

Bodybuilding WoMen: Transforming Perception on Female Bodybuilders

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Abstract: Societal constructions of gender identity rely heavily on body image. In this paper I address how norms of acceptable body constructions encourage and discourage muscle development in women. Separating gender identities can be either: a limiting gateway that confines women to fixed ideologies of femininity, or a liberating pathway that enables women to redefine what femininity entails. I will be discussing what is considered feminine versus masculine and how society needs to have a separation between the two. My research on the subject reveals that the motivation behind male and female bodybuilding is similar and different in various ways. Both women and men are constantly at war with their bodies in an effort to create the perfect, most fit version of themselves often causing them to resort to bodybuilding. Females are particularly attracted to bodybuilding because it is a rebellious sport that facilitates the reconstruction of norms. This rebellious attitude against socially constructed gender norms, ironically, creates similar results both in men and women: confidence, empowerment and control of the body. Women must negotiate their identity and balance muscular development with normative femininity in order to be socially accepted. This balance is in essence what enables female bodybuilding to occur.

Bodybuilding is a method used by men and women as a form of expression. It is a transcending tool that enables the reconstruction of societal notions generally define feminine and masculine roles. When these norms are challenged, they become fluid and alterable by those who choose not to conform. Norms are culturally established to differentiate gender identities, ultimately creating a dividing line between men and women. It is this non-acceptably crossed division that protects gender identity and allows it to be easily perceivable. When women bodybuild they are empowered to engage in transcending actions due to an increase in confidence and control over their bodies. But this newfound confidence is not enough for women bodybuilders to be perceivably

considered females. Gender identity is directly reliant on body image and physical attractiveness. Nevertheless, the social construction of gender therefore limits empowered female bodybuilders by forcing them to find a balance between socially accepted femininity and muscle development. It is by creating this balance that women weightlifters are empowered to transgress normative gender identity and acceptably develop a semi-masculine body image.

Normative Gender Constructions

The distinction in characterization of male identity is based on pre-designed normative constructions of body image. These societal generalizations are encapsulated and made to represent a collective gender identity. In, ““Big Freaky-Looking Women,”” Shelly A. McGrath and Ruth A. Chananie-Hill explain that women must, paradoxically, rebel and conform to normative standards in order to successfully create a balanced identity. Normative standards for men’s identity entail increased muscle definition because it is “culturally coded as ‘masculine,’ signifying power, control, aggression, and dominance” (Chananie-Hill, McGrath 238). Body image is, in essence, a socially constructed judgment that produces a general understanding of perceivable gender. When masculine identity is constructed by the measure of muscularity and dominance, it leaves very little room for women to also portray themselves as such. Socially constructed masculine ideologies depict men as naturally powerful and muscular. Jennifer K. Wesely explains in “Negotiating Gender,” that the body is a work in progress that must allow room for the various ways in which males and females attempt to refashion, recreate, and reconstruct their gendered sense of self. It is due to the pre-designed notions of masculine identity that men are attributed with being “hypermasculine and [are] characterized by femiphobia [...] in fear of appearing female” (Wesely 162). The fact that men feel they should uphold a traditional, masculine trait is what reinforces associations of gender qualities. It is their lack of woman-like attributes that men are able to self-identify as the powerful, masculine gender. By doing so, men solidify stereotypical notions and acknowledge the

importance of conforming to these cultured beliefs. Molding the external body to fit normative gender definitions is what enables differentiation between males and females.

Women, as much as men, are culturally pressured to clearly define gender and reinforce stereotypical ideologies. It is by adhering to cultured gender-related concepts that females can acceptably portray aspects of their femininity. Such women are characterized by exhibiting “a toned, fit, and firm body with limited muscle definition” (Chananie-Hill, McGrath 238). Female normative identity mainly entails a small, less built, toned body frame because society must create a clear distinction between the male and female. If a woman is not limited in muscle development, societal confusion arises towards perceivable gender attribution. Carrie Paechter, in the article “Power, Bodies and Identity,” explains how different forms of physical education construct varying masculinities and femininities in secondary schools. She expands on the different perceptual forms of heterosexual gender identity in sports and physical education, and how each of these perceptions is reliant on the body. Paechter uses the phrase “the mirroring body” to elaborate on the fact that in order for women to be generally accepted, they must mirror what is around them (52). In doing so, women are reflecting traditional gender constructions of what femininity entails. The mirroring effect creates predictability and lessens fear of appearing disfigured. As a result, the outer body becomes the main and most important visual and acceptable representation of gender identity. In Photo 1, progressive change in the stereotypical body of a woman is shown. The left image depicts a culturally acceptable representation of a female. When lifting weights, the feminine physique is distorted and transformed, thus transcending normative ideologies of female gender identity.

Transcending Normative Gender Identities

Bodybuilding is a transformative tool that empowers women to transcend and reshape gender norms. Lifting weights facilitates the altering of women’s subjective feelings towards body perception. When women use “the body as a strong and powerful instrument [it]

runs counter to dominant notions of femininity” (Paechter 50). The female body is socially characterized by being less dominant and less physically strong in relation to male bodies. The active development of muscles in the female body enhance and exacerbate these male qualities that are not readily acceptable within this gender group. When women transgress through the participation in male dominated activities, such as bodybuilding, they resist and reconstruct social perceptions of the gendered body. Using bodybuilding as a reconstructive mechanism enables women to feel a sense of power resulting from the control gained in the transformation of the perceivable body image. When women bodybuilders develop this sense of power and control, they “are constructing their own bodies as an expression of the will to self-construct, to self-fulfill” (Chananie-Hill, McGrath 237). The fact that women bodybuilders take charge of their own body demonstrates the need to construct a personalized identity. Using bodybuilding as a tool of expression enables women to actively re-design self-identification through a subjective medium. Increased control over the body gives women the power to self-create an image that is a self-fulfilling embodiment of what the female perceives herself to be. Although female bodybuilders use this reconstructive tool to gain power and control over the active reshaping of their gendered bodies, they are still limited in how much muscle mass they can acceptably develop.

A socially constructed line is drawn in order to distinguish men from women. Crossing this gender-dividing border and increasing muscle mass in women is culturally unacceptable due to pre-established gender norms. When bodybuilding, the creation of “too much bulk on a woman indicates a gender border into the realm of masculinity, which is widely and cross culturally considered ‘inappropriate’ for women” (Chananie-Hill, McGrath 238). When muscle development in women begins to look manly or overly toned, it suggests that these women are beginning to get too bulky. Excessive muscle mass indicates that female muscularity is directly attributed to crossing gender borders by which women become semi-masculine. This realm of masculinity is one that

goes beyond the socially constructed perceptions of gender identity. Expanding perception of normative identity is culturally unacceptable because it is normative identity that creates the separation and distinction between men and women. Due to this boundary, bodybuilders are constantly faced with societal pressures to avoid being labeled as the opposite gender on the basis of their appearance. Maria R. Lowe, in her book *Women of Steel*, focuses on the struggles female bodybuilders face with self-definition. She explains that one of these struggles has to do with what is considered appropriate and how “there’s a fine line where if you cross it, you’ve gone too far, [and] you’re not attractive anymore” (49). Crossing this thin boundary is the transcendence of the external constraints that limit body size. Because the line that separates gender is so thin, females must carefully construct their outer image and avoid going too far. A female bodybuilder knows she has gone too far when there is no longer any sex appeal to her external looks. In Photo 2, a female bodybuilder is shown next to a male competitor. Their gendered bodies seem indistinguishable, which demonstrates that the female weightlifter has excessive muscle bulk. This perceivable similarity is what drives society to create a boundary limiting the extent of female muscularity. The image also reflects how the skin is a self-limiting boundary that must accommodate excessive development of bulk within growing muscles. This constraint, similarly to limitations imposed by society, is a temporary reflection of how the acceptable mold of gendered bodies is not a fixed ideology because the gender boundary is visibly expandable and readily redefined. This gender-separating boundary can be limiting because it resembles fixed ideologies of femininity, or it can be liberating because it allows females to reconstruct a personal identity and develop a self-fulfilling perceivable body image.

Impact of Bodybuilding

Bodybuilding has transformative power because it allows women the freedom of gender expression and the development of self-confidence. In his work *Little Big Men*, Alan M. Klein attempts to increase awareness of the subculture of bodybuilding by discussing

aspects of identity and sexuality, including the contradictions socially created within them. When women bodybuild, they are essentially using this body sculpting mechanism “as a means to an end. Women’s motives for going into bodybuilding were as often based on poor body-image and insecurity as those of men” (Klein 184). This is due to the fact that women lift weights not as an end result, but as a goal-reaching mechanism that facilitates development of self-acceptance. Increasing muscularity serves as a stepping-stone for female bodybuilders to go beyond their lack of self-confidence and to create a positive body image for themselves. When there is a lack of self-esteem, it becomes visibly portrayed through poor body image. In the article, “The Path Chosen by Female Bodybuilders,” Peggy Roussel and Jean Griffet discuss how the feminine gender is misunderstood and rejected with increased muscle mass. They authors also focus on how female weightlifters develop into a subculture in which they unite and become more inward looking. The resulting body-centered self-perception alters body image and leads to the gradual development of self-confidence. In the interview with “Subject 3,” a 45-year-old female weightlifter, Griffet and Roussel found that through bodybuilding “I was a little stronger, a little freer I’d say. In fact, it came on very gradually, one came with the other, I mean the mental came with the physical. At the start, I used to walk with my head down, I was ashamed of my physique” (141). Women bodybuilders can be sensitive like other non-bodybuilding women; nonetheless, outer looks do not define inner emotions. Weightlifting women demonstrate a strong exterior, yet internally face similar struggles with self-confidence. The progressive shift from feelings of insecurity to this self-accepting attitude is what enables women bodybuilders to transform their bodies and to alter how others perceive them. When altering subjective emotions towards physical aspects of the body, bodybuilders gradually reshape gender aesthetics and make it more culturally acceptable to self-invest. By self-investing, female bodybuilders are able to self-construct a personal gender identity and develop a stronger sense of self-esteem. This boundary breaking movement brings about several reactions from

men and women, non-bodybuilders and bodybuilders alike.

Societal reactions towards women weightlifters vary based on normative gender identity. Chananie-Hill and McGrath conclude that “gender rebellion shape the ways in which interviewees’ family, friends, and significant others perceive female bodybuilders...chang[ing] from fearful or disgusted to fairly relaxed and accepting over time” (251). When women bodybuild, they are enabled to reconstruct perceptions of themselves and of others. Altering common ideologies of the female body initially creates negative societal reactions. After the gate of fear and disgust is transcended society can consequently become “relaxed” and “accepting.” Therefore, the reactions towards gender identity are as fluid and alterable as the norms. Controversial to this concept, Klein explains that the hyper-built body is culturally coded as being queer and gender-transgressive. He expands her argument by making a clear distinction between male and female queer muscle development. Klein’s interview with Bartky, a non-bodybuilding female, displays negative reactions towards women weightlifters and emphasizes that women who bodybuild exhibit excess masculinity through their “hyper-muscular grotesque body [...] I see a bunch of men parading in women’s bikinis, and that’s gross [...] I am very disappointed by the current direction of women’s bodybuilding” (181). Female bodybuilders are referred to as men because of the negative societal reactions attributed to excessive muscularity. When strong words such as “grotesque” and “gross” are used to describe women weightlifters, this proves that they are socially rejected for pushing against gender separating boundaries. These non-accepting societal reactions influence women bodybuilders to choose between conforming to normative gender identity and transcending these gender assumptions. When negative comments are made towards women bodybuilders who attempt to expand gender boundaries, they begin to “interpret these comments as stemming from insecurities: insecurities about a woman being stronger than a man and insecurities about the men’s unfit physiques” (Lowe 46). By making alterations to the gender status quo, women bodybuilders must cope with unique responses from

an overly conforming society. When fear, disgust, or negative remarks are made towards women's muscularity, it demonstrates that the idea of muscles on the female body is not yet accepted. This intolerant attitude indicates insecurity among those who automatically reject the idea and think of female muscles as being queer. The rejection of status quo changing notions is triggered by fear, jealousy, and anxiety in those who are completely different from female bodybuilders.

Negotiating Body Image

Gender must be easily perceivable and readily performative in order to be socially and personally recognized in bodybuilding. In bodybuilding the demonstration of femininity as well as masculinity, is essential in order for gender to be recognized and accepted. Paechter expands on the idea that gender is an action more than it is a description of an individual because it is "strongly performative; we are all, in our daily lives, consciously and unconsciously, performing what it is to be male or female, demonstrating masculinity and femininity in and through our actions" (48). By acting out a particular gendered identity, it becomes easier to balance the conscious and unconscious perceptual aspects of identification. The idea of femininity and masculinity being constantly performed shows that it is a continuous struggle that must be demonstrated in daily behavior. It is when gender is internally formed and accepted, that it is unconsciously and consciously validated for society to accept as well. When a self-constructed identity is evident through explicit actions, it becomes less volatile due to social recognition. Therefore, "social meanings attributed to bodies dictate the acceptable ways to perceive and perform our gendered selves as masculine or feminine" (Wesely 162). The meaning culture has constructed behind identity is reduced to particular meanings of the visually perceived body. Gender identity is a product of the external demonstrations of gender as well as a balance between acceptable masculine and feminine aspects. For this reason, women with muscular bodies "work extra hard to obtain the 'hyperfeminine' look of 'done hair' and use feminizing accessories to subvert the 'gender and sexuality

confusing among the general public" (Chananie-Hill, McGrath 238). When females bodybuild they are perceptually labeled to be mannish, and must therefore negotiate their identity in order to be considered more feminine. The heightened importance of the external body demonstrates how superficial females must be in order to conform and be accepted. Being highly groomed in terms of hair, makeup, and accessories enables females to clear the "confusion among general public." The fact that females must work hard to clarify this confusion means that being able to balance female muscularity and normative femininity is not easily done. In Photo 3, the balance between traditional femininity and transcendence through muscularity is shown. The bodybuilder's conforming aspects include her: long groomed hair, large implants, done-up makeup, manicured nails, jewelry, and girly swimsuit attire. It is by achieving this flirty look that women pave their way into bodybuilding. This hyperfeminine exhibition of gender is the result of the need to compensate for the lack of perceivable feminine attributes.

Although women bodybuilders must negotiate different aspects of identity in order to be culturally accepted, some find that this negotiation is not an essential component in their gender self-definition. It is due to these transcending emotions of non-conformity, that female bodybuilders become more empowered and less willing to strengthen pre-existing gender norms. Wesely argues that in some cases women bodybuilders find that "conventional constructions of the feminine body were either less desirable or more difficult for them to attain and turned to building their bodies as an alternative" (177). When women transform their bodies with excessive muscle mass, the ability to exhibit or enhance feminine qualities becomes visually unnatural. It is due to this surreal combination of female gender and masculine muscles that draws women away from the desire of being culturally accepted. This non-conforming attitude is one that liberates women from being encapsulated to fit common gender definitions, and begin to construct personalized gender perceptions. Lowe expands on the relationship between perceptual body image and cultured society. This correlation further analyzes how society

directly impacts women's body image and how, paradoxically, women reshape these norms. When women bodybuilders develop self-esteem, they no longer feel as if they reflect a distorted perceptual body image. This enables them to deviate and reconstruct an acceptable reality, "because hegemony is based on ideas and beliefs...thus, this reality is volatile and must be continuously maintained, it can be challenged at any moment by members of marginalized and subordinated groups" (Lowe 711). The fact that women bodybuilders are categorized as being part of an overpowered society, demonstrates that they are challenging dominant hegemonies. It is the elastic nature of culturally coded gender identities that provides female bodybuilders with enough room to successfully expand and resist these societal gender perceptions. By challenging hegemonic norms, women bodybuilders feel a sense of power and collectively resist conforming to these socially binding standards. Thus, they are liberated and begin to reconstruct a personalized identity, enabling them to acceptably transition from normative females to transcendent semi-masculine individuals. This newfound gender perception is characterized by significant muscle development while having a non-apologetic attitude towards deviance of the status quo set up by social gatekeepers.

Bodybuilding is a transformative tool that both empowers and limits women. Acceptable perceptions of masculinity and femininity are social constructions that limit women from becoming semi-masculine. Exhibiting both masculine and feminine traits creates confusion among society. The perceivable similarities between men and women muscularity motivate society to create a gender boundary that limits the extent to which women can transform their bodies. This separation is generally male constructed and creates a double standard in order to protect and stabilize gender identity. Bodybuilding is a sculpting mechanism that effectively transforms women's perceivable body image by becoming less feminine; while enabling men to enhance their body aesthetic by becoming more masculine. This less feminine body image puts added pressure on women to appear more sexually attractive.

In order to develop sex appeal, physical aspects of gender must be exhibited and negotiated by women bodybuilders. The fact that society finds physical attractiveness a crucial component in women's identity is what limits females from appearing too muscular. Alternatively, some transgressing women weightlifters find that bodybuilding gives them enough confidence to take control over their body construction. Unlike non-bodybuilding women who passively accept socially objectified beauty of the external body, female bodybuilders view beauty in actively taking initiative to recreate a subjective self-fulfilling body image. This correlation further analyzes women's body image and how it impacts body satisfaction and self-esteem. Societal norms directly influence women's perspective of their own body when they constantly need to show physical attractiveness. This continuous demonstration of femininity objectifies what beauty entails and becomes an essential aspect of gender identity. Bodybuilding, as much as beauty, are oppressive and liberating factors that encourage women bodybuilders to flex the tensions of normative ideologies.

Appendix

Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



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