Female Fitness in the Blogosphere: Gender, Health, and the Body

Jesper Andreasson¹ and Thomas Johansson²

Abstract
This article analyzes self-portrayals and gender constructions among female personal trainers within an Internet-mediated framework of fitness culture. The empirical material comes from a close examination of three strategically selected blogs. The result shows that some of the blogs clearly build upon what Connell calls emphasized femininity, as a means of legitimizing and constructing appropriate female fitness. In addition, there are also tendencies of sexualization in text and imagery present. As such, these self-representations are framed within a cultural history of body fitness dominated by stereotypical ways of perceiving masculinity and femininity. However, this does not capture the entire presentation of the self among the analyzed fitness bloggers. The blogs also point in the direction of ongoing negotiations and subversions of traditional gender norms. Among other things, they show how irony and humor are used as a means of questioning normative gender constructions while empowering female fitness and bodyliness.

Keywords
blog culture, gender, femininity, fitness, personal trainer, hegemonic masculinity

In 1978, there were 3,000 private fitness clubs in the United States, and in 2002, the number had increased to 20,000 (Stern, 2008). This development can also be seen in many European countries during this period of time (Crossley, 2006; Sassatelli, 2010). From the 1970s and onward, we have thus been witnessing a global transformation and expansion of the fitness industry (IHRSA, 2011). This industry and the idea of muscular bodies have deep roots in what used to be called “physical culture” in the late 19th century and the teachings of the forefathers of bodybuilding such as Eugene Sandow and Charles Atlas (Budd, 1997). Originally, this was almost exclusively a male body subculture, and the same goes for contemporary bodybuilding.

An important landmark for bodybuilding as a phenomenon can be found in the movie and book Pumping Iron (Gaines & Butler, 1977; Klein, 1993). In this classic and influential movie, a number of highly rated and well-known male bodybuilders were portrayed, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Franco Columbo, when working out at the famous Gold’s Gym in California. Here, bodybuilding was conceptualized in terms of a global, masculine, and exotic phenomenon.

In the late 1970s, and particularly in the 1980s, a number of women started to take an interest in weight lifting. The movie Pumping Iron II (1985) portraying four women preparing for the Caesars Palace World Cup Championship can be seen as a breakthrough for female participation in this subcultural sphere. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a first wave of female bodybuilders. To a great extent, these women were confined to the limits of emphasized femininity (McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). At the same time, these women contributed to a certain acceptance of women building bodies. Thus, it is possible to read this development as a slow and silent transformation of the definition of gender, and as a sign of a changed balance between men and women in society. At the same time, however, female bodybuilding often caused intense debates. Women building muscle were often seen as a threat against “natural” bodies and gender identities (Heywood, 1998; McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). In this sense, the culture was trapped in conflicting discourses pitting sexual difference against an ethic of a universal, transcendent, and undifferentiated body culture (Lindsay, 1996). Nevertheless, women gradually entered into the subculture of bodybuilding, and in many ways, this was probably also the start signal of a rapid transformation of the whole idea of physical culture and muscle-building practices (Johansson, 1996, 2003).

However, as far back as 1968, Kenneth Cooper published his best seller Aerobics (later version, 1981). This book was a major force behind a veritable explosion of different forms of fitness exercises. Cooper’s intention was to reduce stress

¹Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden
²University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Corresponding Author:
Jesper Andreasson, Department of Sport Science, Linnaeus University, Arena, Kalmar, 39182, Sweden.
Email: Jesper.andreasson@lnu.se
and stress-related diseases. Later, the concept of aerobics became well-known as a specific form of exercise. The rise of health clubs in the United States was related to a growing urban population of singles. Working out became part of an urban, middle-class, and single lifestyle. Parallel with developments in bodybuilding, Jane Fonda and others developed a specific form of dance and gymnastics, labeled as workout. In 1982, Fonda published *Jane Fonda's Workout Book*. At that time, Fonda had trained for many years at Gilda Marx's studio and Body Design by Gilda. Using the same kind of concept, but developing the techniques and adding a flavor of celebrity, Fonda managed to attract a number of celebrities, and soon the concept developed to include videos, books, and different training programs. This development within aerobics and fitness evolved parallel to the development in bodybuilding.

In the 1990s, we can see how female bodybuilders challenged hegemonic masculinity in different ways. There was a clear split between, on one hand, female bodybuilding, and, on the other, fitness bodies and emphasized femininity. Whereas female bodybuilders were seen as parts of a grotesque subculture, fitness women were seen as desirable and feminine.

Perceptions of body and gender have changed since the early 1990s. Women doing strength training and other fitness activities have successively become a natural feature at the gym (Leeds & Liberti, 2007). These changes certainly meet up to the development of a new, modern fitness culture, where the notion of the gym seemed to present itself in a new guise, as a health clinic for the masses (Sassatelli, 1999, 2010). Even though the relation between bodybuilding and fitness is strained and conflict-ridden, it is obvious that the entire fitness phenomenon developed out of, and is deeply indebted to, the art and technique of bodybuilding. Thus, many of the training techniques and exercises in fitness are directly imported from bodybuilding. The crucial difference lies more in the presentation of different types of bodies, looks, and ideals.

Today women are overrepresented at fitness gyms (Bennett et al., 2009). Furthermore, there are also an increasing number of internationally accredited female personal trainers. In this article, we analyze central parts of the fitness culture through a close study of blogs and home pages, where female fitness experts share their knowledge and expertise. We are interested in how these educators and professionals situate themselves in relation to bodybuilding, fitness, gender identities and body ideals, and hence how their narratives are positioned in relation to the history of gym and fitness culture. The main purpose is to analyze how ideals of gender and femininity are constructed within selected blogs. Blogs run by male fitness gurus are also of considerable importance for understanding gender and fitness culture. Such an analysis has been described in another article, whereas this study focuses exclusively on female bloggers and their framing of gender (Andreasson & Johansson, in press). The purpose of the article can be addressed through the following questions:

*Research Question 1:* What enactments and presentations of the self are visible in the blogs?

*Research Question 2:* In what ways are gender and, more specifically, femininity displayed and negotiated?

*Research Question 3:* How do narratives on the blogs relate to the cultural context in which they are produced and commercialized?

In an attempt to answer the queries above, this article has been structured as follows: First to follow is a presentation of the article's theoretical framework. The next section deals with methodology where we address issues such as virtual research methods, approaches to sampling, and ethical concerns. Thereafter, the result of the study is presented. Selected blogs are described and analyzed, one by one. Based on its contents and positioning in relation to fitness culture at large, each blog has been given a certain “theme” and is systematically analyzed and discussed in relation to the purpose of the study. The article ends with some concluding thoughts, where we connect our findings to the cultural history of fitness and theories on gender and the body.

**Hard Bodies and Gender Theory**

In 1994, the International Federation of BodyBuilding and Fitness (IFBB) issued new directives for female contestants. The message to female bodybuilders was quite clear and distinct: adjust to adequate norms for feminine traits and body shapes, and avoid exaggerating and developing masculine bodies. This is well captured by Sandra Lee Bartky (1990):

> It is true that the current fitness movement has permitted women to develop more muscular strength and endurance than was heretofore allowed; indeed, images of women have begun to appear in the mass media that seem to eroticize this new masculinity. But a woman may by no means develop more muscular strength than her partner; the bride who would tenderly carry her groom across the threshold is a figure of comedy, not romance. (p. 73)

In the early 1990s, it seems that the pendulum swung back to women exhibiting heavy-duty muscular developments. The cofounder of IFBB, Josef Edwin “Joe” Weider, wanted to reinscribe the small, lean, tender, and female body into the sphere of competitions. Hence, femininity was written into the very rules of the sport, and as a result, women’s physical strength and capabilities were de-emphasized. Too many people had reacted negatively toward the larger female bodybuilders’ attempts to compete and compare themselves with their male counterparts. Furthermore, this reaction led to the development of fitness competitions, such as Fitness Olympia in the 1990s, which also was the beginning of a strained relationship between bodybuilding and fitness.
According to Heywood (1998), fitness competitions and the idea of a female fitness body threatened to set back body competitions and the entire sport to an earlier state of celebrations of the traditional female body. This tendency is further emphasized through the massive sexualization of women’s bodies, especially as many female bodybuilders and fitness instructors were portrayed as sexual, exotic, and sensual beings and caught in “do-me” images (Roth & Basow, 2004). Muscles were accepted as long as they were inscribed into a polarized understanding of gender. At the same time, the efforts to control competitions and expressions within this physical culture also show that gender was not a fixed category (Moore, 1997). Women devoted to bodybuilding have continued to challenge normative conceptions of gender and disrupt the idea of a “natural order” (MacGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009).

To a great extent, fitness and gym culture is defined and developed in relation to a historical pattern of dynamic and hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony here points at different ways of legitimating men’s dominance over women—and subordinated men—in different spheres in society. This is a historically mobile and dynamic structure and relationship between different groups of men and women. Hegemonic masculinity can be contested, and gender relations are always situated on an arena of tensions and conflicts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities. These other masculinities need not be as clearly defined—indeed, achieving hegemony may consist precisely in preventing alternatives gaining cultural definition and recognition as alternatives, confining them to ghettos, to privacy, to unconsciousness. (Connell, 1987, p. 186)

Hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily mean brutal oppression of women. Women and men may feel that hegemonic patterns are quite manageable, “natural,” and familiar. Therefore, there is sometimes a perfect match between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. This means that some women may quite willingly accommodate to the interests and desires of men (cf., “The feminine apologetic,” Theberge, 2000). This strategy stands in stark contrast to different subversive forms of resistance toward dominant masculinity. According to Butler (2005), terms such as masculine and feminine are historical and thereby also notoriously changeable categories (Felski, 1995). Gender designations are, therefore, in a constant process of being remade and redefined.

In this study, we have used three carefully selected case studies to investigate and dissect different ways of doing gender and fitness. We have been interested in the adaptation to norms and categories, and the transgressions of these norms. Furthermore, we have been interested in the possibility of developing creative readings of our material, making it possible to imagine things in different ways. Following Butler (1990), “[f]antasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (p. 29).

**Method**

Theories and methodologies developed for online Internet research have a relatively short history (Hine, 2000). In addition, due to the very nature of online research, the technologies and social environment seem to be ever shifting, making a great impact on peoples’ everyday life. The focus of this article is “on written accounts resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 58). The article is inspired by Kozinets (2010), who has developed a specifically designed method for studying the social web of culture and communities online, called netnography. Netnography is, in turn, methodologically influenced by the traditions and practices of ethnography and cultural anthropology (Hine, 2000).

Undoubtedly, Internet-focused methods such as netnography differ from conventional ethnographies. For example, narratives told on Internet cannot be easily positioned to places or communities. Furthermore, Internet studies provide the researcher with limited possibilities to gather empirical material from events and happenings offline and generally exclude face-to-face interaction (Hooley, Marriott, & Wellens, 2012). At the same time, Internet research methods have many similarities to more traditional methods (Fleischmann, 2004; Sheehan, 2010). Social media, such as personal blogs, are usually thematized in ways that will attract and target specific audiences and lifestyle groups (Orgad, 2006). Therefore, they can be seen as embedded in a particular sociocultural and/or national context. Furthermore, social practices on the Internet have blurred the boundaries between public and private and made personal information easier to access than ever before, thus creating new opportunities for interaction and forms of intimacy (Hugh, 2010; Joinson, McKenna, & Postmes, 2007). Kozinets (2010) concludes,

> With our ideas and actions, we choose technologies, we adapt and shape them. To this realization it is also critical to add that our culture does not entirely control the technologies that we use, either. The way that technology and culture interact is a complex dance, an interweaving and intertwining. This element of technocultural change is present in our public spaces, our workplaces, our homes, our relationships and our bodies—each institutional element intermixed with every other one. Technology constantly shapes and reshapes our bodies, our places, and our identities, and is shaped to our needs as well. (p. 22)

Emphasizing the importance of including technology in efforts to understand peoples everyday life, Kozinets shows
that the study of narratives on the Internet can be an excellent source for understanding the construction of cultural meaning. Using discourse analysis, we focus on texts and images on certain fitness blogs with the perspective that these Internet communications/communities in one way or another can be viewed as cultural manifestations (Kozinets, 2010; see also Porter, 1997). We intend to analyze how the selected bloggers define their perception of the(ir) world, and thereby contribute to shaping a specific understanding of gender and the body within (Internet-mediated) fitness culture (Smith Maguire, 2008).

The selected empirical material consists of 3 female fitness blogs. As a first step, we read 10 blogs each. Thereafter, we discussed the 20 blogs and on basis of our theoretical interests selected 3 blogs. These blogs have been strategically selected, partly based on popularity such as high rankings regarding number of readers and partly based on theoretical and analytical relevance. Hence, in addition to selecting blogs based on popularity, the aim of the sample is that the blogs clearly reflect diverse illustrations and features of body and gender, such as traditional concepts of femininity as well as more gender challenging and subversive constructions. Of course, our purpose is not to generalize our empirical results, but to develop a way of analyzing and categorize fitness blogs. Thus, our ambition is primarily theoretical, but we also think that our work with these empirical cases may contribute to a methodological development within this particular field of study. Furthermore, we have read through the whole blogs, and thereafter selected sections/quotations appropriate for our purpose and for the overall intention of capturing certain cases/types of subject positions.

The first blog in our selection is run by Laureen Brooks, a fitness and nutrition coach who preferably uses kettle bells in her workout routine (http://kbellqueen.blogspot.se/). She has developed several exercise and nutrition programs and is the creator of highly acclaimed DVDs dealing with, for example, workout after pregnancy. The second blog is run by Jennifer Nicole Lee who presents herself as a weight loss success story, celebrity, and fitness model (http://www.jennifernicolelee.com/JNLblog/). She is the founder of an international fitness company and is said to hold a record for appearing numerous times on fitness magazine covers. The third blog is edited by Krista Scott-Dixon (http://www.stumptuous.com/). This is a noncommercial blog/web site aiming to offer an alternative representation of female athleticism, bringing a feminist perspective into the realm of fitness culture. In sum, these three blogs are viewed as interesting case studies, which together illustrate various ways of approaching and understanding gender and different tendencies within a changeable fitness culture.

Certainly there are some ethical issues associated with the use of blogs and web pages as empirical material. For instance, participants in online communities and cultures may not expect that their comments are going to be read and discussed by researchers outside their community, which raises questions about consent and degree of publicity (Walther, 2002). At the same time, however, it is reasonable to assume that any “person who uses publicly-available communication systems on the internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments” (Walther, 2002, p. 207). The status of the selected blogs is that they are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection (Rosenberg, 2010). We have, on the basis of this, concluded that the bloggers see no reason to protect their personal privacy (Grodzinsky & Tavani, 2010). However, this fact obviously does not give us the right to use remarks given in the blogs as we please. As search engine technology has become so powerful that anyone can easily enter a quotation and thereby locate the authors of the blogs, they have not been given pseudonyms (Kozinets, 2010). Instead, when selecting quotations, we have been careful not to focus on the most sensitive information, and restricted our use of quotations to those that promote relevant analyses of gender construction within Internet-mediated fitness culture.

**Results**

*Training Like a (Wo)man!*

Laureen is a 30-year-old, certified clinical nutritionist, fitness instructor, and personal trainer, with a degree in kinesiology. She has specialized in Russian kettle bells. The blog has been running for 6 years, and there are a number of entries on issues such as diet and food, inspiration, and exercising after pregnancy. She presents herself in the following way:

> I am a fitness and nutrition coach who loves what I do! My favorite workout tool of choice is the kettlebell. But I definitely love to use many other types of equipment as well. Fitness to me is only part of the puzzle to have the happy and healthy quality of life people strive for. With my educational background and experiences I make sure to emphasize Nutrition, Lifestyle, Exercise, and a positive mental attitude in people’s lives. (Brooks, 2007)

The blog is filled with advice to women, and Laureen is first and foremost targeting a heterosexual and White female audience. The presentation of the self is framed in terms of motherhood and as lifestyle advisor mainly for women and mothers. In one passage, Laureen tells us a little about her own life situation, trying to balance her career with her two young children and also getting some time for herself. As a consequence, she states that “although I do my best to give as much quality time to my babies, I don’t give much quality time to myself!” In the discussion that follows, this sacrificial and compassionate role as a nurturer is expressed several times, and, in addition, presented as self-chosen and desirable (cf., Woollett & Marshall, 2000). In this sense, it becomes obvious how many women, still after many years of practice and presence in gym culture, have to defend their
position and their ways of developing a professional career. It fits neatly into an ideology of women as first and foremost natural mothers and caretakers for others. Hence, it does not seem to bring much of a change when it comes to the social construction of femininity and the traditional ways of performing it (Butler, 1990).

The tools, techniques, and ideas of training and exercise permeating the fitness culture have roots in classical body-building culture. Kettle Bells and the movements performed with these tools go all the way back to Sandow, Atlas, and the history of bodybuilding. These reference points and cultural conceptions about bodies, techniques, and muscles are also present in Laureen’s stories. At the same time, they are continuously related to normative conceptions and representations of femininity.

Many women have the illusion that if they even glance at free weights, they will end up looking like Arnold’s long lost twin sister. As a result, women flock to aerobics classes and exercise machines every year with the hope of discovering the holy grail of fat loss. I do not have to tell you what the end result is. Think I am being too harsh? Go to an aerobics class today and take a mental note of the class. Now go back in a month and take a look at the results. See what I mean? Results that are noticeable do not come from just cardiovascular exercise. Make no mistake about it, the best way to get a lean, sexy, and a well-defined physique is with heavy weights and low reps. . . . By the time you get to the end of this article, you will be over the irrational fear that lifting heavy weights make women bulky. You will have a plan of action to develop a body that is super strong and conditioned. The body you have always wanted. (Brooks, 2005)

One way of approaching and understanding this quotation would be to read it through Connell’s concept emphasizing femininity. Connell is using this concept to capture the ways women relate to and become subordinated, in relation to hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, this would probably give us a too limited view of what is taking place in Laureen’s blog and also in contemporary fitness culture. The respect for masculine techniques is not there at all. Instead, contemporary fitness culture is part of a historical transformation of our ways of looking at bodies and genders. Laureen is teaching her students how to reinterpret, use, and claim certain techniques and body ideals. In this way, she is part of a slow and subtle transgression of gender and body ideals within fitness culture.

Laureen is developing a remarkably consistent and thorough approach to exercise, nutrition, and lifestyle. She is promoting a strong hard-body as the ideal for women. The blog is also filled with advice on how to exercise and eat. For example, one entry is filled with suggestions for how to prepare and cook different meals.

It’s easy for a young woman to be encouraged to go down the wrong eating path. There are already enough body image and emotional eating issues for young women and men to deal with, so let’s lead the way and continue to show that being strong and training like a (wo)man is empowering, healthy, and sexy. Strong is the new sexy. Let’s lead by example and demonstrate to women they can have healthy relationships with food and be strong, lean, and eat when their hunger cues tell them to eat. It’s time to focus on what’s healthy for each individual’s lifestyle. We must encourage smart food choices by listening and being in tune with our bodies and knowing the difference between feeling full and feeling hungry. (Brooks, 2012)

The fitness body presented in this blog has its roots in the fitness revolution of the 1980s and 1990s. In a way, the body-builder is present in his or her absence. Being strong, and training like a woman, is probably the key message constructed here. Kettle bells and muscle training are no longer exclusively male techniques and territories. Hence, even if this strategy and enacting of gender identity does not imply a complete transformation of hegemonic masculinity, it contributes to a slow and gradual change of the content and definition of gender and bodies. In this sense, this case study points toward a process of redefinition and redesignation of what it means to perform femininity and female athleticism.

**Becoming a Bikini Model!**

Jennifer Nicole Lee was born in 1975 and her career as a fitness expert and model started when she lost more than 35 kilo of bodyweight while trying to become a fitness model. She writes:

It all started in 2003 after the birth of my second son—I took my infamous before photo where I weighed over 200 pounds. In order to have a visual goal of what I wanted to look like when I started my weight loss transformation, I went to one of the leading female Fitness Magazines for inspiration. I wanted a physique that was strong and muscular, yet still feminine—somewhat of an animated Superwoman. (Lee, n.d.-a)

On Jennifer’s blog/homepage, there is not much information about the private person Jennifer except that she comes from a “non-athletic background,” that she struggled with “weight problems” until she was in her late twenties, and is a certified life coach. Like many other blog stories, hers takes its point of departure from an old picture of herself followed by numerous newer, updated ones, where her body is transformed into the desired idealized image of “magazine cover worthy” femininity. Her transformation became a success and recognized in several popular talk shows in the United States, such as the Oprah Winfrey Show and “E” Entertainment. This media attention boosted her career, and she became not only a personal trainer and life coach but also a successful entrepreneur who founded her own international company. She became the face/name and the body of her own lifestyle brand, selling wellness products, training programs, and exercise equipment internationally. Clearly, her quest for becoming a strong “superwoman” and her success as a businesswoman sends signals of an autonomous woman in control. In this respect, Jennifer’s story is defying the
strong discursive connection between muscularity and masculinity, praising a newfound unity between femininity and strong muscles. As a means of saluting this combination, she sells and poses in different kinds of clothing with taglines such as “strong is the new skinny” and “Got Muscle?” Jennifer concludes,

Women’s fitness is just not limited to aerobics anymore! In the past, women would just workout with no crystal clear objective of what they wanted to achieve. Welcome to the modern day millennium in women’s fitness where we as females now have the CHOICE to choose how we want to feel and look! Having a fitness goal is almost like shopping. You get to pick out what type of physique you want. (Lee, n.d.-b)

When it comes to the aesthetics of the female body as well as the lifestyles of modern women, Jennifer clearly celebrates the freedom of individual choice, and in this sense adopts a feminist perspective. She is saluting women’s privilege to bodily change and, unlike traditional views of normative feminine identities based upon social and cultural expectations that women are to prioritize the needs and interest of others, the morals she emphasizes is that women are allowed to live a self-absorbed and narcissistic lifestyle, in this case based upon consumerist values (Lazar, 2009). At the same time, however, clicks back and forth on her website reveal that the pursued freedom of choice is, in fact, rather confined. Motivated by her own success, for example, she has constructed a specific program for women, guiding them in what she perceives to be the proper and obvious bodily direction for a woman.

Picture this—You’re walking in the mall and you spot out a short slinky sexy little dress that you would just love to wear. You pick it out just hoping that it will fit. You enter into the dressing room, that little room that haunts you and always are used to leaving feeling defeated. But this time it’s different. You close the drape. Your dream dress slips right on, and hugs your new hard firm feminine body on all the right curves. You take a real good look at yourself in the mirror and let out a sigh of relief and of victory! It didn’t sink in till just this very moment, that you now have the body of your dreams, the body of a Fitness Model! ( . . . ) And please let us clarify: The Bikini Model Program is for the woman who does NOT want to look like a Bodybuilder or a Figure Competitor but rather a Bikini Model. (Lee, n.d.-c)

Although Jennifer describes herself as a world famous certified fitness expert and celebrity, author and lifestyle consultant, her website does not give much direct advice about training and nutrition. Rather, becoming a bikini model seems to be the primary objective being coveted and sold (Smith Maguire, 2008). Obviously, the pursued “superwoman” is not supposed to show signs of considerable strength with bulking muscles and may, therefore, be interpreted as an example of the feminine apologetic (Theberge, 2000). On the blog, one finds numerous highly stylized snapshots featuring Jennifer posing almost nakedly. Except for one picture of a female bodybuilder with the sign NO, the imagery is relatively uniform. Next to the quotation above, for example, one finds Jennifer leaning against a wall, wearing nothing but a (partly transparent) red bikini top and a minimal string bikini bottom, covering remarkably little of her most intimate parts. She has placed one hand above her head partly concealed by her voluminous wavy hair. The other hand is “resting” on the thin ribbon of the string bikini bottom, making it slide downward as if she is about to take them off. Her lips have a deep red color, and her mouth is slightly open. Her gaze is capturing the camera lens. This visual illustration of a sensualized and eroticized, “do-me-femininity” is expressed in different variations throughout the website. In addition, the pictures are often branded, marketing different products, simultaneously highlighting Jennifer’s status as a fashion celebrity. The kind of femininity displayed within her workout program becomes even more explicit when she presents the following scenario:

As she waves to her friends on the other side of the pool, there is not an ounce of jiggle in her arms. She begins to apply her sun block to her evenly tanned and golden brown body starting with her smooth, sleek, and cellulite-free legs. Her round butt rivals that of top celebrities. Her flat abs and whittled waist lead up to her youthful buxom bosom. Her bikini looks as if it were tailor made for her fit hourglass physique, hugging all the right curves. As she flips her shiny hair, it cascades down her beautiful back and she alluringly smiles, revealing her self-assuredness as all the men stare. She’s the center of everyone’s attention, even yours! What does she have that separates her from all of the other girls at the pool? She’s got a Bikini Model Body! (Lee, n.d.-d)

Jennifer is an autonomous woman with substantial confidence. She symbolizes the idea of a modern working woman, living a hectic life, and presents herself as a success story. In the meantime, however, her perception of the modern fit woman and female body seems to reinstall quite a stereotypical ideal of women all over again, presenting them as voluntary sexual objects. Furthermore, the scenario presented above also seems to be manufactured to make readers of the blog forget the incredible amount of dedication required to achieve this ideal feminine body. Jennifer is emphasizing looks rather than abilities and assumes that the most cherished goal for a woman with training ambitions is to become a fitness model and, as a consequence, also treasured by men (Connell, 1995). She is presenting herself as a fitness coach/model, but in the introduction video on her website she clearly states that she first and foremost is a “devoted wife and mother, representing the millions of other mom’s and wives in the world with a brand they can trust” (cf., Malcolm, 2003). In addition, her training program is constructed in such a way that it explicitly is to be performed by women “in the comfort of your own home,” thereby also reinforcing binary and heteronormative gender positions. All in all, this storyline
Krista Stewart-Dixon describes herself as a former stumpy, food loving woman who started training. Her blog was initiated in the late 1990s, as a result of her finding much information about weight training and fitness for women to be “just bad.” In addition, her academic background, with a PhD in Women’s studies, gave her access to a university library with research journals and textbooks on physiology, coaching, nutrition, and so forth. Her blog has a scientific approach, and articles and advice given about exercise, nutrition, and injuries are commonly followed by long lists of scientific references. Although the advice given on the blog is meant to concern mostly female readers, the information on the blog is presented to be “gender-neutral.” Dedicated to the task of giving evidence-based information and a feminist perspective on (women’s) training, Krista states that she wants to provide alternative images/representations of fit women, showing that women’s training does not equal “fitness model” ambitions. In this respect, Krista’s nonprofitable blog appears to be an antithesis to the one edited by Jennifer Nicole Lee. In almost every aspect, it differs regarding how content and imagery is presented. For example, Krista is explicitly critical to much of the advice given by so-called “experts of fitness.”

You don’t have to go far in the average gym to find someone willing to give you bad information. People are full of ideas and advice about women and weights. And most of them are wrong. ( . . . ) The other day I heard the most ludicrous thing yet: that cardio work was bad for you because it built muscle that pushed the fat out farther. Yep, I guess that’s why marathon runners are all so obese—duh. Some of the worst offenders are fitness magazines and personal trainers. This is somewhat distressing, considering that people look to such sources for help and information. The other day, reading a fitness magazine, I learned that yoga will firm my breasts (it won’t, unless they meant to write “plastic surgeon” instead of “yoga”). (Scott-Dixon, 2009)

Taking on an ironic and sarcastic tone toward the expertise of personal training, Krista tries to highlight the ways representatives and representations of the fitness culture/industry often try to place stereotypical norms upon women. There is not much of compliance to a hegemonic masculinity built into this blog excerpt. Rather, the irony appears to be a playful tool for Krista to encourage reflexive opposition and to challenge gender norms in relation to women’s training and fitness. This becomes even more pronounced when Krista discusses what she has perceived as “probably the worst lie ever,” namely, that weight training will make women huge and masculine (Markula, 2001). So when a reader of her blog asks Krista if she can tell her how to lose muscle, supposedly to comply with a traditional celebrated femininity, the message is clear:

No. Trust me, you’ll need that stuff when you’re 80. I don’t care if you think you’re the She-Hulk (you’re probably not), or if your muscular thighs are “too bulky” (most of it is probably body fat not muscle, and your thighs are probably totally normal), if you can’t find clothes (aren’t the manufacturers the one with problem, not you?) I’m not enabling your dysfunctional crap. Find non-fucked up role models and be strong. And enjoy not getting stuck on the toilet in the old age home. (Scott-Dixon, 2013)

Krista is so obviously critical to the cultural control that masculinity seems to have over musculature that it is tempting to think that she is inspired by the work of Rita Felski (1995) and her analysis of the gendering of history. In her classical work, The Gender of Modernity, Felski concludes that our sense of the past, that is, our understanding of history and culture, is shaped by the explanatory logic of narrative. This implies that the stories we create of history in turn reveal the inescapable presence and power of gender symbolism. Krista criticizes the symbolism that “says” that masculinity is the gender of musculature and athleticism. In contrast to historical constructions of femininity as vulnerable and weak, she embraces a femininity that is strong, active, and physically empowered. In some sense, she is expressing to readers that bodybuilding and muscles are not necessarily masculine. Rather, they should be viewed simply as workout activities and results (Roth & Basow, 2004). For example, the imagery of the blog is focused on the function rather than the appearance of the body. Pictures are often in black and white, accompanied with instructions and encouragements. Also, turning away from the cultural framing of the fitness industry and the idealization of beauty and youth, the blog celebrates aging, discusses training with MS, when overweight and so on. Furthermore, Krista discusses training-related topics that may be perceived as bodily “off-limits,” not the least in relation to traditional views of femininity.

You finish a set of heavy squats, or all-out sprints, and suddenly your stomach tries to make a break for it. Blowing chunks, technicolour yawn, talking to Ralph on the great white phone, whatever you want to call it, nausea and vomiting during a workout are no fun. (Scott-Dixon, 2008)

Discussing vomiting, urinary leakage, farts, and even poo during training deviates from the storyline where fitness culture is presented as a leisure activity, fueled by a fashion and beauty industry that is making profits on superficiality
and glamour (Sassatelli, 2010). When discussing different bodily responses, as above, the rhetoric is not focused on the embarrassment they may cause, but rather on them being natural aspects (outcomes) of dedicated training. For instance, the reader can watch a YouTube-clip where a bodybuilder projectile vomits during squats. Next to the clip Krista writes, “way to try buddy!” Read in a feminist context, this could be understood not just as encouragement for making an effort, but also as an embracement of one’s body through allowing it to respond, grow, react, and feel during a workout, in this case regardless of gender. Probably, it could also be understood in a wider context, as a cultural critique of the (re)gendering of the fitness industry as a whole. By questioning normative representations of fitness femininity, Krista invites her readers to begin a deconstruction of gender within fitness culture, making it a bit less normative and masculine.

Conclusion

Clearly, the blogs and representations of selves being analyzed in this article can be read in many ways. In our analysis, there are, however, three distinct and differentiated positions emerging from the narratives, in relation to “doing gender.” The first position regarding views on female athletes, seems to have a long history, and would be the one related to emphasized femininity and compliance to hegemonic masculinity. Jennifer is a good example of this position, and Laureen to some extent, which also seems to be by far the most common on the Internet (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). It is expressed in different ways but overall, this position builds heavily upon binary perceptions of gendered bodies and competences, mainly drawing on stereotypical representations of a weak, sexualized, and/or mothering femininity (Heywood, 1998). In many ways, this position seems to reinstall a myth of women’s inevitable inferiority in the realm of physical culture.

The second position could be labeled a negotiating position, where there are intertwined tendencies to compliance and to transformations of contemporary gender positions. Laureen’s blog seems to be the one that most explicitly, but not exclusively, can be placed within this category. Certain aspects of her blog fit neatly into the description of emphasized femininity, but this term cannot capture her entire presentation of the self, which is more complex and nuanced. Her self-presentation also extends the notion of femininity in alternative directions, for example, questioning and remolding the masculine exclusive rights to heavy lifting practices using kettle bells and so forth.

Finally, we have a subversive position, pointing toward unconventional ways of approaching, reading, and enacting gender. The last case study, Krista, points in the direction of subversion and a potential of something quite different from emphasized and oppressed femininity. Within this subversive stand, female athletics are no longer constructed as embedded in a masculine hegemony. Instead, this blog creates its own ways of approaching muscularity, fitness, and bodyliness, by using humor and irony as a means of questioning normative gender constructions and empowering female athletics. Furthermore, Krista is aware that the prerequisites for physical power differ among women. Embodying a feminist perspective, her blog houses a rejection of dualism not only between genders but also within each gender, saluting individual bodily experiences as the basis of reality (Braidotti, 1994). By discussing physical strength and MS, obesity and so forth, while this subversive stance encourages women to become stronger, as it states that physical strength is not an end in itself, it does not equal the importance of an individual (Roth & Basow, 2004).

Discussion

Today, the boundary between fitness and bodybuilding is clear. Still, however, there is an interesting and complex interdependency between these two characters of contemporary fitness. It seems that fitness women gradually are becoming more muscular than before. At the same time, there is evidence that fitness discourse and imagery are totally permeated by polar descriptions and portrayals of men and women. Men are often more muscular than women, and women are often slenderer than men. Furthermore, many women also emphasize certain parts of the “female” body, such as breasts, bum, and thighs.

All in all, the field of bodybuilding and fitness allows us to explore different ways of doing and (re)presenting gender. The field is differentiated, but there is also much evidence of a strong tendency to comply with and adjust to certain gender fantasies. Many blogs on the Internet contain sexualized images of female personal trainers and coaches. The commercialization of fitness and the selling of fitness and bodies is an intrinsic part of the self-presentations found in this work (Smith Maguire, 2008). However, as we have seen, there are also challenges to hegemonic masculinity, and people are trying hard to emphasize other possible ways of performing gender in everyday life.

Above all, this article is mainly theoretically informed and case study based. Nevertheless, it identifies a strong need for future research to explore the actual number of blogs that can be categorized within the three above-discussed positions and, in addition, also to identify other ways of approaching and understanding female fitness in the blogosphere.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.
References

Andreasonn, J., & Johansson, T. (in press). The health guru. Masculinity and fitness coaching in the blogosphere. The Journal of Men’s Studies.

Bartky, S. L. (1990). Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression. London, England: Routledge.

Braidotti, R. (1994). Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Brooks, L. (2005, December 5). The need to train like a man, especially if you are a woman! [Blog post/article]. Retrieved from http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/lbrooks2.htm

Brooks, L. (2007, March). About me [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.bodybuilder.com/profile/07329485509526075515

Brooks, L. (2012, March 29). Train like a man, but eat like a woman [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.bodybuilder.com/profile/07329485509526075515

Budd, M. A. (1997). The sculpture machine. Physical culture and body politics in the age of empire. London, England: Macmillan.

Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. London, England: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2005). Undoing gender. New York, NY: Routledge.

Connell, R. W. (1987). Gender & power. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Connell, R. W. (1995). Masculinities. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. Gender & Society, 19, 829-859.

Cooper, K. W. (1981). Aerobics. London, England: Bantham Books

Crossley, N. (2006). In the gym: Motives, meaning and moral careers. Body & Society, 12(3), 23-50.

Dworkin, S. L., & Wachs, L. (2009). “Cause that’s what girls do”: The making of a feminized gym. Gender & Society, 21, 676-699.

Felski, R. (1995). The gender of modernity. London, England: Harvard University Press.

Fleischmann, A. (2004). Narratives published on the Internet by parents of children with autism: What do they reveal and why is it important? Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 19, 35-43.

Gaines, C., & Butler, G. (1977). Pumping iron: The art and sports of bodybuilding. London, England: Sphere Books

Grodzinsky, F., & Tavani, H. (2010). Applying the “Contextual Integrity” model of privacy to personal blogs in the blogosphere. International Journal of Internet Research Ethics, 3, 38-47.

Heywood, L. (1998). Body makers: A cultural anatomy of women’s body building. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Hine, C. M. (2000). Virtual ethnography. London, England: Sage.

Hooley, T., Marriott, J., & Wellens, J. (2012). What is online research? New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Hugh, M. (2010). New connections, familiar settings: Issues in the ethnographic study of new media use at home. In C. Hine (Eds.), Virtual methods: Issues in social research on the Internet (pp. 129-140). New York, NY: Berg.

IHRSA. (2011). The 2011 IHRSA global report: The state of the health club industry. Boston, MA: Author.

Johansson, T. (1996). Gendered spaces: The gym culture and the construction of gender. Young, 4, 32-47.

Johansson, T. (2003). What’s behind the mask? Bodybuilding and masculinity. In S. Ervö & T. Johansson (Eds.), Bending bodies: Moulding masculinities Volume 2 (pp. 92-106). Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Joinson, A., McKenna, K., & Postmes, T. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Klein, A. M. (1993). Little big men: Bodybuilding subculture and gender construction. New York: State University of New York Press.

Kozinets, R. (2010). Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online. London, England: Sage.

Lazar, M. (2009). Entitled to consume: Postfeminist femininity and a culture of post-critique. Discourse & Communication, 3, 371-400.

Lee, J. N. (n.d.-a). It all started 2000 pounds ago [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.fitnessmodelprogram.com/

Lee, J. N. (n.d.-b). What’s the difference between a fitness model and bikini model? [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://jenjennicoolee.com/

Lee, J. N. (n.d.-c). Just imagine this for a minute [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://jenjennicoolee.com/

Lee, J. N. (n.d.-d). The Bikini Model Diet Program [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.bikinimodelprogram.com/?hop=choneycut

Leeds, M. C., & Liberti, R. (2007). “Cause that’s what girls do”: The making of a feminized gym. Gender & Society, 21, 676-699.

Lindsay, C. (1996). Bodybuilding: A postmodern freak show. In R. G. Thomson (Eds.), Freakery. Cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body. New York: New York University Press.

Malcolm, N. (2003). Constructing female athleticism: A study of girls recreational softball. American Behavioral Scientist, 46, 1387-1404.

Markula, P. (2001). Beyond the perfect body: Women’s body image distortion in fitness magazine discourse. Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 25, 158-179.

McGrath, S., & Chananie-Hill, R. (2009). “Big freaky-looking women”: Normalizing gender transgression through bodybuilding. Sociology of Sport Journal, 26, 235-254.

Moore, P. L. (Eds.). (1997). Building bodies. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Otrad, D. (2006). The cultural dimension of online communication: A study of breast cancer patient’s Internet spaces. New media & Society, 8, 877-899.

Porter, D. (1997). Internet culture. New York, NY: Routledge.

Roth, A., & Basow, S. (2004). Femininity, sports, and feminism: Developing a theory of physical liberation. Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 28, 245-265.

Sassatelli, R. (1999). Interaction order and beyond: A field of analysis of body culture within fitness gym. Body & Society, 5, 227-248.

Sassatelli, R. (2010). Fitness culture: Gyms and the commercialization of discipline and fun. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Scott-Dixon, K. (2008, July 16). Vomit [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.stumptuous.com/effluvia
Scott-Dixon, K. (2009, January 8). LIES in the gym [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.stumptuous.com/lies-in-the-gym
Scott-Dixon, K. (2013). Will you tell me how to lose muscles? [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.stumptuous.com/stumptuous-faq
Sheehan, K. B. (2010). Online research methodology: Reflections and speculations. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 3*, 56-61.
Smith Maguire, J. (2008). *Fit for consumption: Sociology and the business of fitness*. London, England: Routledge.
Stern, M. (2008). The fitness movement and the fitness center industry, 1960–2000. *Business and Economic History, 6*. Retrieved from http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2008/stern
Theberge, N. (2000). *Higher goals: Women’s ice hockey and the politics of gender*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Walther, J. (2002). Research ethics in internet-enabled research: Human subjects issues and methodological myopia. *Ethics and Information Technology, 4*, 205-216.
Woollett, A., & Marshall, H. (2000). Motherhood and mothering. In J. M. Ussher (Eds.), *Women’s health: Contemporary international perspectives*. Leicester, England: BPS Books.

**Author Biographies**

**Jesper Andreasson** works as a senior lecturer in sport science at Linnaeus University, Sweden. He has written mainly in the field of gender studies, the sociology of sport, and about gym culture.

**Thomas Johansson** is a professor of education. He has written extensively in the field of gender studies, the sociology of the family, and youth research.