An Autoethnographical Tapestry of Feminist Reflection on My Journey of a Fitness Model Physique

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL TAPESTRY OF FEMINIST REFLECTION ON MY PURSUIT OF A FITNESS MODEL PHYSIQUE

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

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Graduate Program in Kinesiology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts

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Abstract

Weight training and fitness competitions are increasingly popular activities for many women seeking an aesthetically fit body. This thesis entails a critical reflection of the various factors surrounding my personal decision to partake in body sculpting, examining how these factors parallel the experience of other women in the fitness industry. Using a feminist theoretical framework and autoethnography, a history of feminist theory is incorporated to demonstrate some of the various perspectives surrounding women bodies. Two challenges for women are discussed in this paper: i) the fear of fat, and how it is connected to a woman’s initial decision to attend the gym; and ii) the fear of masculinization, which is often experienced by women once they are in weight training environments. A discussion of women’s fitness and health magazines is included to expand the discussion on body image. These magazines are also analyzed for their positive and negative influences on women’s fitness. Performance-based activities are proposed as an alternative to fitness competitions for their objectivity. Finally, a personal perspective is offered on the meaning of femininity, within the context of North American culture.

Keywords

body sculpting, gender, autoethnography, body image, weight training, bodybuilding, feminist theory, feminism
Dedication

“For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.”

~ Christina Rossetti,

Goblin Market

Dedicated to my sister, Theresa.
Acknowledgments

Before I begin, I must take a moment to thank those who played an invaluable role in making this thesis possible.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Angela Schneider, for her unwavering support and guidance over the last two years. Thank you for encouraging me to share my story.

Dr. Alison Lee and Dr. Don Morrow, thank you for your time, insight, discussion, suggestions, feedback and patience. You have influenced me more than you will know. I owe my sanity to the both of you.

To my friends and colleagues, you were there through it all – the late nights at the office, the pep-talks, the trips to Starbucks, and the final product. I’m blessed to have such awesome people in my life.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Mikey, Candice, Ian, Katie, Theresa, Mom and Dad. Thank you for always supporting me in all my endeavors. Your unending love and encouragement has helped me grow into the woman I am today.
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Abbreviations

IFBB – International Federation of Body Building and Fitness

IOC – International Olympic Committee

OPA – Ontario Physique Association

WBFF – World Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation
Chapter 1

1 Tabula Rasa

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge?

To this I answer, in one word, from experience. 

July 24, 2012

I decided to compete in another OPA show... Show? That’s what I have learned to call it. Some may disagree... Show? Competition? Spectacle? Circus? There are many words to describe the event that takes place.

Essentially, as a competitor, I am showing the judges and the audience my body. Every curve is showcased, with the exception of the areas covered by velvet and rhinestones. With the help of a little dehydration, my skin remains glued to my muscles, illustrating every curve and vein. I remember it so vividly. High on the stage in clear, five-inch platform heels, I stood beside those who understand the hard work and discipline it took to get here. My gaze looked outward to the shadows while the hot spotlights beam down on me. Sweat beads begin to drip from my brow. The cloud of

---

1 Tabula Rasa is a Latin phrase, meaning “blank (or erased) slate.” It is most often associated with John Locke, who provided the most comprehensive articulation of the “blank slate” theory.


3 OPA is an acronym for the Ontario Physique Association.
spray tan and body odor lingers in the air. Simultaneously, I flex every muscle in my body. My belly is held in tight while I take short, shallow breaths. My lower back is starting to ache from the excessive arch. The dryness of my mouth is masked by Vaseline, which is coated on my teeth to prevent my gums from sticking to them.

Smile.

Chest up.

Square shoulders.

Suck in.

Arch back.

Squeeze glutes.

Flex quads.

Breathe.

I move head-to-toe through my checklist, over, and over, and over. Flex, smile, flex, chest up, flex, arch back, flex, breathe. Don’t look too rigid! I might only have a few minutes to present my body. I am working my best angles in hopes that the judges rank my physique higher than the girl standing on either side of me. Do I have what the judges are looking for? Do I have the proportions? Do I have the ideal amount of muscle? Does the girl beside me look better? What is the audience saying?

18!

53!

71!
Numbers are echoed from shadows in the audience. I listen intently for the number that matches the ‘24’ on my hip. At this point, I have no idea where I rank. I only hope that the past sixteen weeks have been worth the time and discipline. Sometimes I wonder... *If I had only done ‘this’ instead of ‘that’, I wish I hadn’t gone away the weekend that caused me to miss my workouts, or, I shouldn’t have ate that whole bag of chocolate covered almonds... oops.* There is no room for regrets now. There is nothing I can hide standing in front of these hundreds of people. Side by side, I am compared to the other girls. Cottage cheese bum has no place beside perfectly capped deltoids and six-pack washboard abs. As I stand there, I hope to be one of the girls that get a Top-5 call-out. In the meantime... my checklist continues.

*Smile.*

---

*18 weeks out of my show, I reflect back on memories from my last competition.*
Figure 1: My first fitness model competition; April 9, 2011

(Linton, C.V. “UFESBFin1104-CVL1283” 2011. Digital File Type.)
1.1 Introduction

If you asked me six years ago where I saw myself today, doing a Masters degree was not a thought that would have crossed my mind. It seemed like one of those times where the universe is pointing you in a direction and all the pieces fell together. As I write, I am reliving the journey from where I began to where I am now. From a small town, country girl to a city-loving academic, it is interesting to reflect back on the moments that have led me to this point. The pursuit of post-secondary education, to me, seemed to be a means of moving on from the humble upbringings of my childhood and embarking on a journey of soul searching and re-invention.

My initial intention for attending university was to become a gym teacher. Throughout my childhood, I looked up to my gym teachers as role models. I viewed teaching as a means to influence growing minds in the same way my teachers influenced me. I was never afraid of judgment and found myself confiding in them about issues on and off the field. They were the coolest people I knew, and I wanted to be like them.

Another motivator for pursuing post-secondary education was my love for sports. Spending most of my childhood on a farm in the upper Ottawa Valley, I could always be counted on to explore in the field, barns, or forest. I could never sit still or stay inside because being active in the outdoors was second nature to me. I followed my imagination wherever it took me and loved it. The only thing I loved more was playing sports.

As an all-around athlete in high school, I was never exceptional at one specific sport but was athletically inclined for multiple activities. My tomboyish nature also made me quite competitive, and growing up with seven other siblings only encouraged my drive. I was continuously looking to challenge myself wherever possible. Mostly, I chose to compete with my fellow classmates, playing alongside them during lunchtime soccer and volleyball games, or challenging the boys to pushup contests, or arm wrestling matches, where I held my own. I was not ready to go out into the ‘real world’ just yet. So naturally when I learned that university offered a program called Kinesiology that allowed me to play sports for marks while pursuing a teaching career, I was sold. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made.
Somewhere between my first and fourth year, the idea of becoming a teacher diminished as my interests shifted. Certain courses began to have a profound effect on my thought processes. Specifically, I began developing my view of the body, both on a physiological and socio-cultural level. Seeing athletic bodies on lecture overheads drew my attention. The glistening skin of a sprinter compared to the muscle tone of a gymnast. These bodies were beautiful. Then, I began to internalize the images I was seeing to my own body. I had been active my whole life – why didn’t I look like that? I had never considered myself to be overweight, but suddenly I was pinching my stomach and flexing my arms. I was doing what many women do – critiquing my body.

Although I had spent the past four years learning about anatomy and physiology, I was not applying my knowledge of exercise or nutrition to my own body. As a goal-oriented person, I needed something to work towards. From a young age, I found an instant fascination with watching the annual Ms. Fitness America pageants. I was amazed with their athleticism and fitness, as well as the muscular bodies they carried. I always admired the bodies of Figure Olympia competitors Monica Brant and Rachel McLish. Their physiques resembled statuesque-Greek gods. That was when I decided, “I’m going to do a figure competition!” Then, I hung up my soccer cleats in exchange for a set of dumbbells and the rest is history…

Not quite.

It was only the beginning. Amongst the highs of molding my body into a lean, muscle machine and the thrill of walking on the competition stage, came the lows of the post-competition rebound and shame that accompanies it. For the first time, I was incredibly insecure about my body, which alongside my mind, was burnt out from an emotionally taxing rollercoaster-like caused by the disappointment I felt when I gained

5 Monica Brant is one of the most well-known figure competitors in the world.
all of my weight back post-show. The weight that took me five months to get off only took one month to put back on. It was a depressing slap in the face.

While uncovering my inner thoughts and feelings, I soon realized that I was not the only one experiencing this insecurity about my body. The more women I met—athletes, bodybuilders, mothers, daughters, sisters, and everyone in between—the more I realized that women are constantly bombarded with feelings of inadequacies about their bodies. I am hard-pressed to find a woman who does not carry insecurity about the way she looks or perceives herself to look. Even when I was preparing for my first fitness model competition, I carried feelings of inadequacy with me. Interestingly enough, the leaner I became, the more insecure I felt. I began to recognize the mind/body dualism I was facing. By aesthetic standards, my body was in the best shape it had ever been, yet my mind thought differently. There was a disconnect between the two, as if they were separate entities. Shouldn’t I be getting more confident as I get leaner, instead of becoming more insecure? My body should be flaunted, not hidden; my mind wanted the opposite. Everyone told me I looked great, I know I’ve lost a lot of weight. Why do I avoid the compliments and try to hide a body that I’ve been working my butt off to attain? This duality of feelings led me to ask questions for which I sought to find answers.

When did I begin to feel insecure about my body? I was always a confident child growing up. My parents never stressed being a certain weight or pressured me into going on a diet if I over-indulged at Christmas or other family gatherings. The focus was never placed on image, but rather, being healthy and eating balanced meals. Working out was never a problem because I was always an active person, even throughout my university career. So why did I feel insecure about my body in this way? Where did these insecurities stem from? How do I get back to a healthy mentality in regards to my physique? These are all questions I sought to answer, which leads me to my Master’s experience thus far. The more questions I began to ask, the more I realized that many women around me were going through similar experiences with their bodies—some were aware of this mind/body duality, while others were not. As I seek out on a journey to critically analyze my own personal experiences of bodybuilding and figure competitions, my hope is to shed a light on the opinions women hold of their physical, emotional, and
spiritual selves. Each chapter is an extension of my thinking and analysis of the situation facing women today. I have my own conclusions, which have come from my life experiences. My hope is that reading this will help educate, discover, and lead you to your own.

1.2 Purpose

“Only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth.

And that is not speaking.”

Why do I write?

Initially, I set out to prove a point. I wanted to showcase to my audience and academia that women are being repressed by misogynist norms that define societal expectations to look physically fit. While my research has led me to believe this to be partially true, it has also broadened my perspectives and my purpose, both at a personal and academic level. After my own ‘light bulb’ experience, I am relieved to admit that the purpose of this thesis is not to find the answers, but rather, to explore the questions.

During the past two years I have spent within the fitness industry, I have been given many gifts. I have met wonderful people, many of whom have become great friends. I have had opportunities to do fun and exciting things that I may not have done otherwise. I’ve been exposed to a variety of training styles and habits that have worked to


challenge and expand my knowledge. I have found mentors and, in the process, have been able to mentor and teach others.

I have also witnessed many contradictions. I have been exposed to the negative aspects of the industry itself. I have learned that there are some mean and superficial people out there. I have subjected by body to the physical and mental stress of competition prep. I have gone through a post-competition rebound. I have watched others go through similar, and sometime worse, experiences. Looking back, I do not regret any of it. Each event, person, place, obstacle and success has made me stronger, wiser, and led me to where I am today. For this reason, I am grateful, but I want others to read and learn from my experience.

Who do I write for?

I write this thesis for any woman who has gone through a similar experience to mine, who may not have asked herself these questions or who was afraid to share her answers. I write for the other women who attend the gym because they want to, not because they think they should. I write for the women who struggle to find their inner and outer beauty. I write for the women who doubt their strength and capabilities. I write for the women who are searching to find themselves. I write to show that you are not alone.

I also write for men and those who have not experienced what I plan to discuss in the following pages. I understand that what I write might only make sense to me and I am okay with that. I do not write to create conflict or displacement but to provide myself as a case study, using my story as a tool to demonstrate thoughts and ideas that may not have been previously considered. My hope is to provoke discussion between people, to open their minds to a new perspective and help elicit change on a personal level.

Finally, I write for myself. I cannot deny the influence that the past two years have had on my analytical thinking and perspectives of the fitness industry; however, I credit the last 24 years for challenging and changing me into the student, teacher, daughter, sister, friend, feminist, and woman that I am today. I am truly grateful for the
opportunity to share my lived experience and simply ask that you read my words with an open mind and heart.

Why does it matter?

I believe it is important to share my story as a woman and as a feminist. Although I label myself as both a ‘woman’ and a ‘feminist,’ I do not necessarily believe that the words are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive for other women. In fact, my experience has demonstrated that many people (female and male) have a negative association with the term ‘feminist.’ Regardless, I find comfort in calling myself a feminist. It is a label that I am proud to showcase because the word has my own unique value and meaning attached to it. Being a feminist is not meant to be a scary or intimidating thing. It does not mean I am anti-male or that I like to complain about female repression. Instead, I tend to see it in a positive light. To me, being a feminist means that, as a woman, I have the power to choose. I have control over my thoughts, actions, and identity, which grants me the power to choose what I do, where I go, what I wear, and how I act. Each decision I make is one that is meant to increase my overall well-being and is independent of the comments and opinions from those around me. Being a feminist means I support others who do the same, both female and male. In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with being labeled a feminist. While reading through, I hope to convey this message and potentially inspire others to see and embrace the word for themselves.

As a personal trainer and figure competitor, I understand the effort required to achieving a ‘fit’ body. Daily, I am surrounded by women, many of whom are clients, friends, and colleagues, who are seeking ways of improving their lifestyles and, particularly, their physiques. It should be noted that my referral to ‘women’ in this thesis is not meant to imply the general population (even though a situation or term may apply to many women), instead I am focused on those women who have competed, are interested in competing, or are a part of the fitness and bodybuilding industry in any degree. When I have been given the opportunity to discuss their bodies with them, each woman has given me different and distinctive insights into the intentions, methods, and
reasons for the pursuit of a fit-looking body. While some would argue that the pursuit of fitness and the pursuit of a fitness body are synonymous, I am inclined to believe otherwise. I have met countless women in the industry who over-train, under-eat, and obsess about their image. They are continually dissatisfied with themselves because they allow their self-worth to be determined by a number on a scale. They constantly seek out external validity but are never satisfied with their efforts because they buy into a vain, unrealistic idea of success and beauty. This may or may not seem obvious to some, but it happens every day. While I understand the need to be our own toughest critics (and I have been guilty of these thoughts too), I wish women could stop trying to change their bodies to fit an unrealistic standard and start embracing their inner strength and uniqueness. I often ask women why they participate in weight training, fitness classes, running, yoga, etc. Do they enjoy it? Do they have measurable goals? What is their motivation? Is it for aesthetics or performance purposes?

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold. Primarily, this thesis provides personal and cultural insight on the ‘fit’ female using autoethnography and feminist theory of changing views on women’s bodies. It serves to unveil and compare the influences affecting a woman’s decision to partake in weight training, especially for aesthetic purposes, in North American culture. By extension, this thesis allows me to share my experiences as a fitness competitor, personal trainer, feminist, and woman with my audience by presenting my thoughts, actions and beliefs using autoethnography. As an extension, I also analyze the thoughts, actions and beliefs of North American society in hopes of understanding the intentions influencing a woman’s decision to participate in fitness competitions or pursue fitness solely for aesthetic purposes. Fitness competitions, and women who participate in them, are the focal point for my discussions because this is the context of my knowledge, research, and experience. My goal is to discuss personal and theoretical perspectives on dilemmas shared by myself and female fitness enthusiasts like myself in the quest for an aesthetically fit-looking body.
1.3 Method and Methodology

Autoethnography is the primary method used for this thesis and will be explained further in Chapter 2. To briefly summarize, autoethnography is the process through which a researcher becomes part of the study, where “I” am an active participant in the outcome, rather than being a mere bystander. On this process, Ellis\(^9\) writes:

\begin{quote}
Back and forth the autoethnographers gaze; First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their own personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations.
\end{quote}

Ellis and Bochner define autoethnography as the use of a research process (graphy) in combination with the culture (ethno) and inner self (auto)\(^10\). Autoethnography creates a complex framework that serves to weave a deeply personal representation of self with surrounding cultural ideologies, thus developing an autobiographical account of its writer. In combination with feminist theory of women’s bodies, I use personal narrative writings in the form of journaling, as a means of unveiling the societal ideologies surrounding women’s bodies, particularly regarding the ‘fit’ body. While journaling is only one form of autoethnographic recording, I felt it was the best method to initiate and develop discussions around my fitness competition experience.

During my competition preparation, I recorded a personal journal of day-to-day interactions and significant events. These journal entries will be incorporated throughout my thesis as a means of connecting my thoughts to a larger socio-cultural construct of how we, as individuals, view the female body.


1.4 Literature Review of Primary Authors & Theorists

When studying the works of the following theorists’, it is evident that women have struggled to find a place for themselves in a male-dominated society. In particular, gender bias is a form of repression that causes discussion in academic and cultural circles alike, both of the past and the present.

The authors and theorists chosen for this thesis are largely due to the influences they have in regards to women’s issues in general and, specifically, in regards to the issues surrounding women’s bodies. Throughout this thesis, I discuss a variety of subject matter as it relates to my experiences as a fitness competitor, while using these theorists to evolve the discussion on issues affecting women in the fitness community. Primarily, body image, gender issues, feminism, media influence, physiology, and psychology will be largely concentrated upon (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The multiple topic areas interwoven in My Story
Each of the subsequent authors brings a unique perspective to one or more of the aforementioned areas of discussion, which aids in expanding the theoretical and scientific merit of my lived-experiences. Since the topics are interwoven throughout the following pages, they help to illustrate the multi-disciplinary nature of my thesis and aid examining the issues from distinctive viewpoints. Each individual contribution assists to outline the depth of issues I have personally witnessed during my time as a fitness competitor. Taken together, these perspectives are merged to evaluate the problem and work toward proposing a solution.

As an autoethnographer, I define and summarize the use of autoethnography through the framework outlined by Carolyn Ellis, Heewon Chang, and Deborah Reed-Danahay. Their research and applications of autoethnography as a method, represents some of the most current and widely used resources on the subject to date. I also give examples of prior autoethnographical research pertaining to body image to provide context for its use.

As a feminist, I draw parallels from prior feminist theories and compare them to present theories, in an attempt to determine the similarities and differences in regard to women and their bodies. To help my readers understand the origins of my own perspectives, specific feminist theorists, psychologists, and researchers are incorporated into my writing to help clarify concepts and elaborate on discussion topics pertaining to women’s bodies.

---


When discussing women’s rights, Mary Wollstonecraft\(^{13}\) and Betty Friedan\(^{14}\) are pioneers for the cause. Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* is considered to be the founding document of liberal feminism. Combined with radical feminist Betty Friedan, the foundation is laid for women’s rights and for the theoretical frameworks from which modern feminism is derived. In contrast to these women, Sigmund Freud\(^{15}\) provides notable and interesting insights on an alternative view of the body and sexuality. While Freud is not categorized as a feminist, his work is successful in providing a counter argument from which gender feminism\(^{16}\) originates. Unlike psychoanalytical theorists, who are concerned with the psychosexual development of beings, gender feminists are interested in the differences that distinguish the female psyche from the male psyche.\(^{17}\) They do not seek to study the physical or biological sex of a being. Instead, their focus lies on the gender-specific values and virtues that shape one’s personhood at a moral level.

During the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties, Sandra Bem\(^{18}\) and Naoimi Wolf\(^{19}\) expanded upon the prior gender theorists to provide transitional opinions on women’s bodies as gender feminist scholars. Bem’s *Sex Role Inventory* provides a spectrum of gender characteristics that represent societal norms from which ideas of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are derived. The induction of this scale, that seeks to


\(^{16}\) Gender feminism is also referred to as cultural feminism.


categorize men and women by their character traits, satisfies the socio-cultural context rather than biology context; thus dealing with the concept of ‘gender’ and not biological ‘sex.’

Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* has provoked controversial debates between women’s groups and alternative groups alike. *Beauty Myth* illustrates that, although women have been granted more opportunity and authority than ever, they are conversely being repressed by misogynistic ideals in multiple areas including, sex, religion, hunger, violence, work, and culture. Specifically, her chapter on hunger is quite applicable to health and fitness because it discusses women’s desire to internalize the external pressures of society, which often require the fulfillment of an unrealistic depiction of beauty.

Moving into the twenty-first century, in relation to women’s perceptions of their bodies, narrow pools of theorists emerged with fresh and enlightening perspectives. Looking at women’s bodybuilding specifically, St. Martin and Gavey\textsuperscript{20}, Melina Bell\textsuperscript{21}, Ann Bolin\textsuperscript{22}, and Maria Lowe\textsuperscript{23} share insight on the women challenging gender norms set by society along with their struggle for self-definition by participating in such activities. Expanding on the representation of women’s bodies, feminist researchers and scholars Shari L. Dworkin\textsuperscript{24} and Cecilia Hartley\textsuperscript{25} share their perspectives on contrasting

perspectives affecting the modern ‘fit’ and ‘fat’ woman, which is collected from various studies they conducted. Hartley votes in favor of fat women and argues that fuller body types should be embraced due to their rejection of the norms in a fat-fearing society. Inversely, Dworkin’s argument is directed at the fitness enthusiasts of the world. Her research sheds light on issues women have in the weight room environment, specifically, women’s reluctance to train with heavy weights due to a fear of becoming overly muscular. Together, Dworkin and Hartley’s identification of contrasting feminist perspectives and supporting evidence on women’s bodies portrays relevant examples of women’s acceptance and rejection of misogynist norms. Despite the fact that the opinions of these two feminists are quite different, they successfully demonstrate the confluence of different social standards, imposed norms, and image ideals projected onto the female body, and subsequently used as a standard by which society judges "women."

With the prevalence of a ‘fit’ body that highlights the cover of many health and fitness magazines, the influence of media outlets must be considered when attempting to understand why women pursue fitness/figure competitions as a means of becoming fit. Feminist blogger Jessica Valenti26 speaks against women’s acceptance of the current standards demonstrated by the media. The rise of information technology allows for more access to information that can be both beneficial and harmful to women, if taken to the extreme.

1.5 Chapter Descriptions

The focus of this thesis is placed on fitness and bodybuilding competitions for their unique position in North American culture and consequently, for the influence that they have on current cultural norms affecting the growing presence of women in the weight room.

To begin, I introduce autotethnography as a methodology. There are various types of autoethnographical research that can be conducted and this chapter seeks to demonstrate the vast spectrum the term encompasses, while also revealing the limitations and benefits of this particular type of data organization. I then draw on examples of recent autoethnographical texts to demonstrate the various uses and evidence behind the method as it applies to women and their bodies, using examples from women who have used autoethnography to document their lived-body experiences.

In Chapter 3, I use selected feminist and psychological theorists as touchstones. In particular, I will focus on those whose works have contributed to modern views on the female body. Specifically, I review parts of the works of Wollstonecraft, Friedan, and Freud for their founding ideas and criticisms in feminist thought. Here, I provide a theoretical framework of prior theories on the female body, namely those by Bem and Wolf, in order to build a foundation upon which I expand using more contemporary theories on women’s subjection and repression. Finally, I use specific research accounts from Dworkin and Hartley to demonstrate alternative perspectives of feminist theory of women’s bodies. I also use these two researchers later to discuss the current state of the views and treatments of women’s bodies and how the societal pressures and expectations placed on women creates a dualistic approach to health and fitness.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on this duality between women’s initial reason for pursuing these activities (the fear of becoming fat) contrasted with their fears of the outcomes (the fear of masculinization). Chapter 4 entails an examination of the socio-cultural pressures placed on women to attain an unrealistic idea of beauty, with a particular focus on the discussion that surrounds fat. The fear of being, or becoming, fat, seems to be the motivating factor for most women’s participation in exercise programs and for following diet plans, evidence of which can be found in the majority of fitness magazines dedicated to this subject matter. In this chapter, I look at examples of fat-obsession in our culture and to draw a connection to the fit-obsession mentality that is becoming increasingly popular with women.
To contrast and compliment the fear of fat, Chapter 5 looks at the fear of masculinization that propels many women away from the weight room altogether. Studying society’s ideas of masculinity and femininity, I determine how female bodybuilders embody the standards of femininity, while discussing how they reject the norms associated with these ideals using literature from Lowe, Bolin, Bell, and St. Martin and Gavey. I also determine whether or not the views stated by these authors hold precedence in a woman’s mind when she enters a gym or training environment and whether ‘women’s only’ gyms provide an acceptable solution to the fears women have with the weight room.

Chapter 6 contains an overall analysis of the current situation of women’s pursuits in the fitness competitions within my local community but also North America. The influence of modern media outlets included establishing the benefits and dangers of women participating in shows. Both aspects will be analyzed in an attempt to ascertain whether or not the participation in fitness shows is a progressive means of achieving a fit body. Alternative methods of fitness will be examined to determine if they provide a healthier option for those looking for a balance between performance and aesthetics.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the outcomes to my experience and understanding as a figure competitor. Alternatives to the current ‘fit body’ ideal are those that offer internal rewards to aid in improving overall well-being from the mental and physical states of its participants. Crossfit and other performance-based sports will be proposed as offering a solution for women seeking to be fit at a performance level, while also wanting to look fit at an aesthetic level. A new ideal of femininity is discussed, which focuses on the objective and intrinsic outcomes of fitness and exercise rather than subjective ideals that may occur as a result of training pursuits. In turn, this new outlook provides a possibility of looking fit while also being fit.

27 Crossfit is a recent training phenomenon that is focused on the performance aspect of fitness.
Chapter 2

2 Method

“A crystal has an infinite number of shapes, dimensions, and angles. It acts as a prism and changes shape, but still has structure. What we see depends on our angle of vision.”

2.1 Autoethnography: An Introduction

Through research on this topic, I quickly realized that there are limited resources on women’s figure competitions. Consequently, the research and data in this thesis on women’s fitness shows is a direct result of my personal experiences. For this reason, I have chosen autoethnography as a primary methodology for my thesis. In this chapter, I intend to review the method, while also listing potential limitations and benefits to its usage in academic literature.

Autoethnography is a relatively new method of research to many in the academic community. Stemming from the word ‘ethnography’, Madden defines autoethnography as a qualitative social science practice that seeks to understand human groups (or societies, or cultures, or institutions) by having the researcher in the same social space as the participants in the study. Autoethnography differs significantly from other methods in that it includes the use of ‘self’. With this working definition in mind, one can weave the perspectives of these human groups with a specific situation, idea, or moment in one’s life through autoethnography. I have also used feminist theory, as outlined in the second part of this chapter on method and it should be noted that these methodologies are not

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mutually exclusive; rather, they are cyclical building blocks of each other. Increasingly, ethnography is autobiographical and autobiography reflects cultural and social frames of reference\textsuperscript{30}. Essentially, autoethnography is a phenomenon, which takes ethnography further by placing the researcher (or researchers) as an authentic member of the group they study, who is also a member of a larger cultural context.

Anthropologists Karl Heider and David Hayano originally introduced the expression ‘autoethnography’ to the social science community during the 1970s. While Hayano is credited as the originator of the term\textsuperscript{31} both researchers were unique because they participated in studies where their own non-fictive reports were recorded as data due to their immersion into the culture of their respective studied groups. Their accounts were so personal that there was no other alternative than to use themselves as primary participants. Simply stated, autoethnography as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context\textsuperscript{32}.

2.2 Types & Approaches

As previously noted in my introduction section, autoethnography is both a method and a methodology. To those who are unfamiliar with its use, autoethnography can often be interpreted as narrative story-telling. However, this is only one application of its multifaceted approach. Language used for this style of writing designates particular types, such as: i) personal ethnography – documenting research as it is occurring; and ii) reflexive ethnography – reflecting on research after it has occurred. While other types refer to methodological approaches, such as: i) systematic sociological introspection; ii) narrative inquiry; and iii) biographical method.\textsuperscript{33} Common descriptors of autoethnographical

\textsuperscript{31} Ellis, (2004), p. 38.
\textsuperscript{32} Reed-Danahay, (1997), p. 9.
\textsuperscript{33} Ellis, (2004), p. 45.
research include: *self-ethnography, ethnographic novel, interpretive ethnography, experimental ethnography, autobiographical sociology, introspective novel, ethnographic novel, introspective ethnography, impressionistic tale, and personal narrative*, among others.

Despite these varying labels, the foremost goal of autoethnography seeks to use the writer(s) as the primary voice of the text. If done correctly, this inclusion has the potential to evoke multiple layers of consciousness through the thoughts, emotions, actions, reactions, and expressions of the author, inevitably provoking a phenomenological state of multiple aspects of conscious thought and interpretation. This provocation occurs as the researcher analyzes his/her thoughts and behaviors because he/she inescapably delves deeper into his/her conscious or subconscious. This is a natural occurrence within autoethnographical research and plays a vital role in unlocking his/her thoughts, but also the unveiling source of the thoughts themselves. In turn, it reveals confounding dilemmas at times, which he/she must analyze and interpret for his/her investigation. I use a combination of the personal and the reflexive narrative autoethnography throughout my thesis.

### 2.3 Limitations

A common challenge associated with this form of methodology is the reliance on authenticity of the voice presented:

The voice of the insider is assumed to be more true than that of the outsider in much current debate. However, this issue is more complicated, partly because of the multiple shifting identities which characterize our lives. Double identity and insider/outsider are constructs too simplistic for an adequate understanding of the processes of representation and power.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{34}\) Ellis, (2004), p. 310.

\(^{35}\) Reed-Danahay, (1997), p. 5.
The reader must trust that the voice is genuine in their expression, which is the responsibility of the writer to uphold. However, even if the author does create a sincere piece, there are often dualistic ideas attached to this form of expression and these dichotomizing identities are sometimes hard for an outsider to fully understand due their complex and often disjointed nature. Therefore, it is the duty of the autoethnographer to convey their ideas as unambiguously as possible while remaining true to their purpose.

Additionally, the explicit nature of this writing style contains a high level of vulnerability on behalf of the author, which can be difficult for many when first undergoing the task of this specific methodology. The accounts should be intimate, allowing the audience to connect with the author, and the details should be specific enough to negate any misinterpretations of the content, without becoming self-indulgent.

Another limitation to the use of autoethnography is the memory of the writer. Such is the case of reflexive research, where one may tend to focus more towards happy memories or sequences of events while leaving the unpleasant experiences to drift into memory. Similarly, one may tend to only recall certain events due to personal relevance or general interest; therefore, the author must work around this bias by making note of any event that elicits some sort of emotion, big or small:

The worst offence, in my mind, is omitting details that don’t fit the analysis, or playing down their importance. But even without that, when it comes to analysis, most traditional ethnographers have no problem reaching beyond description for all kinds of interpretation\[36\].

No emotion can be overlooked, and no detail should be deemed insignificant. This idea runs parallel to how the writer will decide what should be included in their work and what does not make the final draft. True to the methodology, an autoethnographer should include details that may not make sense to its reader, but succeed in drawing broader scenery of the idea presented.

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2.4 Benefits

Despite some of the possible limitations of autoethographical research, there are many benefits for both the reader and the writer. According to Chang, autoethnographers’ vulnerable self-exposure opens a door to the readers’ participation in the stories. This open invitation to mutual vulnerability may appeal to readers and evoke empathy resulting towards a greater personal and cultural understanding. It allows the researcher to explore an area of study from a first-person account, thereby helping to remove one of the walls between data collection and interpretation. As the events occur, the autoethnographer is recording and responding to them in detail while contemplating or interpreting the meaning behind it. In fact, nowhere is the diversity of genres of life-writing more apparent than in the literature by feminist ethnographers who write about women’s lives based on a single women in a particular cultural context. Because many feminist writers advocate starting research from one’s own experience they were better able to advocate for a larger group based upon individual experiences at the time. Because of this, I have included touchstones of feminist theory in my thesis as a fundamental background into my arguments and ideology.

2.5 Examples

In recent years, there have been emerging uses of autoethnographical accounts as research methods in the academic sphere. At the forefront is Carolyn Ellis, a Professor of Sociology at the University of South Florida; whose writings are a constant reference for examples of autoethnography. As one of the experts in the field, she serves as a forefront reference to those looking to understand the methodology at a basic, intermediate, or expert level. Her knowledge on the subject developed while writing her memoir, Final

Negotiations as her partner, a fellow sociologist who was also her professor, entered the final stages of chronic emphysema:

I began to keep daily field notes about my relationship with Gene during the last year of his life, 1984 – 1985. The notes included my thoughts and feelings, conversations between Gene and me, and a description of what happened daily, especially when Gene was in the hospital.

As described by Ellis, keeping a daily account of events, thoughts, feelings, and interactions is a fundamental first step researchers take when beginning autoethnography. This can be done for a multitude of purposes, but mostly to allow the author to become in touch with their inner being. For Ellis, writing was therapeutic, while also being analytical:

My purposes were twofold. Writing notes was therapeutic. The process helped me organize my life, figure out what was going on, and then put away events and feelings in order to deal with what happened next… Second, I felt my life experiences could and should be analyzed sociologically. As sociologists, Gene and I spent a lot of time analyzing our relationship and his illness, and I thought about it when I was alone, too. Thinking sociologically provided a coping mechanism.

By reflecting on her own experience, Ellis was able to create an outline for others to build upon. Using Ellis’ writing as a primary reference, Shellie McParland and Megan Popovic combine a multitude of examples to demonstrate elaborate uses of autoethnography. The results of both create effective examples of the multiple layers of consciousness present in their writing.

41 Ibid, p. 19.
44 Popovic, M. (2010). *Stories of (my)nd body and Soul: An Autoethnography through Hockey, Figure Skating, and Yoga*. London, Ontario: The University of Western Ontario.
McParland provides a fundamental example of the duality that autoethnography can have to the author:

Scene 5

The sweat runs down my face as the heat from the afternoon sun streams onto my skin. My shirt is sticking to me and I want to take it off like everyone else here has already done. As I do every day, I weigh the pros and cons of removing my shirt in front of these male athletes and doing my workout in a sports bra. I feel their gaze and I shouldn’t encourage their sexy image of me by showing lots of skin, but shouldn’t I be able to practice comfortably without worrying what they will say about me in the locker room?

Pro: I want to feel my body through the air as the wind whips past me.

Con: These guys will think I am looking for attention.

Pro: I won’t be so hot.

Con: These guys will think I’m hot.

Pro: These guys will think I’m hot.

Annoyed that my clothing carries such a heavy consequence, I decide I don’t care. I take off my shirt and continue to warm up.45

The dilemma McParland experiences surrounds her decision to remove her shirt at track practice. This example demonstrates the double bind she faces between relieving herself from the heat of the day or being seen as a sexual object to her male peers. This situation may ring true to a large majority of sporting women who may have a similar experience, creating a connection to her audience based upon the authenticity of her writing. This is

one example of the conflicts a writer can experience using this method. Others expand
further to depict multiple dimensions of an event, thought, feeling, or experience.

In her PhD dissertation, Popovic expands on the autoethnographic writing
phenomenon and invites her audience into her lived experiences of hockey, figure
skating, and yoga. Below is an excerpt\(^{46}\) from Popovic that successfully demonstrates the
multiple perspectives of the writer in an autoethnographical text:

**My-Ethnographic Observations: I AM a Leo, My Words Roar Softly**

*Observing-as-Observer: What I see.*

lululemon. Wrinkly skin. Short bodies. Old bodies. Young bodies. All bodies. No
bodies. Soul bodies. Tight muscles. Spare tires. Ponytails and headbands. Naked
Hairy backs. Water bottles. Big mirror. Hazy reflections. Glass door. Grey hair,
brown hair, blond hair, no hair. My eyes refocus straight ahead.

*Observer-Observed: What I feel.*

Grateful + rebellious + excited + nervous + stiff + anxious + worried + speechless
+ careful + hesitant + courageous + outspoken + creative. Bold.

*Observing-the-Observer: What my letters say.*

Moksha yoga student (2003-2010)

Certified Moksha Yoga Instructor (2005-2010)

M.A. Kinesiology (2005): interdisciplinary thesis on snowboarding inspired by
subcultures and histories of alternative sports.

Ph.D (Summer 2010): dissertation explores process of meaning-making through
lived experiences of the mind, body, and soul.

*Observed-observing-Observer: What are your thoughts?*

What do you notice when you look in the mirror?

What do you feel?

Are you surprised by certain qualities of your Self?

Do you choose to turn away?

A wise mentor once old me, one way to empower your life and those around you is to assume a strengths perspective.\(^47\)

Here, Popovic creates a psycho-sensory understanding due to her combination of sight, sense, words, and thoughts. This illustration encompasses multiple-dimensions of interpretation for a single moment in her journey. By clearly identifying and separating her frames of focus, she is not ambiguous in her approach, which – as previously stated – is important when connecting to a reader.

Individually, Popovic and M‘Parland create several examples of the various stylistic approaches within the use of autoethnography. While I do not utilize a range of aspect and styles of the autoethnographical method as my predecessors have done, I do include a singular example of reflexive autoethnography through my contest journals. I use my journal entries to reveal my thoughts and feelings at the time because reflexive journaling is a representation of autoethnographic writing. While reflexive writing may not reflect my current thoughts on the matter, the entries serve to demonstrate my mental processes at the time to which I then observe and develop upon using research-supported works from external authors and theories.

As a result, I write and share my story to help others understand their experiences sociologically\textsuperscript{48} by using my own unique experience as a smaller fragment of a larger issue experienced by women in similar situations. I hope to present a case study that I hope transcends past issues on women’s aesthetic pursuits solely, but that also speaks to how our society views the female body now and how that compares to the views held by those in the preceding years and decades. I hope that this final product will be seen to envelop the goal of autoethnographic writing—what is truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, p. 135.
Chapter 3

3 A Feminist Perspective: An Overview

One of the current obsessions in North American society is the discipline of the body: health and fitness continues to be booming businesses. Evidence of this can be seen from the countless fad diet plans seen on television, the weight loss advertisements found in magazines, and the increasing number of gym memberships over the last two decades. These trends suggest that both men and women are focused on physical appearance. Although this increased focus on the body affects both men and women, I intend to focus specifically on the effect it has on women, particularly because of the pressures placed on women (both currently and historically) to look a certain way. What this “certain way” consists of has changed over time, but it is clear that women have been unusually pressured to focus on corporeality. Current popular culture, in conjunction with the fashion and beauty industries, focuses on the image of the “ideal feminine body” – an ideal that ignores differences among women and homogenizes them into groups that either do or do not embody this “ideal,” which bears a disturbing resemblance to a Barbie doll (see Figure 3).

Asking why our society upholds such an image, or who is responsible for creating these images, is important. However, the answers to these questions are perhaps beyond the scope of any individual study. While I believe that scholars should continue to ask and answer these questions in a broad an encompassing manner, I have chosen to focus on three historical moments in the construction of women’s body images in order to provide a concise and relevant background to my examination of the socio-cultural ideals surrounding women’s bodies. I am going to start by drawing on Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Sigmund Freud’s *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. By drawing on these
three theorists, I do not mean to suggest that I am providing an exhaustive background to social constructions of the female body; however, I use these three writers – the founder of liberal feminism, the father of psychoanalysis and the woman credited with introducing the “second wave” of feminism – as touchstones to provide information about historical representations of the female form.

I then highlight the “third wave” of feminism using Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*. I am choosing this text because of its significance in illustrating society’s shift in how it values women’s bodies. The focus for this portion of this overview is placed on the shifting views women hold of their bodies as they move into the social sphere and up the economic ladder; territory that is overwhelmingly male-dominated. I will highlight the significant points in Wolf’s text that demonstrate women's insecurities about their physical bodies and the disconnect women feel physically, as their intellectual positions in the social hierarchy increases.

I conclude this Chapter with modern feminist theory on the female body, categorized as the "fourth wave". Because this 'wave' is quite extensive and encompasses multiple ideologies, I am choosing to focus specifically on the 'fit' female form to help understand why our current society upholds this image as the 'ideal' and the potential repercussions this has on women at the individual level, as well as on the whole. Inevitably, I draw parallels with various points in the history of feminist theory to determine how, though it seems to have changed over time, the concept of embodiment for women has, at its core, remained the same.

### 3.1 The First Wave

Before an analysis can be made of the current issues facing women, one must look back at the historical source. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the founding feminist theorists due to her discussion of women's rights (or rather, a lack thereof) in her essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As one of the first texts exploring traditional liberal feminism, the *Vindication* argues that women are not simply inferior creatures but have
been made to assume this role because of male dominance in society. Specifically focusing her attention on political structures, Wollstonecraft proposes that providing women with similar educational and occupational opportunities as those enjoyed by men could reduce, at least in part, the immense gender inequality that women were facing at the time. She states that women ought to be viewed as autonomous beings, independent of their husbands and children. While her argument has its limitations, she was influential in addressing the idea of women as persons, rather than being a “mere means” to their husband’s physical pleasures. On the topics, Wollstonecraft states:

> Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward\(^{51}\) obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives.\(^{52}\)

The idea of a female stereotype here courses throughout Wollstonecraft’s work. She addresses the problems of a society where physical attractiveness supersedes that of intellect, and how beauty is a favorable asset when seeking popularity with men. Her words emphasize that there is a pressure placed on women to look a certain way even in childhood. Girls are expected to mind their appearance and dress up at a young age for at least 'twenty years of their lives' or until they find a suitable husband. It is important to do this when girls are young because it becomes increasingly difficult as they get older and their beauty begins to fade. Therefore, the importance of finding a suitable husband while they are in their youth is held in high regard, suggesting that, in this type of society, a woman’s worth is diminished in a direct relationship with the loss of her youth. Wollstonecraft also criticizes 'outward' obedience, which can be seen as how a woman dresses and acts. For the middle-class, a high value was placed on women who were

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\(^{51}\) Making reference to the physical adherence of women to an appropriate style of dress and how presented themselves in a co-ed environment.

\(^{52}\) Wollstonecraft, (1792), p. 61.
dressed for domestic life - always proper in action and reaction and dressed in attire that was fitting for a housewife.

As an educated woman, Wollstonecraft was in a minority in her society. From her experiences and understanding, she comments, "I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education… have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been…"\textsuperscript{53}

Wollstonecraft emphasizes that there is a noticeable repression of the female sex by their male counterparts. The words "artificial" and "weak" generally refer to the physical structure and ability of women. Although Wollstonecraft's argument centers on the development of a woman’s intellectual capabilities, she elucidates how the language of weakness and frailty represents not only a mental, but also a physical oppression of women. The implication here is that women of the late 1700s are 'fragile' and 'dainty' compared to their male counterparts. Men set this sort of standard, and it is the women who have to make accommodations to fit themselves into its mold. Unfortunately, women did not have access to the resources and education to act in opposition to this norm. It is for this reason that Wollstonecraft argues an intervention must take place. Being a member of the bourgeoisie, Wollstonecraft had access to higher education and was able to stand out in her circle. While she did not experience the hardships of lower class women, she was able to recognize some of the issues these women faced in regards to their bodies. Wollstonecraft seems to be an exception as a member of upper class society but her words resound as a common voice of the social expectations and pressures placed on women at the time. In voicing her individual opinion on various matters affecting women, she was able to lobby for women as a group. Her writings became the main arguments for women’s rights until the early 1900s, where a variety of theories on women and women’s rights began to emerge.

\textsuperscript{53} Wollstonecraft, (1792), p. 588.
3.2 The Second Wave

Following Mary Wollstonecraft was a multitude of other theorists, feminist and otherwise, that had vastly different views on the female body. One of the most revolutionary and controversial analyses of the body was Sigmund Freud's *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality*. Freud was definitely not a feminist, but his explicit language and depiction of sexual maturation were highly discussed and criticized for multiple reasons, especially by feminists.

If the transference of the erogenous excitability from the clitoris to the vagina has succeeded, the woman has thus changed her leading zone for the future sexual activity; the man on the other hand retains his from childhood. The main determinants for the woman's preference for the neuroses, especially for hysteria, lie in this change of the leading zone as well as in the repression of puberty. These determinants are therefore most intimately connected with the nature of femininity.\(^{54}\)

Freud’s theory states that women are 'defective' compared to their male counterparts because they do not have a visible penis—that they are somehow lacking due to their own anatomy. For this reason, they are highly likely to experience hysteria, which innately stems from 'penis envy' because their physical deformity causes them to experience psychological stress. This ideology suggests that women are inferior beings because they physically lack the characteristics that would enable them to excel otherwise. Freud is suggesting that women's bodies are essentially to blame for their subordination, resulting in a constant, internal inferiority-complex. 'Penis envy' is a manifestation of female jealously towards men, who will always be superior because of the presence of their physical member.

Despite the lack of evidence to support his theory, Freud’s psychoanalytic theories about the female body had a profound effect, not only on scientific understandings of the female body at the time, but also on how society as a whole viewed and analyzed the female body. Many of Freud's supporters were male which, not

\(^{54}\) Freud, (1953), p. 144.
surprisingly, only reinforced his ideas and the repression of the female form. What is significant about Freud's theory is that it is a male perspective on a female topic, with no input from women on the formation of the theory. Women were not talking about their own bodies; instead men were discussing women's bodies and the value that they hold. As women were being exposed to this idea, it directly affected their outlook on their physical form. When women are told that their physical bodies are lacking, it is questioned whether or not their mental perspectives on their bodies inevitably suffer as a consequence. If this idea becomes instantiated in society, does it then become “common knowledge” and accepted as a truth? While this was not necessarily accepted by every individual at the time, it was nonetheless a theory that had many people thinking about women's bodies, which led to many writers criticizing Freud’s theories and the eventual birth of gender feminism. Despite his extreme and narrow perspective on women’s bodies, and the many taboo topics of discussion in his work, he is seen as one of the first theorists to discuss the relationship between biological and psychoanalytical processes. His work incited a lot of discussion about the female body, whether people agreed with Freud or not.

Critic and radical feminist\textsuperscript{55} Betty Friedan rejected Freud's methodologies and fixation on sex. On Friedan's rejection of Freudian ideology, Rosemarie Tong\textsuperscript{56} stated:

By encouraging women to think female discontent and dissatisfaction have their roots in women's lack of the penis per se rather than in the privileged socioeconomic and cultural status its possession confers on men, Freud led women to believe, falsely, that women are defective. Moreover, by suggesting to women that in lieu of possession of the penis, they can instead have a baby, Freud lured women into the trap of the feminine mystique.\textsuperscript{57}

Friedan and her National Organization for Women (NOW) coalition, of which she was the founding member and president, continued the second wave of radical-

\textsuperscript{55} The primary goal for radical feminists was achieving equal rights for women through participation in radical social movements during the 1960s. See Tong, (1998), p. 45.

\textsuperscript{56} Rosemarie Putnam Tong is a Professor of Philosophy and Medical Humanities at Davidson College.

\textsuperscript{57} Tong, (1998), p. 135.
liberal feminism that continued to lobby on the social and legislative rights of women. Along with her fellow radicals, she fought against the sex/gender system, which was believed to be the fundamental cause of women’s oppression. She became a household name among feminist theorists with the release of her book *The Feminine Mystique*, where she takes the opportunity to explore the link between gender equalities and the dilemma women were facing within themselves. In one particularly horrifying passage, Friedan writes "In other hospitals, women dying of cancer refused a drug which research had proved might save their lives: its side effects were said to be unfeminine…”58 Even a woman’s life was subordinated to the ideal of “femininity.”

It seems ridiculous to think that women would rather die from a terminal illness than receive a treatment that could alter their appearance in a way that would be considered 'masculine', but this was the reality that housewives were facing in the 1950s and 1960s. They were battling an inner crisis of what they were expected to do versus what they wanted to do, especially in relation to their appearance. Consequently, women were becoming more depressed than ever, as revealed by Friedan:

[Women] ate a chalk called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink to the size of the thin young models. Department store buyers reported that American women, since 1939, had become three and four sizes smaller. 'Women are out to fit the clothes, instead of vice-versa.'59

Women in Friedan's time were at odds with their appearance. In a time where being a housewife was the highest accomplishment a woman could attain, women began exposing themselves to a variety of different 'tortures' in order to be more caring, nurturing, and pleasant as a means of dealing with their unhappiness. When society encourages women to act, look, and behave in a more feminine way, many women set their own feelings and beliefs aside to accommodate these expectations, as demonstrated by the act of eating chalk to maintain a petite frame. By exposing the reality that women were unhappy in their socially pre-determined roles, Friedan rejected the notion that

58 Friedan, (1963), p.163.
59 Ibid, p. 163.
women should remain in these roles and, instead, proposed women seek out education opportunities and professional work. It was her belief that, "America's greatest source of unused brain-power was women. But girls would not study physics: it was 'unfeminine'." ⁶₀

By acknowledging 'feminine' and 'masculine' in her works, Friedan is stating a difference in action and appearance between the sexes. While these terms are socially constructed, they serve a purpose that, Friedan believes, is inhibiting women from achieving their potential as equals in society. If women continue to be viewed as and take the part of the caretaker and homemaker, they will never enter the realm of being 'the equal' and will continue to remain 'the inferior' to men. Woman’s socially determined roles lie in the caretaker, nurturer, and ‘angel of the house’, while a man is always the warrior, provider, and aggressor.

Again, the emphasis placed on the appearance and the roles of women and men is socially constructed to keep women passive, but Friedan introduced androgyny as a potential solution to this problem. She proposed that women take on male characteristics and roles in society, and likewise, men should take on female characteristics in order to level out the field. This was, and still is, a controversial stance because it challenges the idea of a gender dichotomy in society with two distinct, opposing sides.

As recognized by Friedan, within gender constructs there seems to be a socially acceptable set of behaviours that one is expected to follow in order to be seen as masculine or feminine. During the same time as the second-wave feminism, psychologist Sandra Bem published many academic works on sex typing and androgyny that go hand-in-hand with the radical feminist movement. Her most notable work when considering gender typing was The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality. Here, she critically identifies and analyzes the lenses that shape our cultural understanding of gender roles. According to Bem, there is a "Sex

⁶₀ Ibid, p. 163.
Role Inventory" that helps society form acceptable behaviours and characteristics between genders:

Examples of feminine traits include being yielding, cheerful, shy, affectionate, flatterable, loyal, sympathetic... child-loving, and gentle. Masculine traits include being self-reliant, independent, athletic... dominant, aggressive... and having leadership abilities and a strong personality.61

This categorization of genders is known as gender polarization. It not only serves as a means of character-typing, but also superimposes male-female differences on virtually every aspect of human experience, from modes of dress and social roles to ways of expressing emotion and sexual desire. In relevance to the body, it is important to note how the physical aspects of the gender spectrum are represented. With women being 'gentle' and men being 'athletic', Bem is demonstrating how society continues to see women as the inferior of the two.

Combining Bem’s Sex Role Inventory with Friedan’s search for an androgynous society, can lead to the suggestions that a socially acceptable set of actions and characteristics are attached to someone who is ‘male’ or ‘female’, with these labels lying at opposite ends of the spectrum. However, women were challenging this norm by taking an active role in their education. An increasing number of university graduates were women throughout the seventies, eighties and leading into the nineties. Women were no longer restricting themselves to the household as their mothers had done, but instead were pursuing their careers and interests in a male-dominated society. With their increasing knowledge, women were making decisions for themselves in political spheres as voters and even candidates, as demonstrated by Rita Johnston and Jeanne Sauvé and their positions in Canadian Parliament.62

Additionally, birth control was also a source of female independence. Its use was a fundamental example of women’s rights because it allowed women take an active role

61 Bem, (1993), p. 82.
in their sexuality, something that was frowned upon in previous decades. Birth control gave women the ability to choose whether or not they wanted to have kids, when they wanted to have them, and how many. They were no longer relegated solely to the role of homemaker, and could choose to get an education and pursue various interests regardless of marital status. Arguably, birth control could be seen as the primary cause of women’s liberation.

When taking these events into account, it would seem that women have broken through the mold of the ‘passive’ and ‘gentle’ and have transitioned into ‘active’ and ‘independent’ models in society. They have broken into areas that were once reserved for men alone and are free to act as autonomous persons. Unfortunately, this is only partially true. Although women have been granted the legal and ethical rights of equality in regards to their actions, a transparent force that is attacking women both internally and externally – their body image, still represses them.

### 3.3 The Third Wave

As women continued to solidify themselves as independent and autonomous beings in the 1990s, the issues facing women continue to expand and seemed to stem from women's greater position in the hierarchy of society. This cultural shift brought on what feminists consider to be the third wave, which can be summed up by one particular text; namely, Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. In her text, Wolf discusses the repercussions of women's rise in society, which she labels 'the beauty myth', stating that "The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us.”

Her premise suggests that as women increase in social and economic power, their expected adherence to an unrealistic standard of physical beauty also increases. Wolf argues that the beauty myth attacks women in six distinct areas: work, culture, religion,

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sex, hunger, and violence. As females continue to branch out in each of the six areas, they are inflicted with social pressures to conform to a physical standard of beauty. Women are constantly trying to acquire this 'ideal', which is intrinsically unattainable because it is formed by the external pressures of society that are constantly changing based on culture, religion, and sex. As a result, women become prisoners in their own bodies - trapped inside of what Wolf refers to as “the iron maiden”:

The original Iron Maiden was a medieval German instrument of torture, a body-shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a lovely, smiling young woman... The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel, and euphemistically painted. Contemporary culture direct attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women's faces and bodies.64

This analogy helps to conceptualize the severe constriction on women’s bodies that exists in contemporary society. Without knowing it, many females in society are falling into the Iron Maiden and are unable to escape because they are blinded by multi-faceted influences that trap them in the first place. The beauty myth creates a cyclical pattern in which women can never truly be content in their bodies, despite the socio-economic successes they may achieve. A female CEO may successfully run a company; however, can she do so without being called a ‘bitch’ or having some stigma attached to her image? Similarly, can young high school girls be labeled as ‘prudes’ for choosing to abstain from sex, while other are called ‘sluts’ for their decision to be sexually active? I see no reason for one over the other, but the underlying issues are not limited to the area of women's sexuality. Eating disorders were increasing at drastic levels over this period due to the 'Twiggy'65-esque models that were plastered in various fashion magazines like Vogue and Cosmopolitan. The media's reinforcement of this rail-thin frame created insecurities in women, which they thought could be overcome if they adopted this body type. Unfortunately, the recent increase in social media outlets over the past decade has

65 Twiggy is a top model of the late 1960s who made skinny the new gold standard in the fashion industry.
spawned an increase in societal pressures on the female body. To demonstrate the current status of the feminist movement, the fourth wave is examined.

3.4 The Fourth Wave

The fourth wave of feminism is distinctive in that it is often correlated with the rise of media and information technology. From the early 1990s to present day, accessibility and communication outlets have significantly increased, thus allowing women and men to constantly interact on a daily basis. More doors have been opened for women, resulting in a greater female presence in the workforce, educational institutes, and social hierarchy than ever before. Cultural norms that Freidan and others rallied against seem to be overcome with the increasing number of women in the workforce, while men are taking an active role in the home. Yet, despite all of the boundaries women had to face and current knowledge of past feminist struggles, the rate of cosmetic surgery procedures continues to grow each year, magazines still have underweight models on their covers, and violence against women seems to be a present issue among support groups. Each of these examples can provide insight into the state of women's bodies in society and how women are viewed in general. Wolf's book seems to hold relevance now when considering that of the current 'fit' body ideal. It should be noted that the theories behind a 'fit' body seem to be a limited area of study among modern feminists.

How are women with fit bodies viewed? They obviously take an active role in their health as shown through a genuine concern for the foods they eat and the activities in which they participate. Most workout frequently and eat a balanced diet to achieve their physiques. Is this a form of resistance against the thin ideal that Wolf discusses? Or is this 'fit' the new skinny among women – used to exercise a method of control, inevitably conforming to the new extreme of beauty?

66 Stop Violence Against Women (STOPVAW) is an organization is one of the primary organizations that advocates for women’s basic human rights globally.
To answer these questions, one must at least consider the purpose of exercise for women. It is shown that weight training and exercise are beneficial to women – they regulate hormones, increase bone density, and reduce the onset of osteoporosis, among other benefits. So the decision to participate in weight training does have intrinsic value to those who want to be healthy. It is also true that toned bodies are aesthetically pleasing. For this reason, it can be argued that women's desire to achieve a fit body stems from the misogynist norms of society as recognized by Hartley:

Because the male gaze is always present, even when it is physically absent, women must continually produce bodies that are acceptable to that gaze. Thus a woman's own gaze becomes a substitute for a man's gaze, and she evaluates her own body as ruthlessly as she expects to be evaluated by him....

Hartley acknowledges that the male gaze continues to be present when viewing women's bodies. The difference now seems to be that the gaze has altered from simply wanting a petite “Twiggy” frame to wanting a toned “fitness” frame based upon the images of women that are depicted on many magazine covers, fitness or otherwise. These bodies are much harder to achieve than that of the skinny girl because they take time and planned efforts. Women who train to achieve these lean physiques and muscle definition spend hours in the gym molding their bodies into statuesque replications of those seen on the Olympia or other IFBB competition stage. Rounded shoulders, slim waist, and a firm butt are characteristics generally associated with women who pursue a fitness or bodybuilding lifestyle, but are not restricted to these women alone. In combination with proper eating habits to maintain their muscle mass and energy levels, this fit woman dedicates more time to her body than does the thin woman because it requires more work. The thin woman can abstain from eating and exercise and still continue to be thin, while a fit woman must consistently attend her local or home gym to keep her body firm. She is meticulous in her food choices and preparations, choosing only that which will help

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69 One of the most coveted bodybuilding shows in the world.
keep her lean. Wolf’s argument rings true in reference to the fit body when she declares, “A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience.” Following such a lifestyle requires dedication and a high level of compliance, which is why it is seen as an extension to the beauty myth; it fosters a stricter regime to be successful.

Alternatively, there are women who claim they follow a diet that eliminates processed foods and workout for the sole purpose of being healthy. For practical and purposeful living, this could be true. Many women chose an active lifestyle for longevity or to combat hereditary diseases. While other women choose this lifestyle for personal and ethical reasons, like vegans or vegetarians. In these circumstances, their motivation is intrinsically driven; it comes from within, rather than from an external means or pressure. This intrinsic motivation is separate from the motivation of those who would choose to live a particular lifestyle solely based on outward appearance. However, it must be noted that claiming to be 'healthy' does not necessarily mean that one is in fact living at optimal health. Vegans must be cautious of not meeting their nutrient requirements through plant sources alone, or malnourishment could be a natural consequence.

It must also be said that looking healthy and being healthy are not one and the same. The fitness and figure competitors found on the covers of Muscle and Fitness Her and Shape magazine all resemble the epitome of health. Yet, most are in their competition seasons when the photos are taken, a time when they are over-training, their diets restricted, and their bodies are dehydrated. These women openly admit that they cannot maintain their physique year-round, so why the desire to put one’s body through such stress?

This question brings us back to the problem of control; restricting the body to a certain size and shape that appeals to society's standards. Even the amount of muscle women carry is under social regulation. Too much muscle will cause her to be seen as 'masculine', whereas if there is too little, she fails to meet the 'fit' standard of femininity,

as emphasized in fitness shows. Monica Brant is one of the most noticeable and successful competitors in the bodybuilding industry and is said to have the perfect balance of muscularity and femininity (see Figure 4). Female bodybuilders are accused of tampering with this line. Gender theorist Anne Bolin writes: women’s bodybuilding both challenges and reproduces ideals of emphasized femininity because the increasing size of the female bodybuilder is only acceptable once ‘tamed’ by beauty.\footnote{Bolin, (1992), p. 382.} Hence, why these competitors are judged on physique as well as overall presentation. Similarly, hair, makeup, fake nails, and embellished designer suits are all taken into consideration when ranking a figure athlete. Women with breast implants also tend to score higher than those without (see Appendix). It is all in an effort to keep a feminine look to the athlete, thus implying that there is an upper limit to the amount of muscle a woman \emph{ought} to have. These standards relate back to Bem's \textit{Sex Role Inventory}, where women are to remain the softer of the two sexes. In the case of the fit women, she must be cautious of her size or strength so that she is not deemed physically threatening or intimidating to a man.
Either consciously or sub-consciously, women are placing restrictions on their bodies. As referred to in Chapter 1, a study by Shari L. Dworkin observed regular female gym attendees to determine if there was an innate ‘holding back’ from training heavy with free weights, which I discuss more in Chapter 4.

Women’s adherence to a strict exercise and diet regime only exacerbates the desire to control their bodies within the misogynistic norms of the twenty-first century. Women continue to believe whatever new, male-guided ideal emerges, falling victim to the lies of the beauty myth.
The exceptions are the women who choose to maintain healthy, balanced diets and exercise regularly without extrinsic goals or motivation. As previously stated, their aspirations may stem from a social, medical, or personal (internal) desire to be healthy without a strict regime; however, these women are not likely to be found prancing in 4-inch plastic heels on a competition stage. There are many remaining minorities that participate to attain some external goal. They view their bodies as having innate flaws needing to be fixed. Whether it is to ‘lose 10 pounds’ or ‘get rid of my belly fat’, women remain at war with what they perceive in the mirror. The cause of this cannot be definitive but it is plausible to suggest the media and increased demand of information technology has played a significant role due to its growth and accessibility in the past decade, which I will discuss further in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The fit body is no different than the skinny body; it stems from a similar external façade and falls to the same internal critique.

3.5 Body In Transition

When looking through a timeline of feminist women and what that it means to be a female in society in general, it has not come without obvious setbacks. The right to education, to vote, sexual freedom and individual autonomy were once unheard of territories for girls and women alike. Feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Betty Friedan, and others fought an uphill battle to find open doors to the houses of legislation. Because of them, women have been granted many benefits in society, but these are met with cautionary celebration. Despite the gains women have made in society, there is still an unhindered pressure affecting women’s self-esteem and body image.

Naomi Wolf made us take a focused look into the realities that, although women have gained rights and freedom for much of their actions, a misogynistic gaze is strategically repressing their bodies. The result of this gaze, creates in women the need to constantly be striving for perfection and, in the end, they often turn up unsatisfied. The issues that Wolf addresses in *The Beauty Myth*, during the early nineties are still, if not more, pertinent today.
The prevalence of fad-diets and strict exercise programs found in magazines and online advertisements has prompted the twenty-first century woman to adapt her everyday routine to accommodate this new ‘fit’ body image. These messages push the notion on women to exercise daily and eat only that, which will sustain a leaner physique, for anything less will cause them to look anorexic and the opposite will make her obese. It should be noted that the term ‘diet’ in this thesis refers to the conscious calculation, restriction, or monitoring of food intake for the purpose of decreasing fat mass, whether it be for a fitness show or simply to reduce your body fat to a percentage that is lower than optimal. For her, it is about controlling her intake, cravings, and activities to meet this ideal. It seems that the beauty myth has not changed in the slightest, but rather is now being sold to women as a healthy lifestyle. Women are reading through articles and are taught to control, restrict and work their bodies (sometimes to the point of exhaustion) if they wish to achieve a certain physique. It would seem that this message creates physical and psychological stress in women, which would seem contrary to the original goal of ‘being healthy’. Therefore, seeking and obsessing over a ‘fit body’ may not actually result in a ‘healthy body.’ It seems that Wolf’s iron maiden is still influencing women and seems to apply more fittingly to the fit body than the thin body, since the fit body has a lot more of a strict maintenance regime. Thin is more of a constant abstention from food, whereas fit is a constant self-policing of food plus exercise. The former is passive, the latter is active as, for the fit woman, the mind is never at rest, but always calculating, criticizing, and conforming.

The theorists examined in this chapter are fundamental when considering the evolution of our ideals of women’s bodies. I use this chapter as an overview of the primary touchstones that shape the current mentality of the viewing and judging of women’s physical state. Throughout this paper, I refer back to these theorists in my discussions to demonstrate how these theories remain relevant in twenty-first century culture.

I now direct my attentions towards two different pressures specifically facing the twenty-first century woman, namely the fear of body fat and the fear of masculinization will be examined. These are pressures that I have come into contact with personally,
during my contest preparations leading up to a fitness show, as well as, issues I have observed from other women. The fear of being fat continues to lie at the forefront of female insecurities. I continue by elaborating on the current ideas that both women and society have towards fat in general and how women have internalized them.
Chapter 4

4 The Fear of Fat

“Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels”72

July 3, 2012

Time for my bi-weekly check-in...

Biceps, triceps, chest, subscapular, midaxillary, iliac crest, abdomen, thigh.

Pinch (pause) repeat.

Measure and record.

Insert into equation.

Please don’t be too high, please don’t be too high… at least under 21, max 22. Anything more than that is going to be a major challenge. I’m not sure if I can cut that much in the time I have. Last time it was 24 and that was ok, but I know I can do better.

The moment of truth...

19.6%

I breathe an internal sigh of relief.

Nineteen point six percent… basically, 20. Ok, that’s doable.

I just met with my coach for the first time after a 6-month hiatus. True to form, the meeting began with a set of calipers.

72 As quoted by supermodel Kate Moss – one of the most controversial supermodels of the 1990s due to her size 0 figure and her public struggles with substance abuse.
Moving on, I now direct my attention to the ideas surrounding fat in the fitness community. When considering the requirements to compete in fitness competitions, the desire to over-train, restrict your diet, cover yourself in fake tanner, and stand nearly-naked on stage to be judged by a panel and your peers seems rather preposterous, especially since you’re being judged solely based on the way you look in comparison to the other girls on stage. Why would any woman want to subject herself to such criticism? Evaluation of your proportions, leanness, femininity and muscularity are taken into account when determining who has the best overall physique.\(^{73}\) Specifically, the degree of leanness is held in high regard depending on the category you compete in. Figure girls, like Monica Brant (see Figure 4), are expected to have noticeable deltoid insertions, harder abs and slight quad definition, which require a bit less body fat than bikini girls, whose judging criteria are more forgiving – softer without noticeable muscle definition – and focused more on ‘sex appeal’ (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: IFBB Bikini Competitor Nathalia Melo


However, both these physiques fall in a body fat range that is not necessarily maintainable or healthy. A healthy body fat content for women has been determined to be between 20-30 percent of their body weight. Most female competitors are stepping on the stage at 8-13 percent body fat – a significantly lower number than what is prescribed as healthy. One must question whether the desire to compete in a figure show stems from an internal goal or from external pressures? Or does this goal emerge from a combination of the two?

4.1 Fat-Obsessed

*October 11, 2012*

30 days to go!

*For some reason, 30 seems to be that magic number. The day is so close yet still slightly far. You know the next 30 days are going to fly by. There's no stopping now. Now is when everything really matters. Training has to be consistent. Diet needs to be impeccable. I need to be getting 7-8 hours of sleep every night. Any slight deviation could mean that I won't be ready in time.*

*I met with my coach two days ago - I'm at 16.5% body fat and the goal is 13%. This means I have to cut 1% every 10 days, or 0.1% per day. Focus! Focus! Focus! I don't want to be that girl on stage that 'could have used a few more weeks'. NO! Not me. I'm sure I will fall right where I'm supposed to. Plus, the dehydration alludes to an extra 1-2% cut. So I'll look like I'm 11-12%.*

*I got my new training program last night. Pretty typical, very clean. NO extra calories A-N-Y-W-H-E-R-E. People ask why I eat this or that but they just don’t*

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75 Based upon the women I have met backstage at OPA and IFBB shows.
understand. An extra 50 calories here or there can add up really quickly. Before you know it, you’re at a total of 125 (maybe) a day, that's 875 in one week, which is 3500 calories in 1 month or 1 POUND! I can't afford to do that this close to the competition. I've been training my butt off the past 12 weeks. 3 weight days, 3 cardio, and one circuit per week. Now, some days I'll be going to the gym twice. I love to workout, but this definitely will leave no extra time for fun or a social life.

But it's ok. I just need to remember... 30 days to go.  

As I reflect back on my thoughts, I am reminded of the intense drive I had to get as lean as I could. With my goal being to get leaner than my last show (over a year and a half before), I was determined to do whatever necessary to ensure I met my deadline. I knew that my time was of the essence, so I set my sights on the next 30 days, even if it meant missing out on other aspects of my life. I would like to think my actions were justified because I was competing in a show; however, I am not so naïve as to not know that, in fact, I was obsessing over the way I looked. I cannot help but notice the desire I had to lose fat and how this feeling mirrors issues facing women in society. Whether one is competing in a show or not, there seems to be a constant focus on fat – having it, losing it, hating it, pinching it – it is a dominant and visible part of our modern culture.

Magazine stands are overflowing with pictures of underweight-models, which continues to portray a false perception of beauty. It seems the same images that plagued Naomi Wolf’s generation are still continuing to have an impact decades later. The magazine covers selected for this chapter were chosen because they were the most recently printed copies during the writing of this thesis. The magazines chosen are those that were sold on newsstands during the summer of 2013 with the exception of Figure 10, which was chosen specifically because it featured Ms. Figure Olympia Nicole Wilkins on the cover.

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76 My journal entry written 30 days out from my show.

The difference now, is the Twiggy and Kate Moss frames of the second and third waves are being replaced with images of fourth-wave women that are more athletic, possessing visible muscle. These ‘fit’ females can more often than not be found on covers of *Muscle & Fitness Hers*, *Women’s Health*, *FitnessRX*, and *Shape*, among others (see Figures 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).
The message being sent by these newer images involves promoting health and exercise to women around the globe. While many of these kinds of magazines offer medically and scientifically supported information throughout the pages, the result emphasizes the idea of a certain type of body and body image. Even music and movie celebrities are being praised on the covers of these and other magazines for their toned bodies (see Figure 8 and 9). Part of the message in these handful of magazines aimed at women’s health is meant to help their readers ‘get fit’, which, more often than not, translates into ‘lose fat’ and diet.
With cover stories stating, “Drop 10lbs Fast!” “The Body You Want!” and “Smoothies that Slim and Satisfy”, it is no wonder that we have a huge focus on the way we look. A similar focus can be found in many women’s’ magazine today, including those not specifically directed at health and fitness (i.e. People and Us magazine, not shown). Now, we are told that being overweight is bad for our overall health and can lead to complications and disease over time. This, of course, can be true. We also know that

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78 People and Us magazine are relatively popular celebrity gossip magazines sold in North America.
being too thin has its consequences too, but these magazines and articles fail to address the skinny problem in society, as they are solely focused on the fat.

Figure 9: Shape June 2013 Issue

It can be argued that these health and fitness magazines are a progressive approach to creating a positive body image and lifestyle because they attempt to teach people how to improve their health. Their cover stories allude to the idea that reading the magazine will help get you on track through exercise and proper eating habits. However, one cannot deny the importance that they place on ‘fat removal’. When reading the cover of fitness magazines specifically, there is an obvious underlying status quo on how society views fat. Since the primary motivation behind most magazine production is to

sell more issues in order to make money, by appealing to its audience, one can deduce that the women reading these books may hold a similar view on fat.

Figure 10: Muscle & Fitness Hers January 2010 Issue

Therefore, it can be concluded that women, who want to get rid of their body fat may buy these magazines because the magazine offers ways in which to do it, which begs the questions: Why are we, as a society, stressing the importance of being lean? Are we afraid of fat? If so, why? In this chapter, I focus on providing some insight to these questions in order to help understand how women view fat and the effect this influence has on their decision to participate in fitness endeavors.

As previously discussed, Naomi Wolf was one of the earlier authors to address the problem women have in regards to their body image. She introduces the subject of a male gaze that seeks to objectify women for men’s desires. Since then, there have been
many women who have written on the topic of the objectification of women. Authors Natasha Walter\textsuperscript{80}, Laurie Penny\textsuperscript{81} and Ariel Levy\textsuperscript{82} have all spoken out against the rise of feminine sexualization. With their subject matter focusing on women’s bodies as the objects of male pleasures, these theories direct their attentions towards sex and desire.

Some researchers and theorists have also analyzed women’s perceived value of self, in relation to their dress size. A recent study found a positive correlation between body satisfaction and preferred silhouette with women over fifty years of age\textsuperscript{83}. Additionally, Joan Ryan\textsuperscript{84} uses a sporting example to unveil the physical and emotional trauma that elite gymnasts endure to stay thin and compete at the Olympic level (see Figure 11).

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\end{thebibliography}
Psychologists like Susie Orbach and Helen Malson seem to be exceptions, by providing comprehensive research in the areas of social psychology, and specifically, eating disorders. They focus their attentions on women’s obsession with being thin. On the subject, Malson states,

[D]iscursive constructions of ‘the fat body’ are consistently negative and this negativity is produced in a variety of ways. ‘The fat body’ is construed as ugly, unattractive, disgusting and shameful. It signifies gluttony and uncontrolled sexual availability. The ‘fat self’ is unhappy and lacking in control and self-confidence.

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87 Ibid. p. 105
With these pre-existing notions in mind, it is no wonder why many women hold a negative view of being fat and unfortunately, a portion of these women may even take certain measures to prevent themselves from becoming fat (ex. taking laxatives for non-medicinal purposes).\(^8\) The more these types of magazines push images of skinny as sexy and successful, the more likely it will be that women internalize these ideas and attempt conform to the standards found within the pages; whether it be through diet, exercise, competitions, or all the above.\(^9\) As a means of fulfilling these societal expectations, women undertake a variety of strategies and behaviors in order to lose weight, such as restrictive dieting and over-exercising. It should be clarified that the concept of losing ‘weight’ is generally synonymous with losing ‘fat’ because it is not likely one will be seeking to intentionally lose bone or muscle tissue. The decision to participate in fitness plays an important role in this equation because it is an increasingly popular tool many fitness enthusiasts use to market themselves or attain a goal weight.\(^10\) This causes a shift in the conventional norm because, now, instead of being skinny, society has set a standard that you must also be, or at least look, fit.\(^11\)

### 4.2 Fit-Obsessed

*October 25, 2012*

> How can this be? I’ve dropped 4lbs on the scale. Why hasn’t my body fat gone down? I’ve done everything according to what was laid out for me – I increased my

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10. Based upon my experience in the fitness industry, the more successful a competitor is on stage, the more clients and publicity they receive off-stage.

11. Many fitness organizations offer supplement contracts and advertisement to top competitors in each category.
cardio significantly, and my diet was slightly decreased. I've been working/training my ass off. What's going on? Why is my body fighting me so much?

How far am I willing to push it to succeed in getting on the OPA stage? Things can still be cut; training volume can increase and diet can get extremely restrictive. I can see what happens. But my coach warns me, “My body is waving a red flag” and for whatever reason, ignoring it could have worse consequences post-show. I get it, but I want to step on stage so bad! I refused to take any stimulants or fat burners due to the adrenal stress they cause, which leads to greater post-show rebounding. Ironically, had I taken some, I would probably be right on track to compete in 16 days. I just know that I don’t want to rebound. To me it’s just not worth it.

Fitness and bodybuilding competitions are effective examples of society’s current obsession to look fit because they reinforce and exaggerate the existing norms and messages found on fitness magazine covers. With the focus being placed on outward appearances, participants are rewarded for their leanness (i.e. their lack of fat⁹²). More often than not, the leaner you are, the better you will be ranked. Those who are not as lean as their competitors are consequently marked lower and therefore do not place well.⁹³

This ranking system is not limited to the stage though. Many IFBB⁹⁴ pros and nationally ranked competitors receive reimbursement for their accolades. Successful competitors proceed to get sponsorships and modeling opportunities because of their extreme discipline to achieve a lean physique.⁹⁵ They can often be found gracing the

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⁹² If low body fat and lean body mass are positively correlated.
⁹³ Based on competitions I have personally attended or watched on television.
⁹⁴ IFBB is an acronym for the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness.
⁹⁵ Gaspari Nutrition is an example of a supplement company who sponsors fitness and physique athletes. See http://www.gasparinutrition.com/teamgaspari/bodybuilding.aspx
front, back and inside covers of *Shape, Muscle & Fitness Hers, FitnessRX*, and other fitness magazines that are overflowing with exercises and strategies for their readers who are looking to achieve a similar body.\(^{96}\) The dilemma lies not with the articles and exercises, but rather, the models chosen. Most are well-known IFBB pros who are within days of competition and, as discussed prior, are at an abnormally low and unmaintainable body fat percentage compared to the average North American woman.\(^{97}\) Even when compared to the average fitness enthusiast, bodybuilders and similar competitors are unnaturally lean to the point that staying in this range could have negative long-term health implications.\(^{98}\) Weeks of strict dieting, bouts of intense workouts in addition to hours of cardio, and the increasingly popular use of fat burners and steroids help mold this fit body that not only presents an unrealistic depiction of fitness, but also feeds the notion that having fat is unattractive.\(^{99}\) Therefore, it can be argued that the fitness magazines in Figures 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 sell a false image of beauty that is likely unreachable for the majority of the population.

Alternatively, the aforementioned women’s magazines can offer a positive outlook on health and fitness. More often than not, these fitness magazines include valid and scientifically supported information for its female audience.\(^{100}\) They offer helpful daily tips and habits that are beneficial to those looking to change their lifestyle for the better. By including examples of various workouts and workout programs, women are able to teach their readers how to workout properly, giving them confidence when entering a gym environment. Fitness magazines also include a variety of healthy recipes,

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\(^{96}\) Many of the magazines listed in this thesis include a fitness section including the workout programs of their cover models for readers.


\(^{100}\) When reading the articles in fitness magazines, many include evidence-based studies.
teaching their readers creative and tasty ways to eat healthy and portion control properly. Overall, it can be an effective means of helping get people to incorporate a more balanced and active lifestyle, compared to what they may have had prior, at a price that is affordable to most. Some women credit these magazines for ‘changing their lives’ so it is safe to assume they have an impact, but the problem surrounding fat and body image still remains. Is presenting an unrealistic body image to women justified if it helps them become healthier? Or is this image feeding into the fears women carry regarding their body, especially in regards to their body fat?

Fatness, as an unspoken communication, can imply bigness, strength, motherliness, solidarity; it can embrace any problem. Slimness equals beauty and attractiveness, and is elusive. For many women, fatness feels like a rejection of the packaged sexuality around us. We need to decipher the meaning of fatness to the individual, what it symbolized, to understand why a woman has expressed her self through food and body image.

According to Orbach’s theory, it can be derived that ‘fat’ is synonymous with ‘unfit’, in the same way ‘lean’ is synonymous with ‘fit’. In the fitness world, fat is associated with laziness and carelessness with regards to the body. Fat people lack the discipline necessary to achieve the fit body, while fit people are thought to care about their health and will take necessary precautions to ensure their bodies meet the expectations demonstrated by fitness magazines cited in this work.

When considering Orbach’s comments and applying them to fitness and bodybuilding shows, many in the fitness community say the decision to workout, ‘eat clean’, and compete, stems from the desire to be healthy. However, when competitors step onstage, most are anything but healthy. Regardless of the category they compete –

101 A year subscription to Shape magazine costs $17.97 for twelve issues. www.shape.com.


104 Based on the discussions I have had with other competitors and my own reasons for starting competition prep.
bikini, fitness, figure, physique, or bodybuilding – most are over-trained and underfed to set their bodies at a caloric deficit during their preparation leading up to the show (see Appendix). In order to cut down to their show weight, carb cycling, fasting, and other dietary methods are used to trick the body into utilizing its fat stores. Many of these tactics are effective in the short-term but should not be used in the long-term.

Female contestants often develop health problems associated with this extreme means of fat loss. Because they are so lean, many women acquire amenorrhea – a loss of menstruation – that, in turn, can lead to decrease in bone density or even early-onset osteoporosis if left untreated for a prolonged period of time. In addition, steroid use is quite common among the bodybuilding community and women are no exception. Unlike men who use anabolic steroids to gain muscle mass, women use steroids like Clenbuterol to help them get lean, and stay lean. Both of these situations are not ideal in a short or long-term capacity.

With all this in mind, it is plausible to conclude the decision to compete is driven by aesthetic outcomes rather than for health benefits. Granted, this is not the case for all women, however, the message the fitness industry pushes resonates the same within its target audience:

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108 Ibid. Online.


110 Clenbuterol is a β2 agonist that causes an increase in aerobic capacity, central nervous system stimulation, and an increase in blood pressure and oxygen transportation. It is on the IOC banned substance list.
**Workout + Restricting Diet = Get Lean = be attractive, successful & sexy**

Despite the benefits a reader may gain by reading fitness magazine, aesthetically driven images and headlines tend to mask those representing healthy living because the use of overly trim fitness models only reinforces the problem and continues to reinforce the fear of fat in women by embellishing the aforementioned aspects of leanness. Regardless of the primary reason for combatting fat, I have met many women (myself included) who are influenced into taking steps to seek out the physiques they see on the covers of fitness magazines.\(^{111}\) Many of who join gyms as the first step to their transformation. However, upon entering the gym environment, another dilemma emerges in some women: the fear of masculinization\(^{112}\).

\(^{111}\) Many of my personal training clients bring magazines with them during our initial consultation to show examples of aesthetic features they would like to achieve.

\(^{112}\) Dworkin, (2010).
Chapter 5

5  The Fear of Masculinization

November 7, 2012

I just got back from an upper body workout... I love upper body! It’s probably my favorite workout day. I can train hard and heavy. I love the burning sensation in my deltoid when I drop-set\textsuperscript{113} lateral raises. Sometimes I can’t even lift my arms over my head afterward – so good! My favorite exercise has to be chin-ups... I’m able to do 9 full right now (only because I’m 10 days away from a show, but nonetheless – 9)! I love being at this phase of contest prep. I feel light, but strong... that’s the only way I can describe it. I know I look jacked too. I would be lying if I said I didn’t walk into the gym with my chest up and my peripheral gaze on. From the corner of my eye, I can see people looking. They notice too... my muscles, my definition. I’m looking pretty jacked right now. I’m a bit cocky about it, only because I know I can’t maintain my leanness forever, the additional cardio has been monotonous and I cannot wait to be done with it, but for now I’ll take the attention. I’ve worked hard for my body. I hear the whispers, “she’s jacked!” and “she’s got more muscle than some guys here!”

Sometimes I wonder though... is being ‘jacked’ a good thing or bad thing? I have come to interpret being ‘jacked’ in a couple ways:

\begin{itemize}
\item[a)] Good, because I’m strong and that’s hot
\item[b)] Bad, because I’m strong and that’s not hot
\item[c)] Girls may find me intimidating
\end{itemize}

d) Guys may find me intimidating

e) All of the above?

I’m usually pretty good at multiple choice, but this one stumps me... it’s something that lingers in the back of my mind from time to time. When I really think about it, I guess I don’t care, I’ll continue working hard while showing off my muscles while I can still see them. The whispers are a compliment.

5.1 A Tale of Two Bodies

Up to this point, I have discussed women’s fears of inadequacy surrounding their bodies in regards to their body fat and body image. I would now like to transition into a discussion that arises as a result of the fear women have of being fat. Excited to undertake the challenge of transforming their bodies, potential competitors and ‘fit body’ enthusiasts (myself included) put on their lululemons¹¹⁴, grab their water bottles, the latest issue of Fitness magazine, and head to the nearest gym. However, once these women enter into the gym environment, their identity soon becomes threatened by another dilemma¹¹⁵. Amongst the racks of dumbbells, rows of machines, and smell of sweat, many new-to-the-gym women I have met at the gym are no longer afraid of being fat, they are afraid of being masculinized.¹¹⁶ I can relate to their comments as I reflect back to first-year university, when I was considered a newcomer to the world of weight training. Initially, seeing men grunting, huffing and puffing, created uneasiness within my female psyche, causing myself to contemplate the idea gender identity. Like other women in similar situations, one voice inside them is telling them that lifting weights will

¹¹⁴ Lululemon is a clothing company specializing in yoga attire.
¹¹⁵ Dworkin, (2010).
¹¹⁶ Referring to female gym newcomers.
help them become healthy and fit, while another tells them that lifting too much weight will inevitably make them muscular – maybe even too muscular. Consequently, some of these women become torn between two opposing ideas in their minds of what their bodies may look like should they pursue weight training.

Feminist writer Jacqueline Brady discusses two types of female bodies (i.e. “the ‘new’ sporting woman and the ‘new’ hypermuscular woman) that follow from this discussion and we see them in fitness contexts. “One familiar type is the ‘new’ sporting woman of advertising culture. She exists in an array of ads from sportswear to milk and no matter what the backdrop or sport is, she always looks slim, toned, and conventionally attractive.” These women are seen gracing the covers of Shape and Fitness magazine because of their ‘toned’ body types. Upon close inspection, their musculature is noticeable, but more subtle. Tennis star, Anna Kournikova (see Figure 12), and American actress, Hilary Swank (see Figure 13), are two women who typify this particular physical form.

\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{Dworkin} (2010).}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{Ibid} (2010).}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{Brady} (2010), p. 80.}\]
Figure 12: Anna Kournikova

In comparison to the first body, Brady includes “a second and more extreme type is the ‘new’ hyper muscular bodybuilder celebrated by feminists (see Figure 14). [H]eavy makeup, long, red fingernails, and bleached blonde hair… With massive angular shoulders framing voluptuous round breast implants and a body as large as her bikini is small, the female bodybuilder is a chock-o-block full of visual contradictions.”\(^\text{120}\) An audience finds it difficult to interpret the image of the female bodybuilder because it drastically contradicts, while simultaneously embraces, the norms of femininity. Power lifter-turned-bodybuilder Bev Francis (below) is one of the most recognized physiques that illustrate Brady’s depiction of the hyper muscular woman.

\(^\text{120}\) Brady, (2010), p. 80.
Theorists St. Martin and Gavey (1996) argue that women’s bodybuilding is often very much about self-mastery and control. Control in this case of the body itself through strict diet and exercise, as well as control of their sexuality and how they define themselves as female. Others speculate that bodybuilding is a feminist practice to “highlight that women’s supposed relative physical weakness is socially produced and surpassable,”\(^\text{121}\) acknowledging that women continue to seek opportunities for

\(^{121}\) St. Martin & Gavey, (1996), p. 46.
themselves in what is seen as ‘male’ territory. Those women who participate continue to push the cultural boundaries of gender and sexuality along the way. While this body type is often viewed as an extreme form of feminist liberation.

Brady’s depiction of two bodies provides a relevant framework for the way women see fitness at the gym. Although they know that lifting weights will not turn them directly into men, they still fear weight training because, as previously stated, there seems to be a masculine identity that is associated with it.

When female bodybuilders step on stage, the extent of their musculature may call their sexuality into question. St. Martin and Gavey discuss how the first female bodybuilders “attempted to transcend sexual dichotomy (the sex/gender system) by implying that the body developed by women in bodybuilding should not be categorized as either feminine or masculine.”122 For many, the female bodybuilder is an example of a rejection of this ideal because she is hyper-muscular, resembling a male bodybuilder. For her body to be accepted on the bodybuilding stage, female bodybuilders must embellish their suits with rhinestones and wear noticeable amounts of makeup and jewelry to maintain the ‘feminine’ requirements ranked by the judges. Whether or not these requirements meet a favorable score off the stage is still a common debate among gender feminists like to Bell, Lowe, and St. Martin and Gavey.

Regardless, these authors illustrate that images of female bodybuilders remain unsettling in the eyes of society, and other women, because it questions gender and gender roles. Based upon prior discussion of the male gaze and the media’s representation of a ‘fit-looking’ body, it can be inferred that many women decide to lift weights because they desire to be viewed as attractive and feminine. After all, aesthetics can be the primary motivators for participation in bodybuilding for many people. The literal interpretation of the term is that you are ‘building your body’. The fear of gaining too much muscle lingers in the back (or front, depending on the individual) of a woman’s
mind, and often deters them from lifting heavy weights. Instead, they seek to attain a softer and ‘more feminine’ image of the fitness ideal.\textsuperscript{123}

Take for instance the bikini and figure competitor. Bikini models have an hourglass shape to them to represent a more feminine appearance, while figure competitors are known for the ‘V’-taper shape formed by their broad shoulders and narrow waist (see Figure 11 in Appendix). Figure competitors have a noticeable increase in muscle mass but the greatest difference lies in the shape of their bodies (see Figures 5 and 13). Across all categories, “hairstyle, make-up, expression, posture and demeanor that mimic and almost exaggerate the traditional requirements of femininity.”\textsuperscript{124} Both offer slightly different, but still acceptable images of femininity and strength that many fitness and physique women seek to attain. Although they are aware that a single gym session will not transform them into bodybuilders, female fitness enthusiasts continue to proceed with caution when entering into the weight room.\textsuperscript{125}

\section*{5.2 Holding Back}

When discussing the subject of women’s passivity with training, researcher Shari L. Dworkin suggests that despite women’s attendance in the weight room, there is a fear lingering in the back of women’s minds. She discusses a ‘ceiling effect’ that is present with regards to the amount of muscle mass that women deem appropriate for themselves. From the sample of regular gym attendees Dworkin used in her study, she found that 25\% of the women were non-lifters, 65\% were moderate lifters, and only 10\% were heavy lifters.\textsuperscript{126} Although moderate lifters comprised the majority of the sample, they noted their resistance to lift heavy. Most of these women found themselves ‘holding back’ in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{123} As discussed and depicted in figures 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10.
\textsuperscript{125} As noted from my experience as a personal trainer.
\textsuperscript{126} Dworkin, (2010), p. 305.
\end{flushright}
the weight room by ‘keeping weight the same’ or ‘backing off’ certain exercises that might cause them to ‘bulk up’. In her findings, she concludes the following:

Approximately three-fourths of the women at the fitness sites expressed an awareness of an upper limit on the quest for muscular size and strength. Non- and moderate lifters in fact used very specific weight-lifting and cardiovascular strategies in fitness settings to mediate these tensions. 127

Dworkin’s observations demonstrate that women’s reluctance to lift heavy weights is correlated to the fear of becoming too muscular, which is only reinforced by “toned” and “soft” images pushed by the media.

For the majority of the women used in Dworkin’s study, the evidence presented concludes that: men lift heavy weights to get big muscles and therefore women will get big muscles if they lift heavy weights too. Basic human physiology proves that women’s muscle-building capabilities are drastically lower than a man’s because of their lack of testosterone. As previously stated, the means of attaining ‘bodybuilder’ physiques can only be accomplished through the use of steroids; “quite honestly there’s no way a woman can get that muscular without steroids.”128

These views are not exclusive to Dworkin’s study. In general, it seems women have a fear of becoming too muscular and therefore do not push themselves as men do in the weight room. According to societal norms, and Bem’s Sex Role Inventory, men are seen to be the stronger and more dominant of the two sexes. The archetypal man is a manifestation of muscularity and strength, which is often developed through the active pursuit of weight training. For women, the norms have stayed fairly similar as well. Women are still considered to be nurturing and passive, as they are meant to complement their male counterparts, as noted by Bem. Men are encouraged to take up space physically as demonstrated by the male archetype. In order to compliment men, women

127 Ibid. p. 314.
are meant to do the opposite – to use as little space as possible.\textsuperscript{129} This helps to explain the fear of fat in women, as fat is connected to being large and taking up space, but it also draws parallels of women’s resistance to gaining muscle mass\textsuperscript{130}. When women gain muscle, they physically become bigger and take up more space around them. If men are meant to take up space, then it is not socially acceptable for women to challenge this by participating in activity that may elicit a similar response and cause competition between the sexes.

Some women defy these boundaries and openly attack the co-ed weight room regardless of gender archetypes. For those who are less ambitious, a more passive approach is taken. The alternative gateway for women is to practice weight training in an area that does not promote a competitive atmosphere between the sexes. Thus, women’s only areas were created to provide a more welcoming atmosphere for women to lift freely, away from the societal pressures of a male gaze, as explained by Wolf.

5.3 Women’s Only

While some women are comfortable enough to tackle the co-ed weight room environment head-on, an alternative to the co-ed gym atmosphere is a move to the ‘women’s only’ section. The factors behind a female’s decision to choose the ‘women’s only’ section over the co-ed space spawn another dilemma about the interpretation of the particular woman’s psychological perspective: Are women using these areas as a form of liberation to work out as they wish without the male gaze? Or do these areas promote segregation for females in gym culture?

The idea to separate women into their own areas promotes segregation because it implies that women may require a different environment or treatment as men. One

\textsuperscript{129} Bem, (1993).

\textsuperscript{130} As demonstrated by Dworkin’s study, (2010).
notable difference between men and women’s sections in the gym is the size of the area. While it is not always the case, ‘women’s only’ sections can often be smaller and more compact than that of the ‘co-ed section’. Arguably, there are more people using the co-ed area and, therefore, more room is needed to accommodate more bodies. Yet, there is something to be said about having a separate, smaller section reserved for women – especially when its layout tends to be more inviting. Drawing parallels from Bem’s Sex-typing, where it is postulated that women tend to possess the characteristics of ‘gentleness’ and a ‘nurturing’ nature, the same description can be said to the set-up of the ‘women’s only’ area. The walls are covered in a light pastel and dumbbells are organized by colour rather than weight. Men might not find this environment appealing, but do women see it as a safe environment?

While the amount of machines and free weights in women’s only sections are proportionate to the co-ed areas in the gyms, the machines are predominantly occupied. In comparison to a co-ed section, the number of machines is significantly higher in women’s only sections when considering the body-to-machine ratio of these areas. Despite having more bodies in a regular gym area, the number of weight machines closely parallels that of the women’s section, who have significantly less users overall. This body-to-machine ratio promotes women to use equipment as their primary source of training and suggests that women are not as proficient as men in regard to the use of free-weights. Free-weights are not coupled with a set of instructions and, therefore, one must know how to use them effectively through various exercises, reps, speeds, and angles. Machines, on the other hand, have set ranges of movement and are usually paired with the name of the machine, a description of the machine itself, and the target muscle groups. For novice weight lifters, this is ideal to begin a training program, because, generally, their muscle strength and stability is lower when compared to that of an avid

\[\text{131} \quad \text{As examined from my experiences at various co-ed gyms across southern Ontario, Canada.}\]
\[\text{132} \quad \text{From my personal experience in the women’s only section at the Athletic Club in North London, Ontario, Canada.}\]
\[\text{133} \quad \text{As demonstrated in Dworkin’s study, (2010).}\]
lifter. However, some women continue to use these machines for years after they commence their training programs, especially in co-ed environments, where men tend to occupy the free-weight area. The combination of men using free-weights and women using machines continues to promote separation between the sexes. When considering the use of ‘women’s only’ sections, this segregation is further enforced. Still, there is another theory to be considered.

Figure 16: An extreme example of a "Women's Only" gym in Los Angeles, CA


Despite the segregation that occurs by separating the sexes, ‘women’s only’ areas can provide a space of liberation. These areas represent a space where women can train as aggressively or passively as they wish without the fear of male judgment. Since training is already intimidating for some women, it is important to provide a space for them to learn about their bodies. They are able to experiment with various workouts and equipment that they might not have done in the company of a male presence. Women can

134 Based on my discussion with men and women at the Western Student Recreation center in London Ontario, Canada.
take an active role in choosing how they wish to train and they can make mistakes without embarrassment.

They are also free from the male gaze, as discussed by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*, where she describes ‘the male gaze’ as creating the pressures women feel to look or behave a certain way, according to gender and cultural norms. A ‘women’s only’ area helps to remove this gaze by allowing women to act independently of the norms stated by Wolf. They can train with what equipment they wish, how they wish, without feeling judged or sexualized by men. It also liberates women in that it gives them the choice to lift either in the co-ed area or the women’s area. Without this choice, women are confined to use whatever area is available, generally causing them to forgo the gym altogether, or at least the weights area.

“Women’s only” areas can also serve another purpose and double as a safe area for certain cultural demographics. Certain members of groups, like Muslim women, are not able to show their bodies in the company of any males other than their husbands due to their religious beliefs.\(^{135}\) Due to the religious beliefs of Muslim women, finding a safe area to workout can be a challenge in the gym environment.\(^ {136}\) A separate section of the gym reserved for women alone helps to ease and eliminate some of the discomfort the presence of males have on these fears, while allowing them to partake in health and fitness activities. For each of these reasons, the women’s only sections can enable more freedom for women than seclusion because they provide a space for women to feel comfortable without being idolized or sexualized by a male gaze or presence. This is especially evident when looking at specific religious demographics, such as Muslim women, who might not be able to attend the gym if these areas were not available.

\(^{135}\) Natalie Szudy discusses the challenges Muslim women face in their pursuit of physical activity in her PhD dissertation entitled *Experiences of Embodiment: Analysis of Muslim Women’s Participation in Physical Activity*, (2011).

http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1924488,00.html
Still, this is does not solve the problem fully. Despite the new accommodating areas, women’s attendance in separate and co-ed weight rooms remains lower than that of their male counterparts. Based upon the points of discussion by the theorists in this chapter, it is consequential to state that the fear of masculinization is faced by a number of women associated with lifting weights or the gym environment. In contrast, there are also those women who brave the weight room and partake in weight training are seen as challenging social norms outlined by Bem and Wolf. Those using minimal or no weights may be seen as conforming to the norm to maintain their femininity, while those who train with heavy weights are seen as protesting against the conventional norms. Regardless of what side of the scale these women fall under, all have the choice to decide whether or not they allow themselves to be influenced by the ever-present gaze that might hold them back, as illustrated by many of the women in Dworkin’s study. The question remains of whether they will allow the gaze to influence them or not, and if this thought remains in their minds, can they ever be fully liberated, either physically or socially?

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138 As depicted by the fitness magazines listed in this thesis.

139 Dworkin, (2010).
Chapter 6

6  Posedown

November 27, 2012

It’s been 3 days since my OPA show! Although I only placed 6th in Figure, I’m still running on the high of getting 2nd place in Physique! It was a long road.

Now, the real work begins... maintaining as much as I can for as long as I can. I can’t start going crazy on junk foods, I’ll have to taper back off my cardio routine slowly, and I’m sticking to one cheat meal per week – basically nothing has really changed. The difference now is that there is no ‘show’ goal ahead, which makes motivation that much harder. This is where I faulted last time... I hope I don’t rebound this time around.

Figure 17: My 2nd place Physique trophy; November 24, 2012

(Paplinskie, T. “Steph Wins.” 2012. Digital File Type.)
Now, two distinct sides of the issues have been addressed in Chapters 4 and 5. Regarding the issues surrounding women’s bodies, I now analyze the benefits and dangers to a woman’s decision for participating in fitness competitions. As support, I continue to call upon my own learned experience in order to analyze a viable solution or alternative to these activities.

6.1 Media, Magazines & Makeup

April 9, 2013

Looking back to two years after my first show and five months following my last show, I see that I was guilty of doing what so many other women do: I was focused on maintaining a ‘show’ physique that, realistically, could not be maintained. I was set on keeping the body I had because I worked hard for it and enjoyed the attention I received because of it. I had the idea that I needed to continue to do whatever it took to stay as lean as possible, for as long as possible. However, there was no need to restrict myself anymore; the show was over. I had new things to focus on, and I could set my priorities to something more important, like work or school. I did not want that, I just kept thinking that I had the ability to maintain the body that I saw in the mirror, regardless of the cost. I was falling victim to the ‘fit beauty myth’.

At this point, my body was already exhausted from the four months of dieting, the hours of cardio, and the lack of carbohydrates. The loss of physical strength (I was down 15% on all my lifts) and the absence of my menstrual cycle\(^{140}\) were both indications that

I needed a break. My body was ready to go back to a healthy state, but my mind was focused on continuing on the path I was on regardless of the negative impacts it could have had on my body over time. I had already made it this far. It wouldn’t be that hard to maintain, I just wanted to look like the women I saw on the magazines. Why was I willing to place my health secondary to my appearance? What was the force behind my desire to stay lean?

Magazines, websites, and bodybuilding shows (among others) are all visible media outlets an average person could look to find information on how to be ‘fit’. Within these various sources, there is a substantial amount of content and information on how this ‘fit’ body or lifestyle can be achieved. When looking at the fitness industry today, two factors should be examined. The first is the influence of the media.

As previously stated, magazines like *Shape* and *Fitness* (see Figures 7 and 9) can be beneficial to help women become active. They are ideal for those who do not have a lot of money to spend on personal training or have a substantial amount of time to research weight loss strategies for themselves. These magazines are full of information, a lot of which is scientifically based and is useful for quick, efficient workouts alongside healthy, creative recipes. Women, like myself, are often inspired while flipping through the pages as they read stories of women with similar backgrounds that were able to transform their lives and giving hope to those looking to do the same. They create a potential kind of community support group for women to learn, share, and grow in fitness.

On a broader scale, fitness and bodybuilding websites are able to accomplish a similar goal but to a larger, more profound degree. As information technology expands, websites are the new ‘go-to’ for advice on any subject, particularly fitness. Because they have the ability to reach an international audience (more so than magazines), websites are

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141 As discussed in Chapter 4.
also ideal for women looking for programs that cater to their unique health and fitness needs. Bodybuilding.com is one of the largest online fitness communities for both males and females in North America. The website is laden with articles from the most popular fitness gurus and each page is overflowing with every workout program you could imagine. From old-school bodybuilding to HIIT training, there seems to be a workout that can fit any body or lifestyle. Workouts are not the only resources they offer; the site also contains a large variety of meal plans and recipe ideas, as well as a supplement store where you can buy almost any brand/type/product. With the click of a mouse, you can find, view, download, and print off your favorite workout routine to bring with you to the gym, post your new meal plan on the fridge, and stock up on your favorite protein powder. This can be a crucial resource to women who are just starting out and have no idea where to begin, or for those who are looking to try something new.

Many of the authors and contributors to the sites are fitness and figure icons, who often post their own workout plans for their readers to follow. Women can look up their favorite figure competitor and follow their workout plan to help get them on the path to a ‘show’ physique.

Additionally, bodybuilding and fitness shows can be a strong motivator for potential competitors to pursue the idea of competing. While sitting in the audience and watching as fitness and figure competitors line up on stage, each female competitor is lean, defined and flawless under the bright lights that beam off their dark tans. From head-to-toe, each body represents months (and sometimes years) of diet and training, compliance, and routine. When looking at these women, may give others hope to believe, “If she can do it, so can I!”

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142 Bodybuilding.com is one the largest online supplement stores and workout resource sites in the world. It is founded and based in the United States.
143 Based upon the amount of daily and annual hits to the website.
144 As found on bodybuilding.com
With the number of magazines, websites, diets, workouts, trainers, and resources available, it becomes easier to actively seek out information on training, eating, and find coaches willing to help achieve the fitness bodies that are seen on magazine covers and on the competition stage. While competing in a show seems like a natural and positive course of action for those in the fitness industry (and for some it is), this is only one part of the equation. The fitness community-at-large glamorizes these types of bodies and the people who possess them, through supplement endorsements and modeling contracts. However, little attention is placed upon what happens behind the scenes, or what happens when the show is over.

6.2 Behind the Curtain

As mentioned throughout this thesis, the unseen aspect of competing encompasses a wide variety of challenges and complications that occur ‘behind the curtain’. For those women wanting to compete but who have a limited background in training or nutrition, adhering to a strict 16-20 week meal plan can be extremely difficult.\(^\text{145}\) More often than not, these plans require a few hours per week, or even per day, of meal preparation. Many contest-prep programs also require 3-5 days of weight training per week with an additional 30-60 minutes of steady-state cardio or interval training 2-3 times per week, either directly following the weight workout or as a separate bout of exercise\(^\text{146}\). In total, this training schedule can require anywhere between 1.5-4 hours per day to complete. This is a substantial amount of time to set aside each day, and often leads to overtraining.

Overtraining is often a reaction to metabolic and adrenal fatigue in the individual/athlete\(^\text{147}\), which can take months or years to correct. While the risk of

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\(^{145}\) Based on my experience as a competitor.


overtraining seems to be a dangerous parts of contest prep, it is not the only risk. A contest diet plan also brings about risks and concerns.

Due to the timeline required to compete in a show, many participants must follow a strict diet plan in order to meet their goal on time. Generally, this diet involves restricting certain types of foods, or entire food groups altogether because of the excess calories they hold. Diet plans are usually quite plain, consisting mainly of lean proteins, most vegetables, and a small amount of healthy fats like almonds. Sugars and starchy carbohydrate intake is timed in accordance with workouts, and there is no room for additional calories from any source. These programs require a high amount of consistency to be effective. Some competitors say that they enjoy the challenge of a diet plan and their ability to comply with one over a specified course of time; however, the act of restrictive dieting comes with a price. Because certain foods have been eliminated for an extended period of time, reintroducing them can cause digestive problems or food-intolerances and symptoms.\(^{148}\)

In addition, many post-show activities include eating all the food you were restricted from having during your prep – especially candy and junk food. In my experience, competitors (myself included) often carry a bag of food backstage that they are waiting to devour once the show is over. They might even continue eating these types of foods for days or weeks following the show because there is no longer a need to be restricted. Malson categorizes this behavior as unhealthy and as resembling procuring symptoms to that of eating disorders, such as bulimia, anorexia nervosa, or both\(^ {149}\).

With both of these ideas in mind, there is some speculation about why anyone would want to diet in the first place. While some female and male competitors argue that they want to challenge their mind and body, and that doing a competition is a form of

\(^{148}\) I personally experienced a great deal of digestive issues after each of my contest and had many fellow competitors complain of similar issues.

self-discipline,\textsuperscript{150} the outcomes can be more dangerous than the process itself. In the case of women, who are highly susceptible to experiencing the athlete triad,\textsuperscript{151} competitions create an unhealthy physical, and potentially unhealthy mental state. These potential risk factors force the question of whether or not competing is an appropriate way to demonstrate self-control particularly if a loss of control is experienced afterwards, i.e., post-competition rebound.\textsuperscript{152}

Considering the aforementioned dangers with fitness competitions, there are surprising numbers of women who continue to enter them, believing that they will be exempt from post-show rebound. The idea of competing is quite radical when taking into account the potential side effects of amenorrhea and weight rebounding; however, many held similar beliefs about Freud’s theories on the body, despite their support. In today’s world, the numbers of diets found online are endless; some are credible, while others are completely ridiculous. Regardless, if there is someone willing to write about it, there is usually someone willing to follow it. Many women partake in extreme diets and training strategies every day to help achieve a ‘fit body’. Eventually, the end begins to take precedence over the means.. What’s worse is that women are not naïve about their own reasons or blinded by the vanity behind their actions. Feminist, and founder of feministing.com,\textsuperscript{153} Jessica Valenti\textsuperscript{154} describes it well.

We know that we’re doing damage to ourselves – not only to our bodies but also to our mental well-being. And it’s not worth it. It’s not worth the pain. It’s not worth the time and the money. And really – with all the money or


\textsuperscript{151} Low bone density risk is higher in exercising women with multiple Triad risk factors. Gibbs et al. (2013).

\textsuperscript{152} Post competition rebound is the occurrence of unwanted weight gain after a show due to poor dietary choices.

\textsuperscript{153} Feministing.com is a feminist blog founded in 2004 by Jessica Valenti.

time you spend in front of the mirror – have you yet to be truly happy? I’m guessing not. 155

Despite the fact that some women are educated in kinesiology or movement sciences and ought to know better, there are still those who partake in activities that may be harmful in the long run, specifically to accommodate the ‘fit body’ ideal found on the covers of fitness and fashion magazines alike. I was an example of this type of woman and I know others who continue to demonstrate this extreme dedication to fulfilling a ‘lean’ body through unrealistic means, such as restrictive dieting and extensive workout sessions.

What happens when a woman follows all of the scientific advice and still cannot get herself to look like the cover model? Do these media outlets ultimately do more harm than good? The media not is inclined to mention the pre-determined factors that affect the shape of a woman’s body. Genetics play a large role in muscle development, and also tend to be the determining factor in how you store fat. If a woman has a pear-shaped figure, the odds are that it will be difficult for her to lose fat around her legs and thighs, while a woman who is apple-shape may have difficulty losing belly fat. Some magazines take a women’s body type into account when writing articles on diet and workout plans. 156 However, most do not, so those women seeking information through these sources may have to look elsewhere. In Wolf’s The Beauty Myth, it is interesting to see that the behavior of women in her generation continues to grow within women of the current generation, in regards to the fitness community specifically. 157

156 Women’s Health is an example of a magazine that wrote about training and diet based upon the different female body types. http://www.womenshealthmag.com/fitness/best-workout-for-your-body-type
6.3 Changing the ‘Fit Ideal'

What if we, as a society, got back to focusing on what the body is capable of doing instead of how it looks? As previously mentioned, “the gaze” is purely superficial and is solely concerned with the physical aspect of what a fit female body should look like. Again, this is problematic because someone can look like the epitome of fitness, while not actually being fit – they might simply have good genetics or follow a restrictive diet. The industry can be a good source of information and resources; however, the problem with magazines and fitness shows is they do not actually validate how fit you truly are because there is no measureable performance aspect. Therefore, they are not a good indicator of one’s fitness level; only one’s degree of musculature and tone. We must begin to shift our perspectives from that of the aesthetic to something more tangible, where outcomes are measured by what a body can do rather than how a body looks. A focus on performance-based goals would allow for an objective standard to be set that takes the focus away from subjective ideals while also providing a functional purpose to training.

CrossFit is a new type of training that has been emerging from the fitness industry and challenging the fear of masculinization. It can help to combat women’s fear of fat, and help promote a healthy active lifestyle. With the focus placed on performance, more and more women are seeking out CrossFit as an alternative to the average gym environment, which seems mundane in comparison. CrossFit is an ever-increasing aid for those against the superficial archetype because it requires women to lift heavy weights in addition to performing body weight circuits. Thus, it allows women to benefit from the physical aspects of exercise, while improving their body composition (see Figure 18). CrossFit is not the only solution to helping women become confident in their bodies, it is

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a modern activity that exemplifies the importance of performance rather than just aesthetics and introduces its participants to basic functional movement patterns.

**Figure 18: CrossFit Athlete Libby DiBiase**

![CrossFit Athlete Libby DiBiase](http://www.gasparinutrition.com/teamgaspari/libby-dibiase/photos/#/0)

Additionally, participation in sport has been, and will continue to be, a suitable solution to creating a balance between performance and aesthetics. This is due to the fact that sport showcases the abilities of its participants through a combination of aesthetics, performance, and functionality. While each sport is unique, all serve a purpose and have an end-goal that is qualitative in nature, which allows the focus to be placed on acts over aesthetics. Sport demonstrates the diversity between athletes and awards their participants based upon skills and proficiencies through specific physical and/or mental tasks, rather than being based strictly on looks.

**SPORT = (FUNCTION + PERFORMANCE + AESTHETICS)**
While it cannot be denied that there is sex appeal in men’s and women’s sports alike (i.e. gymnastics, swimming, and beach volleyball, among others) the focus lies upon the functional proficiencies of the athletes. Often, the aesthetic appeal of sports lies in watching the athletes perform movements in a manner that exceeds that of an average person’s capabilities, particularly in elite sport, such as the Olympics. When considering recreational sport, people may have various reasons for participating that are often intrinsically driven. Overall, sport seems to be a better option for women who are looking for internal benefits – to improve their health and have fun – while potentially benefitting from an external standpoint as well. For these reasons, I propose that women turn their attention to sport and careful use of CrossFit as alternatives to figure competitions as a means of moving away from aesthetic-focused activities.

When considering the media’s role in promoting a healthy body image, fitness magazines and others are at fault for promoting the ‘fit beauty myth’; they can also send a positive message to many women. By reaching out to a large demographic of women, these magazines provide knowledge and support to those seeking to improve their health and change their lives for the better. The decision to attend a gym for working out or taking fitness classes is definitely one that obtains many health benefits, both internally and externally, and should not be discouraged by any means. The same can be said for choosing healthy eating habits. Neither of these actions should be rejected; however, the reasons must be analyzed to ensure their authenticity. For some women, aesthetics may be the primary goal, and that is completely fine. Others may choose health as their primary goal; aesthetics may not even be a consideration, or are simply an added benefit. Neither one is wrong, nor more acceptable than the other, providing it is the result of individual and informed choice.

Unfortunately, there are many women who remain trapped in the cyclical pattern of feeling inadequate because that is what the ‘fit beauty myth’ enforces. Recognition of the problem is not enough, and if it were, the same issues Wolf address two decades ago

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159 Having having fun and improving skill level are examples of intrinsic motivators.
would be inconsequential. Instead, they remain present with the fit and average woman alike. Real change requires action. We, women, need to take action and accountability for our own thoughts. We need to start understanding why we think the way we do about our bodies and what drives our desires to self-improvement. If not, there will always be a feeling of inadequacy that cannot be fixed with a fitness competition or the latest diet trend. Health is a state of being that does not change with the times or beauty trends, and is the key to providing a solution to eliminating the beauty myth.

6.4 Challenging the Definition of Femininity

April 19, 2013

As a woman, I can understand the pressures that society places on us to look ‘feminine’ in order to be deemed ‘attractive’ from an aesthetic viewpoint because I have lived through and felt those pressures. Not only have I fallen into the trap, I have watched many others do the same. The hope lies with the few who are not as easily swayed by the feedback from the external world. Those who have internal motivators that do not stem from vanity are generally more contented by their actions; however, it is hard to conclude that there is not a certain level of aesthetic appeal behind leading an active lifestyle.

Without a doubt, the media carries a large part of the responsibility on the views of the fitness industry and its participants. Looking at the way fitness models and fit bodies are glamourized exemplifies the presence of the sexualized gaze.

To overcome the physical and mental barriers that confine women in regards to their bodies based on the gaze, there is a fundamental need to get to the root of the cause. This can only be done when women analyze why they are acting the way they do. When taking a step back to recognize why one chooses to participate in weight training and certain diets, then progress toward change can be made.
Our attitude towards femininity ought to be re-examined in order to initiate a change in the way women perceive their bodies. The spectrum laid out by Bem was a step towards understanding how we categorize the sexes, but the issue is more complex than a list of prescribed features. As demonstrated through media, gender binds are deeply rooted in society and only enforced through popular culture. With evolution comes change, and the barriers of ‘gender’ are continuously being changed as our culture expands. As demonstrated by Hartley and Dworkin, there are opposing ideas of what constitutes as feminist actions and, as an extension, the pursuit of femininity itself. Author Susan Bordo offered a similar conclusion to her generation, stating:

Popular representations, as we have seen, may forcefully employ the rhetoric and symbolism of empowerment, personal freedom, “having it all.” Yet, female bodies, pursuing these ideals, may find themselves as distracted, depressed, and physically ill as female bodies in the nineteenth century were made when pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity, and delicacy.

The problem lies within the prevailing stereotypical ideal – namely, that women should remain the subordinate of the sexes. Thereby, femininity is equated to inferiority. As demonstrated through women’s fear of getting fat, women are conditioned to believe that they must workout to remain within an acceptable size. Seeking out fitness to solve their dilemma, women enter the weight room only to be confounded by the idea of moving too far from the conventional norm for them.

Women’s bodybuilding contradicts the norm, as demonstrated by Lowe, Brady, and St. Martin and Gavey. Women who participate in bodybuilding are categorized as ‘masculine’ because they are strong and visibly muscular. To combat fear of

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160 In reference to Bem’s Sex Role Inventory (1993).
162 Ibid. p. 2376.
masculinized identity, female bodybuilders must garnish themselves with over-the-top makeup and flashy bikinis to add a feminine aspect in order to be accepted.\textsuperscript{164} Without a doubt these women worked hard to achieve their figures through years of training and proper diet; yet, this is often overshadowed by their rebellion of conventional femininity.\textsuperscript{165}

Hence, this interpretation can lead to the conclusion that femininity in its entirety needs to change, especially in the fitness and bodybuilding community. Why is there a lack of focus placed on a woman’s strength and capabilities as an expression of femininity? We, as a society, need to turn the focus away from the adherence of specific characteristics and the physical portion of the term. The media is not a suitable source to solutions because it is focused on superficial ideals that change variably based on what is popular at the moment. Philosopher Melina Bell\textsuperscript{166} offers a radical stance by “denying that there should be a specifically feminine aesthetic.” Instead of trying to define the term, we should seek to recognize femininity as being represented through the decisions women make to benefit themselves mentally or physically.

In trying to resolve female issues of the body in the 1990s, Naomi Wolf concluded that, “[t]he next phase of our movement forward as individual women, as women together, and as tenants of our bodies and this planet, depends now on what we decide to see when we look in the mirror. What will we see?\textsuperscript{167}” However, since the \textit{Beauty Myth} continues to plague women over a decade after Wolf identified it, I am inclined to offer an alternative to her closing statement. The mirror must begin to take a backseat in our society in order for women to stop judging what they see in it. Women

\textsuperscript{164} Referring to the glamorized bikinis and makeup worn by my female fitness competitors.

\textsuperscript{165} Conventional femininity is referring to the actions and appearance associated with being female.


pursuing fitness competitions must change their perspectives of the external, to the internal, and begin to question the root of their endeavors – fitness or otherwise.

Shellie McParland and Megan Popovic lead their audience on the path to female liberation from the gender binds by opening themselves up to provoke discussion; “Writing as women we can use our voices to encourage others to speak up, tell their stories, and look at the future. Autoethnography provides shared experience, knowledge of self; it brings women together, and it helps us unite and make changes within and around us.” 168

For some, liberation may entail the pursuit of fitness, not to conform to an ideal but rather, to benefit their overall health and well-being. 169 While figure competition may not be the easiest or healthiest means for some, each woman is entitled to make her own decisions based on the information they are given. The difference lies in those women who inquire to understand the motivations behind their choice. Intrinsic rewards can provide the most value to participants. Awareness of the challenges and the benefits of a decision is preferable for the basis of an acceptance of the outcomes. Correspondingly, if a woman is informed of the pros and cons of competing in a fitness or figure show, she can make an informed decision based on her understanding of the outcomes experienced by others. If decisions are intrinsically driven, they have a better likelihood of leading to the most happiness, as opposed to those that are extrinsically driven and more susceptible to external change over time. The question of intent must be seen as the path to intrinsic prosperity. Additionally, a woman who chooses to compete in a show, run a marathon, play on a club volleyball team or got to the gym should not be scrutinized for her decisions. Instead, this should be viewed as an expression of her self and her femininity. Feminine liberation lies in those women who are not afraid to be unique and who allow themselves to be vulnerable. They chase their goals because they genuinely want to and

169 A state of being genuinely comfortable, healthy or happy.
share their stories and experiences with others in hopes of educating and motivating. Will do you the same?
Chapter 7

7 Strong Is Sexy

June 8, 2013

Second place. Reflecting back on my thoughts that day over six months ago, I know what it took to get on stage, and stepping on the stage itself is an accomplishment. The fact that I placed top three means so much, considering I might not have been ready to compete at all. It was a long, hard 18 weeks of dieting, workouts, and cardio. I’m glad to have the experience. It challenged me to push my body and gave me the self-actualization to realize what I am capable of. It taught me about my body, my mind, my limits, and my priorities.

Having said this, I am also haunted by the shadow of competing. My body fought my entire prep. I experienced amenorrhea, demonstrating that I was doing harm to my body that may have a long-term impact on my health. At times, I did not care. I recognize my mind is a powerful tool in convincing me to believe I was doing more good than harm, while in reality I was doing the opposite.

Fast-forward to this hour, second, minute, I can honestly say I sometimes catch myself feeling inadequate about my body. I know I cannot maintain a show physique year-round; my body is not built to be that lean; my genetics do not allow me to be that lean. Still, when I look back at photos, I sometimes wish I would compete again, simply to get my body back.

Then it occurs to me... why do I feel this way? This is a purely superficial attitude to have; I know this. Then I reassess, “The Fit Beauty Myth has tried to fool me again, but not this time” because I am better able to recognize the source of my desires. They are superficial and I can see past it. I now seek to attain that which will bring me the most satisfaction at a personal level. To me, being healthy and strong is the main components to living optimally and promotes happiness. Being strong is the most
satisfying reward to training and fitness. It means that I am constantly growing and becoming stronger on a physical and measurable level. Being healthy

I was taught that being strong is a good thing and this carries into my life today. I love to lift heavy weights. I love putting my body through rigorous training. I love the feeling after hitting a personal best. I love the feeling of reaching goals and having measurable results. To me, being strong is being fit. Being strong is empowering. Being strong is sexy.

Despite any negative aspects I discuss in regards to fitness and bodybuilding show, I do not regret my decision to compete. Competing helped to teach me how to eat right and workout properly. It challenged my beliefs and understanding in what I was mentally able to make my physical body do. It allowed me to work towards a goal that required discipline that I may not have implemented otherwise. It also drives my passion to continue to be fit and active, and to help others do the same. I make me recognize that I love to be fit and strong, not to conform to an ideal, but to be the best version of me, inside and out.

7.1 Conclusion

The decision to pursue fitness is one that every woman will no doubt face at some point during her life. My journey started when I was young and continues to change and develop with each day and every person I encounter along my path. Autoethnography granted me an outpost to which I explore and share my personal thoughts on fitness competitions, fitness magazines, and the industry as a whole. Whether others share the same feelings is not for me to judge. In combination with feminist theory, both gave me a perspective that helped expand and express the issues I have observed pertaining to women’s bodies. While reflecting on my own personal experience, I am able to recognize my own thoughts and draw parallels from similar examples of women in the fitness industry or outside of the industry alike.
In Chapter 3, I illustrated touchstones of the feminist theorists from the First, Second, and Third Wave of Feminism provide a fundamental history of women’s place and expectations in society. Wollstonecraft and Friedan laid the foundation that fought against the social patriarchy, often led by a Freudian mentality. Although Wolf was an influential voice in revealing the misogynist “gaze” that continues to repress women, this history, that has revealed how we are led to these ideals, has been examined to demonstrate that they are not ‘new’ ideals, but rather old ones, reincarnated for the women of today’s world. Wolf’s timeframe did not seem to experience a change and, thus, the same “gaze” continues to hinder women, only now it affects those seeking the fit body in the twenty-first century.

The intention in writing this thesis is to draw attention to the motivating factors behind women’s pursuit of fitness and the potential dangers involved with these pursuits. As discussed in Chapter 4, the fear of becoming fat continues to have many women signing up for gym memberships. Hartley and Dworkin provide research supporting the cause of the fit-obsession and fat-obsession lingering throughout modern culture.

Chapter 5 provided examples of the fear of masculinization that is a result of the stereotypes surround female bodybuilding as discussed by authors Bolin, Lowe, and St. Martin and Gavey. Women’s bodybuilding challenges gender norms by displaying a socially unacceptable amount musculature on women. It also conforms to norms of femininity through the requirements of extravagant bikini suits, high heels and full makeup. Together, the fear of being fat and the fear of masculinization discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 forge to create a dualism in a woman’s mind of how she seeks to define herself and her body through weight training.

After determining these fears are a reoccurring issue within the pursuit of fitness, and how these issues can often lead to unhealthy means of creating a fit body, some of the blame is placed on the media for glamourizing figure competitions. By glamourizing the fitness industry, the media leads its audience to buy into a fit body as the new ideal. Competitions serve as an avenue of meeting these ideals but they also have dangerous ramifications on a woman’s health. The problems that result from trying to attain this fit
body are that it requires time, calculation and discipline, often to the point of controlling and restricting to the extreme, where health is left to suffer.

After revealing potential issues surrounding the quest for an aesthetically fit body, it is determined that the focus should lie on tangible goals rather than superficial ones, where the ideal is prone to change with time. Crossfit is an example of transition in the fitness industry that focuses on performance first, and aesthetics second. Additionally, sport is a viable solution for its ability to simultaneously combine the performance with functionality and aesthetics. Performance-based activities provide the best alternative to aesthetic hobby of fitness competitions.

Finally, I propose that our society change its perspective of femininity. Instead of following the modern stereotypes of the physical nature, women should open dialogue with one another and discuss their intentions for pursuing fitness and other activities alike. As a result, femininity ought to reflect and illustrate the choice to seek optimal expressions of self, both physically and mentally. Once this recognition occurs, female liberation follows as a natural product of this expression of femininity.

Today

So there it is. Within these past 90 pages, I have shared parts of my journey as a fitness competitor, analyzed societal perspectives on body image, discussed the problems I find in the fitness industry, and offered what I think to be an alternative to those seeking to achieve a fit-looking body. Despite the complexity to the issues I have discussed, I have merely provided a lens and perspective that I hope provoke thoughts and ideas that may not have been considered otherwise. I am not expecting to change the world, just share my perspective to help others work toward their solutions. Personally, I have found my solution to be rather simple. I have learned that my body is my temple. It is all I have and it deserves the upmost care and respect. Despite all the things I know it is capable of doing, I am not going to subject it to an unsafe state. As much as I enjoyed my time
competing, I look back and know that I was harming my body a large majority of the time.

Moving forward, I am working towards keeping it in a balance that is neither passive, nor extreme. This balance embodies a constant desire for growth, which I get closer each day with every action and decision that I make. While I have found it can be difficult to not get caught up in superficial expectations, I ground myself in the intrinsic values I hold for my health and my body, rather than the external validity I was once guilty of seeking. Throughout this writing process, I have battled with my body and mind to find a solution for others; however, I have finally come to terms with the fact that through reading this, you will make your own conclusions. What is my conclusion? I have chosen to pursue that which allows me to progress into the best version of myself physically, mentally, and spiritually.
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Appendix

Figure 11: IFBB Bikini Model Nicole Nagrani

Figure 12: WBFF Fitness Model Lyzabeth Lopez

(Grant. G.E. “Lyzabeth Lopez” 2010.

http://www.lyzabethlopez.com/gallery/competition/)
Figure 13: IFBB Figure Competitor Nicole Wilkins

Figure 14: IFBB Physique Competitor Dana Lynn Bailey

(“Dana Linn Bailey” 2011.

http://edraby.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/danallnbailey.jpg)
Figure 15: IFBB Bodybuilder Maria Bello

Figure 16: 2012 Mr. Olympia Phil Heath

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Title: “Introduction to Feminist Theory”

Title: “Transgender Issues in International Sport”

Title: “Women, Sport, and Pop Culture: Million Dollar Baby”