FEMALE WEIGHTLIFTER'S PRESENTATION OF GENDER ON INSTAGRAM

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A growing literature uses Goffman's dramaturgical analysis to examine the role of social media in upholding beauty norms for women, but these studies do not examine the unique position of women posting weightlifting content, who appear to be aware of gender norms, but post in defiance of them. This study utilizes ten semi-structured interviews with women who post weightlifting content on Instagram to learn the motivations and consequences of performing femininity in a masculine gym space, and stigma management techniques to negotiate engaging in gender non-conforming behavior online. Abductive coding of transcript data revealed the subjects use stigma management techniques common of deviant subcultures such as normalizing, upstaging, and engaging in boundary work. The female participants demonstrated the salience of gender in both the physical and online gym spaces, and relayed feeling like they acted as representatives of all women in those spaces. They therefore continued to engage in deviant behavior at the risk of failed gender assessments to be a role model for other women. These results contribute to the understanding of social media's ability to support performance teams among women who perform femininity in a normatively masculine environment.

KEYWORDS: Femininity, weightlifting, social media, stigma management

Female Weightlifter's Presentation of Gender on Instagram

The popularity of social media applications has undergone rapid and unprecedented growth in the last decade, magnifying the extent to which beauty norms are entrenched in the American collective consciousness. The same online tools that unlock global possibilities of communication have also been found to enhance feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction, especially in young women who compare themselves to pervasive, and often edited, idealized images. A growing research literature has examined the effects of beauty norms enforced online and the impact those norms have on women's presentation of self in the social media space (Baker et al. 2019; Groesz et al. 2002; Striegel-Moore 2009). In addition, prior research has examined how women who are professional athletes can be analyzed as transgressors of these female beauty norms (Howe 2001; Previte 2013). However, the intersection of female athletics and the social media space is an underdeveloped area of research, that would benefit from the study of female weightlifters specifically due to the noncompetitive nature of the activity, and the dual intentionality required to both engage in the non-normative activity and present that activity publicly on social media. Applying Goffman's dramaturgical analysis to view these women as comprising a subculture would be a unique approach to understanding why they choose to present behavior that results in sanctions online. Engaging in this line of inquiry would assist in developing our understanding of social media's capabilities to facilitate stigma management and the tools that deviant subcultures can use to claim belonging in gendered spaces.

Research viewing women weightlifters as norm transgressors has also been constrained by focusing heavily on competitive bodybuilding, or other professional pursuits that result in financial compensation for the norm breaking activity (Bretherton 2010; Scott 2011). The result of this approach is emphasis on how women negotiate their presentation of femininity within the

constraints of the institution whose rules they are paid to follow. In contrast, women who lift weights in a noncompetitive environment chose to enter the space of their own volition, and further publically highlight this presentation of self on social media.

Prior research has attempted to gain understanding of the motivations behind the content choices women make when posting online via semi-structured interviews (Baker et al. 2015). To address these gaps in the literature, this qualitative method was applied to conduct ten remote teleconference interviews with female participants ages 18-25. The interviews were used to generate data focusing on understanding the salience of gender in the gym, intentional choices made in the performance of gender online, the types of choices that generate sanctions, and what techniques are used in managing the stigma resulting from those interactions. Importantly, the sample was analyzed with abductive coding methods that looked for patterns with connections to prior literature, while allowing for new findings to emerge through analytical codes.

The findings of this research were broken down into three sections to answer the three main research questions: is gender salient for women weightlifters in the gym, if so what intentional choices are made to present gender online, and how is stigma arising from those interactions managed? The results supported that gender is highly salient for women who lift weights, that they make intentional choices in their presentation of femininity on social media, and that their stigma management strategies reflect the strategies similarly adopted by other deviant subcultures. Many participants discussed utilizing superficial societal expectations for women to transgress physical expectations, so even though they were engaging in masculine behavior, it wasn't with the goal of appearing masculine. For example, intentional choices were made to wear pink, apply makeup, and post images that would lead the viewer to rely on heuristics for femininity. Women who lifted weights described how they perceived being viewed

as representatives of all women in the masculine space of the gym, and curated their online image to be encouraging to other women, to highlight their femininity and bolster perceptions of competence. This led to posting images instead of videos, to avoid sanctions from men that would question their technical knowledge, while still highlighting their muscular gains. When women were faced with sanctions, responses varied from high to low in terms of visibility. While some participants described their social media content as self motivated, or posting to monitor their own muscular growth, other interviewees noted that they wanted to inspire other women on social media to similarly take up space in the gym, and not to be afraid of social sanctions that may follow the initial norm breaking activity. While the motivations from this small sample are by no means representative of all women who use social media to display weightlifting content, these results show how there may be a growing effort to redefine the parameters of femininity, on terms that are more compatible with displays of strength.

These findings are essential contributions to the growing body of social media and stigma management literature because there is a lack of intersectional research about how women in athletics negotiate gender and presentation of self online. Filling this gap aids in the understanding of social media's capabilities to facilitate performance teams, and potentially bring members of deviant communities together to not only share stigma management strategies, but support broader social movements to redefine which actions are sanction-worthy. This research paper will first review existing literature, including foundation theories that support women as performers of gender, existing beauty standards and social media literature, research on women as athletes, and stigma management techniques. This literature review will be followed by an exploration of the research methods, analysis of the interview data collected, and concluded with a discussion of potential future avenues of research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundational Theory: Women as Performers of Gender

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis will be used to examine women who lift weights and post their activities on social media as actors who perform their accomplishments of gender. Specifically, Goffman's view of discreditable social identities, boundary work, and stigma management are essential concepts for understanding gender as a social doing and the presentation of self in the social media space.

Goffman posited that social actors possess both a virtual and actual identity (Goffman 1956). A person's virtual identity is adaptable depending on what social characteristics are deemed desirable in different interaction contexts. However, a person who possesses a discreditable social identity is someone whose actual identity contains a stigmatizing trait that is not visually apparent, and hides that trait behind a virtual identity. Goffman often discussed discreditable identities in terms of individuals who possessed stigmatizing mental illnesses, but in the case of women who lift weights, this information may or may not be physically apparent depending on their stage of musculature development.

Goffman used the term moral career to refer to changes in a person's concept of self, where awareness that a person possesses a stigmatizing trait leads to the internalization of shame due to the failing of a social norm. This shame also produces uncertainty about which social category their actual social identity would be evaluated by, considering their virtual identity would not meet expectations (Goffman 1956). Participants in my research are all at the same second stage of their moral careers because they are aware weight lifting activity is categorized as deviant from normative behavior, and if this trait were to be public, stigmatization and social sanctions could follow. Furthermore, this stigma has the potential to become overarching and

generalized, in the sense that a stranger's entire assessment of their person would be determined by the weightlifting stigma, and their failure to accurately perform femininity.

Goffman's assessment of the consequences of stigma applies to women performing femininity specifically. West and Zimmerman (1987) demonstrate that because gender is an omnirelevant accomplished status, failure to perform appropriately and adhere to cultural norms leads to individual sanctions. This means that when a woman is seen as breaking gender norms, society does not tend to question why the norm exists, but punish the norm-breaker. This is relevant because the female weightlifters engage in the behavior of lifting weights and posting on social media at the risk of gendered assessment, and their behavior would be described as norm-breaking. Established social research contributed that pink is culturally recognized as a symbol of femininity, in addition to other demure or soft attitudes which comprise society's expectations for women (Messner 2000). Even if women in the gym adhere to the appropriate feminine surface level presentation, their status as a woman is vulnerable on the basis of exhibiting masculine-type strength.

Finally, objectification theory will be a foundational concept necessary for understanding the effect of media exposure on body image. This theory posits that, "the female body is considered as an object to be looked at and evaluated mainly based on physical appearance" (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997:2). This supports the West and Zimmerman evaluation of gender as an omnipresent, accomplished status, meaning that gender is not only something conferred at birth, but a status that must be continually performed. Objectification theory states that the salience of gendered expectations leads women to consider their own bodies as, "an object to be looked at and evaluated in terms of appearance," meaning, women are aware they are being evaluated by society, and evaluate themselves by what they think society expects (Fredrickson

and Roberts 1997:6). This will be relevant in examining if women who lift weights are viewing themselves through the lens of gendered expectations, and how they navigate the consequences of stigmatization by making that trait public on social media.

Beauty Standards and Social Media Expectations

Social media has been found to have a harmful, magnifying effect on idealized beauty standards for women, lauding unrealistically thin and toned bodies, slenderness and extreme weight loss (Groesz, Levine, and Mernin 2002). Young adult women (ages 18-25) are of particular interest to this study because prior research has demonstrated that women in this age demographic are both more likely to use social media than men, and are at higher risk for developing body image concerns based on these unattainable standards (Striegel-Moore 2009). To demonstrate the extent to which the definitions of feminine desirability from the time of social media's infancy have not only failed to evolve to a more inclusive standard, but in fact have become more deeply entrenched in the American collective consciousness, a recent study asked women from the young adult demographic to distinguish between unedited and digitally altered female bodies (Verrastro, Fontanesi, Liga, Cuzzocrea, and Gugliandolo 2020). The study found that the women were unable to significantly distinguish the real bodies from those that had been photoshopped with unnaturally thin proportions or flawless skin. Furthermore, findings indicated that viewing idealized images was correlated with increased body dissatisfaction among the young women viewers, supporting the findings of the Striegel-Moore study from 2009 (Verrastro et al. 2020).

These findings can be encapsulated in the term digitized dysmorphia, which was coined to define the gap between digital beauty standards and female body image (Fioravanti, Benucci, Ceragioli, and Casale 2022). The concept of digitized dysmorphia is relevant to the examination

of the social media practices of female weightlifters, because while prior research suggests that social media has negatively impacted the relationship between women and their bodies, women who lift weights appear to disregard the normative expectations of desiring thinness and the other qualities social media equates with correctly performing femininity.

While quantitative social media research has largely focused on women's reactions and relationships to caricatured beauty norms online, the qualitative strain of prior research has investigated personal motivations for posting on social media. An especially relevant study from 2019 utilized semi-structured interviews with 27 women aged 18-22 to ask about personal Instagram use and body-image. The researchers found participants' Instagram use revolved around effortful posting, promotion of self, and seeking engagement (Baker, Ferszt, and Breines 2019). In other words, participants reported being aware that their content was measured by the yardstick of normative beauty standards, and sought to post online in a way that would garner public approval for adequately performing femininity. This study was particularly interesting because female participants in the targeted age demographic reported not only being cognizant of beauty standards influencing public appraisal, but intentionally curated a self image that adhered to those standards. While this descriptive, qualitative approach seems the best method to garner personal insight into the motivations for posting online, prior research ignores the niche space of female weight lifters and posters of fitness content. Exposing this niche space will explore the motivations of women who are also responding to gender norms online, but in a way that purposefully violates them.

Women as Athletes

Research on the effects of social media on women's perception of self has been conducted, as well as how women perform gender. More recently, the sociological canon has

expanded to acknowledge that female professional athletes face challenges negotiating gender that are unique to both men and other women. For example, an ethnographic study that included interviews with professional women rugby players reported that women were confronted by a "two-folded stigma" where they were perceived both as unfeminine and homosexual (Howe 2001:13). Women who engage in activities that "run counter to prevailing health messages" are often vulnerable to such stigmatization and exclusion (Previte 2013:1). This research is relevant because it acknowledged that rugby is one of the more progressive women's professional sports, in that both male and female players wear the same style uniform, as opposed to golf or tennis where the women wear skirts and perform according to normative femininity. However, the article acknowledged that wearing male attire may have contributed to the public reproval of rugby as a sport for lesbians. These public sanctions could provide insight to the type of response female weight-lifters receive online, showing that sexual degradation can be weaponized to ensure women conform to heteronormative physical doings of gender. This may be even further emphasized in a gym environment, where women are confronted with a choice of choosing between normatively feminine or masculine dress.

Gym Culture vs Women Weightlifting Subculture

Goffman's definition of deviance as failing to abide by social norms is paramount to understanding the formation of subcultures. A subculture is composed of individuals who deviate from social norms in common ways, sometimes to the extent that they reject the norms in favor of an in-group culture that praises intentional mainstream rejection (Goffman 1956). As far as professional sports go, research on weight lifting exclusively has shown that women who participate should be analyzed as a subculture, one which society would consider deviant from

mainstream gym culture. This is due to the fact that extensive prior research has deemed the gym a masculine environment.

Chelsea-Ann Bretherton conducted a qualitative, semi-structured interview study that defined the gym as a "liminal space" where people who enter the space are motivated by the desire to attain a physique that "conforms to western ideals of femininity and masculinity" (Bretherton 2010:1). Her interviews yielded the conclusion that subjects joined the gym with hopes of gaining social mobility through a toned physique. Her portrayal of the gym as a liminal space arose from this conclusion, because although the space does not formally exclude women, they were excluded via mainstream conceptions of who belonged with a muscular physique (Bretherton 2010). In other words, women were ideologically excluded. In order for women to attain the same social mobility and respect conferred onto men at the gym, they were required to engage in masculine activities, painting femininity and strength as mutually exclusive. Additionally, Bretherton wrote that the gym should be considered liminal because it blurred the lines between what Goffman deemed front stage and backstage performances (Goffman 1956). This is because participating in weightlifting leads to, "hair becoming damp and unkempt, the face is often strained in expression… and the occasional episode of vomiting (Bretherton 2010:5). Although a social actor usually would not choose to present themselves in this manner in the frontstage, research by Julia Coffey found that for men, exercise related to their embodiments of masculinity, therefore making the practice acceptable in a means justifies ends logic (Coffey 2016). For women, this rationale does not hold true. Bretherton (2010) writes that few people would choose to appear as they do in the gym in any other social setting, but women are further ideologically isolated because this performance is only socially acceptable for the product: the musculature development of man.

There is a debate in the current literature over if women participating in this defined masculine gym space constitutes an act of conformity or rebellion to expectations of femininity. One strain of research that seeks to undermine the view that women who lift weights constitute a deviant subculture. These researchers suggest normative expectations of femininity are upheld in the masculine sport of bodybuilding, due to male dominated regulations (Scott 2011). However, this research was founded based on observations of competitive bodybuilding, not lifting weights in a gym, which holds key distinctions. Women who compete in bodybuilding professionally are required to comply with mandatory hair extensions, tanning, and dieting to be allowed to compete, and then to be successful these steps are taken in excess (Scott 2011). Finally, these researchers argue that the resistant subculture narrative is undermined because in agreeing to participate, women are primarily judged by men (Scott 2011).

This concept of complying to audience expectations may apply to women who lift weights in noncompetition gym settings, but alternative research has found, "the aim of achieving maximum muscular size and definition is key to these women's identities" and making this intentional decision, "in itself, is highly transgressive of gendered norms" (Shilling and Bunsell 2009:8). Qualitative studies that examined noncompetitive female bodybuilders as a deviant social group found women faced stigmatization because they disregarded "aesthetic and kinesthetic" gender norms, commonly being portrayed by media as "scary monsters" (Shilling and Bunsell 2009:4). Furthermore, women who lift weights should be considered a deviant subculture because prior research found female bodybuilders are not insulated from moral sanctions in the gym (Shilling and Bunsell 2009). This is because the normatively masculine strength required to perform weightlifting is not conducive not to appropriate feminine "virtue"

and "modesty" (Shilling and Bunsell 2009:7). Women therefore face media sanctions from

outside the gym community, and from male weightlifters within the community.

Stigma Management Techniques

A gap in the literature exists where women with muscle-building goals performance of

gender intersects with social media presentation of self. This will be especially highlighted by

studying women who lift weights, who engage in muscle building seen as normatively

masculine, and choose present that activity as their public image. Furthermore, once exploring

the motivations of these women, research is needed to determine the stigma management

strategies they adopt to succeed in what has been established as an adverse environment.

Previous sociological research examining techniques that other subcultures use to manage stigma

is relevant to this research concerning female weight lifters, insofar that they may choose to

adopt similar strategies, or modify the strategies to accomplish unique goals. If any of the

strategies explored in prior literature are uniquely contorted to meet the needs of female

weightlifters, this sociological contribution could shed light on how other stigmatized

communities thrive in spaces that threaten a social actor's sense of self.

Robert Emerson (2009) proposed that stigma management strategies be considered along

the spectrum of low visibility to high visibility responses. An example of a low visibility

response could include what Emerson terms a "managerial" response, where the aggrieved

individual navigates a social interaction unilaterally to mitigate conflict (Emerson 2009:6). For

women who lift weights, this could look like choosing to leave a stigmatizing space, or refusing

to interact with individuals who threaten their sense of self online. However, since women who

lift weights are choosing to remain in the gym spaces and continue posting gym content, they

may choose to adopt more high visibility responses. Emerson reported that some stigmatized

individuals chose to use "dyadic complaints", where the subject directly confronts the problem, usually in a way that induces the norm-enforcer to change their behavior (Emerson 2009:6). This direct confrontation may ultimately culminate in "distancing", or taking highly visible direct action to prevent the confronting party from further social interactions (Emerson 2009:6). This could be manifested in using social media features such as blocking or reporting offensive accounts.

An additional stigma management strategy that could be employed by women who lift weights and post their gym content online is utilizing boundary work. The concept of boundary work includes defining the parameters of a subculture, how flexible are the requirements for entry, and who is considered a viable group member. This work was explored in depth by Alexandria Henley in her research to discover techniques employed by private and personal chefs who possessed an uncertain social status, somewhere between an auxiliary luxury of the rich consumer and valued professionals (Henley 2016). Henley found these possessors of an uncertain social status managed stigma via normalizing and upstaging techniques. First, normalizing was used by the chefs to demonstrate essential qualities they possessed similar to the valued professional social group in which they wished to be considered. Second, upstaging was used to suggest that not only did the private chefs possess common traits with professionals, but that they may be even better at their jobs, and thus should be even more valued by society. Ross Haenfler corroborated these findings of upstaging, but wrote that participation in a subculture necessitates subjugating an even lower social group to reclaim power and distance members from association with a stigmatized identity (Haenfler 2010). Therefore, upstaging can be used to avoid stigmatization by positioning the boundaries of a subculture above another group rejected by mainstream society, or above the mainstream society itself. The boundary work in that

research is relevant because I expect female bodybuilders may utilize these normalizing and upstaging techniques since they are also possessors of an uncertain social status. In other words, because the women's status of belonging as an athlete is threatened due to social evaluation of their status as women, this prior research suggests they can employ multiple options, the first being to demonstrate "essential similarities" between themselves as women weightlifters and socially accepted male weightlifters (Kusenbach, 2009:13). Otherwise, they can increase salience of their feminine identity, or position themselves above others who claim to belong in the space.

An essential tool used in boundary work is selective application of key terminology. In her work with stigmatized intersex communities, researcher Georgiann Davis found intentional use of terminology is important for subculture activism because linguistic choices are responsible for creating intra-group distinctions, or rejecting members of the subculture that do not conform to the group's values (Davis 2015). Using language to demonstrate similarities with a mainstream culture facilitates acceptance through neutralization, and furthermore dictates who is granted authority over sanctioning the subculture. Additionally, subcultures may seek to change the language used by the dominant culture to control the meanings associated with their members. There is currently research that suggests female members of a gym community choose to self identify as "gym rats", but there is a lack of research into women's online gym community and the terms used to identify other members of their subculture (Ian 1991:2). Messner's cultural symbol level analysis could alternatively suggest the women's online weightlifting community adopt language connoting "sweetness" as opposed to power naming choices used by men, such as the normatively accepted gym rats (Messner, 2000:3).

Regardless of which individual stigma management strategies are employed by women who lift weights, what Messner's study and Spencer Cahill's research both suggest is that

networking is a key feature of stigma management. In his qualitative research, Cahill found that women facing stigmatizing interactions in nightclub environments negotiated with other women to form performance teams which reaffirmed group morale (Cahill 1985). My research conducted to investigate stigma management techniques used by women online in the gym community may find that when confronted by negative comments, women find support from other female weightlifters who would reaffirm her belonging in the gym space. On the other hand, even though social media facilitates networking between members of the community, it is unknown whether women find support from others, or the salience of public perception pits women against each other online. This new strain of research will not only fill a gap in the literature about the types of stigma management used by women who lift weights and post their activities online, but contribute to our understanding of the capability of social media to form support groups, or performance teams.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were used to guide participants to answer three main veins of questioning: if their gender identity as a woman was salient in the gym space, if so what conscious decisions they made to perform gender, and the types of stigma management techniques they employed when their performance of gender was met with resistance or sanctions online. A quantitative content analysis of the subject's social media would not have generated a deeper understanding of the motivations behind engaging in such norm-breaking behavior, and prior literature supports interviews as the preferred method to discern the reasoning of women who post their gym-going activity on social media.

Ten total interviews were conducted with cisgender, female-identifying women ages 18-25. Six initial subjects were recruited via direct message on their Instagram platforms, and snowball sampling methods expanded the sample to the final ten. Instagram was used as the social media platform of choice due to the perceived permanent nature of the content and established popularity among the population of interest. The ten women sampled were diverse in terms of race and socioeconomic background, but due to time and network constraints, a larger sample more representative of the population of interest could not be attained. In addition, this sample would not be representative of transwomen or women who's experience with gender did not fit into the heteronormative binary definition, not because they were not a population of interest, but due to a lack of access to any members of that community. Nonetheless this interview design provided valid and reliable data to answer the research questions, because respondents were given the leeway to share personal experiences, while the standardized question themes provided a starting point for comparison across all interview data gathered. The prompts consistently generated discussion surrounding gendered norms, expectations, and stigma that come from being a woman in the gym, in addition to providing answers to insight behind presentation of self on social media and the online gym community.

The interviews took place over a six week period using Zoom, a remote teleconference application chosen for maximal participant scheduling convenience. Verbal consent was given by participants before the record function of Zoom was engaged. The Zoom platform was also optimal because enabling the record function generated interview transcripts, but no permanent audio or video files. In addition, once the interviews began and the record function was engaged, the subjects were never referred to by name, and no personal identifying information was

collected. There was no way to identify participants once the individual transcripts were generated, ensuring participant confidentiality.

The interviews were shaped by my own positionality as a woman in the chosen age demographic who also lifts weights in the gym. The initial interview contacts were women I knew personally who engaged in posting social media content online, so there was no need for a gatekeeper to negotiate access to the community. However, I myself do not engage in posting social media content that revolves around my activity in the gym. While I was able to connect with participants by being a woman in a gym space, this disconnect between levels of online activity did not prevent interviewees from assuming we shared a common experience, and therefore did not feel uncomfortable elaborating upon the motivations that lead to further presentation of their gym activity on social media. However, it is essential to recognize this common rapport was key to establishing trust with participants that may have been unavailable to a male interviewer.

Analysis Methods

After the interviews had been conducted, an abductive analysis method was used to code the transcripted data into categories of index codes, analytical codes, and analytical sub-codes. The abductive method was appropriate after becoming highly familiar with existing literature on the influence of social media on gendered expectations for women, and prior research detailing women's experience in athletic environments. Therefore, the coding process was informed by existing theory, and analysis was conducted by revisiting and defamiliarizing myself with the data (Tavory and Timmermans 2013).

The coding software MAXQDA was used to code the interview transcripts due to financial availability of student licenses and the beginner-friendly interface. Each transcript was

reviewed line-by-line and assigned an index code, or preconceived mother code. The index codes were informed by the main topics of the interview guideline (located in Appendix). These codes included: Gender, Physical Gym Space, Social Media, and Stigma Management. The code "gender" was symbolically assigned to capture where the summative experiences of being a woman were discussed. This included physical traits of femininity, contexts where being a woman lead to different experiences than those perceived to be experienced by men, and societal expectations of women. This index code emerged specifically from the first portion of interview questions such as, "What does it mean to be a woman?" and the associations that the subjects' gender identity carried. The index code "physical gym space" was used any time subjects discussed being in the physical gym environment. Similarly, the index code "social media" was used to capture elements of the social media online space, including what the subjects perceived to be beauty standards for social media, motivations for posting gym related content, and the online female gym community. Finally, the index code "stigma management" was used to code any areas of the transcript where the subjects discussed strategies to manage public sanctions for performing gender in both the gym and online spaces.

From these starting blocks, the transcripts were re-examined and further sorted into analytical codes that included themes, processes, and meanings relating to the index codes. Analytical sub-codes were used where analytical codes diverged into different subcategories, where subjects clarified distinct situations where the analytical codes were relevant. Therefore, while the index codes aligned closely with the interview format, the analytical codes and sub-codes emerged at different places throughout the data, and were useful in comparing the responses of different subjects. The resulting code tree is reflected in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Code tree used to analyze transcript data.

RESULTS

Is gender salient in the gym?

The first research question of interest was if the knowledge of gendered assessment impacted the choices of women posting weightlifting content on social media. In other words, to reject a null hypothesis that gender did not impact posting behavior by establishing the perception of the gym as a gendered space. The interview data revealed that gender was salient in three ways: physical traits expected of femininity, the moral implications of feminine presentation, and gender facilitating/hindering belonging. Each of these patterns will be discussed in turn below.

Participants commonly commented on the physical traits of femininity, and how weightlifting related to transgressing normative beauty standards. For example, one interviewee commented that, "For women if you're pretty, you have an hourglass, long hair, for guys it's more if you're muscular and tall. For girls if you're tall you're not valued as much." Height was similarly remarked upon by respondents as a limiting factor on strangers' expectations, "My dimensions I am physically shorter than most men, if I am able to accomplish certain things it can be more surprising." These comments demonstrate gender salience in the gym space because the women are commenting on how others' expectations are moderated by their physical assessments. Height is associated with masculinity, whereas the women are aware they are physically expected to take up less space, and display less strength, linked to less belonging.

In addition, three separate interviewees portrayed the gym as a gendered space through interactions with their families, specifically their mothers who did not want them to "look like a man" or asked, "Why do you want to look like a guy?" In this case, physical stature was related to the muscle groups associated with feminine and masculine attractiveness. One participant shared, "I have friends with major traps, who are really muscular, and a man might not be attracted to that being less of a woman because they aren't slim, petite, or dainty." When participants shared their mother's concerns, it was often regarding growing a larger upper body. This was supported by statements claiming, "If my biceps were getting better I look less womanly." These comments all show how the gym space enhances women's awareness that muscles, especially in the upper body, are associated with masculinity, and aids to the assessment of women who post weightlifting content growing these muscle groups on social media as a deviant subculture. These women reject mainstream society's claim of being an inadequate woman, and adhere to their own opposite values of muscle building.

In addition to commenting on how physical traits are related to gender salience in the gym, multiple interviewees commented on the moral implications of performing femininity. One key quote includes, "Walking into the gym confident, you get this connotation that you are a b-word, or seen as a different type of woman, than a regular likes to go shopping and what not". The women interviewed displayed awareness that their actions would be sanctioned specifically due to their failure to adequately perform gender. Wanting to build muscle was seen as an audacious ambition, and one that was inappropriate for women not only because they physically possessed masculine strength, but a masculine attitude of projecting confidence and self assurance.

Not only did participants discuss how physical traits and moral implications contributed to their understanding of the gym as a gendered space, but interviewees compared how entering the gym space was different for men and women. Multiple participants expressed anxiousness about entering the gym space because, "there are men everywhere, men are always looking at you." In addition to evaluation by men, participants worried about evaluation from other women, with one participant stating, " I was insecure because you compare yourself to girls who are bigger." These comments show that women who lift weights have internalized the gym community norms that value developed musculature.

How is gender performed, and reflected in online choices?

The participants discussed intentional strategies used to perform gender in their presentation of self online that revolved around tactical clothing and cosmetic selection. What is interesting is that while the women weightlifters valued nonnormative muscular development, they often chose to adhere to normative beauty standards for women to highlight their femininity in the masculine space.

The first way the participants discussed performing gender online was through their use of clothing and gym accessories. Participants commonly discussed wearing pink, and choosing pink gym accessories such as straps, weightlifting belts and water bottles, also highlighting their choices to wear pink sports bras and spandex. One participant stated this was because, "If I wore a baggy sweatshirt I become invisible," which is supported by a different participant who added, "I wear a lot of pink, that alone you walk in and it's like bam you're a woman… it's something you see and with your fellow girls it's like we see each other." This shows how participants used clothing choice to identify other members of their subcultural community, and used normative expectations for women in a way to highlight their belonging in the space. Instead of making choices that would result in blending in, they highlighted the norm breaking behavior.

In addition to clothing and gym accessories, the women interviewed discussed utilizing feminine beauty norms surrounding cosmetics to highlight their gendered performances. One way they engaged in feminine presentation was through having, "my nails done, earrings in, hair curled… and a full face of makeup." In addition, one interviewee discussed how before posting online, they will make sure this presentation is polished stating, "Sometimes I go to the gym and my physique looks really good, I will go home and change into a different outfit so you can see it, then take pictures. Then I see what my hair looks like, what my makeup looks like." Interviewees explained that there were both practical and aesthetic considerations to relying on heuristics for femininity while engaging in weightlifting online. Interviewees explained that normative beauty standards for social media praised either skinny or curvaceous female bodies, and muscular women do not fit neatly into either camp. Therefore, they rely on social expectations for facial presentation to claim and emphasize their femininity, and that they can both be feminine and succeed in muscle development. In this sense, they try to challenge what

women are viewed as capable of accomplishing by highlighting femininity through other socially recognized beauty standards. In addition to this aesthetic logic, cosmetics and outfit changes play a practical role for women performing femininity. One interviewee explained that she started getting approached by other women more often when she dressed in a way that highlighted her muscular development. When asked if it was difficult to enter into the online community of weightlifting women, a participant responded that, "When I started to make physical progress, that validates that I am good enough, and women will want to exchange information… but I wasn't dressed in a way that you could tell." In this case, when the participant started wearing more stereotypically feminine clothing such as tighter fitting spandex as opposed to men's sweat shorts, other women were able to recognize that she was dedicated to muscle building because they saw her muscle, and encouraged her to enter their personal networks.

On the other hand, some interviewees expressed the importance of emphasizing the realities of femininity, and intentionally posting pictures with cosmetic imperfections to emphasize the process of muscle building as messy and a nonlinear journey. Some interviewees stated the most important motivation for their online norm breaking activity was tracking their own muscle building progres, and creating a memory vault that reflected authenticity. While there was a temptation to post the pictures where there was "less messy hair, less acne showing," women tried to also actively resist these norms they viewed as instituted by patriarchal expectations for women to adhere to dress for their viewing pleasure. Some interviewees recognized that relying on presentation aspects of hair and nails can lead to women's credibility as weightlifters being undermined due to the challenges of lifting a heavy weight with fake nails, or being seen as unwilling to sweat. However, others argued that they were experts at this point in their journeys at navigating the masculine environment, could easily rack their weights with

nails ("It's all about grip strength I use my knuckles") and that having their hair and makeup done made them feel confident as women. The results demonstrated that there is ongoing negotiation in the online female weightlifting community about what constitutes breaking of masculine norms to negotiate belonging.

How is stigma associated with this performance managed?

Finally, the participants discussed types of content that generated the most social sanctions, the type of sanctions received, and how they managed stigmatizing interactions. Stigma management strategies discussed by participants included managerial responses, curating selective audiences, distancing responses, upstaging, and group work. The participants also discussed how the perceived audiences for their online activity contributed to their motivation to continue the non-normative behavior despite receiving sanctions.

Participants stated one category of sanctions they faced from men online was "inappropriate" comments about their bodies. One participant stated that if someone commented on her Instagram about her body in a way that made her uncomfortable, or a comment that suggested she was unattractive for wanting to build muscle, she would block that commenter. This is an example of a distancing response, where the owner of the account took a visible action, as opposed to ignoring the feedback. A different interviewee confirmed, "I block or ignore usually… I take them out of my story" which suggests a spectrum of responses from managerial low visibility response to distancing. However, interviewees also suggested that the type of sanction impacted the visibility of their management technique. Results show that if the sanction was less focused on the physical attractiveness of the weightlifter's body and instead insulted the competency of women in the gym, a dyadic complaint was utilized. For example, one interviewee stated, " I get comments where guys slide up and ask how much I squat, or say I

am only there to take picture" and she, "sometimes respond with my PRs (personal best)" when a commenter suggested she was physically weak or not as capable as a male gym goer. Furthermore, an instance of upstaging was observed when one participant expressed frustration with sanctions that questioned competency stating, "and I'll remark that there are girls out there better than most men." When asked what interactions resulted in confrontation as opposed to the usual distancing response, interviewees agreed that if they felt the commenter was questioning their skill sets, they wanted to defend their sense of self and belonging as weightlifters.

An additional stigma management technique discussed by participants was managing the type of content that they chose to post to avoid sanctions that focused on undermining their capability. Many interviewees stated they often posted pictures instead of videos, even if video content such as workout routines were requested by commenters who validated and encouraged their belonging in the gym space. One interviewee stated, "I don't post videos because I don't want to be critiqued based on my form." Furthermore, a different interviewee demonstrated an unwillingness to face sanctions associated with posting videos stating, " I have the videos I filmed them, but I don't post them because what if I am not doing it right or get a lot of criticism." This interview data suggests that women who lift weights and post the norm breaking content on Instagram have both adapted to social sanctions by defending the content that they post, but do curate their content to generate less sanctions so there is less work to defend their identity online.

Finally, the interviews revealed that awareness of these sanctions made them feel like representatives of all women in the gym, and managed stigmatizing interactions by both curating their audience and remaining motivated due to this sense of being closely monitored. Some women responded that they did not want to view any negative feedback from male audiences,

and made Instagram pages where they created content specifically geared towards a female audience, not allowing male users of Instagram to follow those pages. However, an unexpected finding was that sanctions are also sometimes received from other women. One interviewee stated that they received sanctions from women who were more muscular, and that within the female weightlifting community there is a sect that will ostracize members who go to the gym to lose weight. One interviewee specifically stated she first joined a gym to lose weight, but as her relationship with her body changed and she began weightlifting to grow muscle, she felt "more part of the community." This poses a question about female weightlifter's ability to act in performance teams on social media and boundary work conducted by the community. On one hand, women wanted to create content for other women who lifted weights, and curate a space online where norm breakers could challenge the sanctions regarding both beauty and competency espoused by men. However, it would appear that if a woman was in the gym to lose weight, or seen as adhering to the values promoted by men who sanctioned muscle building, then that woman was not included in the same online community as the women weightlifters. The values of this more extreme subgroup may not be claimed by the entire online weightlifting community, as one of the interviewees labeled women who discouraged others for wanting to lose weight as "mean girls". Challenging this narrative, an interviewee succinctly put, "I post to feel good about myself and inspire other women to feel good." The overall tone of the interviewees was that women should support other women, and challenge the norms valued by men weightlifters, but not at the expense of ostracizing women with different fitness goals.

DISCUSSION

Answering the three guiding research questions of: is gender salient in the physical and online gym space for women who lift weights, asking what intentional choices they make in the

performance of gender, and how they manage stigma associated with this performance contributes to the developing understanding of social media's ability to support performance teams among deviant subgroup communities. Summative analysis of the results show that gender is highly salient for women who lift weights, and both the physical and online gym communities are seen as normatively masculine spaces. Therefore, women perform femininity by utilizing gender-informed clothing and cosmetic choices and modifying the type of content posted, often favoring still images over videos. When these performances were met with social sanctions online, responses varied from high to low visibility, and sometimes led to the participants curating their content to be viewed by audiences that would bolster their sense of self.

These findings relate to prior research in that the women who lifted weights and engaged in that presentation of self on Instagram utilized similar strategies to previously studied deviant subcultures. However, the conclusions that are able to be drawn from this research are limited by the sample size being constrained to ten interviews. In addition, since there is a gap in the literature exploring the intersection between social media and presentation of gender, the semi-structured interview guide focused on eliciting responses that would shed light on the perception of the physical and online gym communities, and less about the boundaries of the subculture. If I were to perform this research again, I would include more questions targeted specifically at the use of language, to better understand the distinctions women create to describe when they felt belonging in the gym community, and the names used to identify members of the community. The interview data yielded mixed results about the porousness of the community, and if the more extremists who sanctioned other women were accepted by the wider subculture. While the interview guideline provided valuable data that explored the motivations of women engaging in non-normative behavior on social media and how they felt they could negotiate

belonging in the space, asking specifically about what names members of the female

weightlifting community use to identify each other could reveal additional tools used to claim

legitimacy in a male dominated environment, and which women are recognized by each other as

legitimate members of the community.

The steps that should be taken in the pursuance of future research include widening the

sample to include subjects representative of the spectrum of gender and attraction. This study

aimed to discover how women negotiated presentation of gender in a masculine space, and the

results showed they chose to rely on tools stereotypically associated with femininity to claim

belonging in that space. However, as the sample contained only cisgender women, whereas

subjects who identify as nonbinary may not have relied on the same social tools symbolically

linked to femininity. Since this research established that the gym is viewed as a masculine space

defined by the antiquated gender binary, it would be informative to compare the stigma

management techniques of this deviant subgroup. Whereas the cisgender women violated social

norms by participating in a masculine space and intentionally emphasizing that norm breaking

behavior online, participants who are members of the LGBTQ community possess an additional

Goffmanian discreditable identity, and may not chose to rely on heuristics for femininity, but

reject those social expectations as well. Furthermore, research that explored how cisgender,

heterosesual women interacted with members of the LGBTQ community in the online space

could show how the gym, as a masculine space, is either a place that facilitates all other

stigmatized communities networking together, or if further boundaries were drawn and the

groups who subscribed to divergent definitions of belonging. Continuing to develop this strain of

questioning is important because there is a lack of research regarding the ability of social media

to facilitate challenges to institutional expectations. Prior research has established that social

norms permeated the boundaries of social media, but by beginning to explore emphasis on deviant presentations of self, social media can be viewed as a tool to facilitate norm breaking, and possible integration of norm change.

In addition to including a more diverse array of subjects in future research, qualitative analysis could be supported by a quantitative study of social media content. While the qualitative data collected provided valuable insight to the reasoning behind female weightlifter's presentation of gender on social media, this research would be supported by empirical evidence of the amount of weightlifting content that emphasizes these hyper feminine presentations. Furthermore, limited research has explored the connection between the developing field of social media algorithms and the techniques elaborated upon by the interview subjects. Social media is sometimes characterized as an echo chamber, due to the algorithm showing a user content similar to that which has previously been interacted with, or liked. Therefore, quantitative research dedicated to the intersection of social media and presentation of gender has the potential to support the claims of interviewees that they are aware of their status as a representative of all women, and make intentional choices to perform gender that would be encouraging to a female audience. Showing that other women see these performances, and possibly alter their own behavior after seeing online presentations of femininity in a masculine space would support the ability of social media to act as an agent for social change for communities that face stigmatization in both physical and online gendered spaces.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

Perception of Gender

1. How do you define gender?
2. What does it mean to be a woman?
3. Have there been times you felt you were being evaluated due to your gender?

Gender Expectations and Social Media

1. How do you decide what type of gym-related content to post?
2. When you are filming videos/taking pictures for Instagram in the gym, what would be your first step to ensure it is "Instagram worthy?"
3. When posting images of yourself, do you consider how other users will respond to those images?
4. Do you think there are beauty standards for Instagram?
5. If so, what are these standards?
6. Do you think there are different beauty standards for men and women?
7. Where are these standards and how are they displayed?

Gendered Choices

1. When you post content in the gym, do those standards affect your decisions of what to post?
2. If you are mindful of gendered beauty standards, would you describe your content as adhering too, or defying gendered expectations?
3. What types of choices do you make in your content that emphasize/de-emphasize gender in the gym?
4. What do you think about when you see other women posting content lifting weights in the gym?

Stigma Management

1. Do you ever receive social sanctions or push-back online for violating gendered expectations?
2. If so, how do you manage those interactions?

Wrap Up

1. Are there any more questions you think I should ask you, or anything else you would like to talk about?
2. Do you have any questions for me?