

Masculinity, Protestantism, and Devalued Femininity in Strength-Oriented Fitness Spaces



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INTRODUCTION

- Strength-oriented exercise has historically been a mechanism for reaffirming masculinity (Gibbs et al., 2022; Bederman, 1989).
- Beauty standards reflect influences from Protestant ideals of purity and temperance, historically contributing to the reinforcement of racial hierarchies (Strings, 2019; Griffith, 2019).
- The Protestant Work Ethic offers support for the association between fitness, self-discipline, and moral worth (Weber, 1905; McKenzie, 2013).
- Women in earlier studies have justified their use of strength-oriented fitness spaces by moderating their femininity (Dworkin, 2001; Hutson, 2016).
- Existing research has overlooked messages that come directly from gyms and has neglected to consider how ideals of masculinity and Protestantism coalesce in strength-oriented fitness spaces.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- How does gyms' use of language on Instagram perpetuate ideals of fitness culture steeped in ideals of masculinity and Protestantism?
- I hypothesize that gyms' use of language and imagery on social media (1) reinforce white middle-class beauty standards; (2) celebrate ideals of physical dominance; and (3) uphold the association between hard work, self-discipline, and moral worth.

METHODS

- Deductive content analysis of 120 Instagram posts from three commercial gyms in Tallahassee, FL
- Posts were coded into study themes derived from extant literature, and subversive themes were created for posts that did not fit into the study themes.
- Approved by Florida State University's IRB.
- Intercoder reliability measures demonstrate substantial (0.61-0.8) or almost perfect (0.81-1.0) agreement between coders (Neuendorf, 2017).

Table 1. Intercoder agreement.

Theme	Hard work	Physical dominance	Beauty standards	Resistance to "soft"	Ad only	Re-doing fitness
Intercoder agreement	0.696	0.692	0.895	0.737	1.00	1.00

SELECTION OF CASES

- Gym 1: A national franchise that advertises to broad gender and age demographics.
- Gym 2: A local gym that touts an intense ruggedness and appeals primarily to men.
- Gym 3: A local gym that advertises curated workouts to college-aged women.
 - Allows examination of language used by gyms appealing to people of differing gender identities.

RESULTS

Hard Work (in the gym) Defines Value

- This theme was most frequently reflected by the gym that advertises primarily to women, which may indicate that women are expected to subvert certain aspects of traditional femininity (i.e., passivity, fragility) to justify their use of strength-oriented fitness spaces.

The Necessity of Physical Dominance

- Posts frequently idolize physical dominance and use violence-coded language, framing rigorous exercise as a protective force against vague threats. This framing may encourage men to turn to exercise to affirm their masculinity.

Alignment with White Middle-class Beauty Standards Defines Value

- This theme is most frequently reflected by the gym that appeals primarily to college aged women, and least frequently by the gym that advertises primarily to men. This may indicate that there may be a stricter expectation for women to remain within the confines of beauty standards.

Resistance to Becoming "Soft"

- Posts often frame femininity as a weakness that others have succumbed to, implicitly calling for gym-goers to avoid the pitfalls of femininity.

Figure 1. Sample text: "Hard work (in the gym) defines worth" theme

"Break through barriers, feel the burn, and **discover your true potential** with our curated workout classes"

Figure 2. Sample text: "Resistance to becoming 'soft'" theme

"**OOOOH!** Amenities? You mean sh*t **you can't lift?** **Step it up, MF'r!!**"

Figure 3. Sample text: "Necessity of physical dominance" theme

"At 100 degrees and 80% humidity, what's the point of choosing such a **harsh ass environment** to train in? Well, mother**ker, maybe because it makes us even **harder to kill**. Any more questions???"

Figure 4. Sample text: "Alignment with beauty standards defines worth" theme

"In high-intensity intervals, this workout class is designed to challenge and **transform you**. In a motivating environment with the support of expert trainers, **getting shredded has never been this fun!**"

DISCUSSION

Devalued Femininity and Self-Surveillance

- Positing femininity as undesirable while urging women to remain within beauty standards may make the work of moderating femininity more difficult by narrowing the expressions of femininity that are considered acceptable.

Surveillance and Precarity in the Performance of Masculinity

- By framing femininity as a threat to success, these gyms may foster a fear of emasculation and implicitly encourage men to engage in self-surveillance.

Protestant Standards and Valorized Masculinity

- Because rigorous physical labor implies deviance from traditional feminine beauty standards, women's claim to strength-oriented spaces may be undermined by the failure to meet at least one standard.

Table 2. Frequency of themes in posts sampled.

Theme	Hard work & value	Physical dominance	Beauty standards	Resistance to "soft"	Ad only	Redoing fitness
All posts (n=120)	58.3%	19%	62%	40%	12%	5%
Gym 1 (n=40)	55%	18%	60%	38%	13%	8%
Gym 2 (n=40)	55%	30%	53%	50%	18%	5%
Gym 3 (n=40)	65%	10%	73%	33%	8%	3%

LIMITATIONS

- Only Instagram posts from commercial gyms were included in the sample, so this study cannot evaluate the messages gyms convey via social media in general.
- This study does not ascertain how Instagram users interpret posts. Instead, this study is concerned with the dominant readings of posts (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- How are youth and aging discussed by gyms?
- How do fitness spaces that advertise primarily to non-white gymgoers use (or subvert) controlling images in their social media messaging?
- How is femininity expressed and moderated in fitness spaces that are marketed toward women (i.e., Pilates, Barre)?

FURTHER INFORMATION



References



Full thesis



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