working out being something that was an individual prospect, it was something to share and compare with others.

Working Out Builds Discipline

In CrossFit, working out was not just for one’s physical health, but also a way to build discipline inside and outside of the gym. Within the space, working out was framed as a challenge, with an instructor named Peter (a white man in his mid-30s) encouraging athletes to “Try and make it (the workout) as difficult as you can” (December 2022). Another instructor, Mitch (a white man in his late 20s) revealed the purpose of CrossFit was to experience discomfort, saying: “That’s the point of the workout, to feel discomfort... That’s why we’re here right? To push ourselves” (December 2022). Within the field site, there were three words written on the wall, “Grit, Gratitude, Humility” (December 2022). The instructors’ encouragement for athletes to push themselves through the workout and the explicit mention of grit within the facility’s messaging demonstrated CrossFit’s view that working out was a way to build discipline. Even if interviewees expressed finding joy in the workout, it was clear the workout was not framed like this at a higher level. Thus, working out in a CrossFit gym was not meant to be easy or joyful at all times, but a way to challenge oneself.

CrossFit Translating Into Athletes’ Personal Lives

The discipline of CrossFit bled into other areas of participants’ lives, demonstrating the way CrossFit was a lifestyle rather than just a workout. Paul, a lawyer who works 75-80 hours per week, discussed how CrossFit had taught him lessons applicable to his personal life. He stated:

It's discipline...And I tell the coaches, some of this has bled over into my work. My work is still a major part of my life, but I use this concept that they tell you, [which is] just keep chipping away. Just keep moving forward. Don't have a negative perspective. Don't look at it and go, "Oh God, I can't do this, this is too much." Just tackle it. Start and keep chipping away. Pace yourself. I implement that into work. (Straight white man with Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit).

Paul's statement showed how CrossFit's messaging was not meant to be left in the gym, but brought into one's everyday life to build discipline outside of the gym.

This discipline also translated into a form of overachieving for many CrossFitters. Within the workout, participants did not just do pull-ups, but pull-ups with added weight. Athletes did not do push-ups, but handstand push-ups to challenge themselves. Multiple interviewees also revealed that CrossFit pushed one's body to the limit. Alex revealed to me the potentially dangerous nature of the workout, stating:

I think CrossFit as an exercise, if you take out that community aspect, is terrifying. I mean, it's insane. You get injured, almost inevitably. The severity is up for debate, but people get hurt...About a week after I tore my bicep tendon, another member dislocated their shoulder on a snatch. So this is all insane, but being able to do the insanity with other people is what really makes it worthwhile. (Bisexual white woman with Hispanic background in her 20s, CrossFit)

Though most people would avoid dangerous activities, for Alex and other CrossFitters, the difficulty and intimidation of the workout was part of the appeal. With CrossFit being so community-based, pushing one's body to the limit alongside a supportive community was part of the experience.

This mindset of pushing oneself appeared not only in CrossFitters' workouts, but their personal lives too. Within the gym, participants did not just work; they owned businesses, were lawyers, or were high-up in their fields. This was not just my observation, but something that was understood by the athletes too. Jackson revealed to me:

Especially in CrossFit, more than anything else, I think you get the people who like... Everyone at this gym makes a good living. Which partially it's expensive to belong

here...If you think about the different personality types, I think you get a lot of...drivers and people who are very motivated in all aspects of their life because you have to be motivated to come in here. Like this type of workout style doesn't lend itself very well to someone who's just kind of in it for like shits and giggles. (Gay man in his early 30s, CrossFit)

Rather than the workout being something one could casually incorporate into their life, it became a reflection of how athletes acted in and out of the gym. Importantly, the all-encompassing nature of CrossFit appeared gendered, as women who disproportionately performed caretaking tasks did not have the same amount of time to dedicate to the workout as the men.

CrossFit is Centered on Community

While interviewing my participants, I was surprised to learn just how far this idea of CrossFit as a way of life went. Multiple participants referred to CrossFit as being a cult or “cultish.” Others put this more lightly, calling CrossFit “community-based,” where athletes followed coaches around the city to maintain community. Though these statements were made in a joking manner, it was clear the workout played a large role in athletes’ lives, a larger role than other workouts had played in the past. By attending CrossFit classes multiple times a week, tracking workouts to stay accountable, and spending time with other athletes outside of the gym, CrossFit became an all-encompassing area of athletes’ lives. Simon told me the accountability between members was one aspect of the “cult,” stating:

The other aspect of it (CrossFit) is the cult, right? It's absolutely cultish in every positive aspect of the thing. You have your friends come in and talking to you about “Are you going to work out tomorrow, are you getting enough sleep? Are you eating healthily? Are you not overindulging?” (Straight white man in his 50s, CrossFit)

Though this may appear to be more intensive than many fitness facilities, it was clear that the intensive nature of CrossFit was viewed as a positive thing by the athletes. Thus, respondents revealed that to be a true CrossFitter was to align one’s habits with those desired by the

organization. These habits were then upheld through individual connections within the shared space.

Accountability was also displayed in the decor of the space. One poster was titled “Healthy Habits,” outlining guidelines CrossFitters should follow like “Drink more water,” “Prioritize Fiber,” “Eat More Veggies,” and “Reduce Added Sugar” (December 2022). This specific gym also provided guidelines to cultivate a positive community, with one poster being titled “Community Rx” (Prescription) (December 2022). These guidelines included “Don’t gossip, don’t complain” and “Introduce yourself to new members” (December 2022). Thus, CrossFit’s influence extended beyond the workout by impacting how athletes ate and thought.

The gym was also viewed as a safe and welcoming space for athletes to gather. Unlike the other spaces I observed, members would arrive around 15 minutes before and stay late after class to chat, eat, and stretch with one another. The gym also provided social and community-based activities, including holiday parties, a secret Santa gift exchange, and a toy donation box ahead of Christmas. In my observations, I was struck by how well members knew each other, frequently overhearing conversations about work and family life. I was also surprised to witness this jovial camaraderie not just between participants, but between the trainers and the owner too. Rather than locker room talk occurring in this more masculine space, it appeared that genuine connections between participants of all genders were cultivated. Most interview participants revealed the community aspect of CrossFit was what kept them there, by gaining social interaction, accountability partners, and a sense of belonging. Participants talked to me about forming relationships that extended beyond the gym, with Jackson having sold other athletes their homes, Paul planning a trip with other athletes to visit an old coach, and Simon

bringing up how he had visited other athletes' homes. Thus, the community aspect of CrossFit was reinforced through participants' individual experiences and the facility's messaging.

Drawing off the facility's focus on community, the lobby was quite large compared to the barre and personal training gyms. An open-concept lobby of couches provided a space for participants to chat before and after class and store their belongings. In contrast, the other facilities had lockers, but perhaps trust among the CrossFit community led to belongings being placed in the open space.

It was clear that through the decor, the high-intensity nature of the workout, and the men-dominated space, CrossFit reinforced the idea that to be a good CrossFitter was to dedicate one's life to the organization. Dedicating one's life to this workout meant adapting habits, committing to the program's high-intensity workouts, and developing a strong community inside and outside of the gym.

Barre

Description of the Workout

Barre took on a distinctly feminine nature, with the workout's goal not being to lift heavy weights and build bulky muscle, but rather to tone the whole body through small movements. Though parts of the workout were done with just body weight, sometimes light weights, often two or three pounds, were used. The movements were often light and flowy and used a bar, displaying its connections to ballet. At times, other tools were used like a small ball or a "tube" (a set of resistance bands) to increase the difficulty of the workout (January 2023).

The workout included low-impact exercises like crunches, squats, small biceps curls, donkey kicks, and leg lifts. Importantly, rather than these exercises achieving a full range of motion, they often were smaller versions of the exercises, with students moving only a few

inches. After working out a particular body part, students would stretch out the muscles they just worked, providing a moment of respite before the next section.

The “postures” of barre often indicated that the goal was to create a body that was feminine (January 2023). That is, a small, lean, long, and toned body. Similar to the CrossFit gym, there were three words written on the barre studio’s wall: “Lift, Tone, Burn” (January 2023). Thus, the focus of the workout was not to cultivate masculine characteristics that would change one’s life (grit, gratitude, humility) but to change one’s body to become more feminine.

Instructors (who were all white women in their 20s and 30s) additionally revealed the purpose of the workout by using phrases like “Tiny bend, extend,” “Burn out your thighs,” and “Pulse it out” (January 2023). These statements revealed that to work out in a feminine way meant to perform small movements to burn fat and create a lean body. One of my interviewees, Nikita (a straight Asian woman in her 30s, barre) explained the purpose of the workout, saying: “Barre in itself is really great at shaping your small group muscles and turning them into really pretty lines.” Thus, the terms utilized throughout the barre studio were distinct from those used in CrossFit, revealing how barre took on a distinctly feminine nature by focusing on small movements.

While the purpose of CrossFit and personal training was to build strength through heavy weights, strength was also discussed in barre, albeit in a different way. Perhaps because women are infrequently thought of as strong, instructors would frequently remind participants they were strong enough to finish the workout. This came in the form of one instructor, Chelsea (a white woman in her 30s) saying “Ignore the voice in your head telling you you can’t, because you can” (January 2023). Before the class completed a set of knee push-ups, Chelsea encouraged them by stating “Get ready, so strong, you’ve got it” (January 2023). Thus, rather than strength being an

implicit understanding due to the heavy weights used in CrossFit or personal training, strength was explicitly mentioned to women in barre.

During class, loud remixes of pop music played, so loud that the instructor would speak through a microphone. Instead of music playing in the background as it did in CrossFit and personal training, music guided the barre class. Instructors would frequently ask their students to use the music as a guide, making statements like, “Close your eyes. Let the music guide you” and “Stretch to the beat” (January 2023). The instructors would also sync their directions to the beat of the music, repeating phrases like “press, press, press, press” as the music played (January 2023). Perhaps due to the workout’s connections with ballet, the workout took on an energy similar to a dance class. During the stretching portions, however, the instructor would lower her voice and turn down the music and lights to create a relaxing environment.

An Appearance-Focused Workout

Appearance also played a large role in barre, being the only studio that had mirrors. The workout was heavily focused on how postures looked, with the instructors frequently ensuring students were in proper form through small adjustments. Participants were often encouraged to look in the mirror to see how their bodies looked, with Chelsea (an instructor who was white woman in her early 30s) saying: “Take a peek in the mirror, look at those biceps pop” (January 2023). Others like Lila (a white woman in her early 30s) would frequently remind her students to “Find a spot where you can see yourself in the front mirror” to ensure students could monitor their bodies throughout class (January 2023). When instructors would compliment their students, it often took the form of how a participant looked by using more feminine terms like “beautiful” and “perfect form” (January 2023).

Instructors would also indicate where the postures were supposed to create change. Chelsea, an instructor, said during a core exercise: “Starting to work your abs, carving out that waistband” (January 2023). This revealed that the exercise was meant to create a toned stomach and a thin waist, relating to characteristics of the ideal feminine body. These observations demonstrated that rather than working out being something one could intuitively feel, to do well in barre was to look a certain way while exercising to obtain the ideal feminine body.

Barre As A Status Symbol

When talking with my interviewees, many revealed how much they paid for their memberships. Across the studios, most monthly memberships were approximately \$200. It appeared that connotations surrounding socioeconomic status only appeared when discussing barre, however. Verde (a white gay man in his early 20s, barre) described that attending barre classes has a “status symbol” associated with it, as it catered to a specific woman: one who could afford it. Verde referred to this as the “stay-at-home-mom vibe” of barre, referring to how many women who attended mid-day classes did not work traditional nine-to-five jobs. Another participant, Anne (a straight white woman in her early 40s, personal training) who did not take barre classes, referred to barre as “white and bougie,” and thus something she had never considered trying because of this perception. Thus, barre was often thought of as something “exclusive,” catering to a specific audience and taking on gendered, racialized, and class connotations because of it.

A Curated Experience: The Space

Because this facility was a chain, there were similarities across the two locations I observed, with the spaces being virtually the same in the classes and clientele. Though there was limited equipment in the studio, it stood out with the company’s logo personalizing each item.

Each small inflatable ball, set of weights, mat, and ankle weight had the company logo on it. This personalization made it clear it was not just about the workout or the equipment, but working out with this equipment specific to this studio. By the equipment being small rather than bulky steel machines, the equipment additionally revealed the more feminine nature of the workout.

When a participant walked into the lobby, they were instructed to remove their shoes as the workout was done with grippy socks rather than traditional shoes. Within the lobby, crowding the cubbies for students to place their belongings, were racks of merchandise available for purchase. The merchandise included women's workout clothing: expensive, tighter-fitting clothing like sports bras and leggings. This merchandise communicated messages about the proper attire to wear to class -- attire that only a particular demographic could wear and afford. Most participants were spotted in the types of clothing available for purchase at the studio, including expensive brands like Lululemon and Alo Yoga.

Interestingly, though the facility was curated toward women, the space itself was quite gender neutral. Rather than traditionally feminine colors like pink and purple dominating the space, the facility was decorated with black, red, and white decor. In contrast to the brighter fluorescent lighting of the CrossFit and personal training gyms, the barre studio had more precise studio lighting that was controlled by the instructor throughout the workout.

A Lack of Men

Gender was also explicitly seen within the space. Throughout my entire observation period, I never saw a man within either studio (either as a participant or as an employee) (January 2023). With a few exceptions, the majority of the women were in their mid-twenties or

thirties (January 2023). The majority possessed what could be considered the “ideal” body of barre, one that was thin, toned, and for the most part, white (January 2023).

It was not just the type of workout that prevented men from entering the space, but a cultural misunderstanding that women-focused workouts were not real workouts. Nikita explained this to me, saying:

For the time that I have been working, I have seen fewer than ten men between three studios... These men came with their girlfriends or a wife, [as a] special occasion between them. Or like, the studio has some kind of event saying you can bring your significant other. And these women want to show their men that this is a real workout. Because a lot of the time, the men feel like if you're not going to a gym [it] is not a real workout. So they come here, and then they get totally destroyed. (Straight Asian woman in her early 30s, barre)

Sue (a straight white woman in her late 20s, barre) put it a similar way, stating: “I think that's kind of the biggest stereotype, more like a gender thing, that it's a girly, weenie, lay around and do nothing class, and it's not.” Sue and Nikita’s statements demonstrate that across the studio, because the workout was associated with women, participants felt the need to justify the workout’s difficulty by bringing men to the studio. Regardless of if these men attended, it seemed their memberships did not last. The space, even if men occasionally entered it, was dominated by women and took on feminine connotations because of it.

A Lack of Community?

For barre participants, working out did not fulfill the same social need that was present in CrossFit and personal training. Though the barre studio was presented as a “community of strong women” through its national collective identity, there was a lack of connection among participants during my observation (January 2023). It seemed there were more broad examples of building community, such as instructors guiding participants to “Give yourself and your neighbors a round of applause” at the end of each class (January 2023). But, throughout my

observation, I saw exactly one personal interaction occur between participants (January 2023).

Participants occasionally interacted with the instructor by getting corrections, learning what equipment was required, or being complimented by name throughout the class. Genuine interpersonal connections between participants seemed lacking, however.

Compared to CrossFit, there appeared to be a lack of camaraderie between participants. Rather than arriving early to chat with one another before the start of class, it seemed participants arrived with just a few minutes to spare. For those who did arrive early, they stretched on their own or looked at their phones, often on separate corners of the room from other participants. This was also felt by my interviewees, with Julia (a straight white woman in her mid-30s, barre) revealing: “Among the people that go to [the studio], it’s not that we interact a lot unless people come and they’re already a friend [of mine]...Otherwise we kind of don’t talk.” Thus, rather than being a location for social interaction, it appeared the barre studio was a facility where people arrived alone, worked out individually, and left on their own.

In conclusion, in stark contrast to the masculine setting of the CrossFit gym, the barre studio was women centered. Through appearance-focused workouts, small movements, and the virtually all-women clientele, barre sent the message that to work out properly was to work out in a distinctly feminine way to achieve a lean and toned body.

Personal Training and Group Fitness at the Personal Training Gym

Description of the Workout and the Space

Though the personal training gym was advertised as something that was geared toward each individual’s desires and needs, it often took on a more masculine tone, being more similar to CrossFit than barre. The personal training gym advertised its workout plans as “Customized for YOU” and a way to “Master your DNA” on their website (February 2023). But by focusing

on strength training rather than lower-impact or cardio-based workouts, these plans veered toward being more masculine than feminine or gender-neutral.

The goal of most personal training and group fitness sessions was to build strength through interval workouts with heavy weights. For women, free weights ranged between seven to 7 to 20 pounds. For men, free weights ranged from 10 pounds to 30 pounds. The weight used was in between that used for barre and CrossFit, but veered on the heavier end, catering to a more masculine audience. The equipment was mostly strength-based, with only a few cardio machines (treadmills, bikes, ski machines, rowing machines) being used to warm up before class. The workouts consisted of similar movements to CrossFit, although they were less intense. Kettle-bell squats, weighted core exercises, and dumbbell shoulder presses were commonplace in both personal training and group fitness sessions.

Like the CrossFit gym, the personal training studio had a more industrial appearance. Exposed brick, visible air vents, and unfinished wood provided a more rugged and masculine look. Unlike the CrossFit gym, music in the personal training gym was more similar to barre, with popular songs and remixes being played at all times. Like the CrossFit gym and in contrast to the barre studio, the personal training gym was more eclectic in its equipment and decor. Examples of local flare, including a hand-drawn map of the neighborhood and chalkboard art, provided a quirkier presence over the heavily curated barre studio.

Demographics of Participants and Trainers

This gym was the least racially diverse out of my three sites. Throughout my hours of observation, I never saw a person of color in the space, except for one trainer. With the price of personal training and group fitness being so expensive according to participants (around \$200 a month for group fitness and \$50 per personal training session), and the studio being in a

primarily white area, there was likely a barrier to entry for people of color and low-income residents.

Though lacking in racial diversity, this studio provided the most equal breakdown of women to men. It appeared that while men did personal training and women did group fitness more, overall the demographics were approximately 50% men to 50% women (January and February 2023). For the trainers, however, the breakdown was less even, with three women trainers and five men trainers occupying the space (Personal Training Site's Website).

The fact that there were more men personal trainers was something many women interviewees brought up. Meredith thought through why there were fewer women trainers, stating:

I think more of the trainers are male. Like, we only have one woman trainer right now. No, that's not true. We have two...I think...It just seems like when they're hiring, they do struggle to find women, because I think there are less women in that field. I don't think it's an intentional thing at all. I think it's just who works in that space. (Straight white woman in her mid-30s, personal training)

Most women brought the topic up similarly to Meredith. They pointed out how there were more men trainers but clarified they weren't critiquing the facility for this. But, by bringing up this gender discrepancy, women made it clear the lack of women trainers had made an impression on them. Similarly, women frequently pointed out their perceptions that more men did personal training. From my observation, this definitely appeared to be the case, with two group fitness classes being women-dominated and the majority of personal training sessions being with clients who were men (January and February 2023).

This gym also provided the most body diversity out of my three field sites, being the only space where someone who would be deemed "plus-size" was seen. The majority of participants were of a more average muscle mass than the barre studio or CrossFit gym. Most women did not

have the dancer's body seen in barre, and the majority of men did not have the overt muscles seen in CrossFit. Put another way, this facility did not seem to project a gendered image of an ideal body like was done in CrossFit and barre.

Working Out As a Challenge

Similar to CrossFit, working out was framed as a challenge in the personal training studio. Instructors would frequently use a louder voice to push their participants to challenge themselves. One instructor named Tatiana (a woman of color in her mid-30s) guided her students to "Challenge yourself. If this weight is too easy, on the next round, go a bit higher" (February 2023). Like the grittiness of the CrossFit gym, more of a boot-camp style was also demonstrated with Tatiana encouraging her participants by stating "You only have a few minutes! Come on! Step it Up!" (February 2023). Thus, in both the CrossFit and personal training gyms, exercise was framed as a way to challenge oneself. This was often in ways that were traditionally masculine, such as through lifting heavier weights and moving faster to complete more reps in a set amount of time.

Thus, while an equal split of men and women could be found in the personal training studio, the energy of the space veered into the territory of masculinity. Through weight-bearing exercises, the framing of working out as a challenge, and the industrial appearance of the space, this seemingly gender-neutral gym took on masculine connotations.

CHAPTER FIVE

DOING GENDER AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL: FINDINGS FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION

Within each facility, there were subtle cues indicating what the ideal body of each space was. This ideal body most often was gendered, but at times also class-based, racialized, and of a specific body type.

Within Specific Facilities

CrossFit: Equipment Settings

At the CrossFit gym, some equipment was adjusted for a taller body, with that body often being a man's body. During one workout, participants were guided through a series of pull-ups using a rig, a metal structure with bars to hang from. In order to begin the exercise, women would make their way to the wooden boxes I was sitting on to use as step stools to reach the bars. There were also steps built into the rigs, suggesting that rather than having a variety of bar heights to cater to varying body types, women must adjust their bodies to utilize the equipment that was created with a man's body in mind.

Barre: Available Merchandise

Within the barre studio, the lobby was filled with workout clothing available for purchase. This clothing, however, was only catered toward a woman's body. Gear including sports bras, leggings, and tight-fitting tank tops were available, but there were not sections dedicated to gender-neutral clothing or clothing associated with men. Due to the price of this

merchandise, with a sports bra being around \$60, the message was not only that barre was catered toward women's bodies, but women who could afford the proper attire.

On the studio's website, in a frequently asked questions area, there was a section titled "Can men do barre?" (February 2023). The studio additionally advertised itself as a "community of strong women" (February 2023). These implied that even if men could do barre, the workout was geared toward women. Ashley, a barre participant, reflected on the time she tried to sign up her fiancé and brother-in-law for a class. She said:

I've never been in a class where there was a male in the class...I was trying to get my fiancé and my brother-in-law to come with me to a class...and I ended up submitting forms for them...[The studio] called, and they assumed that both my fiancé and my brother-in-law were females...And then when I spoke with them (the studio), I was like, "Oh, they're males." And she (the studio representative) had said, "Oh, boys. Well, we don't usually have guys come." And she kind of warned me maybe not to bring them, which I thought was really funny, so we didn't end up going. (Straight white woman in her mid-20s, barre)

Ashley's story demonstrates that even if men desired to attend classes, there was a stigma, even among staff, against men entering the space. Other women I spoke with echoed Ashley's sentiment, revealing that while they had invited their women friends to attend a barre class with them, they had never asked their friends who were men. Thus, there was an implicit understanding that the workout was for women, and this was reflected within the studio's messaging and clientele.

Across the Facilities

The Range of Weights

At the CrossFit and personal training gyms, there were more opportunities to scale the workout by using heavier weights. Though the facilities did have a variety of dumbbell weights (five to sixty pounds) it was clear the variety of weights catered more to men. There were

approximately five sets of five to ten-pound weights, weights most likely to be used by beginners and women. In contrast, those lifting heavier weights (most often men), had a wider variety to choose from. Thus, if there were more than five women in the space, there would potentially not be enough equipment for women to use. Men, who may be able to scale their workouts up and down because of the wide variety of weights to choose from, would not encounter this problem.

In barre, while there were different weights to scale the workout, there was a narrower range (between one to five pounds). Because these weights were so close in size to one another, it was more difficult to see if someone was using a lighter weight. Barre also frequently had body weight exercises, providing even fewer chances for differentiation, as students relied on their own bodies for resistance. In the personal training and CrossFit gyms, however, you could find women using significantly smaller dumbbells or less weight on their bars than men, providing a visual example of gendered differences.

At the personal training gym, if one wanted to use weights lighter than five pounds, they would have an option of two sets. These two sets were placed away in the corner of a windowsill and were a different material and color from the rest of the weights. Thus, these weights implied that anyone who used them was of a different status than the general clientele. Because these weights were more likely to be used by women, the message was clear: women would be labeled as a different status, reinforcing the men-centric nature of the weight room.

Modifications

The modifications taken by each person were gendered too. While men would use heavier weights, women would use lighter ones. My participants described that the CrossFit gym had used the terms “men’s weight and women’s weight” when providing recommendations for particular exercises, but recently pivoted their language to be more gender-neutral, using the

terms “smaller and bigger athletes.” This displayed that it was not just individual choice about how much weight one used, but a recommendation from the organization.

In CrossFit, when the body-weight exercise of a pull-up was presented, men could be found tying kettlebells to themselves to increase their resistance. In CrossFit, push-ups were not push-ups but handstand push-ups. In barre, push-ups were described as a plank where you “bend for two, press up for two” (January 2023). During push-up pulses, barre instructors would use language like “hold it low and pulse it out” (January 2023). Across the facilities, if there were low-impact options to make the exercise a bit easier, women were often found taking these modifications. In CrossFit, when provided a set of exercises to complete, it seemed that men were more likely to finish before women. This often led to an additional gendered power dynamic, as men would crowd around the women as they finished the workout to cheer them on.

Unlike the barre classes, in the CrossFit and personal training studios, participants did not sync their movements to the instructor’s. Thus, even if the instructor would demonstrate an exercise before participants began, there was an assumption that participants understood the terminology used and the form they should take during the exercise. In barre, participants synced their movements to the instructor’s. They also were frequently guided through how to achieve proper form through minor adjustments Barre instructors would make statements like “Toes are pointed,” “Can you get your leg a straighter? A little higher?” (January 2023). Thus, across the facilities, there was a different level of knowledge required of participants to safely complete the workout. From this, women-focused sites may provide more guidance while men-focused sites may assume a certain level of fitness knowledge.

The Goal of the Workout

Within CrossFit and personal training, the purpose of the workouts was to work up to the most difficult exercise. When an exercise was presented, often the most difficult form of the exercise was initially shown, with ways to make this exercise easier being presented after. In contrast, in barre, often the more simple version of a posture was presented with the instructor guiding the class through ways to make the posture more difficult. Barre instructors would make comments like “Option to switch to a heavier set of weights” and “Maybe sink your heels down a tiny bit deeper [to make the posture more difficult]” (January 2023). Thus, while the goal of CrossFit and personal training was to be able to do the most difficult exercise, barre’s goal was to master the basic moves before adding on. Importantly, while folks of all gender identities could complete the barre workout’s basic moves, it was often the men who could do the most complicated exercises in CrossFit. Thus, women were implicitly sent the message that their goal should be to achieve what most of the men could do, rather than the workout being scaled for each person’s abilities, in CrossFit and personal training.

When describing what they liked about the workout, barre participants frequently described it as being challenging but not too much of a challenge so as to be intimidating. Callie said:

I think why I enjoyed it (barre) was mainly because the first few classes, they were challenging, but not so much that you didn't want to come back...And so every class can be a challenge. I think for me [it] was definitely the fact that I could do every class from the beginning. (Straight Indian American woman in her mid-30s, barre)

Similar comments were made by the women at the personal training gym, expressing how workouts were often difficult but manageable given they were only 30 minutes long. Both studios stood in stark contrast to CrossFit, where participants like Alex (Bisexual white woman

with Hispanic background in her mid-20s, CrossFit) mentioned “You get injured, almost inevitably [in CrossFit].” Thus, the range of weights available in each facility, the goals presented in each workout, and whether the classes were appropriate for beginners all communicated messages about the facility’s ideal gendered body.

“The Mom Squad”

In gender-neutral and men-dominated settings, women-dominated classes stood out and took on their own distinct culture. In CrossFit, the 8:30 am class, was referred to by the owner and other participants as “The Mom Squad” (December 2022). This class was seen as a time where women could work out after dropping their kids off at school. “The Mom Squad” was the only class that was women-dominated at the CrossFit gym, but only had one more woman than there were men (December 2022). Because “The Mom Squad” defied the norm of being men-dominated, it took on this quirky name and stood out. This class seemed more casual than the others, almost being a social outing rather than a workout that happened to include a social element.

In personal training, there was one class called “Core Flex” that was filled with all women (January 2023). This class took on more of the vibe of the barre classes with the goal being to create a toned body. The instructor, Aria, (a white woman in her mid-30s) guided her participants to “Keep everything tight” and “Squeeze your glutes,” demonstrating the similarities to barre (January 2023).

Additionally, there was a women-only class held around 8:30 am at the personal training gym that was similar to the co-ed classes that day, marked by weight lifting and interval training. Though the moves were the same, the energy of this class was different. Tatiana (an instructor of color in her mid-30s) joked with me before class, stating: “This is the fun bunch” (February

2023). This description suggested that this class was different in some way from the previous classes, with the only difference being the gender dynamic. Thus, within the more masculine spaces of personal training and CrossFit, women-dominated classes had a different energy and were perceived differently than co-ed classes, reinforcing the masculine nature of the facilities.

Clothing

Gender differences were also expressed through clothing in the facilities. Across the three field sites, women often wore tight-fitting clothing including leggings and fitted workout tops. At the CrossFit facility, some women were found wearing more gender-neutral clothing (like T-shirts) but often with a feminine twist through shorter sleeves, a tighter fit, or a cropped bottom. Women also demonstrated femininity through their accessories, with many women wearing earrings, claw clips, head bands, animal print, and bright colors while working out. Within barre, it seemed that more athleisure was present, reminiscent of the types of clothing the studio sold, including matching workout sets and trendy-cut tops. Men, in contrast, most often wore baggier clothes like loose shorts, relaxed T-shirts, sweatshirts, and sweatpants. Men would often wear darker colors and hats, distinct from the more feminine clothing women wore.

The amount of clothing expected at each facility also differed. Within CrossFit, it was not uncommon to find a man working out without his shirt on. Within barre, women would often wear cropped tank tops or sports bras. Interestingly, men did not take off their shirts in the personal training gym and women did not wear sports bras in the personal training gym or the CrossFit gym as often.

In conclusion, throughout my ethnographic observation, examples of doing gender, especially as it related to embodied characteristics, were present. Through participants' clothing and the modifications they took, this was shown with individual choices that were impacted by

broader gender ideals. Through the range of weights and the equipment settings, this was seen at the organization level.

CHAPTER SIX

DOING GENDER INDIVIDUALLY: FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Throughout my interviews, it became clear that participants' individual experiences with health and fitness differed by gender. Factors ranging from why participants enjoyed workout classes to participants' perceptions of the facilities depended on their gender identities.

Comparison Versus Competition

Both men and women made judgments about their bodies in comparison to others, but it was done in different ways depending on one's gender and sexuality. Men more often mentioned competing in the gym, often taking the form of physically trying to outperform another person. Women pointed to comparisons against other women, often pointing to insecurities with their bodies or progress. While gay men appreciated the competition aspect specific to CrossFit, they also pointed out the comparisons they struggled with surrounding appearance. Thus, while men of all sexualities competed, gay men and women of all sexualities compared. Importantly, while competition seemed to be motivating, comparison surrounding appearance seemed to be harmful.

Men Competing in CrossFit

As described above, competition played a large role in CrossFit. It was seen through athletes tracking their workouts, comparing their PRs to one another, and the international CrossFit Games. Men in CrossFit also described competing with one another on a regular basis, trying to be better than other men at the gym to physically outdo them. Jackson described how this competition was motivating, stating:

There's an element of competitiveness here that I think is a thread that connects me to more people... There's always someone better than you. There's always someone who's coming right up on your tail, so it keeps me motivated in that sense. (Gay man in his 30s, CrossFit)

Jackson's statement was echoed by the majority of men CrossFitters who appreciated the competitive nature of the sport. Women in CrossFit, in contrast, seemed to compete far less than the men. Natalie described her experiences in CrossFit, saying:

I've noticed that the men at the gym are a little bit more competitive with each other. They pay attention to what the guys around them are doing. I feel like if there's someone who joined around the same time as them, they kind of compete against each other a little bit. It might just be that there's less women. I don't find that I'm really looking at the people around me and trying to compete with them. Mostly I'm just trying to finish. (Queer white woman in her early 30s, CrossFit)

Natalie additionally described seeing fewer women use the app to track their workouts, framing it as women not “needing that kind of validation” for completing their workout.

Similarly, Paul brought up his concerns with competing against women in CrossFit for the fear of losing. Paul described his first class to me, stating:

Secretly, I was like, “Shit, this sucks. These girls can kick my ass”... As a man that was the piece where it was a little hard... I think that as a man you fall prey... to this “we're supposed to be better” type-thing. (Straight white man with Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit)

It appears for men in CrossFit, competition provided a sense of validation that they were physically better than someone else – regardless of whether that other person was a man or a woman. Women, in contrast, did not experience this drive to compete with others. Thus, within the masculine site of CrossFit, competition, especially between men, was a part of the game.

Women's Harmful Comparison

In contrast, women were quick to point out their struggles with comparison. Women across all of the sites revealed the body standards they had been subjected to from a young age, and how these standards continued to impact their body image. Only women in the barre studio

mentioned the comparison they face toward other women while working out, however. Through the presence of trendy workout clothes, following the instructor who often had the ideal dancer's body, and the presence of mirrors, women barre participants expressed their struggles with comparison while working out. Ashley explained of the barre facility:

I think it's easier to quickly compare in those settings... With the mirrors, I can look at myself in the mirror and judge myself for looking a certain way. If I notice something that I'm insecure about myself, just like right on display in front of me and in front of the whole class, that can be challenging. And that's obviously an insecurity [for] me to deal with, and I would never blame [barre] for that. (Straight white woman in her mid-20s, barre)

Though Ashley said she did not blame the barre studio for these comparisons, it was striking that the only site to have mirrors and have clients complain about this comparison was the barre studio. Thus, while all the women participants struggled with comparison, it seemed this comparison was exacerbated within the women-oriented facility of barre.

Gay Men and Comparison

Like women, my participants who were gay men mentioned feeling the need to achieve a certain body standard, similar to the expectations women faced. Jackson, a gay man in CrossFit, explained it in the following way:

Gay men are more concerned with how they look than straight men... So I think it's a lot more similar to how women have a lot of external body standards or whatever. Like that same thing is true in the gay community... So I think a lot of men, gay men, are very into fitness now. That can take obviously different shapes and forms, like running, or like just going to a gym. (Gay man in his early 30s, CrossFit)

As Jackson explained, both gay men and women are held to a different standard than straight men when it comes to their appearance. In contrast to women though, the ideal body gay men strive for is different: one that is lean and muscular rather than thin. But Jackson's quotation demonstrates that to meet the body standard prescribed by our culture, gay men and women are expected to work out in particular ways.

These quotations demonstrated that whether one compared or competed while working out was gendered. Further, specific fitness facilities, because of their gendered audiences, may have encouraged competition or comparison through their messaging and physical space. While the masculine site of CrossFit promoted competition which was frequently viewed as healthy, the barre studio often promoted comparison, making clients feel inadequate about their appearance and abilities.

The Switch to a Class-Based Gym

Hypermasculine Traditional Gyms

For participants of all gender identities, there was a shared understanding that traditional gyms were mundane, depersonalized, and subsequently unwelcoming. Interestingly, when discussing their qualms with traditional gyms, both men and women brought up the archetype of “the gym bro.” The gym bro is a man who embodies traditionally masculine traits by lifting absurdly heavy weights, spitting, and possessing large chest and arm muscles. Respondents of all gender identities used words like “meathead,” “he-man,” or “gym bro” to describe these men, indicating they viewed these men in a negative light. For many respondents, it was a point of pride that their new workout facility was not home to this type of man. But while participants of all gender identities brought up gym bros as a frustration with traditional gyms, their ultimate reasons for switching to a class-based gym differed by gender.

Even if men pointed to gym bros as creating a toxic environment at traditional gyms, they did not experience the same type of gendered discomfort women had experienced at these facilities. Many women described feeling intimidated by traditional weight rooms due to their hypermasculine nature, feeling subjected to traditional gyms’ cardio rooms or corners of the weight areas to complete their workouts in peace. Women often voiced concerns about the

hypermasculine nature of traditional gyms as a reason for switching facilities. As Ashley explained:

Whenever I go to [a traditional gym], sometimes I'm the only girl in the gym...Or whenever I'm lifting weights in the weight section, I'm usually the only female at the squat rack and by the dumbbells...It's sometimes uncomfortable. I feel like I'm way more likely to just be in my own space and have my headphones in and probably not be as chatty...I'm always a little on edge of a guy hitting on me or approaching me in some way, or wrong signals going back and forth...Sometimes it's a little uncomfortable. (Straight white woman in her mid-20s, barre)

Many women brought up similar points to Ashley. Rather than traditional gyms being a space where women felt comfortable, the hypermasculine nature and the unwanted attention it brought, often led to women desiring a new environment to exercise in.

Women's Reasons: Classes Are A Guided and Efficient Escape

Many women viewed exercise as an opportunity to focus on themselves by escaping from the mental load of their everyday lives. This was especially true for women who were mothers.

As Christine put it:

I love small group training...Because as a 41-year-old mother, the mental load is nonstop. So I'm like the person that organizes the household and is constantly taking care of every single thing in the household except the car...I feel like I deal with a lot of mental exhaustion, and I get exhausted from social interactions. So the last thing that I want to do is have to figure out a gym workout. (Straight white woman in her early 40s, personal training)

Christine viewed exercise as the one thing she did for herself, a chance to escape from the mental load of being a mother and a worker. Other women, even those who were not mothers, expressed that exercise was an “investment” for their well-being. This “investment” was often talked about as the only thing women did for themselves or one of the only ways they splurged on themselves. In making these statements, it almost appeared as though women felt the need to justify how much they spent on their exercise habits, something not present with the men I spoke with.

Similarly, most women expressed their appreciation for classes being guided, allowing them to engage in exercises they may not have been socialized to partake in. Meredith described the group fitness classes at the personal training studio as providing her with the knowledge she was never taught as a girl who wasn't an athlete:

I was never an athlete growing up. I like being active, but I just don't have that education... I feel like when you're an athlete in high school, you learn how to work out in the gym, how to use all the machines, how to do all that stuff, and what is a well-rounded workout, and I just never learned that. So I always did classes or I had an instructor who would walk me through...I like having help. (Straight white woman in her mid-30s, personal training)

Meredith's history of mostly taking workout classes rather than doing individual workouts resonated with many women I chatted with. Thus, workout classes provided women a chance to exercise without needing the specialized knowledge men may have been socialized to possess.

Though men at the other studios also brought up using working out as a way to relieve stress, women were more likely to view exercise as a chance to escape from the mental load by following along in a class. It seemed that while people of all gender identities used exercise to destress and as a break from their working and family life, only the feminine site of the barre studio framed their classes around this idea. One barre instructor, Chelsea (a white woman in her early 30s) guided her students to "Set intentions for the rest of class. Think of what you want these next 50 minutes to look like. They're all yours" (January 2023). Though messaging like this only appeared in the barre studio, it was clear that working out was viewed as an escape for many women. Thus, rather than exercise being primarily community based for women, it was viewed as more of an individual endeavor.

Men's Reasons: Variety and Community

In contrast, men appreciated the variety and community aspect of fitness classes. Simon expressed both reasons in one statement, saying:

So the workouts vary, which is great, right? Because you get my age, like you're doing something year after year... This (CrossFit), you challenge yourself to something different every day... And sometimes it's like being a kid, you know?... It's just pure joy. And I'm a fairly competitive person, so I love the competition. It drives me. It motivates me. It energizes me. (Straight white man in his early 50s, CrossFit)

Simon's experiences were very similar to the other men I spoke to. Men appreciated being guided through classes because of the variety of workouts presented, not because they didn't have the knowledge to workout on their own or because they wanted to decrease their mental load. Similarly, rather than working out being an escape from everyday life and a chance to focus on oneself, men viewed it as a chance to connect and compete with others, fulfilling a social role.

How Gender Influences Individual Habits

Toward the end of my interviews, I acknowledged that my interests involved the intersections of fitness and gender. I then asked participants if they thought their gender identities influenced their fitness habits and the facilities they attended. Women were easily able to point out how their gender identity had influenced their relationships with fitness, nutrition, and their bodies. For women especially, society's ideas of the "ideal" feminine body impacted how they worked out, regardless of if they worked out in a traditionally feminine or masculine setting.

When men were asked how gender contributed to their fitness habits, they took more time to think about the question. When asked to discuss the connections between gender and fitness, most men would judge the connection based on their personal experiences. Women, in contrast, were quick to point to the role of the media and society in influencing their habits.

Overall, women's discussions about struggling with body image, past stories of disordered eating, and societal body ideals took up more time in women's interviews. When men did bring up these topics, their explanations were shorter, apart from gay men who talked about these topics more.

Meredith, a woman who does group fitness at the personal training gym explained how being a woman had influenced her exercise habits, stating:

I don't know if it's the chicken or the egg, but I feel like I've definitely done a lot of exercise that would be considered, like, women's exercise. And I don't know if I choose that because I am a woman and I'm more comfortable with it, or because I've never exposed myself to other types of exercise, because that's what's been presented to me, or if it's just genuinely what I want to do. Regardless, maybe if I was a man, I would still want to do those things. But when you think of, like, Zumba or aerobics classes, even yoga, to an extent, you do think of those things as being more female dominated. (Straight white woman in her mid-30s, personal training)

Nikita reiterated this point, stating:

I would definitely say that gender stereotypes play a lot of factors in my fitness goals. I don't know if I would have the same fitness goals and the same fitness routine and discipline if I were a man. (Straight Asian woman in her early 30s, barre)

For Nikita, Meredith, and most of the women I interviewed, gender played a clear role in their relationships with exercise and their bodies. For women, gender seemed all-encompassing, affecting women's fitness goals, the types of exercise they engaged in, and how often they exercised. Put another way, for women, gender was an inescapable reality, something that was unavoidable when discussing fitness.

While talking with men, it became clear that their gender identity influenced their habits, but men rarely made this connection themselves. Many men spoke of liking the competition aspect of workout classes, wanting to build muscles in their arms, or playing traditionally masculine sports in high school. Very rarely though, would men take these thoughts a step further and reveal how they were connected with notions of masculinity. Thus, perhaps because

men saw themselves as the norm in social settings, they did not recognize gender in themselves. Put another way, the influence of gender was top of mind for women, while men had difficulty recognizing its effects, as they may have viewed masculinity as universal.

Women-Focused Fitness: Empowering or Oppressive?

Most barre participants appreciated the workout's low-impact nature and women-oriented setting. Callie found the workout refreshing from other men-dominated sectors of fitness. She explained:

I think it's very geared towards the female body...And I think that's something that I'm noticing in current fitness...[Previous fitness] was very male-focused. I feel like there was not as much importance given to low-impact [workouts] and how it helps the female body. We're made differently than a male body, and so I definitely appreciate that. (Straight Indian American woman in her mid-30s, barre)

For many women like Callie, male and female bodies were viewed as essentially different, thus requiring different types of exercise. Based on this view, a feminine-oriented workout like barre was empowering for Callie because it was made with the female body in mind — something seldom seen in the fitness world.

Ashley furthered this point, describing how for her, women-oriented fitness provided a more empowering community. She stated:

I feel really comfortable in it (the barre class). I feel like it's a really warm environment. It's fun to be around ladies, and I love doing group-type things. It feels supportive...Even if people are on different levels, it's not intimidating. I think everyone can get a good workout with whatever level they're on. (Straight white woman in her mid-20s, barre).

By Ashley specifying “It’s fun to be around ladies,” she demonstrated how barre stood out from a traditional gym. Ashley also demonstrated how a women-focused workout provided a more accepting space for participants of all abilities. Women-oriented workouts thus provided a curated workout for women’s bodies and a more supportive community from a men-dominated space for many women.

Verde expressed similar sentiments to the women. He viewed the women-oriented space of barre as more welcoming than a traditional gym, even if he was outnumbered in the barre studio. He described feeling discomfort when another man, who was presumably straight, entered one of the classes:

So there's me and one other guy that goes. I do think he's straight, he's like married. And even him being there, I get uncomfortable. When he was there, we started going to the same class, and I was like, "Oh, who's this other guy?," and I was honestly creeped out...

I see that female space like a safe space to work out...When that guy came, I was like, "Wait, what are his motives?" I kind of subconsciously probably questioned that even though it might have been harmless. He probably was there to do the same thing I was doing. (White gay man in his early 20s, barre)

For Verde, because of his experiences growing up as a gay man in rural Tennessee, he found the women-oriented barre studio to be a safer space to work out. Often being the only man in the space, he also felt a sense of responsibility to keep the space safe, acknowledging how many women chose to work out there because it was majority women. Hence, when a man who was presumably straight entered the space, Verde sensed the discomfort that could arise. Verde additionally pointed to ways he had advertised his sexuality to display that he wasn't a threat. He described wearing LGBTQ+ pride socks and speaking and displaying mannerisms in a particular way to communicate that he was gay. Thus, Verde's actions demonstrated how he viewed the barre studio as a safe space to work out and the habits he formed to maintain this safe space.

In contrast to these positive sentiments, other interviewees who did not do barre expressed their distaste for the workout. For Natalie, a woman CrossFitter, barre perpetuated gender stereotypes that to be a woman is to be thin. She explained:

It's about toning instead of building muscle. When you look at the language, they'll use language like tone or long or lean. They never talk about building muscle. They might talk about burning fat, but they never talk about muscles. And that's I think what is socially acceptable.

There's a lot of shaming of anything that a woman does. Anything that's like stereotypically feminine, people will find a way to shame it. It's a very difficult line of like you don't want to fall into that...

To me, it bums me out. It just may be that I hate barre class, but it bums me out that people are like that. They're trying to lose weight and they're like, "Oh, if I go to this barre class and I eat 1200 calories, and deprive myself, then I'll look like a ballerina." And it's like, no, you don't look like a ballerina, and like, that's okay. You don't need to look like a ballerina...

There's so much bullshit fitness that's marketed towards women. [Like] "I'm going to have you do arm circles with a one-pound weight for five minutes." No, just fucking lift a weight that's not one pound...

I don't want to be that person that's like gatekeeping exercise or telling someone how they should or should not exercise. Like, that's lame. People should do whatever they want. But I feel like a lot of it with women is that they don't want to get bulky or that they don't get married to pursue something else other than the one pound weight or Pilates. (Queer white woman in her early 30s, CrossFit)

For Natalie, rather than barre providing a workout catered toward women, it reinforced the idea that women are weak and should work out in a specific way to create a small body. Thus, the quotations above demonstrate that women-oriented fitness may not be viewed as empowering by every person.

Men-Focused Fitness: Empowering or Oppressive?

For many women CrossFitters, the men-oriented workout provided a sense of empowerment they had not experienced through other types of exercise. This was especially true when women compared the sport to women-focused workouts like dance, barre, and the cardio rooms at traditional gyms. For Alex, a woman in CrossFit, she found the sport's focus on what her body could do rather than what it looked like refreshing:

Gender has been huge. I think that's part of the reason why for so long I was so, I don't want to say resistant, but I just didn't know the things that were out there. In my mind, I knew what had been told to me my whole life. So in my head, exercise was about smallness. Fitness was about how lean you look, how small you were. It was always aesthetic. Exercise was always aesthetic. Exercise wasn't about enjoyment, it was about reaching this size, goal, whatever ...

But CrossFit is a lot more about what you can do than what you look like. And I know people who don't know me will still look at me and be like, "Well, she doesn't really look like an athlete." But the people around me know that I am fit and celebrate what I can do... I can't remember the last time someone at [the studio] has talked about an aesthetic goal... I think what I connected with was finding an exercise that made me feel sort of powerful...

Outside of being an athlete, all the sort of fitness messaging, especially geared towards women, is about aesthetics and just like, making yourself smaller and making yourself look good. And that wasn't really something I'd ever connected to, particularly being sort of bigger and always having been bigger. (Bisexual white woman with Hispanic background in her mid-20s, CrossFit)

For Alex, growing up as a girl, exercise was always about obtaining the ideal feminine body.

CrossFit, in contrast, allowed her to view fitness as an enjoyable activity because it did not focus on aesthetics but what her body could physically accomplish. Alex also pointed out the connections between gender and body type within this statement too. For Alex, feminine exercise was not only oppressive because it perpetuated ideas of a gendered body, but a body she did not possess being curvier woman. Thus, CrossFit was especially empowering for her because it allowed her to pursue an exercise where she was not just encouraged to lose weight and become smaller, but actually grow in muscular strength.

In conclusion, women found different workouts empowering. Some women were empowered by traditionally feminine workouts because they felt the workouts were made for their bodies. Other women found women-oriented workouts oppressive, given that they often perpetuated the idea that to work out as a woman meant to work out for the goal of being toned. While some women felt intimidated in traditionally masculine settings like CrossFit, others found them liberating.

The Gendered Nature of Body Image

While talking with my participants, they revealed how body image, or the way one views their body, was gendered. While both men and women mentioned having insecurities relating to

their bodies, these insecurities manifested differently depending on gender identity and sexual orientation.

A Desire to Lose Weight

One aspect of body image surrounded participants' desires to lose weight. While the majority of participants mentioned having a past or current goal of losing weight, the manifestations of these goals were different for participants of disparate gender identities. Paul (a straight white man with Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit) described his experience gaining weight, stating: "Yeah, I didn't like that I got heavier. [I] Certainly wanted to lose the weight, but it wasn't because I was too worried about how anyone else saw me. My ego told me I looked okay." Natalie, in contrast, described the emotional toll gaining weight took on her self image, stating:

Once I gained a little bit of weight...I didn't want to be photographed...

My weight would fluctuate. A few years ago, I was backpacking somewhere and lost a bunch of weight doing that, and then I was comfortable being photographed. And then I turned into another sedentary job and gained a bunch of weight and was really ashamed about that and didn't want to be photographed.

And [it was] kind of that back and forth with not feeling like I had any control about what I looked like, not feeling like I had any control over my weight and feeling shame about that, as if I had to hide it. (Queer white woman in her early 30s, CrossFit)

Verde (a white gay man in his early 20s, barre) expressed a similar impact his weight gain had on his self-esteem: "I kind of was looking at myself, and I was like, 'Oh my God, I need to lose weight. I'm so ugly.' Such defamation towards myself."

These quotations reveal the drastic differences weight gain had on participants depending on their gender identity and sexual orientation. For Paul, even if he wasn't thrilled about gaining weight, it did not take an intense toll on his self-esteem. He even mentioned "My ego told me I looked okay," suggesting he internally felt neutral about his weight gain. For Natalie and Verde,

a woman and a gay man respectively, their experiences with gaining weight severely impacted their self-esteem. Natalie would avoid having her photo taken, while Verde would make negative comments about how his body looked. Thus, while gaining weight appeared to be a more neutral topic for straight men, it carried more emotional baggage for gay men and women, likely due to societal expectations of how these populations should look.

Nutrition

The CrossFit and personal training gyms included nutritional services in addition to their fitness programs. While talking with participants, it became clear that people had varying opinions on these nutritional services. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the opinions seemed divided by gender. While men seemed to have a more uncomplicated relationship with food, women seemed to have a more complex relationship that impacted their body image.

Alex explained the CrossFit gym's nutritional services initially intrigued her, as she believed they would provide a more holistic perspective on health. She stated: "We (Alex and her mother) were actually most intrigued by the fitness and nutrition [aspect], and just the idea of more of a well-rounded, wellness-focused gym." In discussing the reality of the nutrition coaching, however, Alex realized that many aspects of it still operated within the paradigm of diet culture. The nutrition program's emphasis on quantification and food tracking was something that did not sit well for Alex, coming from a history of disordered eating. She explained:

We were focusing on protein, and so we had started trying to do some tracking of macros. I have since walked that back just because in order to track macros, you have to track calories, and I don't do well with that. It becomes a game. It's like, "Okay, I need 80 grams of protein today. Well, let's see how many calories, how few calories, I can get that in." So I have yeah, I have stayed away from tracking calories. (Bisexual white woman in her mid-20s, CrossFit)

For Alex, the gym's nutritional services concerned her because it involved tracking calories. Many women echoed Alex's view, revealing that because many women had a complicated history with food, nutritional programs that required food and calorie tracking triggered harmful habits. Thus, it seemed that rather than the gym providing the holistic view of fitness and health Alex was searching for, it continued to perpetuate beliefs that many women found harmful and connected to disordered eating. The other women CrossFitters made similar statements to Alex, while most men CrossFitters mentioned how tracking macros constituted a part of their fitness regimes. Thus, there was a popular part of CrossFit (tracking macros) that may have unintentionally been harmful to women and folks with a history of disordered eating.

Similarly, both the personal training and CrossFit gyms had body scanners for clients to use. These scanners provided measures of body fat, muscle mass, and weight. Though these machines were advertised as more holistic measures of health than just one's weight in pounds, they were infrequently used by women because of the negative relationship many women had with tracking their weight. Christine described her experience, saying:

I don't weigh myself ever...I don't want to know how much I weigh...If you just look at the number, and you don't understand all of the things that impact the number...I think that you can really harm yourself by trying to reduce this number. I just feel like it just becomes this singular obsession, and I just think that it's not sustainable. (Straight white woman in her early 40s, personal training)

Like Alex's views on tracking calories and food, tracking one's quantifiable body metrics held a similar stigma for women. For many women, rather than engaging in these nutritional services, they would often avoid them so as to not trigger their past histories of disordered eating. In contrast, most men mentioned using these machines, revealing that this concern over weight did not place men in the same chokehold. Thus, because men and women tend to have different

relationships with food and weight, men and women used nutritional services differently across the facilities.

Getting Smaller Versus Gaining Muscle: Exercising in Different Ways

In addition to possessing disparate views toward nutrition and weight, participants of different gender identities had different fitness goals. While women often pointed to wanting to lose weight, get lean, and build strength, men pointed to wanting to lose weight and gain more muscle. When women did mention wanting to gain strength, it was often caveated with a statement about current or past fears of getting too bulky. Thus, while women had a fear of bulking up, this was many men's exercise goal.

Within CrossFit and personal training, because the workouts involved weight lifting, many women expressed a fear of gaining too much muscle. Natalie spoke of how women's bodies are advertised in CrossFit, stating:

I feel like when women look at CrossFit female athletes, they're like, "I don't want to look like that because they're jacked." They are jacked... I can say this from experience before I joined. You see the top female athletes and you're like, "They look super masculine, like extremely buff. Like, I don't want to look like that. I don't want to get big." And then once you start lifting, you're like, "Oh, wait, I'm not going to get big. I don't have the actual testosterone to get big." (Queer white woman in her early 30s, CrossFit)

Natalie revealed how for many women, a fear of getting too big to the point of looking masculine affected how they approached working out. Natalie, like other women I chatted with, also pointed out how gaining this extent of muscular strength was likely not possible without the use of steroids. Thus, regardless of if the fear was a realistic one, Natalie revealed that women feared getting bulky and thus worked to exercise in ways that would prevent this from occurring. Often, this was done by using lighter weights or engaging in a feminine workout meant to create a feminine body like barre.

Similarly, Miriam, from the personal training gym, described the intentional ways they had worked out to avoid getting bigger. They stated:

I think before there's definitely certain exercises or activities that I would avoid. I have big thighs, and so I was taught from a young age [that] I have big thighs [and] they are too big or whatever. I'm built exactly like my mom. I look exactly like my mom, and I've never heard my mom say a single positive thing about herself. She will tear herself apart, and she likes nothing about her physical appearance, and I look exactly like her. So that kind of thing. (Bisexual and Non-binary white person in their mid-30s, personal training)

Miriam revealed that throughout their fitness journey, they had intentionally avoided exercising their thighs because they were viewed as a negative thing. Miriam did not just want to prevent their thighs from growing because that was an individual desire of theirs. Rather, it was an engrained expectation to maintain the body expected of them from being assigned female at birth. Thus, both Miriam and Natalie revealed that even if people who are not men engaged in weight lifting activities, concerns surrounding bulking up pervaded their minds.

Men, in stark contrast, expressed desires to build their muscles. This came from Robert (a gay white man in his early 30s, CrossFit) saying he would often focus on his chest during workouts because “I think that kind of highlights broad shoulders.” For Robert, possessing a muscular chest and broad shoulders marked a symbol of masculinity. Robert also pointed to wanting a six-pack in his abdominal region to demonstrate visible core strength, another trait associated with the ideal masculine body.

Garry (A straight white man in his mid-50s, personal training) talked about his previous experiences with weight lifting, particularly with the goal of building his arms, back, and shoulders. He described this focus was for the desire of wanting “to look kind of pumped up” or to show visible strength. Interestingly, while revealing this past goal of building visible muscular strength, Garry caveated it by saying “It wasn’t like a vanity thing.” While the first part of

Garry's quotation revealed he worked out with the desire to build muscles in areas associated with masculinity, the second part also demonstrated that he may have been hesitant to admit this.

Thus, men desired to change their bodies by growing muscles in particular areas associated with masculinity. Even in expressing these desires though, men did not mention how society's masculine ideal had impacted their body image. Women, in contrast, would frequently discuss how their desires to become smaller, because of society's feminine body ideal, had negatively impacted their self-esteem.

Insecurities Weigh Heavier on Women

While both men and women had concerns relating to their body image, they took up more mental space for women participants. When asked about their body concerns, women often blamed the media and society for their negative body image. In contrast, men would more often subtly acknowledge their insecurities and move on, not pointing to a deep history of societal messaging for their body concerns. Anne revealed this gendered difference, stating:

I feel like it (gender) affects everything in terms of how you move through the world and those spaces that you occupy, and being a woman and thinking about how you present your body shape...It's like the constant messages about what we eat, and how much we move, and what other people look like, and social media. I feel like that's always, probably for most women, playing in the background of your mind even when you're not fully cognizant of it. Definitely in a way that maybe for some men...for some white, cis, hetero men, maybe don't have to think about. (Straight white woman in her early 40s, personal training)

Anne's quotation revealed how being a woman had heavily impacted her body image. From societal messaging through social media and internalized beliefs, Anne revealed the consistent gendered messages she had faced surrounding her appearance. Anne, like many women, also acknowledged the gendered nature of these messages, revealing participants recognized how these messages disproportionately impacted women.

Similarly, Natalie from the CrossFit gym described her body image growing up in an appearance-obsessed culture:

I was in middle school from 2004 to 2006, and that was when every popular young female celebrity at the time had an eating disorder. When Lindsay Lohan, Hilary Duff, Nicole Richie, Paris Hilton, all of those girls, and like, Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen. Those were the most popular kind of female celebrities at the time, and they all had eating disorders.

That gives me sadness, honestly. [I] think back to that time and look back on what I looked like as a kid and feeling like I wasn't enough in comparison. Or looking at what society was telling me was beautiful and just seeing it be so disordered.

That makes me very sad. I hope that it's better for kids now, because that was a very tough period to grow up [in] as a young woman... That was a really tough society to grow up in, and I feel like I really internalized a lot of that, and it definitely impacted my body image in a very negative way. (Queer white woman in her early 30s, CrossFit)

For Natalie and nearly every woman I talked to, the goal of wanting to have the ideal feminine body was not an individual goal. Rather, it came from a long history of socialization. By women bringing up the media of the mid-2000s and current social media, they made it clear women had been subjected to societal expectations for a long time. These expectations did not play a positive force in encouraging women to adopt healthy habits, but a harmful force in convincing women to change their bodies.

Contrast this with the men I chatted with, who, even if they acknowledged their insecurities, did not divulge information about how they had been sent this messaging since childhood. As Paul (a straight white man with Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit) explained about gaining weight: “Yeah, I didn't like that I got heavier. Certainly [I] wanted to lose the weight, but it wasn't because I was too worried about how anyone else saw me. My ego told me I looked okay.” Joe (a straight white man in his early 30s, CrossFit) revealed a similar concern, stating: “I think we're always going to be our own harshest critics... I think I have love handles. I hate them. They're like these little side pieces that just piss me off.” After making

these comments, these men did not dive into how past media representations of the ideal body had impacted these insecurities. Rather, they acknowledged these were things they did not like about themselves and moved on.

When describing their relationships with their bodies, women would acknowledge poor body image was a universal phenomenon. Michelle (a straight white woman in her mid-60s, personal training) put this bluntly, stating: “So like every woman my age, my body image was fucked up.” Men, in contrast, would state their insecurities as being individual phenomena, not pointing to how the ideal masculine body had affected their perceptions of themselves.

In contrast, gay men would frequently point to the social media ideal of what a gay man’s body should look like. Importantly, their concerns relating to body image did not appear to weigh as heavy as women’s. Robert revealed this, stating:

I would say obviously the goal is always, like, a six pack between you and I. But I think now it's just more like, how do I feel? It's more like, do I feel good? Do I feel lethargic? Do I feel flexible?

I think one of the things that CrossFit has taught me is that all bodies are shaped differently. So we have bigger people in our gym, but the bigger people are also very strong. They're not, like, super shredded like Zac Efron, but I think fitness comes in all shapes and sizes.

So I think it's a lot more of, like, how I feel. And there's obviously the body image of it like, oh, could I lose a couple of pounds on my waist? Sure. But I also want that donut from [local bakery name], so I'm going to eat that...

I would say it's more about looking good or looking fit, especially when, like, you're single. Right. There's always, like, the relationship weight versus the single weight. You want to look good, you want to feel good, and you want to attract that type of energy.
(Gay white man in his early 30s, CrossFit)

Rather than working out being done for Robert’s individual well-being, he described how societal beliefs of the ideal body of a gay man crept into the picture. Unlike women, the societal body ideal for gay men seemed to surround how potential partners would perceive them. In contrast, for women, it was connected to how other women looked, without the desire of looking

good for a future partner. Thus, even if gay men had greater concerns about their bodies than straight men, it seemed they still did not face the intense gendered socialization that women did.

From these quotations, we can see that men did face insecurities relating to their bodies — often being related to general weight-loss or one's belly area. For the men I spoke with, however, it seemed these insecurities were more of a passing thought in the conversation, rather than the focus of the interview. Constant societal messaging about how the ideal masculine body should look did not weigh heavy in men's minds, with the exception of gay men. Women, in stark contrast, often talked about their relationship with their bodies at greater length.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION

Expanding Acker (1990) and West and Zimmerman (1987)

My study revealed that not only are fitness facilities a place where one does gender, but also a space where race, class, and body type are reproduced. Expanding on Acker's (1990) piece on gendered organizations, fitness facilities do not just reproduce gender, but race and class too. Thus, my study expands West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender and Acker's piece on gendered organizations by tying in elements of race and class to demonstrate how these identities are recreated through the seemingly neutral act of fitness.

Gender was done in each site through clothing, the modifications people chose while working out, the music being played, and the exercises used throughout each workout. Class differences were upheld with the price of each facility, marking a barrier to entry for many people. To put this in perspective, monthly memberships were approximately \$200 at each facility, leading to nearly \$2500 being spent every year per participant. The types of clothing worn by barre participants and sold within the studios also communicated messages about class. By selling expensive gear (approximately \$60 dollars for a sports bra) the barre studio communicated the message that the ideal body within the studio was one that could afford the expensive clothing and thus was of a specific socioeconomic status. By each facility's participants and instructors being predominately white, messages about race were also sent. Thus, these facilities cannot just be understood as facilities where gender was reproduced, but where gender, especially as it concerned wealthier white people, was reproduced. Thus, my

study concurred with previous literature that the fitness industry often perpetuates white, Western beliefs of gendered beauty while expanding West and Zimmerman's focus on gender (Sepúlveda and Calado 2012).

Discussion on Interview Findings

Generational Issues: Not Just for Women Before Title IX

Previous literature has noted generational barriers as a reason for why women have a different relationship with exercise than their men counterparts (Segar et al. 2012). My study found that while these barriers do exist for women of the pre-Title-IX generation, the barriers persist across younger generations too. Michelle, a 66-year-old woman, described the lack of organized sports available to her as a child as a barrier to her fitness. She stated:

Physical fitness for women wasn't stressed when I was growing up, right? There weren't team sports for women. We might have had some extracurricular stuff, but I don't think there were any organized sports when I went that we played competitively. (Straight white woman in her mid-60s, personal training)

For Michelle, barriers to exercise were legal ones, growing up with a lack of legal protections and infrastructure for women's sports. For Michelle, because she did not have organized sports growing up as a child, this manifested as a lack of confidence with her body and working out in her adulthood.

For younger generations of women, though Title IX had been passed, socialization barriers persisted. Younger women pointed to the deep socialization they experienced growing up as a girl, demonstrating how body image issues were often passed down from generation to generation through societal expectations. Many women also revealed they developed appearance-based insecurities based on things they had learned from their mothers. Others revealed that girls' sports did not teach them how to view exercise in a positive way, sending the message that to work out as a girl meant to work out to lose weight. Thus, even if Title IX did

mark a big win for women and exercise, my study revealed that socialization barriers persisted even as societal structures have adapted. Thus, there were still pervasive societal messages that prevented women from feeling fully confident in themselves and while working out, as other authors have found for decades (Fisher, Barbary, and Misener 2018:478; Segar et al. 2002).

Changing Exercise Goals: From A Chore to Enjoyment?

While previous literature has shown that women often view exercise as a chore, my study found that women were starting to see exercise as a joyful activity (Segar et al. 2002; Craft, Carroll, and Lustyk 2014; Azevedo et al. 2007). Unlike men, however, women frequently revealed this change was recent, having viewed exercise as a chore to obtain the ideal feminine body in the past.

As Miriam explained:

But I think my ideas about fitness specifically do stem from the injury I had. Because before, I viewed fitness as exercise, as a punishment for my body not looking the way it should in society. And that's something I had grown up with, where "If you want to eat that, [you] got to make sure you go run". Or, "Oh, you didn't go to the gym, did you really earn this?" kind of thing.

A year ago, I had a pretty significant injury on my right wrist, and it totally immobilized it. I couldn't move my fingers for a few weeks, and that forced me to rethink how I view my body. Because I never really respected it, much less appreciated it. And so through that mental work, I just kind of viewed fitness as more of a celebration of what I can do versus a punishment for what I should look like. (Bisexual and non-binary white person in their mid-30s, personal training)

For Miriam, after suffering a significant injury, they were forced to adapt their body image. Miriam revealed that before this injury, exercise was a punishment, something that was done if they ate too much or were not fitting society's body ideals as someone who was assigned female at birth. Now, Miriam viewed exercise as a celebration, something they enjoyed doing to see how far their body had come.

The women I interviewed revealed similar sentiments to Miriam. Importantly, even if more women have transitioned to see exercise as a fun activity rather than a chore, ideas about the ideal feminine body still crept into the picture, affecting women's perceptions of exercise. These body expectations ran constantly in women's minds, even if quietly, that exercise was not just for one's enjoyment, but a way to achieve a particular body type. These findings reiterated what past literature has shown: men and women were subject to societal expectations of what their bodies should look like, but it weighed heavier on women (Gough 2006; Waggoner 2017; Markula 1995; McComb and Mills 2022; Sepúlveda and Calado 2012; Vartanian and Novak 2012).

This study expands previous literature by incorporating gay men into the conversation. While gay men still did not face the same amount of pressure as women, they were subject to more societal expectations than straight men, impacting their views on exercise. Thus, my study revealed that for women and gay men, a continual struggle existed between viewing exercise as a joyful activity versus as a way to obtain society's ideal body. Straight men, in contrast, seemed to possess joyful views about fitness from a younger age, never expressing that they had viewed exercise as a chore to obtain a particular body type. Thus, while women were starting to view exercise as joyful, marking a departure from the literature, my study revealed that women and gay men continued to struggle with this (Segar et al. 2002; Craft, Carroll, and Lustyk 2014; Azevedo et al. 2007).

Additionally, while previous literature has found that women exercise less than men, my study did not fully find this. Though this was not the main section of my interviews, it appeared that on average, women and men exercised about the same amount across the facilities. However, it seemed that women still did have more barriers to exercise to overcome, even if they

ultimately did combat them. For example, women who were moms mentioned the struggles of having to coordinate their schedules to fit in a workout, while others mentioned past experiences feeling uncomfortable in traditional gyms. Thus, while the barriers others have discussed still exist, it seemed women were able to fit exercise into their lives, even if it took more coordination than men (Hochschild 1989; Johansson 1996:42; Verhoef and Love 1992; Mankys 2019; Yuskel 2021).

Femininity As A Double Liability

Previous researchers like Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson (2017) have brought to light how women face a double bind while working out. The scholars describe this as a “double liability...where women were policed both for breaking with and conforming to normative gendered practices” (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017:32). This concept appeared in my research, with women in CrossFit being criticized for being too masculine and women in barre being criticized for being too feminine.

Women’s frequent concerns over gaining too much muscle demonstrated this. Women’s fears of looking too masculine through big muscles displayed that there was a stigma against women who possessed traditionally masculine characteristics. Thus, on one end of the spectrum, women were criticized for breaking “normative gendered practices” (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017).

The flipside of this was revealed with participants’ beliefs that women-based workouts like barre were not real workouts. Paul, from the CrossFit gym, revealed the misconceptions he had about feminine workouts like yoga. He said:

It took me over a year before I tried a yoga class, and there was a lot of gender [elements]...I hate to admit it, but I was like, "Yeah, yoga is for girls"...And then, “Holy

crud, man, that is harder than a lot of our workouts.” Yoga is hard. Yoga is no joke.
(Straight white man with Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit)

By Paul and other members suggesting workouts like yoga are “for girls,” they revealed the other side of this double liability. Thus, women faced a double bind where they were not allowed to break gender norms for the fear of becoming too masculine while simultaneously being criticized for working out in a feminine way through low-impact workouts. It’s important to note this phenomenon persisted in my study, as it demonstrated how even if women were breaking some exercise barriers, the stigma of breaking or conforming to these barriers persisted.

Women Have More Flexibility in Breaking Gender Norms

Though women faced stigma when engaging in traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine workouts, my study affirmed that women may have had more flexibility in bending gender norms. Paul’s quotation above revealed the sentiment many men shared, that traditionally feminine workouts like barre, Pilates, and yoga are just “for girls.” For many men, traditionally feminine workouts may have appeared threatening to their masculinity, for the fear of engaging in something associated with women. My study did not reveal that men feared being labeled as gay as a reason for not entering feminine spaces, a finding previous research has focused on (Johansson 1996; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). Of course, a fear of being labeled as feminine could be the fear of being labeled gay in disguise, but this particular concern did not arise in my study. Rather, it seemed men were most nervous about not being as good as the women within these spaces. Paul, for example, felt that because he was a man, he was required to outperform the women in these spaces. Paul did express concerns about the workout being “for girls,” but after realizing the workout was difficult, his main concern was his masculinity being threatened by women being better than him.

Thus, my study affirmed that women may feel more comfortable entering masculine spaces than men feel comfortable entering feminine spaces. This was shown with the gender breakdowns of each location. At the CrossFit studio, it was approximately 60% men and 40% women, even though the workout was often conceptualized as hypermasculine (December 2022). The personal training gym was 50% men and 50% women, even though the facility often took on masculine connotations through the workouts and equipment (January and February 2023). In stark contrast, the barre studio was 95% women and only 5% men (January 2023). From these numbers, it was clear: while women were entering masculine spaces, men were not entering feminine spaces at the same rate. This suggested there were exercise barriers affecting men too, preventing them from experimenting with workouts perceived as feminine. Whether this was the fear of being labeled as feminine or the fear of being the worst one in a class as a man, my study showed that men did not enter traditionally feminine workout spaces.

Workout Classes Are Still Gendered

Previous research has found that women are associated with group fitness classes because of their emphasis on community (Johansson 1996). In contrast to Johansson's (1996) findings, my study found the efficiency and guidance of these classes was more important to women. Previous literature has shown that women may try to find an efficient workout to fit in during their busy days working and engaging in disproportionate household and childcare responsibilities (Dworkin 2001:340; Hochschild 1989; Johansson 1996:42; Verhoef and Love 1992). Within this, previous research has focused on women's use of cardio equipment, citing that it allows women the best workout in the shortest amount of time (Dworkin 2001:340). Through my discussions with women, it appeared this idea of efficiency was key to their workouts, but it manifested as participation in workout classes rather than through cardio

equipment. For CrossFit, the intense workout one could get in 50 minutes was seen as a form of efficiency. In personal training, this manifested as the 30-minute sessions that did not require any planning ahead of time. For barre, it was the 50-minute sessions that were intense enough to feel like a good workout without sweating too much, allowing women to return to their lives after the exercise.

Women's focus on efficiency affirmed Fisher, Berbary, and Misener (2018) and Johansson's (1996) findings that gyms can lack communication between participants. Importantly though, rather than the spaces being intentionally unwelcoming, it appeared this was a desire of the women participants in getting an efficient workout. Thus, my study displayed that this lack of communication between participants may have actually been a desirable part of women's workouts, allowing them a chance to escape from the mental load of their everyday lives.

Similarly, because of a lack of exercise socialization, women also appreciated the guidance classes provided. The women-focused barre studio demonstrated this guidance by participants syncing their movements to the instructor's. The personal training and CrossFit gyms had pre-planned workouts participants could follow, eliminating any planning by the participant. By being guided through the workout, this also allowed women to escape the mental load they often felt in their everyday lives at work, as parents, or when completing household labor.

This idea of efficiency and guidance was echoed through the barre studio's workouts, encouraging students to take time for themselves and escape from the outside world. Though the community-focused nature of CrossFit stood in stark contrast to the efficient and depersonalized nature of barre, barre participants did not express being unhappy with this lack of social

interaction. Perhaps for many women, especially because working out was framed as an escape in the barre studio, exercise was viewed as an individual activity. Thus, even if individual women appreciated the community-based aspects of CrossFit and personal training, women-focused fitness may have catered more to busy women who viewed working out as a time to escape, rather than build community.

Men, in contrast, used group fitness classes to cultivate community more than women did, marking a departure from Johansson's (1996) findings that women use group fitness classes for this reason. Men appreciated being guided through classes because of the variety of workouts presented, not because they were not socialized to know how to work out. Similarly, rather than working out being an escape from everyday life and a chance to focus on oneself, men viewed it as a chance to connect and compete with others, fulfilling a social role.

My study found that when classes were the only option, both men and women showed up to them. When given the option between personal training and group fitness classes, however, men more often engaged in the personalized workouts. This marks a connection and departure with the literature, showing how men were more likely to take workout classes, but only in particular studios (Johansson 1996). Previous literature has suggested personal training is viewed as more serious form of fitness than group fitness, and thus is often associated with men (Vogel 2018). By more men engaging in personal training at the personal training gym, my study affirmed this is a plausible case (Vogel 2018). Additionally, it is possible more men could afford personal training sessions, given they were of a higher price tag than group fitness classes.

Qualms with Traditional Gyms

Hegemonic Masculinity

Though women expressed their qualms with traditional gyms, it appeared they did not experience their facilities as hypermasculine, even if they were men-dominated. When discussing their previous experiences at traditional gyms, participants of all gender identities conceptualized these spaces as hypermasculine (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). By participants of all gender identities using terms like “gym bro” and “meathead” to describe men at traditional gyms, they demonstrated the hypermasculine nature of traditional gyms was well known and deemed undesirable. Like Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson (2017) discovered, my study found that because of the hypermasculine nature of traditional weight rooms, these facilities caused most people to feel uncomfortable, including men.

Surprisingly, even if women pointed out how there were more men than women in particular gyms (CrossFit), none of my participants criticized the spaces for being hypermasculine. In observing the spaces, I did not witness any toxic masculinity (e.g. locker room talk or overt gender segregation) suggesting these spaces may have been different from traditional gyms which were viewed as hypermasculine. Women did not discuss experiencing harassment from men at their new gyms, even if they were men-dominated, contrasting with previous findings on harassment toward women at traditional gyms (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davison 2017; Exercise Bike Editorial Team 2022; Norris 2019; Turnock 2021; Johansson 1996).

Importantly though, many women brought up experiencing unwanted attention at traditional gyms. This suggested that while these specialized class-based spaces were providing an escape from the hypermasculine traditional gym, there were still facilities that perpetuated this

harmful environment. Also important, many of the gyms where women's discomfort was found were facilities the average person could afford, whereas the gyms I studied were more specialized and expensive. Thus, by most women switching to class-based gyms that were seen as more welcoming, this affirmed the literature that shows women will often try to mitigate harassment by leaving gyms that perpetuate it (Exercise Bike Editorial Team 2019).

Unlike previous literature has shown on traditional gym facilities, because these facilities were class-based, there was not overt segregation in where men and women congregated (Turnock 2021). There were certainly patterns though, especially with more men engaging in personal training over group fitness classes at the personal training gym. Rather than sections of the gym being gendered, however, it appeared the time of classes was more gendered (Turnock 2021; Vogel 2018; Johansson 1996). The stay-at-home-mom vibe of the mid-morning classes displayed this, with an understanding being seen across participants that certain classes were dominated by women and moms.

Gendered Intimidation Is Based On Men's Sexuality and Age

In talking with my participants, it became clear that whether or not women felt gendered discomfort in a space was dependent on the type of man present within it. For many women at the CrossFit gym, there was an understanding that though CrossFit as a whole was men-dominated and may perpetuate harmful masculinities, this CrossFit was different because of its large LGBTQ+ population. For reference, this particular gym was located between two of the city's quintessential LGBTQ+ neighborhoods. Natalie described her initial fears of CrossFit's hypermasculine nature eventually dissipated when she saw the large queer population within the space:

That was very intimidating, the gender thing...I feel like the second I had, like, probably one class at [the gym] though, that evaporated...[The gym] is really gay. So that's really helpful. You know, it is not the macho-gym-bro thing or anything like that. (Queer white woman in her early 30s, CrossFit)

Thus, even if there were more men than women in CrossFit, it did not take on the same “macho-gym-bro” culture as traditional weight rooms, because many of the men were gay. Certainly the space still was hypermasculine, but this hypermasculinity was not perceived in a toxic way as was present in respondents’ conceptions of traditional gyms.

Many women expressed a similar sentiment about the personal training gym. Even though the personal training facility was 50% men and 50% women, it took on a more masculine nature. But similarly to the CrossFit gym, women at the personal training gym did not experience the toxic masculinity present at many traditional gyms. Many women brought up the gym as a “safe space” given the large LGBTQ+ population and how the gym skewed older, providing forms of masculinity that were not viewed as threatening. This combination of 50% women and most men being gay or older led to less “meatheads” as many respondents put it, and no experiences of discomfort surrounding unwanted attention from men. Importantly, these experiences of feeling comfortable in co-ed spaces contrasted greatly with women’s previous experiences in traditional gyms, revealing how traditional gyms were viewed as locations for unwanted attention.

From this, we can see while straight men were viewed as a threat, men who were gay or older were not. It seemed that women felt gendered discomfort when there was the potential of unwanted romantic interactions from men -- something women did not fear coming from men of different demographics. This contrasted with previous research by showing not all men-dominated spaces created the same hypermasculine energy and discomfort seen in traditional

weight rooms (Frederick et al. 2017; Turnock 2021; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017).

Rather, it seems that it was particularly heteronormative gyms with straight men that led to this discomfort.

Masculine Spaces As Empowering

While most women expressed discomfort with traditional gyms and weight rooms, affirming the literature, women in CrossFit also found the traditionally masculine workout empowering.

Natalie (a queer white woman in her early 30s, CrossFit) summed this up by stating: “It’s really empowering, especially coming from a dance background where my body always felt like it was an inhibiting factor.” Natalie’s experience in the women-dominated sector of dance made her feel like her body was a deficit. Thus, CrossFit’s focus on building strength rather than shrinking one’s body was empowering for Natalie. For women in CrossFit like Natalie, rather than CrossFit being an uncomfortable space because it was associated with masculinity, it actually was an escape from traditional notions of femininity, making it an empowering space. This contrasts with previous literature by displaying men-dominated gyms may not always be perceived as harmful by women (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017; Frederick et al. 2017; Turnock 2021).

Diet Culture and Weight Stigma

In recent years, pop culture has focused on the concept of diet culture, or the section of our culture that valorizes thin bodies and weight loss (Daryanani 2021; Segar et al. 2002). My study found that diet culture is becoming more of a main-stream topic, with people, but particularly women and gay men, being affected by its harmful messaging. By multiple participants discussing diet culture during their interviews, it revealed that this topic deserves more attention outside of just pop-culture sources. Additionally, while participants most often

criticized diet culture for its effect on their self-esteem, beliefs derived from diet culture also appeared in participants' responses.

Previous literature has pointed to media and advertisements as ways our society perpetuates the thin ideal. My study revealed that it was not just visual advertisements that reinforced diet culture, but how workouts were framed and the appearance of fitness instructors too. In barre, the workout's ideal body was upheld by the instructors who mostly possessed the body the workout strived for. Callie, a student at the barre studio, explained this was intimidating, especially if one did not possess this body. She stated:

If you look at a lot of the studios...the instructors are perfectly toned. Like, they're perfectly made. Whatever they're wearing is like there is no rolls or anything. But the client is not that... I think a lot of times you feel like you have to be perfectly toned before stepping into the studio, but that's not the case. (Straight Indian American woman in her mid-30s, barre)

By the average barre instructor possessing the ideal dancer's body, participants felt discomfort when entering the studio if they did not possess this body. Importantly, because all of the instructors I observed were also white, this likely sent the message to participants of color that the ideal body to strive for was not just one who had the build of the instructor, but one who was also white. Additionally, by selling tight-fitting and cropped workout clothing like leggings and sports bras, the barre studio reinforced participants' beliefs that they must possess the type of body associated with this clothing -- a thin body. Barre's focus on creating a slim and toned body through language associated with femininity and smallness additionally reinforced participants' desires to become smaller. This finding affirms Chastain's (2019) finding that fitness facilities often perpetuate a weight stigma by creating a perceived unwelcoming environment for people who do not possess the ideal body of the organization.

In talking about health and nutrition, most participants made comments about the importance of physical and mental health, rather than appearance being their primary reason for working out. Thus, my participants revealed that health was no longer constituted as just one's weight, but a holistic view of one's sleep, nutrition, exercise, and mental state, suggesting a departure from traditional ideas associated with diet culture. However, though participants seemed to understand this, many of the facilities' services still operated within the diet culture framework. By advertising quantifiable measures of health like counting macros, tracking food, and using the body scanner, some facilities reinforced a view of health often associated with diet culture.

Additionally, across gender identities, most participants revealed they were currently exercising to lose weight or had exercised in the past with the goal of losing weight. Previous literature has found that losing weight is primarily a goal associated with women, while men will frame this as building muscle (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017:31). My study, in contrast, found that while both men and women expressed this sentiment, the goal of losing weight seemed to affect women and gay men more than straight men. Put another way, when straight men would mention their desires to lose weight, it appeared as more of a passing thought. For women and gay men, however, this topic took up more mental energy, both in the interviews and their everyday lives. Thus, my study differed from previous literature (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017) by showing men had desires to lose weight, but also affirmed women and gay men were more affected by these desires.

Even if gender patterns were defied in fitness, it seemed women and men still worked out in ways that upheld femininity and masculinity, as previous literature has found (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017; Dworkin 2001). While both men and women expressed desires

to lose weight, specific desires to be leaner, more toned, or smaller came from women. Men, in contrast, pointed to wanting certain areas of their body to be larger. This affirms what previous literature has found, that there was a glass ceiling on women's strength that encouraged women to avoid building too much muscle so as to not look masculine (Dworkin 2001; Johansson 1996; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017). As Dworkin (2001) found, women continued to make "strategic fitness choices" to fit these feminine ideals by avoiding particular exercises to ensure they did not become too masculine. Adding to the literature, my study revealed that men also made these "strategic fitness choices" by focusing on building their arms and chest, engaging in higher-intensity workouts like CrossFit, and adding additional weights to increase their resistance during workouts. My study displayed, however, that even if men and women exercised in these strategic ways, women grappled with this more, with the feminine body ideal weighing heavier on their workout habits.

Discussion on Ethnographic Findings

Culture

Previous literature has looked at traditional gyms and examined how they create a distinct culture where particular norms and gender displays are rewarded. Often, because gyms are seen as masculine spaces, masculinity is rewarded in these spaces (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017; Johansson 1996). Within my study, I found that each space developed its own norms, values, and culture, but not always in ways aligning with masculinity (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017; Johansson 1996). This marks a departure from the literature showing how different fitness styles developed their own unique cultures surrounding gender and fitness.

Subtle Hints At Gender And Operating Within the Binary

Aligning with previous research on gendered organizations (Acker 1990) and gender architecture (Rendell, Penner, and Borden 2000; Weisman 1981), my study affirmed that gyms continued to convey messages about the ideal gendered body of each facility through their spaces. In the majority of the spaces, subtle messages were sent to women to communicate the space was created with men in mind. The presence of a wide variety of heavy weights, equipment being adjusted to accommodate a man's body, and masculine music all subtly communicated this.

Though most research has focused on how fitness facilities are created with a man's body in mind, there were examples where men were implicitly excluded within the barre studio. By the barre studio selling workout clothing only for women (sports bras, leggings) they communicated the message that their merchandise was catered to a woman's body. Thus, anyone who did not feel comfortable wearing these articles of clothing, namely gender-non-conforming people and men, were left out of purchasing items needed for the workout. Thus, this study expanded ideas about gender architecture and gendered spaces, expanding Acker's (1990) piece, by suggesting these spaces could implicitly discriminate against both men and women depending on the facility. Importantly though, even the supposedly gender-neutral facility of the personal training gym sent the message that the facility was meant for men. This suggests that beyond facilities that were nearly all women, facilities frequently catered to men and sent messages to indicate this.

In contrast to previous literature on gendered spaces and architecture, my study found there were also examples where the spaces had become more gender-neutral, suggesting a departure from previous literature that shows gyms heavily operate within the binary (Acker

1990; Rendell, Penner, and Borden 2000; Weisman 1981). The personal training and CrossFit gyms had gender-neutral bathrooms rather than men's and women's bathrooms. One participant from the CrossFit gym also revealed how the facility had recently changed their language to stop operating within the binary. Whereas in CrossFit as an organization men and women are split into separate groups when competing, this particular gym tried to eliminate this language to eliminate stigma across gender groups. Thus, rather than differentiating weight classes by being women's weights and men's weights, the facility started using more neutral terms like weights for "smaller and bigger athletes." Of course, these terms were still implicitly gendered, with women using the weights meant for smaller athletes and men using weights for bigger athletes. However, it does display the gym's efforts to change their language, especially as the larger organization of CrossFit continues to operate within the binary. Thus, while the facilities still operated within the binary in many ways, it did not appear they were hypergendered within the binary like traditional gyms have been described by past researchers (Duncan 2021).

These findings are important as they display that even if the culture of spaces was changing to become more accepting of women and gender-non-conforming people, the physical spaces still communicated messages about gender to make people who were not of the dominant gender group feel excluded.

Discipline: Seen More With Men

Previous literature has found that women are more likely to associate working out with building discipline (Woitak 2018). My study, in contrast, found that men and men-focused sites were more likely to frame fitness as a way to build discipline. The CrossFit and personal training gyms often took on a militaristic tone, spreading the message that to work out properly was to consistently challenge oneself. CrossFit's focus on building grit and the drill-sergeant-like

instructions in the personal training gym demonstrated the workouts' connections with building discipline.

In talking with men, working out was often framed as a discipline-building activity. Paul (A white man with Hispanic background in his 50s, CrossFit) described how CrossFit had taught him the importance of discipline by using phrases like “just keep chipping away.” Paul revealed that this mindset of cultivating discipline allowed him to succeed within CrossFit and his outside life, demonstrating how working out was often associated with discipline for men. While a few women did mention discipline within our conversations, only the men-oriented sites of the CrossFit and personal training gyms used the language of discipline in their workouts. Thus, this marks a departure from previous literature, suggesting that the connections between working out and building discipline may have been associated more with men than women.

CrossFit As A Religion

Though CrossFit as an organization is not religious in nature, the workout at times took on more religious tones. As past literature has shown (Clifford 2016), CrossFit takes on the role religion would for many athletes, being something one devotes their time to like a religion. The three words, “Grit, Gratitude, and Humility,” revealed the gym's goals for its athletes, with the words gratitude and humility having religious connotations (December 2022). One of my respondents, Paul (a straight white man with Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit) also referred to the organization of CrossFit using religious terminology in describing how the organization spread messages to its members. He said: “CrossFit itself is an interesting animal when you break it down, if you listen to what the business, what the company is telling you, what the headquarters is preaching.” Thus, by using the word “preaching” rather than a less religious word like saying, one can see how CrossFit took on religious connotations for many

members. The all-encompassing nature of the workout additionally revealed how respondents' personal lives were affected by the workout, becoming more of a lifestyle than merely an activity. Whether CrossFit was referred to as a religion or a cult by participants, it was clear the workout was more than just a form of exercise.

Comparison: Especially At Women-Oriented Sites

Past literature has criticized gyms for being a site where competition thrives through the use of mirrors and open, panopticon-like spaces (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:483; Johansson 1996; Norris 2019). Surprisingly, my study found that this comparison seemed to be improving, but only in the men-oriented facilities like CrossFit and personal training. The women-oriented barre facility, though marketed as a safe and empowering space, often implicitly encouraged women to compare themselves to one another. While the CrossFit and personal training studios had removed mirrors from their spaces, barre participants were encouraged to look in the mirror to see how their bodies looked throughout the workout. Across the sites, women who did barre were most likely to bring up their habits of comparison, acknowledging how the mirrors and ideal bodies of instructors made them feel inadequate if they did not possess the “proper” barre body. Thus, rather than run-of-the-mill or men-oriented gyms being a space where comparison thrives, my study aligns with the literature that shows comparison often thrives more in women-dominated spaces (Fisher, Burberry, and Misener2018:485). Though evaluating oneself to others did appear with men, it took on the form of competition rather than comparison. Importantly, while competition was often cited as positive force for men in motivating them to work out harder, comparison was almost always negative for women. While men's competition was about how one's body could move, comparison was about how women's bodies looked. Thus, Fisher, Berbary, and Misener's (2018) idea of the gym as “an arena of

constant evaluation” did hold true in my study, but in different ways depending on the facility’s gender dynamics.

The Role of Clothing

Past scholars have looked at how workout clothing conveys messages about gender (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:485; Douglas 1996; Cregan 2012). My study affirmed what previous literature has found: women often wore form-fitting clothing like leggings and tight workout tops which constituted an embodied form of doing gender (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018; Webb et al. 2017; West and Zimmerman 1987; Douglas 1996; Cregan 2012). My study also showed that clothing marked a racialized and class-based form of fitness, as to possess the ideal workout gear for an exercise like barre, one had to be able to afford the expensive clothing (Fisher, Berbary, and Misener 2018:486).

While examples of femininity were demonstrated across all the sites, it seemed to be especially prevalent in the all-women setting of barre. Sue, a barre instructor and student, reflected on the pressure to wear trendy athleisure while in the studio:

The whole athleisure thing... Things are much tighter and shorter, like crop tops... So now it’s kind of like [an expectation] to wear clothes that are in style. You don’t have to, but the ideal image is to be thinner because you can’t just wear the clothes the same way. I feel like prior to like five years ago, stuff wasn’t super tight, and shirts weren’t super tight and short... So you had a bit more wiggle room... Your whole body is on display with what you’re wearing [now]. (Straight white woman in her late-20s, barre)

For Sue, because of the tight-fitting nature of athleisure, not only did barre promote what clothes one should be wearing, but a specific body type as the clothes showed off one’s body by being tight-fitting. Thus, athleisure may not have always been a desired way that women could display their gender identity. Rather, it often constituted a form of oppression that reinforced what women should look like.

This aligns with previous literature that finds our culture's focus on women's workout clothing as a controlling form of femininity. Woitas (2018) explains "By putting so much emphasis on what women wear for training, the traditional image of women having to look appealing in the first place, even in sweaty situations, is reproduced" (p. 155). This certainly played a role for women like Sue, and it appeared to be even more of a force now than ever because of the rise of athleisure.

Importantly, these complaints seemed to be more prevalent at the barre studio rather than the CrossFit or personal training gyms. Michelle, a member of the personal training gym, expressed gratitude for the more casual nature of the facility. She stated:

Nobody wears matchy-matchy workout clothes. People just are in their T-shirts, which is another thing I love...I have workout pants and some T-shirts...

[At other gyms it's like] "I'm going to be sweating when I want to wear makeup. [My] tights don't match my little cute little sports bra"...I don't want to go to a gym like that. I want to go to a gym where we're concentrating on working out...[Where] there are people who want to work out and are focused on fitness...Not like a pickup spot. (Straight white woman in her mid-60s, personal training)

Thus, though women across the sites recognized the gendered expectation to wear feminine workout clothing, this expectation was not present in every site. Perhaps in barre, because it was a women-dominated setting where comparison thrived, women felt the need to maintain standards of femininity through trendy clothing. Thus, while clothing did still communicate gendered messages within the fitness world, my study showed that clothing played a different role depending on the fitness facility.

Employees and Ownership of Facilities

Past research has determined that particular roles within the fitness industry are gendered. Personal trainers and gym owners are associated with men, while women are associated with group fitness instructors (Vogel 2018; Debas 2022). In reality, women are more likely to be

personal and group fitness trainers, while men are more likely to be owners of fitness facilities (Vogel 2019; Debas 2022). My study found that these gendered assumptions differed depending on the facility. Across the masculine space of CrossFit and the supposedly gender-neutral facility of the personal training gym, the owners were men. The CrossFit studio, however, had an equal breakdown of trainers who were men and women, while personal training had more men trainers. The barre studio, in contrast, was all women: from the owner, to the front desk employees, to all of the group fitness instructors. Thus, the assumption of who fills each role within the facilities differed based on the gender audiences and gendered connotations of the facilities.

Defying Femininity in CrossFit?

While observing the CrossFit gym, I was surprised to see traditional displays of masculinity being performed by athletes of all gender identities. Whereas previous literature has found that men perform displays of masculinity like grunting and slamming weights in traditional weight rooms (Johansson 1996; Turnock 2021; Frederick et al. 2017), these actions were not gendered in CrossFit. Both men and women could be found engaging in these traditional displays of masculinity to demonstrate the difficulty of the workout.

One of my respondents, Paul (a straight white man with Hispanic background in his mid-50s, CrossFit) described this, saying: “Gender almost takes on a very different flavor at our gym...Gender gets stripped away pretty freaking quickly there.” While women performing traditionally masculine actions may have been perceived as gender being “stripped away,” women’s gender still existed. When women engaged in displays of masculinity, it was perceived as gender being eliminated because masculinity was seen as the norm in CrossFit. For women entering men-dominated spaces, they may have felt the need to subscribe to traditional notions of masculinity in order to blend in.

Similarly, while men were sometimes able to point out how gender played a role at the gyms they attended, few were able to see how gender impacted their individual habits. This suggested while men were able to see how gender affected women, because they viewed themselves as the norm, they did not question if they were performing gender. For gay man, rather than their stories being related to gender, they most often were related to their sexual orientation. Thus, when women in CrossFit adopted traditionally masculine characteristics, rather than this being an example of women becoming masculine, it was seen as gender being eliminated, as women conformed to the masculine setting of the CrossFit gym.

Aligning with past research, my study found that gender-neutral facilities often veered into masculine territory (Duncan 2021). CrossFit demonstrated this frequently. Rather than incorporating elements of femininity to become more gender-neutral, the studio became more gender-neutral by encouraging women to take on masculine traits and engage in a masculine workout (Duncan 2021). Similarly at the personal training gym, though the gym was 50% men and 50% women, the goal of the workout veered into masculine territory, with the goal being for people of all gender identities to lift weights to build muscles. Thus, by women taking on more masculine traits in these facilities, the facilities were not becoming more gender-neutral, but having people of all gender identities adapt to the masculine setting.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

My study demonstrates how even if gendered barriers are being broken in fitness, many aspects of the fitness world continue to be gendered. While women may have felt empowered by the masculine world of CrossFit, they simultaneously felt disempowered by societal messages of how a woman's body should look. While women in barre appreciated how the workout was made with women in mind, they disliked the gendered comparison that was encouraged in this environment. My study reveals that especially for women, gendered socialization on how a woman should look and how a woman should exercise still impact women's lives, even if they have improved from previous generations.

Directions for Future Research

Like with all research, this study reveals some directions for future research. First, my study only heard the voice of one non-binary individual in navigating the hypergendered, hyperbinary world of fitness. Future research should continue to analyze the experiences of folks outside the gender binary in navigating fitness facilities.

Because of my field sites, the spaces I observed and the people I interviewed were overwhelmingly white and of a higher socioeconomic status. Future research should take a more intersectional approach, focusing on how particularly race, class, and cultural background play a role in fitness.

My research must also be understood in the context of the U.S. and the specific city, neighborhoods, and field sites I observed. Thus, future research should focus on how location

impacts the culture of fitness facilities. Rural areas, suburban areas, different states, and different countries would make an interesting comparison, seeing how the culture and price of fitness differ depending on location.

My study reveals there are still many areas of fitness that have yet to be studied to their fullest potential. We must continue to study fitness sites to make them welcoming, empowering, and joyful spaces. This includes looking at current barriers to exercise, ones that are often gendered, racialized, class-based, and ability-based. Because our society considers exercise a large part of practicing a healthy lifestyle, we must address these barriers because we all deserve to have positive experiences with fitness.

APPENDIX A
SCHEDULE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

SCHEDULE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Information

- To protect your identity as I write my thesis, I will be using pseudonyms for all participants. Do you have a pseudonym you would like me to use for you?
- What is your gender identity? What pronouns do you use?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What is your racial/ethnic identity?
- How old are you?

Background Information on Their Use of the Facility

- Tell me about your transition to ____.
 - What type of membership do you hold at the facility? What made you join? What makes you stay? How often do you go?
- What does a typical week at ____ look like for you?
 - What classes do you attend? (names and times of classes)
 - If they do personal training: When are your personal training sessions? Do you usually meet with one particular trainer?

Fitness History and Current Fitness Habits

- When did you start your fitness journey?
- What are your current fitness goals? What is your motivation for working out?
- Outside of ____, do you engage in any other physical activities?
- Are there any classes or types of workouts that you do not enjoy participating in?
- If the facility has nutrition services: Have you used the nutrition services at ____?
- Do you currently follow any specific diet?

Gender-Related Questions

- If the person does not identify as the dominant gender of the facility: ___ is traditionally associated with masculinity/femininity. How do you navigate the space as a ____ (woman, man, non-binary person, gender-non-conforming person, etc.)?
- How do find gender affecting the space or interactions at ___?
 - Do you find there are certain areas of the gym or certain classes where there are more people of a particular gender identity?
- For yourself, do you believe your gender identity influences your fitness habits?

APPENDIX B
ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION GUIDE

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION GUIDE

The Physical Space

- What types of posters/decorations are on the wall? What does this say about masculinity, femininity, race, age, and body type?
- How are mirrors used in space?
- Are there numerical trackers in the space? (Heart rate monitors, calorie counters)
- What colors are utilized in the space? Does it differ based on the area of the facility?
- What types of equipment are present?
- What are all of the resources available? (pools, saunas, personal training)
- Is there daycare?
- What are the different areas of the gym called?
- Where is the site located?
- Who works at the facility? What does the gender, racial, age, body-type breakdown of the staff look like?

The People and Interactions

- Where do people congregate in the space? Does this differ based on gender, race, or age?
- Are certain demographics more likely to congregate at particular times?
- Do people chat with one another in the facility? Before classes? With the instructor?
- Are there examples of potential harassment, especially a dynamic of men harassing women? This could include inappropriate encounters like catcalling, staring, being hit on, unsolicited comments, flirtatious behavior, etc.
- Is there gender dominance in certain spaces?

- What happens if a woman walks into a men-dominated space? What happens when a man is in a traditionally feminine space?
- What types of clothing do people of each gender wear? (Colors, tightness of the clothing)
- What is the body diversity in the space? (In terms of body type)
- How do people use their phones at the facility? Taking photos/videos of themselves? Listening to music? Watching something on a cardio machine? Following a fitness video?

Fitness Classes

- How is fitness framed in the class? As a chore? As a fun activity? For health? As a punishment?
- What does the instructor call specific body parts?
- What is the gender breakdown of the classes?
- What time are the fitness classes held?
- What types of classes are offered?
- What are the names of the classes?
- What type of music is played?
- Where do people in the class stand? Near the front? In the back? Does it differ by gender?
- How does the instructor motivate their participants?
- How is working out framed? For fitness? Health? Losing weight? Burning calories? A punishment?

Marketing and Online Analysis

- Who is in the marketing materials? Gender? Body type? Race? Age?
- Is the marketing tailored toward a particular gender?
- What is the general description of the website? What is their mission?
- What is the price of the facility? What is included at specific price points?

APPENDIX C
RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS

RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation	Studio
Alex	Woman	24	White with Hispanic background	Bisexual	CrossFit
Natalie	Woman	30	White	Queer	CrossFit
Mary	Woman	50	White	Straight	CrossFit
Robert	Man	32	White	Gay	CrossFit
Paul	Man	55	White with Hispanic background	Straight	CrossFit
Jackson	Man	32	Not provided	Gay	CrossFit
Simon	Man	50	White	Straight	CrossFit
Joe	Man	31	White	Straight	Barre
Nikita	Woman	31	Asian	Straight	Barre
Julia	Woman	35	White	Straight	Barre
Sue	Woman	28	White	Straight	Barre
Ashley	Woman	26	White	Straight	Barre
Callie	Woman	34	Indian American	Straight	Barre
Verde	Man	22	White	Gay	Personal Training
Michelle	Woman	66	White	Straight	Personal Training
Christine	Woman	41	White	Straight	Personal Training
Miriam	Non-binary (She/they)	35	White	Bisexual	Personal Training
Meredith	Woman	37	White	Straight	Personal Training

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation	Studio
Anne	Woman	42	White	Straight	Personal Training
Garry	Man	57	White	Straight	Personal Training

1

¹ Respondents self-identified their gender and ethnic/racial identities.

APPENDIX D
INSTRUCTORS' DEMOGRAPHICS

INSTRUCTORS' DEMGRAPHICS

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Studio
Mitch	Man	Late 20s	White	CrossFit
Peter	Man	Mid 30s	White	CrossFit
Lila	Woman	Early 30s	White	Barre
Chelsea	Woman	Early 30s	White	Barre
Hailey	Woman	Early 30s	White	Barre
Tatiana	Woman	Mid 30s	Person of color	Personal Training
Aria	Woman	Mid 30s	White	Personal Training
Ricky	Man	Mid 30s	White	Personal Training

1

¹ All instructors were given pseudonyms. Other characteristics are estimates based on my observation.

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