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Self-presentation and Social Media: A Qualitative Examination of the Use of Instagram by Amateur NPC Female Figure Competitors

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SELF-PRESENTATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION
OF THE USE OF INSTAGRAM BY AMATEUR NPC FEMALE FIGURE
COMPETITORS

A Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of Kinesiology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Victoria M. Lupinetti

May 2015

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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by

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ABSTRACT

SELF-PRESENTATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF INSTAGRAM BY AMATEUR NPC FEMALE FIGURE COMPETITORS

by Victoria M. Lupinetti

Mainstream media representations of women have shaped the concepts of femininity and have influenced the way women view and present themselves in various contexts. Erving Goffman's (1959) Theory on Self-Presentation described how individuals perform roles to project a desired impression to others. Currently, social media platforms allow women to share their lives and interests with a wide-reaching audience. Within this historic context, the purpose of this study was to examine the lives and experiences of amateur female figure competitors who represented themselves and their interests in fitness via photographs on Instagram.

Eight women who shared their fitness journeys on social media and who competed in National Physique Committee figure competitions participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of responses yielded 90 raw data themes and 16 higher-order themes, which were then categorized into four general dimensions. Analysis indicated that Instagram was used to provide motivation, knowledge, and feedback to women in relation to their fitness journeys. They were also gratified by being role models for other women who sought self-improvement. These findings add to the existing research on self-presentation and social media usage in a given sociocultural context and the contested terrain of sports.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of Purpose	11
Importance of Study	12
Delimitations	12
Definitions	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review	15
Gender and Femininity	15
Self-presentation	18
Embodying gender	19
Shifting ideals of femininity	23
Media Representation of Women	25
Mainstream media's influence on social media	26
Athletic Identities and Negotiating Femininity	28
The contested terrain of female figure competitions	34
National physique committee figure competitors	36
Social gatekeepers in female fitness competitions	37
Social Networking Sites as Platforms for Women to Express Themselves	38
Mobile Media and Smartphones	44
Narcissism in social media	45
Chapter 3: Methods	48
Participants	48
Research Design	49
Data Collection	49
Tools	50
Data Analysis	50
Academic Rigor	52
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion	53
Defining Femininity and Beauty	53
Physique qualities	54
Empowerment	58
Feminine characteristics	62
Beauty pageantry	63
Influences from media representations	65

Self-presentation on Instagram	67
Changes over time	67
Preparation	70
Types of posts	73
Editing	78
Deciding on captions	79
Judging Self and Others on Instagram	81
Reasons for usage	81
Negative aspects of social media	96
Relationship to followers	100
Perceptions of selfies	101
Following others	102
Investments and Outcomes of Training and Competing	103
Process and preparation	103
Limitations	108
Future Directions	109
Conclusion and Implications	111
References	114
Appendix A: Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board Approval	122
Appendix B: Informed Consent	123
Appendix C: Participant Profiles	125
Appendix D: Interview Guide	126
Appendix E: Content Analysis Results	127

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

One way individuals perceive society is through interactions with others. The recent technological advances have changed the way people communicate and interact. Social media have enabled families, friends, long-lost acquaintances, and even strangers to connect and share information instantaneously (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Consequently, people have the freedom to create and project an online identity that may or may not be a reflection of reality (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Mitra, 2010; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2010). Hjorth (2007) noted that people stay connected to one another virtually because the connections may appear to resemble real-life relationships. Similarly, Jenkins (2004) argued that people who once were solely media consumers are now both the media producers and meaning makers who redefine sociocultural contexts.

Social discourse has shifted because technology, online interaction, and communication have changed. As a result, significant value is placed on appearance and self-presentation, which leads people to change personal characteristics to comply with social rules (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Mercurio & Landry, 2008). Further, looking attractive and desirable in Western culture today is vital for social acceptance (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Holmgren, & White, 2004). Women are encouraged to scrutinize their appearance because of the pressure to look and act a certain way (Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012). Television, magazines, music videos, billboards, and other media often portray a hypersexualized version of how a woman should look, which

influences how individuals view and judge one another (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; de Vries & Peter, 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). This issue is compounded because women are reduced to commodities, and they often undertake unhealthy diets and exercise routines in order to attain what is perceived as the ideal body (Mills, Polivy, & Tiggemann, 2002; Owen & Spencer, 2013; Phillips, 2005; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Social media may reinforce those same feminine ideologies and portray types of women that attract men.

Newer online social networking allows people to create an identity and interact with others without any in-person contact (Hjorth, 2007; Hogan, 2010; Luders, 2008; Mitra, 2010; Pink & Hjorth, 2012; Schwarz, 2010; Skageby, 2007; van Dijck, 2013). Social networks enable like-minded individuals to interact at a global scale by being able to judge themselves against others. Social media re-contextualizes social constructions because people create new meaning out of the information they publish and receive in virtual social spaces (Pink & Hjorth, 2012). Little information on how new media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are utilized for self-presentation. There is an opportunity to examine how women use newer social media to present themselves via self-portraits and other self-promoting images. More research is needed to explore the implications of this type of self-presentation and how women construct online identities that may coincide with the representations of women in mainstream media.

With the exponential advancement and accessibility of technology, many people are influenced by the power and social benefits that accompany having virtual access to almost everything in the palm of one's hand (Beer, 2012; Hjorth, 2007). Oeldorf-Hirsch

and Sundar (2010) posited that people are seduced by the expectation of instant gratification that mobile technology offers. They stated that sharing one's mundane experiences with others holds different personal meaning than sharing with family and friends; sharing may invoke a sense of belonging and connectedness to a wider community. Since smartphones are capable of producing high quality images that can be shared instantly or edited, people are enticed to share trivial, as well as important life events. This allows the image owner the freedom to share different aspects of their lives (Hjorth, 2007). Pink and Hjorth (2012) explained that people carry with them thousands of personal images stored on their phones, which creates a new compilation of life events that people construct in different ways. Smartphones are also capable of managing contacts, emails, photo albums, music, financial affairs, and calendars. They can be used to access current events, maps, directions, consumer goods, or to make face-to-face phone calls. More recently, smartphones are used for social media.

Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Instagram have become popular in the last two decades (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012) and have major implications for the way people interact with others. These sites keep people connected to family and friends, and they are even used to share information with strangers from different countries (Bolsover, 2011; Gentile et al., 2012; Hogan, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). SNSs allow people to create an online entity where they can virtually interact and share their thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences with others in the same virtual space (Bailey et al., 2013; Bolsover, 2011; Hogan, 2010; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2010; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013; Schwarz, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). One

might decide to share and project only parts of his or her true self and refrain from including information that may damage his or her image. The result may be to gain acceptance from the people who hold social power in a community. Nevertheless, these designated spaces are where people tell stories, lift praises (i.e., “gifts”), and share ideas, but they may also receive negative feedback and backlash in these virtual sites (Schwarz, 2010; Skageby, 2008; Teodoro & Naaman, 2013).

Similarly, creating an online identity can hold significant meaning for an individual because it is a mode of self-expression, self-exploration, and self-presentation (Bailey et al., 2013; Schwarz, 2010). Bolsover (2011) mentioned that people feel less inhibited presenting themselves online versus in real life, and their online bodies may feel more tangible and in their control. However, this cyber identity and community may not be true and real (Bailey, 2013; Mitra, 2010). One may present an image and information one wants others to see and may exclude anything deemed damaging to their reputation (Bailey et al., 2013). Gentile et al. (2012) argued that constructed online identities are not completely fabricated, but manipulated with the intention of creating the best self-reflection. Previous research has focused on how social media is used and abused; however, not much has been published with regard to the Instagram application (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013).

Instagram enables individuals to express themselves and interact with others primarily via photograph sharing. This SNS is different from sites like Facebook because it easily allows people to access and leave comments on each other’s photos. By examining the experiences of women who use Instagram to illustrate their interests in

health and fitness, a better understanding of the concept of self-presentation in social media may be gained.

In 1959, Erving Goffman, a significant contributor to sociological research of the 20th century, proposed the social Theory of Self-Presentation. Goffman's theory focuses on the context of human behavior based on a viewer's impression of the action or behavior. He studied the roles individuals play, how those roles continually evolve, and the types of masks people wear. The definitions of the roles of the participants and audience are flexible because people have their own experiences that govern their perceptions of society (Manning, 1992). Goffman argued that as social beings, people consciously perform identities for self-seeking purposes. Furthermore, Goffman (1959) suggested that the behavior and actions of one person can influence the trajectory of a situation that involves others. For example, an individual may be manipulative in the hopes of presenting himself or herself in a better light than what is authentic. A person can also unintentionally direct a given situation in a desired direction. For example, a fitness enthusiast may post self-portraits (or "selfies") of their flexed bodies and other fitness-like poses to direct the viewer's attention to the individual's aesthetics. The viewer may judge this posting as egotism, a desire for social approval, or perhaps they appreciate those who are muscular and fit. However, cultural protocol influences these actions, and the desired impression is the byproduct (Goffman, 1959).

The six main components of the Theory of Self-Presentation are: performances, teams, regions, discrepant roles, out of character communication, and impression management (Manning, 1992). Performances are controlled actions that an individual

does to persuade others' perceptions of him or herself (Goffman, 1959). An individual plays out an actual experience via performed body language, facial expressions, and supporting props within a particular social space. Goffman refers to the definition of the word "person," which means "mask" (p. 19). The theatrical display that is created by the mask allows the performer to express what they want their audience to see, whether real or not. Self-Presentation Theory can be applied to the present through the examination of online social interactions. An example of this is the latest in camera phone technology and social media applications that allow users to take, retake, and edit photos to create a desired visual effect for a given community (e.g., Instagram and Facebook). Additionally, people have social roles that allow them to understand one's self and each other (Goffman, 1959). However, people innately want to conform to norms, so performances often become idealized in the hopes of social acceptance (Goffman, 1959). One space this conformity is displayed in is the fitness community on Instagram, where millions of similar fitness-like photos are shared.

The next category in self-presentation theory involves teams. Individuals normally work in groups or teams where each participant accepts responsibility for successful and flawed performances. Goffman (1959) asserted that audience members are to assume that the stage performance is real. Simultaneously, the participants collectively understand that masks are donned, or a "front" is performed for the viewers, so cooperation among the members is imperative (Goffman, 1959). Moreover, the actors know they are being watched, so they actively adhere to creating contextual value for the

audience. The backstage behavior may be more authentic, but the audience might be misled and deceived by the two different performances.

The next four categories: region, discrepant roles, out of character communication, and impression management coincide and will be discussed together. Goffman defined a region in this context to be any space where accessibility by non-performers is limited. For instance, audience members may seek access to backstage information, but barriers are in place to keep them from seeing what typically happens behind the scenes (Goffman, 1959). Instagram is such a space where a wide-reaching audience may be given access to an individual's online profile yet may not know the person outside of that context. Furthermore, non-performers have "discrepant roles" where they intentionally pursue secret knowledge that is kept from them. Goffman posited that one way a performer unintentionally reveals secret information is through "out-of-character outbursts." A viewer may then see fallacy in the "real" performance, which leads them to question the motives of the performers (Manning, 1992). Because it is possible for audience members to gain access to secret information, the actors must keep up their in-character appearances by conscious or subconscious self-regulation. It is prudent for team members to withhold information that is shared backstage with teammates, so as to adhere to the conformist performances and maintain their masked character. Finally, if the secrets of performances are revealed, it destroys the definition of the situation the performers are attempting to convey (Goffman, 1959). One could infer that viewing an individual's carefully constructed photograph selection on

Instagram reflects what the performer wants projected from their personal lives, yet withholds unnecessary information that is not synchronous with their desired reputation.

Manning (1992) described a second important concept to Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory is rooted in the term "frame". He noted that a frame is an abstract idea that is tied to a specific context where individuals create meaning and interpret social behavior. Without contextualizing social information and feedback, disorder occurs with regard to the interpretation of behavior and situations (Manning, 1992). Gender is one such frame that is given meaning in sociocultural contexts. The analysis of gender construction lies in the interactions between men and women and how they bring meaning to their lived-experiences (Goffman, 1959). An interaction that an individual has with others defines the known world. As a result, one's identity is created through performed routines that coincide with social rules. Also, individuals express gender by participating in cultural norms and regulations in the pursuit of gaining acceptance in a given community. Gender prescriptions are rules that enable people to move through society. However, gender is a social construction that women have been transgressing in the last few decades. This is will be discussed further in the literature review section on femininity.

Goffman (1959) asserted that society is governed by rules to which members conform. One becomes a social deviant when they stray from social norms. For this context, a female bodybuilder is considered deviant from the appropriate behavior for women because she does not conform to the dictated definition of hegemonic femininity. Hegemonic femininity means that women are typically defined by the values and

opinions of men who hold social power (Krane et al., 2004). Female bodybuilders are often stigmatized and labeled as rule-breakers, and their identities are therefore compromised (Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004). To resolve this nonconformity, female bodybuilders tend to conceal their muscularity and identities by wearing a mask that enables conformity (Grogan et al., 2004). The term “identity” can be categorized into three meanings. A “social identity” refers to the way one interacts in his or her social spaces. A “personal identity” is related to one’s private self, and an “ego identity” is an individual’s self-perception (Manning, 1992). In brief, women who adhere to gender non-conformity risk being perceived as socially deviant and unacceptable in terms of their femininity.

Critical Feminist Theory is another theoretical framework that will be utilized in the present study. According to Olesen (2005), feminist theory is not a dormant or ineffectual perspective of cultural praxis; rather, it enables a critical awareness that warrants reformations of qualitative research in order to transform unjust societal issues. As Stanley and Wise (1990) and Harding (1993) mentioned, women of many sociocultural backgrounds have one main shared experience: being oppressed by men who judge women as “the other”. Harding (1993) argued that the standpoint of feminist literature does not inflate the beliefs, experiences, and ideals of women to be absolute truth. Rather, feminist theory opens the dialogue to be inclusive of all knowledge pertaining to gender construction.

To understand and conceptualize how women are subordinates to men in many facets of life, one must look at gender relations as a contested and uneven terrain (Krane,

Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Olesen, 2005, p. 236). Sports, for instance, are social and political sites of gender construction and representations of masculinity. Female athletes run the risk of being perceived as too masculine (Krane et al., 2004). Furthermore, their aggressiveness and competitiveness cause their sexuality to be questioned (Krane et al., 2004), and they may no longer display feminine qualities (Forbes et al., 2004) that grant individuals access to social capital (Schwarz, 2010).

Amateur female figure competitors' opinions and experiences may offer insight into a subculture of women that has not been previously examined. These individuals belong to the bodybuilding community, which has its own set of values and norms that contradicts mainstream social norms (Ploderer, Howard, & Thomas, 2008). Female figure competitors are fitness enthusiasts who are dedicated to transforming their bodies into perfected representations of what they perceive as beautiful.

Training for competitions transgresses sociocultural definitions of femininity because the gym space and bodybuilding culture is deemed masculine in nature. However, the competitions themselves have strict regulations that are imposed upon the participants in order to celebrate the female body as a feminine masterpiece. Critical Feminist Theory illuminates the lived-experiences of these women and brings meaning to the ways they present themselves on social media.

Feminist theorists present the salient power relations between men and women (Krane et al., 2004), but theorists must hold sensitivity towards issues related to social justice with equal rights for women in mind. A researcher must also acknowledge his or her role and influence in the research process (Olesen, 2005). Everyone has their own

experiences, biases, and previous knowledge that dictate thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. Therefore, a researcher's own self-awareness is reflected in their perceptions and analysis of others (Markham, 2005). An individual is incapable of being an impartial or objective researcher (Olesen, 2005). Instead, a person contributes to the meaning-making experience. For ideologies in feminist research, however, it is important that researchers accept and evaluate their involvement, yet maintain sensitivity and openness to the participants and processes that lead to the interpretations (Olesen, 2005; Sarantakos, 2005; Stanley & Wise, 1990).

Feminist theorists also study how women negotiate their identities, represent themselves, resist subjugation, or reinforce power dynamics between men and women (Forbes et al., 2004; Sarantakos, 2005). A major goal of feminist theory is to shift the power and political dynamics toward inclusion, equality, and recognition of women in a patriarchal society (Krane et al., 2004; Sarantakos, 2005). Finally, the work that embodies feminist theories promotes the idea that women are not just gendered things, but are talented, capable, intelligent, and empowered human beings that can accomplish as much as men (Forbes et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2004; Sarantakos, 2005).

Statement of Purpose

This paper will specifically examine the experiences of amateur female figure competitors and their use of Instagram to post photographs in an online health and fitness community. Also, a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gain insight into this topic. The approach of this study is based on successful research from Grogan et al. (2004), Krane et al. (2004), and Oeldorf-Hirsch

and Sundar (2010). An examination of the health and fitness images on Instagram is warranted to study how a select group of women post and share these images with others on social media. The researcher posed this question: what are the experiences of amateur National Physique Committee (NPC) female figure competitors who use the social networking space of Instagram to represent themselves and their interests in health and fitness?

Importance of the Study

This study was proposed because much of the previous research has focused on the negative psychological effects of mainstream media representations of the thin ideal female body (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). However, there has been a slight shift in social acceptance of what is deemed attractive in the female body. Lately, many Western societies have started to embrace the healthier, fit, and muscular body ideal as opposed to the thin supermodel ideal. Homan et al. (2012) stated that there is inadequate research that examines how women internalize athletic body image ideals. Their study examined the nature of viewing images of incredibly fit women as opposed to extremely thin ones and how that impacts one's self-esteem. Understanding how ultra-fit women negotiate and adopt the cultural ideals to be fit and muscular may allow insight into a population of amateur female figure athletes.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to amateur NPC female figure competitors. This category of amateur athletes was a sought after division for women who want to achieve the ideal feminine physique, yet they also show off their muscularity (Lowe, 1998).

Bolin (2012) noted that in 2009 participants at the amateur figure level were given the opportunity to transition into other competitions such as the physique and bikini categories. This was important to the study because the NPC is tied to the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) where athletes obtain their professional status. Other categories do not allow for this cross over (Bolin, 2012). Because this category falls between the extremes of thinness and overt muscularity, figure competitors were appropriate to gain insight into the negotiation of their athletic identity and ideals of femininity. Accordingly, the critical feminist approach of this study provided evidence to support work regarding feminist theory where women have been viewed and treated in a manner subjected to patriarchal ideals (Krane et al., 2004).

Definitions

Fitfam: A group of fitness enthusiasts that supports each other to reach their fitness goals. Many use pictures to inspire and motivate others in this passion-centric community, which is also called “fitspo” for “fitness inspiration” (hashtag.org, 2012).

Hashtag: A number sign (#) denoting a specific category that the bit of information or photo is assigned, which is specifically used on SNSs. It can also be considered a “searchable signature” (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013).

Hegemonic femininity: A gender hierarchy governed by men where women are subjugated and marginalized (Krane et al., 2004).

Selfie: A photograph that individual has taken of oneself, typically taken with a smartphone and uploaded to a SNS (Van Dijck, 2013).

Self-objectification: Where a female internalizes the social narrative of femininity and represents herself under those same prescriptions (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will a) discuss gender and femininity; b) discuss mainstream media representations of women; c) examine the negotiation of athletic identities and femininity; d) briefly introduce readers to the paradox of femininity and the social space of amateur figure competitions; e) then shift to the concept of self-presentation via social media; and f) will show how women express themselves in their own personal spaces.

Gender and Femininity

As Goffman (1959) asserted in his Self-Presentation Theory, societies are made up of frames that give meaning to actions and behaviors in specific contexts. Gender is one frame that influences how people interact within a society. Gender is constructed by people in power and is sanctioned for the purposes of implementing sociocultural rules for conformity. Consequently, women are held to the standards of femininity, just as men are held to standards of masculinity.

The set of beliefs regarding femininity is constructed and reconstructed, which categorizes women based on physical, emotional, and psychological qualities (Bessenoff, 2006; Fitzsimmons-Craft, Harney, Koehler, Danzi, Riddell, & Bardone-Cone, 2012; Stevens-Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, & Smith, 2009). In Western cultures, men typically find physical characteristics such as thinness and softness attractive in women (Forbes et al., 2004; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006; Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). If a woman does not conform to these qualities, she may be perceived as unattractive, masculine, and even homosexual based on this patriarchal

ideology (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Shields & Dickey, 2011). Laura Mulvey (1975), a film and feminist theorist, explained that the “male gaze” holds great influence over what feminine characteristics are appreciated, dismissed, or frowned upon. She argued that the male gaze reinforces the idea that women are less than human beings and mere objects to be gazed at by heterosexual men. Furthermore, her theory suggests that men create and maintain the status quo on gender values, and they hold the dominant opinion in society. Therefore, patriarchal perspectives tend to dictate how women should behave, think, feel, and look, which is often detrimental to the way women view and present themselves (de Vries & Peter, 2013; Mercurio & Landry, 2008; Stevens-Aubrey et al., 2009).

Sociocultural power is at the forefront of gender construction, which is based on dominant or hegemonic ideologies. Power, in this context, refers to the influence on religion, politics, socioeconomic status, and access to education, jobs, and social approval. In addition, this group regulates which individuals and actions are admonished, degraded, and frowned upon (Coleman, 2008; Krane et al., 2004). Sarantakos (2005) noted that men have consistently been in positions of authority and therefore have the freedom and authority to dictate ideals and values in society. As a result, mainstream society typically views gender through a conservative and predominantly male perspective (Owen & Spencer, 2013; Sarantakos, 2005; Schwarz, 2010; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). However, women have made positive strides towards changes in social discourse, yet they still fall short of being equals with men in many facets of life.

Women are often recognized and judged by their appearance and physique instead of their character, abilities, and intellect. Mainstream media contain countless sexualized images of women that portray them as weak, submissive, unintelligent, and unimportant objects that only exist for the entertainment and desires of male viewers (Bessesnoff, 2006; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). For example, women are portrayed as submissive, nurturing, sensitive, sacrificial, and loyal to their male spouses or partners (Mulvey, 1975). Also, women should not be too educated, successful, opinionated, aggressive, or independent. More importantly, a woman's appearance should be thin, clean, and orderly, but not too muscular, bulky, or overweight (Forbes et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2004).

This dominant representation of women in the media has been linked to a number of negative consequences. Women often become depressed, acquire eating disorders, have low self-confidence, and are devoid of sociocultural influence (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Mercurio & Landry, 2008; Mills et al., 2002; Owen & Spencer, 2013). Furthermore, they tend to self-objectify and present themselves in a marginalized manner that inculcates the hegemonic ideal of femininity (Thogersen-Ntoumani, Ntoumanis, Cumming, Bartholomew, & Pearce, 2011; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Over time, being reduced to a body in a glass box that is constantly on display reinforces the inequality between men and women (Antunovic and Hardin, 2013; Forbes et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2004). Although social media spaces enable women to take control of the meaning-making process and their own representations, they are not free from societal influences brought forth by mainstream media and dominant ideologies.

Self-presentation

The term “objectification” was proposed by Frederickson and Roberts in 1997, and in a sociocultural context it means that women are thought of and treated as sexual objects, which leads them to view and present themselves as such (Stevens-Aubrey et al., 2009; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012). Hawkins, Richards, Granley, and Stein (2004), Hesse-Biber et al. (2006), Mills et al. (2002), and Owen and Spencer (2013) all confirmed the belief that women further present themselves the way the media represent the ideal body image. This action is somewhat pervasive, however, because people tend to seek affirmation by presenting themselves in a manner that is socially acceptable (Bessenoff, 2006; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012). High self-objectifiers are less likely to take themselves seriously because they are given messages that they are inherently inadequate (Hawkins et al., 2004; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012). Self-objectification tends to have destructive effects, yet recently many women consciously post sexualized and objectified images of themselves.

Society is accustomed to seeing women in subjugated roles in magazine advertisements and other media, and these representations have affected the way women are treated. Across many social and political arenas, they are not taken seriously, are paid less, have fewer responsibilities, and are perceived as incompetent compared to men (Forbes et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2004). According to Mercurio and Landry (2008), women who self-objectify tend to feel more anxious about their bodies and have diminished motivational states. Bessenoff (2006) also found that women upwardly compare themselves to the standard of ideal beauty, which tends to cause decreases in

body satisfaction and self-esteem. Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012), surveyed adolescent female participants to examine self-objectification and body surveillance after watching television shows and using social media. They found that based on the duration of exposure to these moderating factors every week, the girls valued objectifying entertainment more than “competence-based” entertainment. Furthermore, Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012) found a positive correlation between high exposure to sexually objectifying media and the value placed on the ideal body qualities. Vandenbosch and Eggermont’s (2012) results implied that the participants internalize these portrayals and self-objectify in order to fit the hegemonic ideals of femininity. Not only do women receive messages about the importance of beauty and perfection from mass media, but social media enable individuals to perpetuate these qualities and ideologies (Gentile et al., 2012; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011; Steinfield et al., 2008).

Embodying gender

Bolsover (2011) stated that the body can be thought of as a site for control and power in one’s sociocultural world, and individuals make sense of it through social ideologies, influences, and examples. Moreover, the corporeal body is self-regulated to exemplify body image ideals set by mainstream society (Bolsover, 2011; Boyce, Kuijer, & Gleaves, 2013). Arthur Frank’s “typology of body use in action,” as described in Phillips (2005), was used in support of the current study. Frank classified four main methods an individual uses his or her body with regard to sociocultural feedback. As Phillips (2005) suggested, Frank’s categories were developed to describe individuals in

the military, dancers, and women of the medieval period. However, the first three categories will be used as a partial theoretical framework for the current study.

Frank's first classification of the use of the body is the "disciplined body," which is described as one that is lacking or inadequate (Phillips, 2005). Thus, individuals naturally tend to focus on controllable and self-promoting actions that combat the external societal influences. It is understood that exercise positively contributes to overall physical, cognitive, affective, and psychological health and well-being (Wilson & Rodgers, 2002). But, researchers have also found that women may diet and over-exercise because of the social pressures to be thin and beautiful (Owen & Spencer, 2013; Phillips, 2005; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Thogersen-Ntoumani et al., 2011; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Wilson & Rodgers, 2002). Likewise, Phillips (2005) argued that women have moral dilemmas that seem to be affected by their appearance and how they maintain their bodies. So this notion becomes problematic when individuals feel that they have failed themselves when they do not meet the social requirements of the ideal body (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

Frank's explanation of the "mirroring body" suggested that individuals tend to internalize their outward appearance (Phillips, 2005). In terms of fitness and exercise, individuals who devote themselves to attaining the perfect body and feeling healthy judge their whole identity based on their exercise regimen (Phillips, 2005). Participants in Phillips's study stated that they have negative self-perceptions and they let their bodies "get out of hand" if they do not exercise. These avid exercisers were perceived to be worried about gaining weight and feeling "fat." A female participant said in her

interview that she felt as though she needed to exercise in order to eat an extra serving or consume unhealthy foods outside her normal diet. She further mentioned the importance of doing extra exercise to counter her food cravings, thus, enabling herself to have a candy bar or additional slice of pizza guilt-free. This mentality of rewarding or restricting oneself with food may be another form of self-regulation and policing one's body, which may indicate an eating disorder (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006).

Still another aspect of mirroring one's body is the concept of consumption in terms of the influences of advertisements of goods and products (Schwarz, 2010; Skageby, 2008). A participant in Phillips's (2005) study felt that in order to perform well, they needed to look good in a specific article of clothing. One limitation in this study is that individuals may not state that they like to buy clothing and products to promote themselves in order to look good while exercising. Nevertheless, the influential effects of marketing and advertising were acknowledged in the results and discussion portion in the current study.

An embodiment theory from Frank, as described in Phillips (2005), is called the "dominant body," where one feels external power and control relative to the rest of society. Frank continued to explain that when an individual feels deficiency, exercise is used to resist and present oneself as a powerful physical force. Antunovic and Hardin (2013) contended that women who keep online sports blogs negotiate and challenge female stereotypes by reinventing female identities by their individuality, respect, and

value. In other words, women are able to resist patriarchal gender stereotypes with blogs because they are given opportunities to voice their opinion in a public space.

The conceptualization of the embodiment theory may be utilized to assess why hypermuscular men attain praise for their appearance, yet women are criticized for being too muscular and, therefore, unfeminine (Forbes et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2004; Phillips, 2005). To investigate the social hierarchy between men and women, Forbes et al. (2004) asked participants to judge a series of images of hypermuscular women based on four criteria. They found that individuals who already have a biased opinion of gender norms might have more negative perceptions towards women who are deemed hypermuscular. In their 2004 investigation, about 300 college students critiqued images of hypermuscular women to see how they felt about that body type. Prior to the study, they completed the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ), which revealed masculine and feminine personality traits. Results indicated that the participants perceived the women to have more masculine than feminine traits and were less likely to hold traditional jobs. While the majority of men in the study perceived the women to have more homosexual qualities, notably fewer female participants made this assumption. Under gender-biased lenses, a woman with hypermuscularity tends to be seen as homosexual, less of a mother or wife figure, and less successful in the business world (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Bessenoff, 2006; Forbes et al., 2004). In their study, male participants also clearly perceived hypermuscular women to be of lower intelligence or to be less educated (Forbes et al., 2004). Similarly, both men and women judged hypermuscular women to be less physically appealing to men. Thus, women with more masculine than feminine

traits are perceived as being outside heteronormative values. Finally, it was apparent from this study that men are more influential in the perceptions of gender norms than women.

Shifting ideals of femininity

Perceptions of femininity have shifted slightly from the ideals of thinness and skinniness to a more fit, toned, and muscular physique. Not only is the ideal woman supposed to be thin, she must also be fit and muscular (Forbes et al., 2004; Homan et al., 2012). In Homan et al.'s (2012) study, female participants were asked to look at pictures of ultra-fit women to see if that body type had negative effects on their self-perception like images of ultra-thin women do. Their study confirmed this concept when they found that the college-age female participants had more body dissatisfaction when they viewed images of ultra-fit and thin models as opposed to ultra-fit but normal-weighted models (Homan et al., 2012).

Similarly, Stevens-Aubrey et al.'s (2009) study included females who viewed magazine images of other women who were posed in varying levels of sexual objectification. The images were further categorized by how much of their bodies were displayed. They were categorized as full-body shots or segmented parts such as the chest, legs, head, or torso without the head. However, the researchers were careful not to choose images of women with differing degrees of perceived attractiveness. Doing so would have led the participants to judge not only objectification, but on attractiveness, as well. They were asked to write a brief statement summarizing which article they thought correlated to the picture. Results indicated that of the 150 young-adult participants, the

majority of the women who viewed the heavily objectified images were overtly dissatisfied with their own bodies. This study was significant because it demonstrated the influence that any of the images, whether the females were on full display or were segmented into parts, were powerful indicators that the participants felt body shame and dissatisfaction (Mills et al., 2002; Owen & Spencer, 2013; Stevens-Aubrey et al., 2009; Vandembosch & Eggermont, 2012). The current study will also examine the concept of segmenting body parts or posing in full body shots in pictures on Instagram.

Women with muscles are now more widely accepted in mainstream society, yet there are still defined boundaries (Forbes et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2004). Krane et al. (2004) also mentioned that college female athletes must negotiate the boundaries between their sport, muscular build, and the qualifications of femininity. Negotiating the athlete identity and still maintaining the female identity can be nuanced and problematic, however. Athletic traits include strength, aggressiveness, violence, and competitiveness. These traits contradict feminine ideals, so female athletes are somewhat urged to rectify the paradox for fear of being socially ostracized (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Krane et al., 2004).

In Western cultures, when White heterosexual men determine which feminine features are beautiful and appealing, individuals are pressured into categorizing and judging others based on the values of a privileged class. Femininity, therefore, is a culturally learned perspective that is constructed and negotiated. Women are coerced into conforming to hegemonic femininity or they face social rejection (Sarantakos, 2005). Feminist theories aim to re-contextualize these ontological assumptions noted above, and,

consequently, enable women to give their viewpoints as the “knowers” in a given society (Sarantakos, 2005). The knower is defined in this context as the perspective of the individual who is being researched (Stanley & Wise, 1990). Similarly, the authors argued that female researchers have a better chance at locating the female perspective in feminist research because they are members of that group. One goal in feminist research is to eliminate the androcentric perspective that drives hegemonic ideologies, yet acknowledge that gender influences people’s actions and perceptions (Stanley & Wise, 1990). Also, Harding (1993) claimed that, through a feminist lens, it is understood that gender dictates the lives of women. However, their voices are distinct and significant in the absence of the male influence.

Media Representations of Women

One way femininity is portrayed is through mainstream media representations of the ideal female body. As previously discussed, women are not removed from the influences of the dominant ideologies set by men in many Western cultures, and this is most prevalent in mainstream media spaces. Upwards of 80% of the decision makers in American business, media, politics, education, sports, and religious institutions are men (Faludi, 2010). For instance, when women are presented in media, such as in television shows, advertisements, magazines, music videos, billboards, and movies, it is a reflection of what men desire and accept as beautiful and feminine (Bessenoff, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2006; Mills et al., 2002; Owen & Spencer, 2013). Consequently, women who do not comply with the models of beauty and sexual appeal in media are destined to be dismissed and may not be considered icons of femininity (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006;

Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). Aside from the male influence, media representations of women have extensive power and bias that influence how people think and feel about femininity (Hesse-Biber, 2006). The rise of social media and mobile technology enables more negative representations of women, which may cause further psychological and psychosocial issues pertaining to gender stereotypes. Insight into this problem is merited because objectification inhibits women from seeing and being their full potential in all facets of life and negotiating their true identity (Schwarz, 2010).

Mainstream media's influence on social media

Magazine advertisements, billboards, television, movies, reality shows, sport broadcasts, and radio broadcasts all make up the most popular and powerful types of mainstream media platforms. Women tend to be sexualized and degraded in media, which is produced by the very group that oppresses them (Bolsover, 2011; Krane et al., 2004). In a study by Clavio and Eagleman (2011), images of females were analyzed from 10 popular sports blogs. They found that the majority, or 70%, of the women were posed in a sexually suggestive manner (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011). Although quite useful for the present study, their research was limited in that they only examined blogs about sports. Researching these types of blogs only covers some of the ways women are objectified in media. A host of other health and fitness blogs and applications contain sexualized images of women that have yet to be studied. Social media like personal blogs, Flickr, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are rapidly becoming the main venues for these reproductions, which are composed of media-consuming members of society (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; de Vries & Peter, 2013; Schlesselman-Tarango,

2013). Research has fallen short in gaining insight into the effects and implications of how the general public replicates the very images and opinions mainstream media enforces (de Vries & Peter, 2013; Schwarz, 2010).

Related research shows that there is a tendency for models, celebrities, and athletes to be thin, which encourages ordinary women to model these representations via social media (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011). One study demonstrated that viewing a wide-range of online profiles and photographs gave the participants a baseline for which to judge themselves. Haferkamp and Kramer (2011) used interviews to see if there were any effects on self-esteem and body image when individuals looked at images of perfected and rewarded bodies versus less attractive ones. They found that the female participants were more negatively impacted when they viewed profile images of attractive women as opposed to the unattractive ones. Similarly, Haferkamp and Kramer (2011) discovered that the female participants placed more value on the photographs than the profile information, as opposed to the male participants. These findings add merit to the present study because it showed what appearance qualities women focus on.

Women who partake in online “pro-eating disorder” sites often have negative self-perceptions in real life (Bolsover, 2011). Most of the previous research clearly indicated that when individuals compare themselves to an ideal body image, it leads to negative consequences. Negative effects include decreases in self-esteem and a skewed perception of body image. The current study was intended to shed light on personal benefits from posting pictures of one’s body on Instagram for a wide-reaching audience. Female fitness enthusiasts’ experiences with posting and commenting on pictures of ideal

female bodies will bring new meaning to the existing body of research in feminist and sport sociology literature.

According to a recent demographic report, women comprise roughly 68% of Instagram's population over 18 years of age (Duggan, 2013). Instagram is also gaining popularity with women who are involved in the fitness culture. Further, female athletes perform gender differently in a contested terrain such as sports, where masculinity is dominant and celebrated.

Athletic Identities and Negotiating Femininity

Until the passage of Title IX in 1972, many women living in certain areas of the United States were not allowed to participate in sports or physical activities that were deemed masculine (Lopiano, 2000). This law was a major milestone for civil and women's rights, especially with the way they could use their bodies in a gendered space. However, throughout this time and currently, women have faced discrimination and sexism because they are not considered true athletes. Many years since Title IX was enacted, women have transgressed feminine norms, but this has been at the cost of social acceptance. Women who enter a male-dominated space face cultural backlash because they portray masculine qualities like muscularity, aggression, and force (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). Through self-presentations, women have created new female identities to include more masculine traits, yet social protocol still dominates these exhibitions.

Goffman's Theory of Self-Presentation looks at the ways individuals perform and put on facades for an audience. In the realm of fitness and bodybuilding competitions, female athletes must perform their gender and femininity on a stage. In this context, the

term “athlete” will be used to describe female figure competitors because they demonstrate proficiency in some form of physical activity in a competitive arena. Similarly, these individuals are using their bodies as tools like athletes use their bodies to perform in their given sport. Female figure athletes must be meticulous in their appearance, stance, and posing style because having a perfect physique is not enough to win competitions; they must also look like attractive women (Lowe, 1998). Consequently, this on-stage performance will confirm for the audience that they are presumably heterosexual and indeed feminine (Lowe, 1998).

With the pressure to conform to social ideals of femininity, women who play sports must negotiate their role as women, as well as their identity as athletes. Sports have traditionally been sites for men to present force, strength, aggression, and power, so women must achieve these qualities while maintaining their femininity. Krane (2001) argued that while playing sports is empowering, the act of complying with feminine ideals in order to play sports is disempowering. In 2011 Steinfeldt, Carter, Benton, and Steinfeldt examined the perceptions and beliefs of college-age student-athletes on the notion of muscularity. The authors argued that female athletes have a different perception of their muscularity as opposed to female non-athletes. Steinfeldt et al.’s (2011) objectives were to examine the reasons why women wanted a muscular physique and to see the extent of how much muscularity they wanted. They examined 221 students from a university in the Midwest, and most participants were white, female student-athletes. The way female athletes negotiate their feminine identities and bodies was worthy of examination because they use their bodies as instruments for physical

purposes. There is a distinction between female athletes and non-athletes in terms of how they use and view their gendered bodies.

Steinfeldt et al. (2011) were largely interested in female athletes' "drive for muscularity," which in this context means that they examined their experiences in the male-centered space of sports. The "Drive for Muscularity Scale" (DMS) was used to evaluate whether being an athlete or not had any impact on wanting to be muscular (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). This instrument included 15 questions with answers based on a Likert scale. The second component was a qualitative approach that explored perceptions and beliefs about gender prescriptions and muscularity. Interviews were conducted where the participants were asked three open-ended questions. Adding a qualitative method to this study allows for meaningful subjective experiences to emerge, which was important for the goals of the current study.

The results for the quantitative study indicated that there was a significant difference between the degree of contact (e.g., type of sport) and group membership (e.g., female non-athletes, female athletes, or male athletes). Also, male participants had higher DMS scores than females. Similarly, female athletes had higher scores compared to non-athletes. Finally, members in high-contact sports had higher DMS scores.

In the qualitative portion of Steinfeldt et al.'s (2011) study, higher order themes emerged, which involved reasons for wanting to be muscular. These included: "external gratification, health, and I don't want to be muscular" (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). Among female athletes, usefulness of muscles was reported the most. Health reasons closely followed, while external and internal rewards only comprised about 40% of the

participants. However, there was no disparity between the groups, which implied that “functionality” is preferable, whether one is an athlete or not (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). One response regarding the functionality of being muscular indicated that the female athlete liked performing to the best of her ability, but she tended to downplay her muscularity when outside the context of sport. Another noteworthy result in this article was that all participants confirmed that men generally wanted to be muscular (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). This finding was relevant to the current study because it confirmed the concept that muscularity is predominantly a masculine trait that is considered appropriate for men. Also, the results implicated that women tend to view their muscularity as a hindrance to their femininity.

In contrast, explicit detail of the open-ended responses was lacking in this study. Another limitation was that the population was from one university. As with many other studies, generalizability was not appropriate here because the population was specific to a region and socioeconomic status. Therefore, the current study was intended to take an alternative approach that resulted in a clearer understanding of the lived-experiences of female fitness competitors without regard to social standing, location, or education level.

In Steinfeldt et al.’s (2011) study the female participants acknowledged that there are cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity that influence reasons for desiring muscles. Krane et al.’s (2004) article is similar with respect to female athletes negotiating and performing gender in order to meet the social expectations of true femininity. The authors conducted interviews with 21 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) varsity female athletes. All participants were around 20 years of

age and had about 10 years of experience in their sport. They played sports like volleyball, ice hockey, rugby, softball, basketball, and tennis. From thematic analysis, three general dimensions emerged: “the influence of hegemonic femininity, athlete as other, and physicality” (Krane et al., 2004, p. 319). Within each category, the higher order themes that developed were: defining the term femininity, being muscular, but not too much so, and how they defined the ideal body.

The participants’ responses were essentially from a “white, heterosexual perspective” (Krane et al., 2004, p. 319). As a whole, the consensus was that the ideal female body is based on what is presented in magazines. Other comments acknowledged that the ideal body is impractical, yet some claimed thinness and having a model-like physique would always be desirable in mainstream society. Moreover, muscularity was desirable while most participants frowned upon bulkiness. Femininity was generally defined as being gentle, not taking up a lot of space, passive, not sweating profusely, and not making bodily noises (Krane et al., 2004). One hockey player stated that on the ice she intentionally went against everything that is deemed feminine, and she chose to project aggressiveness, strength, and power in order to dominate. Furthermore, the participants all agreed that masculinity directly relates to being athletic, and feminine characteristics do not help them on the playing field. Being in the gym and lifting weights was akin to doing things that men do, which was a source of anxiety for the participants. Also, building muscle was a sign of becoming more masculine, and the participants stated that they feared social repercussions because of it. For the current

study, a look at how athletes define muscularity with respect to their femininity was important because they are members of the masculine terrain of bodybuilding.

The next theme that emerged was “athlete as other”. Categorizing someone as an athlete denotes a distinction between being normal or not because “female athlete” is different than saying just “female” (Krane et al., 2004). Some participants felt that their identity while playing or performing their sport was different than when they were not playing. They also stated that they did not think about their identity as a woman when playing their sport. They were more concerned with being competitive and aggressive enough to win. As we will see in the present study, female figure athletes must still utilize their feminine mystique because it is a determining factor of winning or losing in an aesthetic-based competition.

The theme of Krane et al.’s (2004) study was how female athletes negotiated their identities where gender construction played a significant role. Throughout the focus group interviews, the participants acknowledged that in order to be socially acceptable, they must perform and act differently on and off the field. Further, their feminine identity was important in social settings, but their athletic identity was acceptable in the realm of sports. The current study elaborated on this concept of how female athletes and competitors negotiated differing social spaces such as the gym compared to regular social settings. Female figure competitors, therefore, are defined by their existence in a male-dominated space, which then must be reconciled for social approval. This reconciliation occurs when femininity is performed via high heels, manicured nails, makeup, and

revealing bikinis. Again, this is in line with Goffman's theory where people play various parts and performances so as to conform to social norms.

Krane et al.'s (2004) article was also helpful to the current study because the participants revealed their lived-experiences with regards to being a female athlete in a male-centered space. "Functionality, pride, and empowerment" topics emerged from the data analysis, which focused on how they personally felt as athletes (Krane et al., 2004, p. 325). It was important to the current study to find supporting research on how women feel about their bodies and gaining muscle. For example, the participants stated that they liked seeing improved results in their performance and feeling stronger. Also, they agreed with the belief that being model-thin is more socially rewarding than having athletic abilities. However, these women felt proud of their accomplishments in their sport careers and agreed that recognition of their talent and skills was more desirable than praise for how good they looked (Krane et al., 2004). They also asserted that being an athlete improved their self-esteem and empowered them as strong-independent women. These last themes were salient to the current study because research is lacking that pertains to how female athletes make sense of their feminine identities relative to the rest of society.

The contested terrain of female figure competitions

Women who gravitate toward the gym lifestyle of bodybuilding challenge the power relations between men and women and their subsequent gender constructions (Lowe, 1998). Muscularity has conventionally been associated with traits of masculinity, power, dominance, and advantage, which is in stark contrast to the definitions of

femininity (Bolin, 2012; Krane, 2001). Additionally, female bodybuilders embody strength and power, so those in this category reframe the cultural definition of femininity to embrace a more masculine aesthetic and physique (Bolin, 2012). From its inception, women's bodybuilding has contested gender norms. For instance, Gloria Miller Fudge, a reputable bodybuilder, caused a commotion when she removed her high heels during a performance, which was considered deviant from a characteristic of femininity (Bolin, 2012). Similarly, Bolin (2012) added that Cammie Lusko challenged the gender prescriptions by adding an intense fitness routine during her Ms. Olympia competition. Female competitors are said to be "apologetics" because they often reconcile their masculine qualities by adding back attributes, such as make-up, breast augmentation, graceful poses, and attire that accentuates their feminine qualities (Lowe, 1998). Consequently, these actions allow women to be recognized as authentic athletes in a male-dominated terrain (Krane, 2001). Also, money and fame are coercive factors that entice female competitors to look as feminine as possible. For instance, these athletes are granted access to sponsors and product endorsements if they promote the feminine qualities that the male audience desires (Krane, 2001; Lowe, 1998). Because gender identity is vital for one's social acceptance in a given group, female bodybuilders are persuaded to perform the feminine ideal while simultaneously looking muscular. Further, too many masculine qualities reduce one's chances for social approval, prize money, and career opportunities in the fitness industry (Lowe, 1998). Finally, these gender negotiations are critical for female figure athletes, as well, and the current study explored this more.

National physique committee figure competitors

Women's bodybuilding and fitness competitions emerged in 1977 when the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) allowed a female competition component to the already established Mr. Olympia contest (Lowe, 1998). The competition was little more than a beauty pageant, where women were judged on beauty, aesthetic, and overall fitness (Lowe, 1998). Although this study was not about the bodybuilding level, per se, it is important to mention where physique competitions originated and how women have negotiated femininity in a masculine space over time. According to Bolin (2012), the NPC created the figure category in 2001 and is one of the most popular of all the categories. The bikini division is more popular because feminine ideals still center around thinness. Similar to the early beauty pageants of the 1970s, women in present figure shows have to conform to the competition's rules by wearing bikinis, high heels, and makeup (Lowe, 1998). It is a fitness competition without the exercise performance, and participants have the opportunity to advance to the "Figure Olympia" level (Bolin, 2012). Figure competitors must conform to a series of regulations, such as a specific bikini size and shape, heel height, and their overall age and height (NPC Figure Division Rules, 2014). Also, the competitors are judged on their physique's symmetry that includes "muscularity with separation," but "no visible striations" (NPC Figure Division Rules, 2014). Similarly, they are judged on overall muscle tone and firmness, but they should not be overly lean (NPC Figure Division Rules, 2014). Skin tone, overall "healthy" appearance, and quality of makeup are also criteria the contestants are evaluated on (Bolin, 2012; Lowe, 1998). Finally, in the figure

category the competitors will undergo a solo presentation round, as well as a group comparison round (NPC Figure Division Rules, 2014). Bolin (2012) argued that women are attracted to this competition over the traditional bodybuilding scene because, compared to social values, overt muscularity is not rewarded. Lastly, the allure of endorsements, recognition, and job opportunities motivate women to achieve beauty and aesthetic excellence that are achieved by training for figure contests (Bolin, 2012).

Social gatekeepers in female figure competitions

The fitness industry is a site for social gatekeepers to dictate who and what gets recognition or promoted, and what is overlooked. Both the IFBB and NPC largely control the competitive fitness industry, and these federations produce the most elite bodybuilders and victors (Lowe, 1998). Since these federations hold worldwide influence, it is a lucrative domain when one turns professional. Money and power are central to this association, and a few prominent men hold most of the power and influence. Furthermore, this dynamic results in a hegemonic social system in the fitness and bodybuilding culture (Lowe, 1998). For example, the president of the NPC is also the vice-president of the IFBB. He contributes to many important competitions and has influence on the mainstream media output for the NPC, as well (Lowe, 1998). His power extends to who gets photographed and displayed, and what female competitors get endorsements, modeling opportunities, and other financial gratuities. Thus, this power dynamic corroborates the fact that a few men hold great authority over what gets presented and glorified. This influences mainstream society's perspective on gender and power constructions. However, the emergence of social media like Instagram has helped

many people obtain recognition in the fitness industry through their own devices. The current study revealed that Instagram was a significant contributor to gaining recognition.

Social Networking Sites as Platforms for Women to Express Themselves

Popular media like fashion and fitness magazines, television broadcasting companies, billboards, music, and films have significant social influence, and they lead people to almost become obsessed with their appearance and material possessions. Consequently, the act of taking photographs has shifted. Schwarz (2010) claimed that photography has progressed from capturing others for personal gratifications to taking photographs of the self in order for public appraisal. As a result, young individuals who frequently use social media may be classified as more self-absorbed and insular than previous generations (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010). To some authors, many people who use social media are considered narcissistic because they tend to obsessively post information about themselves and exaggerate facets of their lives to make them seem more interesting and happier than others (Buffardi & Campbell, 2014; de Vries & Peter, 2013; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Tildenberg, 2014). Most people use social media as a means to be seen and heard. Moreover, individuals commoditize themselves for public consumption (Siles, 2012). However, reasons for using SNSs include both external and internal motivations (Schwarz, 2010; Siles, 2012; Tildenberg, 2014). Also, individuals may want to discover themselves or obtain outward validation and praise from others. Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2010) posited that social media give a false impression that society is more connected and communal than ever before. In reality, it seems to be isolating and distracting from the things happening around us (van Dijck,

2013). Contrary to this, other theorists argued that social support is attained (Teodoro & Naaman, 2013), social popularity is garnered (Steinfeld et al., 2008), and even self-therapy is received by using social media (Tildenberg, 2014).

Similarly, SNSs are tools for women to gain exposure, enhance their self-confidence, find commonalities, be in communion with other like-minded individuals, and feel affirmed (de Vries & Peter, 2013; Siibak, 2009). According to van Dijck (2013) SNSs are platforms where one may bring their private life to a more public forum, but they have complete control over what information is shared and seen. Also, Hogan (2010) presented the concept of an online “friend” or “follower” as someone who may have little personal connection with other online users, yet these relationships hold meaning to the user. Individuals are therefore granted the choice to build a following of admirers and “friends” or share with close personal relationships. Some theorists such as Axel Honneth have considered online communities to be sites for the “struggle for recognition” (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013), where individuals search for purpose in their lives, share stories (van Dijck, 2013), and bring meaning to their experiences (Schwarz, 2010; Siles, 2012). Also, Schwarz (2010) mentioned that women are empowered by being photographers on social media since they are able to reclaim power over the way they are embodied as individuals. Frequently, connections on SNSs do not closely mirror real-life personal relationships because one has access to people from around the world that they may not know personally (Siibak, 2009). SNSs are perhaps not intimate and personal connections, but are made up of loose and emotionally detached relationships (van Dijck, 2013). For instance, SNSs allow people to be themselves and original, yet

creating an online identity is a conscious and performed action with a possible end goal of self-enhancement and promotion (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Siibak, 2009). Online performances are exhibitions for the audience to view and judge, and online spaces allow users to feel validated and good about themselves and their accomplishments (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013; Siibak, 2009).

Nevertheless, SNSs are created so that profiles are succinct and uniform in structure. Individuality is allowed and encouraged on sites like Instagram. However, as Schwarz (2010) indicated, women perpetuate the same stereotypes that embody the societal definitions of femininity. In a sense, self-presentations can be thought of as a “branding” of the self, where the individual chooses what is shown and expressed in their pictures (Schwarz, 2010; Skageby, 2008). Further, there are many ways of modifying one’s body, as well as editing photographs with the intention of being admired and validated (de Vries & Peter, 2013; Hogan, 2010; Schwarz, 2010). For example, special editing applications on smartphones are consciously used in order to give the image the desired result and actualization of beauty (Bailey, 2013; Willem, Arauna, Crescenzi, & Tortajada, 2010). For many women, posing oneself in specific and ritualized ways essentially emanates societal prescriptions of feminine ideals (Schwarz, 2010; Willem et al., 2010).

An individual downloads the Instagram app and is ready to start sharing their lived-experiences with the rest of the virtual network of people. When a photograph is uploaded to the site, the user can choose to put a filter on it, and the filter creates the user’s desired effect. Other editing features include cropping, framing, and changing the

composition of colors and lighting. Users also have a chance to “tag” or identify people, denote the location, and write a caption that describes what is in the photograph.

Although the term “hashtag” did not derive from Instagram, people may put these description markers on their photographs on SNSs. The concept creates searchable and distinct categories of pictures that are discernable for other users to view, comment on, or “like” (Schlesselman & Tarango, 2013). The user makes all these adjustments and can then publish the picture in the social networking cyber world which includes other spaces like Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and Flickr (Schlesselman & Tarango, 2013).

According to Schwarz’s (2010) study about how Israelis use the SNS called *Shox*, people use these spaces to form vast connections and gain popularity. It is common for serious and highly active Instagram members to seek out the most “likes” and comments on their photos, which is one main reason for the hashtag method. Millions of users can search these keywords and stumble upon a photo they like. The image owner may have intended to lure new people to their profile and entice them to follow their future posts. For many Instagram users, building up one’s follower or fan capital produces the impression that they are highly desirable in society, and equally attractive people with similar interests and personalities tend to gravitate towards them (Schwarz, 2010). Nov, Naaman, and Ye (2010) argued in their study that a main consequence of using Facebook was to build a social cache, yet they did not find this as a motivating factor for people to create a profile. Also, accumulating comments on photographs is another way to gain popularity and celebrity status. Comments are akin to giving another a “gift” because

most of the time the comments are positive, complimentary, and ego-boosting (Schwarz, 2010; Skageby, 2008).

Another study from Ploderer, Howard, and Thomas (2008) examined the usage of BodySpace, which is a SNS for the bodybuilding community to blog about their fitness journeys and share it with others. BodySpace, similar to Instagram, allows members to share fitness inspiration and knowledge with others while photographically documenting one's own fitness progress. A triangulation approach was used in order to gain insight into the practices and uses of BodySpace. Approaches consisted of participant observations at gyms and competitions, online interaction with members of BodySpace, and semi-structured interviews with nine male and four female participants (Ploderer et al., 2008). The ages ranged from 20 to 56 years old, and they selected individuals who were beginners up through the professional level. The general dimensions that emerged involved the usage of this SNS as a "tool," "theater," and "community" (Ploderer et al., 2008).

The results in the tools theme indicated that the participants used the site to control and publish information regarding bodybuilding and their progress. Public documentation acted as a way for them to track their body's transformation through monitoring goals and physical achievements. Also, posting before and after photographs was essential for participants to see their own transformation and to let others admire and give feedback. Ploderer et al. (2008) suggested that they sought positive feedback, which kept them motivated to train. Lastly, social comparison was found to be significant to their uses of BodySpace. They engaged in downward comparison in order to gain self-

esteem. Ploderer et al. (2008) also noted that the participants used upward comparison for inspiration from those that they considered role models (e.g., professional bodybuilders).

Self-presentation in a theatrical sense was another major reason bodybuilders used BodySpace. The participants mentioned that they needed public praise and admiration in order to feed their “muscle ego” (Ploderer et al., 2008). Bodybuilding is all about aesthetics and has little to do with performance, so receiving social feedback was vital to their fitness journey. One participant also said that some profile pictures were slightly pornographic in nature, which they perceived as a motive to gain popularity.

Community was the last theme Ploderer et al. (2008) described. They suggested that participants seek social inclusion with people who have similar lifestyles and interests in bodybuilding. The participants stated that the gym culture on and offline are the best places to find people to relate to as opposed to other spaces in social contexts.

Lastly, despite the negative aspects of social media, Vitak and Ellison (2013) remarked that people often find positive social reinforcement and inspiration through using mobile fitness media to track and communicate health and fitness ideas. The authors used an analogy to explain why people use SNSs for fitness purposes: people go to fitness centers to not only get a workout in; but, also, they gain personal satisfaction from the social environment. Much can be said about the rewards of an uplifting space, where people inspire and motivate themselves and others to strive for their personal fitness goals. These implications were explained in order to shed light on the proposed

question for the current study, where women gain empowerment and motivation through posting and interacting with other like-minded fitness enthusiasts on Instagram.

Mobile Media and Smartphones

Because SNSs have only been a recent development within the last 20 years, little research is available with regards to how women use personal blogs and SNSs to express and present themselves. Also, since Instagram was first released in 2010, few studies have been published on this SNS in general. Mobile to mobile and social media communication currently prevails as a popular method of communication, so a critical look into the uses of Instagram is merited.

According to Rosen (2012), the net or “Millennial” generation, is comprised of those individuals who grew up in the 1980s to 2000s, and they seem to have the most obsessive attachments to smartphones out of any other generation. Smartphones give the user a certain amount of heightened social standing and power by the ability to obtain a variety of information instantly. Accordingly, not many people carry around digital cameras anymore because smartphones function as phones and have the capability to capture high quality images (Rosen, 2012). Still, Schwarz (2010) argued that people reclaim power over their lives and taking self-portraits empowers them as individuals. Women who photograph themselves may rebel against media representations and present themselves in their own way (Hogan 2010; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). However freeing and gratifying these selfies may be, they tend not to show originality or liberation from social regulation. Rather, they inculcate the same values and depictions that mainstream media produces of women. Furthermore, people may be

under the false pretense that self-photography enlightens and frees the individual, yet as Schwarz (2010) claimed, no one can be removed from the influences of societal norms and hegemonic values. Sociocultural discourse will not change until the mentality shifts from aesthetics and appearances to promoting the importance of internal characteristics. Therefore, feminist theorists seek to promote a new sociocultural dialogue that is concerned with these oppressive ideologies and offer ways to enact social change (Sarantakos, 2005).

Narcissism in social media

New technology has advanced camera settings and capabilities to capture images of the world around us, but self-portraits are gaining popularity. The word “selfie” was admitted to the Oxford dictionary in 2013 and is defined as a photograph that is taken by an individual of himself or herself, which can then be uploaded to some form of social media (Tildenberg, 2014). Schwarz (2010) stated that self-reflections and portraits are often methods of gazing inwardly, much like the purposes of mirrors. Also, digital camera usage has decreased, yet smartphone cameras are used because it appears to be something of a fashion statement (Rosen, 2012; Tildenberg, 2014). One cause of this can be attributed to how society places importance on owning materialistic and expensive things, so these selfies express much more than a self-portrait. For instance, the photos presenting the smartphone in reflections such as mirrors also tells viewers that the user is complying with the social norms, and, therefore, may hold some form of social influence (Beer, 2012; Pink & Hjorth, 2012). In this regard, taking a selfie in the mirror with a disposable or even a digital camera does not have the same effect as a smartphone.

Post-1980s generations have been inundated with technology, and the repercussions of instant gratification are tangible (Rosen, 2012). Furthermore, people born near the 21st century are given messages that one thing or another is lacking in their lives, which may lead them to seek social support via SNSs. However, Rosen argued that the reliance and codependence on smartphone technology has shifted from basic functional usage to a more narcissistic usage pattern among young adults. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have enabled people to become “naval-gazers” and self-absorbed (Rosen, 2012). Social networks were created for people to socialize more, yet the age of smartphones and “technostress” has led to unparalleled changes in the way people communicate and interact with one another (Rosen, 2012).

Narcissism is defined as having traits such as entitlement, self-promotional and prideful tendencies, attention and admiration-seeking for their appearance and social status, worry about public opinion, and lacking empathy for others (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Rosen, 2012). People who fall into this category tend to seek out superficial relationships for the sole purpose of gaining social capital, superiority, and improving their self-esteem (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Not everyone who constantly posts selfies on Instagram is narcissistic. Rather, they could be portrayed as self-promoting, attention-seeking and prideful individuals. Consequently, further inquiry into this paradigm was needed for this study.

According to Stefanone et al. (2011), obsession with social media diminishes one’s experiences in life because they are focused on sharing and recreating these moments with the rest of the world. Instantly posting on social media often does not

allow one to be in the moment. Actually, it diverts their attention toward a lifeless tool, which takes away from the present experiences (Stefanone et al., 2011). The information that is left behind contributes to the meaning members of society give to their lived-experiences. However, as Hogan (2010) pointed out, social media are platforms for exhibition and performance of the self. These presentations could be viewed as problematic for many reasons, but mainly because of the way women have been represented in media. Based on Goffman's (1959) Self-Presentation Theory, women may feel the desire to promote themselves much in the same way because they receive social messages of the importance of looking beautiful and feminine. However, it is possible that Instagram may be a conduit for individual expression that retaliates against the dominant values of femininity. An exploration of the practices and experiences of women was warranted to see how social media platforms are redefining the physical and virtual spaces of health and fitness.

Chapter 3

METHODS

Participants

Participants included eight women between the ages of 20 and 45 years. All were amateur figure competitors in the NPC association and had consistently posted at least two times a week to their Instagram account in a health and fitness capacity. The participants' posts had to include photos such as selfies, physique transformations, inspirational quotes, healthy food ideas, fitness hashtags, and exercise action shots. These criteria were included to define "fitness enthusiast" as it pertained to this study. I did not know any of the participants prior to this investigation. Participants were recruited using lists of competitor's names from past competitions which were located on the NPC's website. Next, I conducted a primary search of their names and accounts on Instagram. Then I searched for users with at least 500 followers to confirm they were active on Instagram. Based on Ploderer et al.'s (2008) study, participants were contacted through private messages on Instagram and via email. I sent inquiry emails to over 50 potential participants, but I did not receive a significant amount responses. Participants who committed were sent a formal letter stating the purpose of their involvement, their voluntary responses to the questions during the interview, the confidentiality of their identities and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Recruitment ceased after I obtained eight participants because of time constraints, lack of commitment from potential participants, and scheduling conflicts. Seven of the eight participants characterized themselves as White-Americans, while one indicated she was Hispanic

(Puerto-Rican). The goal of the study was to recruit participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, but coincidentally most of those who wanted to participate were White.

Research Design

Qualitative methods were chosen because it was important to understand subjective experiences using empirical research methods. Based on previous research regarding this topic, semi-structured and open-ended interviews were utilized (Chmielewski, 2012; Krane et al., 2004; Phillips, 2005; Ploderer et al., 2008; Siles, 2012; Steinfield et al., 2008; Teodoro and Naaman, 2013). Grogan, Evans, Wright, and Hunter (2004) used open-ended interviews with seven female physique competitors. Their questions resembled those of the current study, which involved aspects of their training, social feedback, and self-presentation. According to Maxwell (2005), one goal of gathering varied and rich information from a set number of participants is to form a well-rounded representation of the phenomenon within a particular group being studied. This is significant to the current research because internal generalizability among the participants was evident.

Data Collection

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study (Appendix A). Informed consent forms (Appendix B) were distributed to the participants via email correspondence. Consent forms were collected and kept in a secure file on my computer. The participants then returned the demographic questionnaires and profiles prior to setting up the interview (Appendix C).

Tools

A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D) was created to direct the flow of the meetings, but was left open for follow-up questions, redirection, and prompting. As a result, the participants were given freedom to discuss the questions in as much detail as possible. Each participant was interviewed via telephone or Skype®. The participants determined the time and date of the interviews based on their availability. The interviews began by asking the participants to reflect on their experiences with using Instagram and their interactions with other fitness enthusiasts or curious spectators. Open-ended questions allow participants to feel comfortable discussing their experiences (Dale, 2000). Questions included information on background, sociocultural upbringing, fitness interests, smartphone app and camera usage, body image issues, motives for using Instagram, feedback they receive, and perceptions and the influences of the media pertaining to femininity. Most interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and they were audio recorded using an Olympus® WS-801 digital voice recorder. Pseudonyms were given to conceal the participants' identities and were used for the analysis and discussion sections of the study (Dale, 2000).

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings. Methods of Dale (2000) were used to a) read each transcript several times to familiarize myself with each participant's experience and b) participants were then asked to read electronic copies of their transcripts to see if further clarification was needed. Member checking was warranted because the interviews yielded a lot of information, and I could have

misinterpreted the recordings. Maxwell (2005) noted that member checking helps reduce the researcher's errors in translation, which results in a more accurate analysis of the data. All participants indicated the transcripts corroborated their intentions in the interviews, so no further changes were necessary.

After I completed multiple readings of the transcripts, I proceeded with thematic data analysis. Distinct themes were identified within each interview and across interviews (Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell, 1993). The first step was to extract unique pieces of information or "tags" from each transcript, which classifies information as a specific idea for further categorization (Côté et al., 1993). Consequently, raw data units were obtained from the participants' statements that related to the interests of the study, such as their overall experiences preparing for and competing in the NPC, their usage of social media, and their experiences belonging to the fitness community on Instagram. The second step was based on Côté et al. (1993) where the tags were grouped together to reflect the commonalities among the data within interviews and across interviews until all raw data themes were distinctively categorized. Lastly, general categories were created to classify the higher order themes with similar dimensions such as: defining femininity and beauty, self-presentation on Instagram, judging self and others on Instagram, and investments and outcomes of training and competing. As a result, the raw data was continuously examined until no new information could be extrapolated, and a final cataloging system was created.

Academic Rigor

Academic rigor was established in several ways prior to conducting the study. First, a qualitative analysis expert conducted a bracketing interview to find any known biases I may have held that could have impacted the interpretation of the results. It was also the appropriate time to see whether the questions needed further modification to explore the participants' experiences. Maxwell (2005) noted that bracketing the interviewer enables a reconciliation of any personal beliefs, biases, or opinions that may influence the results. As a consequence, I found that I had biased opinions about people who frequently posted pictures of themselves on social media. I acknowledged the persuasiveness of my perspective and made an effort to avoid it in the transcription and analysis of the data.

Finally, I had previous knowledge of the uses of Instagram and other SNSs. This was significant to the study because it was beneficial to have first-hand knowledge of how this online community interacts. There are many colloquial terms used in social media and Instagram in particular, so it was helpful in the data collection and analysis that I had previous knowledge of how Instagram is used. Thus, the participants appeared to be comfortable discussing a new mobile application with someone who was knowledgeable of it. I also had to negotiate gender issues and representations of women in mainstream media as well as social media. As a result, this added rapport to the interviews.

Chapter 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis yielded 90 raw data units, which were categorized into 16 higher order themes. Four general dimensions separated the higher order themes. The completed content analysis is presented in Appendix E. This chapter is composed of a presentation and a critical analysis of the results followed by the limitations, future directions, conclusions, and implications.

Defining Femininity and Beauty

Definitions of femininity change over time, and social discourse on gender will depend on the sociocultural context it is presented in (McRobbie, 2008). All eight participants acknowledged the social norms of femininity. Contrary to mainstream social norms, the participants believed that physical qualities like being strong and muscular made them more feminine than being thin. Similarly, they defined femininity to be more of an inner feeling (e.g., confidence, body acceptance, and being true to oneself). However, the participants' race and ethnic background influenced their perceptions of femininity. Seven of the eight participants indicated they were White Americans, while one indicated she was Hispanic (Puerto Rican). Regardless, all eight grew up in the United States. Suffice it to say that Western cultural perspectives most likely contributed to their views on femininity and self-presentation.

The participants discussed their physical characteristics, which signified that self-presentation directly related to body ideals and self-esteem. These five themes included

physique qualities, empowerment, feminine characteristics, beauty pageantry, and influences from media representations.

Physique qualities

All eight participants mentioned their desires for a certain level of leanness and muscle definition. Maria explained that the idea (or fear) of becoming too bulky or muscular (i.e., physique athletes) is present for most figure athletes. She stated, "...when you get that [overt] muscularity so much that it kinda crosses over...I don't feel as if that's very feminine, but to each her own. They look great. I could never do that." Similarly, Courtney said that when she gets to that level of leanness, she does not like how her "abs feel like a dude's abs" because they are rock hard. Nor does she like how her breast size reduces when she prepares for competitions. Furthermore, other participants described the phenomenon of acquiring more masculine qualities from their training with similar terms like "too far" and "too extreme." This fear signified the participants' perception that overt muscularity is not rewarded in society, so they actively limited their training to maintain acceptable feminine qualities.

All participants confirmed that they used exercise as a way to resist social gender constructions. Training enabled them to present themselves as a powerful physical force. Also, many of them agreed that non-bodybuilders typically conform to the social norm that thinness equals beauty. Likewise, the physique competitors in Grogan, Evans, Wright, and Hunter's (2004) study had their own ideals involving a feminine body. The participants in their study used terms such as "athletic," "toned," and "healthy" to describe the ideal female physique. The current study presented similar results; the

participants all said there was a level of leanness and muscularity they hoped to achieve that does not cross over the social boundary of masculinity. These findings also correlated to Antunovic and Hardin's (2013) study on female fitness bloggers. They found that the participants were changing the cultural discourse on gender because spaces like sports are exclusively male domains. It was clear from the results of the current study that, through their performances, these women were actively attempting to shift the values of femininity away from the relationship of thinness and beauty to one that incorporates health, fitness, and muscularity.

Goffman (1959) argued that people wear masks to conform to social norms. These pre-selected performances become reflections of the ideals held by the dominant group. However, the results indicated that the participants chose to create a different image of beauty and femininity that correlates to the bodybuilding culture. As an effect, their self-presentations challenged hegemonic gender prescriptions, yet they reflected other cultural standards of femininity via their muscularity (Krane, 2001).

Conversely, Jenn and several other participants said that all competitors have goals to achieve a certain level of leanness, and they admire women who can take it to an extreme. The majority of the participants believed that the figure category represents the "total package of femininity and muscularity" comparing the physical attributes to that of a gymnast. Monique mentioned that she loves the division of figure because it gives her the challenge of trying to keep that softness, but at the same time, she desires to look better than the average woman. Further, the participants described their bodies as being soft with curves and muscular, yet they still have a waist and could maintain a favorable

breast size. Due to the physiological effects of training, multiple participants noted that having breast implants was common in the competition world. However, they all indicated that they would never get implants because it was too invasive. Moreover, it did not coincide with their desire to be a “real” woman. Similarly, physique competitors have the added challenge of keeping their femininity by not getting “huge” like a man (Grogan et al., 2004). Female figure athletes rebel against and transgress societal pressures of being thin and beautiful by shaping their physique and adding muscular definition. However, Krane (2001) stated that these women police their bodies to avoid too much muscularity. Hence, they indeed partially conformed and complied with hegemonic femininity for fear of being seen as too masculine and unattractive.

Jenn confirmed that judges of the shows want the athletes to look like muscular women because the NPC is structured around patriarchal feminine ideals. Female athletes are stigmatized as being more masculine than the average, non-athletic woman because they tend to portray aggression, strength, power, and muscularity (Krane, 2001). As an outcome, some female athletes may be perceived as lesbian, but only if their feminine features fall outside the typical feminine qualities. Results indicated that all participants had experiences where their femininity was questioned, but only Jenn stated that her sexuality was questioned. She attributed this stigma to her short haircut along with her muscular build. This verified previous research on how women must negotiate their athletic identities with their sexuality because social norms dictate how mainstream society perceives the “other.” Krane (2001) asserted that women who do not comply with feminine standards are deemed unmarketable and perceived negatively by the

general public. Shilling and Bunsell (2014) contended that male bodybuilders are not perceived as abnormal because they are conforming to social constructions created by heteronormative values. Although the participants partake in a non-traditional sport like bodybuilding, they are representing the sport via their feminine identity. Since sports are considered spaces where aggression, violence, and force are exhibited, women re-contextualize this by adding feminine qualities to their performances (Krane, 2001). Consequently, these performances trivialize their presence and athleticism in sports because they have to adjust their masculine image to fit hegemonic femininity.

There were noticeable differences across bikini, figure, and physique levels, and the overwhelming consensus was that training for figure competitions allows the participants to create ideal feminine qualities. Jenn described each category, yet clearly favored figure:

I've always had this skewed view of what I find attractive....with bikini it's all about the boobs and the butt. With figure, it's much more athletic...it seems more graceful, elegant, and poised....When you think of physique, it's almost like an attitude more than it is a body type.

Many of the participants find muscularity attractive on a woman, yet they acknowledged the fact that people who hold hegemonic ideals of femininity do not perceive it the same way. Courtney had been an athlete her whole life but struggled with the delicate balance between keeping her appearance feminine yet strong. She asserted:

My whole point of stressing femininity and muscularity is just to get women to embrace the weightlifting world and all the benefits that come from it...just to have women who are not in this [fitness] world know that you can workout, you can lift heavy weight, and you won't look like a guy.

Irene also stated that training for figure shows reflects her ideals of femininity and personality. She stated that she thought the muscular look was better for her versus having the “booty and flaunting it on stage” like what bikini athletes present. Still others said bikini athletes presented as being too “flirty,” “theatrical,” and “[unobtainable] to the public.” Further, the consensus was that bikini athletes have the typical “beach body” or “cheerleader” look, which was not desirable to them. This perspective relates to Kane’s (2013) study that explored the sexualization of female athletes through media representations. Significantly more emphasis is placed on appearance and beauty for female athletes, which causes their talents and abilities to be diminished and unacknowledged. Further, these NPC shows reinforce these ideals because they are judged based on aesthetics and not their performance.

Empowerment

Female bodybuilders choose to present and train their bodies in ways that were once unacceptable for them, which enables empowerment and non-conformity to hegemonic femininity (Shilling & Bunsell 2014). Training for NPC figure shows and documenting it significantly improved many aspects of the participants’ lives. The current discoveries related to Arthur Frank’s “typology of body use in action” philosophy, which was utilized in Phillips’s (2005) study. The “disciplined body” relates to the way women treat and train their bodies in order to feel in control. All of the participants indicated the desire and motivation to create the type of physique they wanted and needed great discipline in order to succeed. They found that through their regimented routine, they were more empowered and successful in other areas of their

lives. Also, the “dominant body” concept refers to an individual expressing their physical presence and power in social contexts. Phillips (2005) found that women who feel inadequate would use things like exercise to empower themselves. Most of the participants in the current study grew up with negative body images and self-perceptions, which influenced their desire to make changes in their appearance. Marlo confirmed this when she discussed her reasons for training and competing in figure shows. She transgressed the stereotype that females were the weaker sex by taking control and making herself a powerful individual. Like the rest of the participants, she wanted to present herself to others as being a strong, independent, capable, and smart woman in a predominantly male-centered space.

These findings confirmed the perspective of Critical Feminist Theory because the participants contributed to the meaning making of a specific social construction (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). In this context, it was the bodybuilding and fitness world. Although these women were non-conformists to hegemonic femininity because of their muscular bodies, they complied with feminine standards via their stage presentations. They were conforming to other social norms that were in agreement with the bodybuilding community. Lastly, Self-Presentation Theory suggests that individuals make every effort to conform to hegemonic social norms. However, the participants chose to transgress the typical feminine ideals by taking control of their bodies and complied with another set of cultural standards. As Krane (2001) argued, women seek control over their bodies and create their own version of beauty by challenging the gender dogma that has oppressed them in spaces like sports.

Several participants shared their thoughts on how training for figure competitions gave them a sense of empowerment. Marlo and four other competitors aspired to become an IFBB professional and eventually win the Olympia contest one day. She believed that weight training and bodybuilding enables one to be the “sculptor of his or her own masterpiece.” She further stated:

I feel like they [women] are more powerful and more feminine because they took control of their own health and their own physique. And they made themselves into what they wanted. They didn't stay the status quo of the weaker sex. They could probably out squat and out bench the average man. And so, they took that and made themselves powerful.

Critical Feminist Theories posit that one’s identity is structured around control and advantage in society. By reclaiming power over their bodies, the participants attempted to resist societal pressures of thinness and beauty. Sport is one site where there is a constant battle between gender politics and the struggle for recognition (Kane, 2013). The power of self-presentation, then, is vital for a woman’s success as an athlete. Ultimately, they must present themselves in a manner that will grant them access to power and privilege. They become empowered by their training and muscularity, yet they become acceptable in the eyes of the public through displays of feminine qualities.

In general, most participants valued the concept of “being comfortable in your own skin” when it pertains to negotiating a masculine sport. As a child, Jenn explained how she hated the way she looked, which caused severe self-esteem issues. Since she was a competitive swimmer, her hair was damaged from the chlorine. She mentioned that she had to shave her head when she was in the sixth grade, and the girls at school were cruel to her. She also said that she refused to be in pictures for a period of several

years because she hated how she looked. Appearance and looks directly relate to how feminine and therefore acceptable one is in the eyes of society. Jenn also explained that one must have self-acceptance and high self-esteem in order to be successful in figure competitions. She said, “you have to love yourself because society looks down on that, which is pathetic. It infuriates me; people look down on others who love themselves so much and are so comfortable in the way they look, you know?” All of the participants affirmed that they preferred more muscle compared to being skinny. Furthermore, Romita, a 43 year-old athlete, described her life-long struggle with weight fluctuations and the persistent desire to shape her body into her own ideal of beauty:

I feel more feminine and more empowered when I'm strength training and adding muscle because it adds a curve to your physique. From a physical standpoint, I feel better not being thinner...I just feel stronger and more confident. I feel more comfortable in my own skin...but I definitely go through times where I don't feel as good about myself when I'm heavier.

Monique, Courtney, Marlo, Jenn, and Irene all want to change the cultural concept that thinness equals beauty for women. Through their training and competing, they wanted to contribute to vanquishing the stigma that surrounds weightlifting and the perception of becoming more masculine. Irene further mentioned that she wants to show women that: “they don't need to be like a double zero to look good. That being strong and muscular and doing things that only men should do isn't the way it is when it comes to working out and weightlifting.” Finally, Marlo believes that there is not really a better way for a woman to embrace her power than getting up on stage and showing what she has done for herself. Undoubtedly, all participants agreed that willingly presenting oneself in front of an audience to be judged and dissected aesthetically is incredibly empowering. Lastly,

women obtain empowerment through physical regimentation because they gain acceptance and respect for their self-transformation and physical identity that was previously denied to them via hegemonic femininity (Krane, 2001).

Feminine characteristics

The participants believed that feminine qualities are not only physical, but also include inner feelings and personalities. For Courtney, things like the way a woman portrays and carries herself matters more than what she looks like. Also, Sam stated that during the last few decades there has been a shift in cultural norms. She said that for many years girls could not have any skin showing, could not have any muscle, and they had to be this sweet thing that cooked. She went on to reference a recent idea that is taking shape and being celebrated by members of the fitness community. She said:

Now there's this t-shirt that says, "I'm the perfect woman: I cook; I clean; I iron," and it has the shaker cup, a girl doing a hang clean, and another lifting a barbell or something....I think it shows you can have both sides: [as a girl], you can be strong, athletic, and independent and still have that sweet feminine side-it doesn't have to be one or the other.

In general, the consensus was that no one definition of femininity is right and there is an array of ways for women to express their femininity and beauty. It was apparent that the participants were struggling to create their own identities, but acknowledged that there are consequences for performances that stray from traditional femininity.

Many of the participants discussed the concept of wanting to be a "real" person in an industry that is all about aesthetics. Irene stated that most women in the industry have breast implants, but she refuses to do that to her body. She said that femininity to her is working hard, being strong, being independent, and being confident no matter what size

one is. Furthermore, she asserted that she likes showing women that you do not have to look like a fake Barbie all the time to be feminine. Also, that being real is being feminine, not being this “dolled up bimbo that you see in magazines and stuff.” The participants’ desire to be authentic women remains overshadowed and controlled by those in authority in the bodybuilding culture. Because these shows promote the value in aesthetics and beauty, inner feminine characteristics are overlooked. Further, physical self-presentations on and offline do not embody these qualities because the performer wishes to portray the physical body rather than their internal identity. As Shilling and Bunsell (2014) posited, female bodybuilders actively seek self-transformation that overcome hegemonic feminine ideals, yet they unconsciously resemble social norms of the bodybuilding culture. Regardless, the participants give significance to their experiences because they felt empowered through their physique transformations.

Beauty pageantry

Vanity was a term used by all participants to describe the NPC figure shows. They expressed that competitions are similar to beauty pageants. However, they unambiguously agreed that athletes could not fake strength. Many of them enjoyed the aspect of getting “dolled up” and presenting their physiques on stage despite the frustration of preparing on the day of a show. The majority of them felt like their stage presentation added femininity to their masculine features. Things like having long hair, wearing more feminine clothing, getting fake nails, and wearing makeup all contributed to their sense of control over their feminine identity. These actions are considered masks in this context, which enabled their conformity (Manning, 1992). Ploderer et al. (2008)

described the bodybuilding culture as one that is solely based on aesthetics, so judgments from others are necessary and desired. Female bodybuilders actively seek other biased opinions from the audience and judges to see if they achieved the ideal physique. However, the bodybuilding culture is also indoctrinated with patriarchal values (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). Consequently, the participants complied with social norms through their stage presentation and wearing masks. As Krane (2001) stated, women become apologetics and deliberately perform femininity so they are socially acceptable. This may also seem natural to them and done through unconscious effort because it feels more comfortable. Female athletes have the added stigma of being too masculine; so things like wearing makeup and form-fitting uniforms helps rectify this issue.

The participants said that the shows are all about getting on stage, posing in specific ways, and being judged solely on appearance. Common terms used to describe this idea consisted of things like being “sparkly,” “tan,” “dolled-up,” “poised,” and “symmetrical.” Marlo, Romita, and Sam argued that this is a misconception because beauty is not what makes one a winner. Marlo stated that what will actually get you first place is how much work you have done on your body. Furthermore, Sam said, “...in order to have those muscles...they have to be working out; they have to be strong...but they don't get on stage to pump iron and show that.” Despite how much work one must do to accomplish a strong and muscular physique, presenting oneself as a true female is counterproductive to overcoming sociocultural gender constructions. Krane (2001) asserted that female athletes unconsciously marginalize and devalue themselves by adding back socially prescribed feminine qualities. This act tends to diminish their

professionalism and talent as athletes because they apologize for their masculine performance in a male-centered space. NPC shows tend to promote the strong but sexy look for women, and the participants exhibited this through their personal philosophy of maintaining a balance between muscularity and femininity. The participants thought they were creating their own version of a “real” woman. However, they were not free from the ideology of the bodybuilding culture and its representations of feminine ideals. The basis of the concept of presenting oneself like a model will be discussed below.

Influences from media representations

Most female athletes are not taken seriously because they perform femininity to counter their masculine attributes. Media portrays women in sexualized and erotic ways in order to instill these social ideals, which is further reflected in self-presentations (Kane (2013). Every participant brought up their childhood and how mainstream media influenced their body image and self-esteem. High school was an especially impressionable time for most of them. For example, Irene discussed how looking at magazines influenced her perception of femininity. She and Romita shared that they had eating disorders in their teenage years, which directly related to media representations of women. Irene said:

When I was in high school, I always thought femininity was to be thin and to be a Victoria's Secret model. And it was around that time that I had some sort of eating disorder where I just thought like being skinny was the most important thing.

Magazines and other media have utilized sex as a selling point for many products and businesses. Monique asserted that this technique is here to stay. She stressed, “it’s part of the game. I just hope that women realize that all these things are edited and people

don't actually look the way they do in those pictures....people are seeking perfection...those pictures don't help.” Jenn also stated that when she looked at profiles on athletes in magazines like *Oxygen*, she could not help but admire and desire that type of body for herself. Visual representations of women, beauty, and femininity have therefore significantly impacted the way the participants viewed themselves and their feminine ideals. It was evident that media influences were at the forefront of their desires to modify their physique. This implies that by actively conforming to norms depicted in media reflects self-marginalization because they were not allowing themselves to venture beyond what is socially acceptable. In the instance of physique competitions, they all believed that achieving that level of muscularity is taking their bodies too far to be judged as a feminine woman.

Not unlike these visual reminders in media, comments and judgments from other people in their adolescent years significantly impacted their self-perception, as well. Courtney explained that when she was a competitive gymnast in high school, her body was on the muscular side. Her boyfriend called her “thunder thighs” and would point out that models like Carmen Electra had the “perfect, toned, and thin body.” Consequently, she started comparing herself to these ideals yet realized those qualities were never attainable. Furthermore, she stated that it was very taxing on her body and self-esteem. All in all, the participants agreed that the way media portrays women negatively affected them growing up. These messages of how important beauty and perfection are to cultural norms also shaped their initial definitions of femininity. The way they presented themselves on social media follows in the next general dimension.

Self-Presentation on Instagram

It is clear that the bodybuilding community is based on muscle worship. Online exhibitions contribute to the justification of such values because individuals seek to perpetuate these images via self-presentations. This was seen through a critical examination based on Goffman's theory. The participants explained their thoughts and experiences of presenting themselves on Instagram, whereby five higher order themes emerged. These included changes over time, preparation, types of posts, editing, and deciding on captions.

Changes over time

All of the participants said their initial use of Instagram was random and directionless because they did not fully understand the purpose of the application. Most posts were of everyday life. For example, Courtney said that it started with nothing physique related, just little shots of her life. There were pictures of her dog, pregnancy, and nursery when she first started. Marlo further explained that her profile went through phases of transformation:

Once I started working out, lifting more, documenting that and how my strength was increasing more, then I'd put pictures of me squatting or bench-pressing a certain amount and documenting that progress. Once I got into the competition world, it was documenting how my physique changed more than how much weight I was lifting. Then, when I got into contest prep, it was my progress; it was my journey towards the stage. And now, it's become how I'm growing.

Maria, Monique, Irene, Sam, and Jenn made similar statements. Maria said that at first it was just random...now it has a purpose, like documenting the progression for her show. Monique, however, said she was strategic with her profile from the beginning. She wanted to put herself out there as a figure competitor, so her first post was of her after a

show. Similarly, Irene mentioned that her second profile was made as a fitness account.

Here she described her thought process when she first started posting:

The very first one was my suit when I was three weeks out, and I remember being like, “I hope this isn't wrong of me to post me in a suit...” I think I didn't want to put up something that was super random, so I tried to show people what I was doing...my mindset was that I was gonna post a picture before my show, then a picture of me at my show, and then a picture of me after my show. So I tried to put it in a kind of sequence.

The majority of the participants expressed this feeling of hesitation when they first started posting photos of themselves. In effect, Irene introspectively questioned her exhibition because she was concerned about how others perceived her. Every participant stated they had apprehension when posing and posting selfies of their bodies. This complies with Self-Presentation Theory because they censored themselves in order to conform to heteronormativity and femininity. Further, Irene’s statement correlates to narcissism due to her concern over what others thought of her. However, Irene questioned the appropriateness of the photographs because posting to social media was foreign to her.

Sam's fitness goals have gone through changes, as well, since using Instagram.

She stated:

Originally it was just to lose weight. Then it was focusing more on positivity as I was trying to get through the junk in life, but then it went back to losing weight and gaining muscle. Now I'm focused more on the food, nutrition, and exercise. It [her usage] has definitely increased partly because when I'm more motivated to keep going on my own journey, I post more. It's also become a lot easier to post, it's just right there [referring to her phone].

Sam mentioned that as smartphones and photo-taking technology have become more advanced, the types of photos on Instagram have changed over the years. She said at first, the cameras were not that good, so the pictures would be fuzzy, poor quality, and

not very artistic. In the last few years though, camera phones have become much more high tech, which makes the pictures look like they are done professionally. Sam asserted:

Specifically in the food category, they look like the picture was taken with a high definition camera on a full set with beautiful backdrops and perfectly placed yin and yang scarves going this way and that way around the food. And I'm like, "ya it doesn't look like that at my house [laughs]."

Jenn and Maria stated that they never intended their accounts to be solely "fitspo" pages.

Jenn described how at first she thought Instagram was just a picture-editing app. But, her posting habits have gone through phases in relation to her life and personality. She, like the majority of the participants, used her profile to document aspects of her life like a "pictorial diary." She said:

My first post was when I was juicing vegetables, and it was a cup of that. My second was a picture of a butterfly on my hand, and then I took a picture of my Gameboy and I thought that was pretty cool....So it started out as silly little snapshots of what I thought would look artistic, and then it slowly turned into my little fitness journey....but now, it's turned into you know, this is who I am, and I'm not going to bullshit you. I'm going to be honest, and I'm not just going to be this happy go lucky, "everyone can do fitness and everyone is happy, and you should always be positive" because that's not what life is about, you know?

For Jenn, her account is more about all aspects of her life that she wishes to share with her viewers: the funny or sad events in life, her quirky side, and her "tell it like it is" opinions. With that, her approach to presenting herself is more flexible and dynamic than any of the other participants, but it is still heavier on fitness and training posts. Jenn's performance on Instagram yielded the conclusion that her intention was not to put on a fake show for people, but to portray herself as a unique individual. Nevertheless, her profile was a constructed performance with the desire to create a specific impression on an audience, which consequently gave meaning to her experiences.

In sum, all of the participants recognized that their interests in fitness and their aspirations to compete in the NPC influenced the transformation of their profiles. At first, their posts were more random, but slowly became more fitness-oriented. More detail on this self-presentation dynamic will be discussed below.

Preparation

A lot of conscious and unconscious preparation goes into taking pictures. When asked how she prepares to take them at the gym, Courtney explained, “I’ll turn my phone on silent, so you can’t hear the click of the iPhone...And then I’ll just act, you know, [natural]...or I’ll wait till nobody is around, but I’ve almost gotten caught in the gym bathroom [laughs].” This constituted Goffman’s theory whereby people act and construct performances for a desired effect. Further, Goffman argued that backstage performances are done where an individual’s true identity is revealed yet in privacy. Irene stated that she places her phone on silent so no one knows she is taking a picture and she has almost been caught. This confirms Goffman’s concept that backstage performances are supposed to be secluded from the intended audience. Many participants mentioned their apprehension over this new concept of taking selfies because it did seem somewhat narcissistic to them.

Similarly, Maria stated that when she arrived at the gym most days, her appearance was “a wreck” because she came from work and had her child with her. She continued to say that if she thought she looked cute she will try to get a photo, but it takes about 30 times to get one good one. Consequently, time and convenience seemed to determine how many photos would be taken as well as deciding on the location. The

majority of the participants said they do not have time or patience to take more than five to 10 pictures. For Monique and Sam, the gym proved to be the best place for them to take pictures of themselves. Monique stated that most of her pictures were definitely in the gym because she was there all day, every day. She worked at a nationally recognized gym, so this location was ideal and convenient. Sam discussed the benefits of using mirrors at the gym and at home, yet many people still feel awkward about taking selfies in public spaces. She said:

In the gym there's mirrors everywhere, so I'd go into the bathroom because it seems to be the selfie haven [laughs]. Like [you see] someone standing and smiling and you walk in on them trying to pretend they're not taking a picture of themselves. Out in the gym I'd take pictures cause the weights are there-the mirrors let you see what you're looking at. At home it'd be in the bathroom where the mirror is, again, you can get a better picture when you shoot yourself. If it's going to take me more than 3 or 4 shots I give up.

Maria and Romita also commented that they dislike taking pictures of themselves in the mirror because it made them uncomfortable. Maria stated that she would be “mortified” if she took pictures of herself in the gym because she claimed to not be that photogenic and did not want to draw attention to herself. Most of her pictures were taken in her house where there was a big mirror going down the stairs into her husband’s “man cave.” Clearly, some participants valued privacy and discretion when it came to documenting their fitness journey. A consensus amongst the participants indicated that most of the pictures were taken where there was good lighting, mirrors, by weight machines, in bathrooms, or other places inside and outside their homes.

Another concept of time was discussed that pertained to the time of day where they would look their best. All of the participants aimed to take photographs when they

looked the leanest or what they called after they got a “pump.” This referred to the phase after a workout where the muscles look extra swollen due to the increased blood flow to the area. First thing in the morning was also a favorable time to take pictures of their bodies because that was another time they tended to look the leanest.

Some of the participants mentioned that they mainly took selfies at the gym because it is uncomfortable asking others to take them. For Jenn, however, she described the atmosphere at her Crossfit gym was much more welcoming and friendly. There was a sense of community where everyone helped each other, so Jenn felt more comfortable asking her peers to take pictures or videos of her performing an exercise.

Lastly, even though the participants did not think about the actual process they go through when taking pictures, they acknowledged that it was a methodical procedure to get the best possible picture of themselves. Jenn said:

Anybody who tells you that they don't do that is lying to you because, you know, it is in our nature to represent ourselves in the best way that we think we can....I'll pose a certain way and then I'll be like, “okay now I'm really flexing,” and then I'll get that picture....or I'll have to hold my breath and suck in really hard when I'm flexing my abs. So there are a few I have to go through and delete before I choose the [best] one.

Similarly, Sam laughed when she discussed the process of taking and posting pictures on Instagram. She sarcastically went through the mental process that happens to people when they try to get a good picture. She described, “in their mind they say, ‘I took that picture 14 times or more,’ then they sit and try every filter, and then you're like ‘screw the filter’ just push post or delete the picture, I give up.” Then Sam talked about how she prepared pictures of food she makes. Her profile was “food-heavy” at the time because

she wanted to make things her kids could eat and enjoy. She made the same reference when she talked about food pictures. She said:

When I'm doing a recipe [for a photo], it tasted amazing, but it kind of looks like baby food after it's been thrown up. So you have to put it on a prettier plate with a piece of fruit in the background. You want it to look prettier, and it's the same concept as it is when taking photos of yourself in the gym...

Ultimately, the end result was to create the best representation of the self or whatever else was being photographed. They would do this by retaking photos until they captured the best one, or staged whatever was being photographed in the best way possible. This relates back to Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory where these women constructed and photographed the ideal body they wished to present to others. Further, all participants explained their need for validation of their achievements. This type of self-admiration and social approval signifies narcissism (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Next, the discussion will turn to what kinds of pictures were posted.

Types of posts

There is a host of research that explores the ways women objectify themselves via self-presentations. However, the participants did not intend to portray their bodies as objects to be gazed at without regard to their human identity and personality.

Mainstream media representations of the female body influenced the participants' body image perceptions, but they did not indicate they wanted to replicate these portrayals in a negative fashion. Moreover, they did not seek sexual attention by posting photos of their bodies on Instagram, so they did not intentionally want to perpetuate the devaluation of women. Alternatively, they intended to post photos that emphasized strength, empowerment, and positivity that promoted women and themselves as individuals.

These self-presentations reflect Goffman's theory by their intention to perform with a specific goal and outcome of influencing an audience.

Most of the posts the participants published involved full body shots or segmented shots of specific body parts. Marlo, Maria, Courtney, and Irene all claimed they posted pictures of their best-looking and most changed body parts. Pictures of shoulders, back, chest, and abdominals were commonly photographed, and there was a pattern of avoidance of other areas like below the waist. However, Courtney felt more confident when it came to posting leg pictures. Courtney said, "...my abs lean out very easily and you can see the separation...then I'll post on my quads because they're my strongest muscle group. No butt shots ever just because it doesn't look nearly as good back there [laughs]." All of the participants agreed that they never took shots of their gluteal muscles because it seemed too sexual and people who post those seek sexual attention and feedback. Consequently, their opinion verifies that they were not intentionally objectifying themselves in their Instagram photos. While most of the participants tend to post on their best features, one participant explained that she liked posting her shortcomings. Monique explained:

I think I post on everything, but I would say it's more on the body parts that I lack, so I'm weaker on the shoulder and back end. When I see some progress in both of those body parts I get excited and want to share...So I like to post pictures that are showing my weaknesses and how I'm trying to improve on them.

By revealing certain features and aspects of their bodies while concealing others, these women contributed to shaping their identity in a gendered and political space. They did

not want to project a message that was sexual or erotic through their presentations, so they consciously avoided poses and pictures that conveyed that.

In general, the participants posted these representations of changes in their physique because they wanted to document their fitness progress. Marlo said her posts typically show her transformations before and after shows because her body was “primed to put on good muscle after competitions.” Transformation photos are where two pictures are side by side representing the past and the present. Marlo went on to say that there could be a year in between, or six months, to show how much work one could do on their body in a relatively short amount of time. More in-depth information on reasons for using Instagram will be discussed in the general dimension of judging self and others.

The majority of the participants stated they liked to see a variety of pictures on other accounts, so they posted similarly. They agreed that it was annoying to see someone who posts all selfies or all transformation pictures. Other pictures they tended to post included food, inspirational quotes and pictures found from other sources, funny memes, videos, and advertisements for their businesses or companies they promoted. For instance, Sam’s account had a significant amount of food inspiration because she wanted people to maintain a desire to eat good-tasting food while still being health-conscious. Among those who train for figure competitions, there was a consensus that food tends to be bland and loses its appeal easily because they have to be very strict with their diet. Sam also said that her Instagram was just showing people how to keep food clean and easy while on the go with two kids.

Those in the “fitfam” often use inspirational quotes and pictures to instill positivity, encouragement, and motivation, so most of the participants posted them. Irene said she used inspirational quotes to stay motivated on her fitness journey. She stated, “I post a lot of quotes...almost every [quote] I post I'll search for on Instagram first...I'll give someone else credit if it's a really good one, but if it's something that a million people use, I won't.” Similarly, Marlo mentioned that whatever she posted had to be positive because there were so many negative people on Instagram. She said:

When you are deep into contest prep and your show is like a month away, you don't feel good, but that's part of the process. No one wants to hear you bitch and complain about how bad you feel. I will try to post positive things about my physique and about how I was gonna win this show, so nothing negative.

It is evident that in this sport you must have self-love and a positive body image. The participants’ consensus was that body shame and lack of confidence will thwart progress and motivation to transform one's physique. Finally, memes are often pictures of something that is perceived as funny, and it will include a funny caption on the picture. Some participants like Romita and Jenn used memes to show the humorous side of the fitness culture. Jenn predominantly expressed her sense of humor and personality through finding and posting memes. She said that was where she got her “comedy gold material.”

Videos are less popular but are done nonetheless to show things like the steps of how food dishes are made or how to do exercises and the techniques. Sam described her process of preparing a meal and how it was easy to document the stages. She said, “I'll take a couple of seconds as I first throw something in...then you get to the next stage of cooking, and you hold down the button for a few more seconds...so it shows the whole

process...” Both Sam and Jenn take videos of their exercises and lifts in Crossfit because there is a greater sense of community as opposed to the gym. Also, they explained that it was a good way to monitor their progress and how they were performing. Jenn stated:

I love posting videos of some of my Olympic lifting and Crossfit, and really that’s a way to see how I’ve progressed with my Olympic lifting. I can scroll through and see that my form looked really shitty back then, but hey, look at it now.

Similarly, Monique enjoyed the educational aspect of posting videos. She explained, “I like [showing] people exactly how I get my body in the shape that it is...I’ll say, ‘you guys have to try this workout, this is an amazing workout for this and this reason.’”

More information will be given about how these athletes train in the higher order theme of investments and outcomes of training and competitions.

Advertising is prominent on Instagram because it is a free and uncensored way for the public to promote things. For Irene, Courtney, and Marlo, they had their own personal training and coaching businesses, and Instagram proved to be an effective method of building their clientele. They also worked for outside supplement companies and clothing lines that they promoted through their account. Irene stated, “there's things tied to it like my job....Cellucor and the clothing line I work for are still important to me that never used to be in existence. I've gotten those opportunities because of Instagram.” Regardless of advertising to profit financially or not, all of the participants freely promoted themselves and their interests in health and fitness through Instagram. More on the benefits of marketing will be discussed in the general dimension of judging self and others. Next, the art of editing photographs had a significant impact on how the participants presented themselves.

Editing

Editing photographs is a popular process on smartphones because there are many applications available and they are easy to use. Another reason people edit and filter their photos is to enhance them, so it shows what the owner wants it to embody. This is a clear example of the way people use masks, which is discussed in Goffman's theory. For Maria, Courtney, Monique, Irene, and Sam, filters and editing features allowed them to create more artistic pictures. Enhancements included things like adding light or shadows, making a mirror image of a selfie, or choosing a filter that made their food look more appetizing. Filtering body shots is common in the fitness community because it helps to show muscle definition that may not be viewable in an unfiltered picture. Courtney said that one could add shadows to make muscles appear more striated and defined. Sam also described how muscle definition is more apparent on darker skin:

Anytime someone has darker skin you're going to see the definition better, which is why getting on stage you wear ridiculous amounts of tanning lotion. Once in a while I'd use a filter, like when I do a stomach shot and then darken it, then even you can see your abs and you're like "awesome!" It gives you that definition that's not there.

Sam then explained that she indicated in the caption that she darkened or filtered her photo because she wanted to be honest. This opinion about being honest was shared by Marlo and Jenn as well. For instance, Marlo's preparation coach advised her to never filter physique photos because it did not represent reality. Marlo agreed that it was just a form of lying to people when you enhance your photo. In the past, Jenn used to enhance her physique in photos to show definition and said, "if I found a filter that made my abs look more cut than they actually were, hell yeah I'm gonna use it." But in the last year or

so of posting to Instagram, she said she advocated for being an honest and real person in general, so she wanted to live by that. Further, Romita liked to remove things like dirty towels or other objects from the background to make the picture look better. She also manipulated the lighting because her skin was fair. Also, food pictures are easily manipulated as Sam stated. She used a “lo-pro” filter to darken out the background, so the food really popped. Lastly, Monique liked the artistic aspect of Instagram and other editing applications because she majored in art and marketing in college. She mentioned that when she rode the subway to and from work, she would spend that time manipulating her photographs to make them that much better.

Editing photographs is comparable to Goffman’s Self-Presentation Theory whereby people use masks to conceal aspects of their identity while enhancing others. The main goal is to exhibit the best possible product to influence an audience and present oneself in the best light possible.

Deciding on captions

All of the participants used the same approach when it came to putting captions on posts. For example, body shots were most often accompanied by positive words or comments about the progress they have made. Marlo stated:

If it's a picture of me, I usually put something about the progress that I've made that I'm referencing. If it's a picture of my shoulders...I'll take a picture of my shoulders with a pump, and I'll say... “it's been such and such since my show, shoulders are growing.”

Still other captions included specific details on the exercises they performed that day.

Monique said, “if there's an action being done, I'll explain it. If I'm flexing a certain body part, I'll explain why....If I have a modeling picture I'll write some quote or something

inspirational...whatever it made me feel...short and sweet.” Maria indicated that she liked to post a “recap” of how she did that week, how she felt, how she managed her diet, and how much she lost. She stated that she used phrases like “5 weeks out,” “4 weeks out,” “delts looking better,” “getting extra lean,” “lost two more pounds,” or “check-in with the coach.”

For Irene, posting in the comments section was more beneficial. She said that she prepared whatever she wanted to say in the notepad on her iPhone, so she could make sure everything was spelled correctly and made sense. She, unlike the majority of the other participants, liked to write longer captions because she had a lot to say. Also, she mentioned that her followers had given her the best feedback on longer posts. Irene described:

[For gym selfies] I'll type what my workout is about...it just lists out everything I did in my reps and sets....most of the time I explain how my workout went, what my workout was, or my mindset or motivation for working out. I'll say, “always working on my goals or always trying to stay committed cause I want to turn pro next year.”...It's always about having a positive mindset.

More on the topic of feedback will be presented in the higher order theme of judging self and others.

However, Sam liked to keep her captions “short and sweet” because she could not imagine people taking the time to read a whole “book” while scrolling through numerous posts. Monique, Romita, and Jenn all agreed that lengthy posts were “just too much.” Jenn, who liked to have fun with her posts said, “if I'm feeling snarky, I'll post one word and then I'll hashtag. So the comment will be just the hashtag, like ‘dat ass doe’

[laughs].” Constructing the written component on their photographs complies with Goffman’s theory, whereby they carefully chose what was displayed.

Food pictures are very common in the fitfam on Instagram because people want to find creative and enjoyable meals that are also healthy. For all of the participants, they wrote out the entire recipe in the comments section because people undoubtedly asked. Irene explained that she tried to make sure everyone was really informed because she was not posting a picture of her food just so they could guess what it was.

Lastly, Courtney and Irene often used advertisements for promotion because they earned a living from their various training and other entrepreneurial ventures. They both posted the advertisement and said they would “elaborate” and described what it was about in more detail in the comments or caption sections. Finally, the consensus about commenting and using captions on their photographs typically related to what was presented in the photograph. Mostly it was something positive, educational, or funny which seemed to sum up the mentality of the fitness family on Instagram.

Judging Self and Others on Instagram

The judging self and others on Instagram general dimension consisted of five higher order themes: reasons for usage, negatives of social media, relationships to followers, perceptions of selfies, and following others.

Reasons for usage

There were several reasons for using Instagram that the participants had in common. The main influence for presenting themselves and their interests in health and fitness was so that they could document their journey to the stage. They all explained

that they enjoyed physically seeing their progress and transformation from posting pictures over time. Terms like “accountability,” “motivation,” “inspiration,” “sharing,” “relating,” “blogging,” “support,” and “encouragement” were used to describe these influences. Courtney, Sam, Maria, Marlo, Romita, Irene, and Jenn all said that they used it to show how they were progressing in their training. Courtney sought motivation when she was going from having a child to training for her first competition. She said, “I started blogging about my fit-pregnancy...I really liked it cause you could find other people in the same situation....The majority of the people I follow are fitness people, so it was motivation for me.” Similarly, several stressful life events occurred simultaneously for Sam, which caused her to become depressed. Besides moving her family to another state, she had a medical condition and the medicine she took caused her to gain weight. So she used Instagram to keep herself on track while getting back in shape. Sam realized that it helped motivate her when she posted and had others asking questions about her weight loss, so she used it as a tool to keep her going. Maria also used it for progress motivation. She stated, “...every Saturday I'll put one up, so I can go back and see the progression; what I need to work on; what have I gained in the past month; what am I lacking, those types of things.” Lastly, Marlo mentioned how she liked that she can scroll backwards through the pictures she posted and see how much her physique had changed that year.

SNSs act as spaces for which its community is free to be the producers of their own reality show. Out of all the different social media platforms online, the participants unequivocally used Instagram and Facebook for social interaction. Even more distinctive

were the differences in what they posted to those sites because the audiences are different. For instance, Maria and Sam were teachers, so they avoided posting their fitness-related material on Facebook because they were connected with a lot of coworkers, parents, and former students. Sam stated that it would be inappropriate to show herself in a bikini on Facebook. Similarly, since her Facebook and Instagram accounts were linked, Courtney could post to both sites simultaneously. But, she still censored herself. She said:

...if it's a selfie or a body shot, I'll post only to Instagram because my population is different. On Facebook I have a lot more family members and a lot more local people, so it's a big Christian following. I don't want to be showing a lot of skin and offend anybody. Whereas on Instagram, I'm probably one of the most covered up people [laughs].

Consideration of how others may feel about or perceive the participants was the main reason they had separate accounts and spaces to present themselves. Marlo and Sam stated that their families and people they know would get annoyed when they posted too much about bodybuilding. Instagram was a way for them to express their interests without feeling judgment from them yet gain support from other fitness-enthusiasts.

Additionally, Jenn explained that she kept her profiles separate to represent herself in different perspectives:

I post a lot more selfies on Instagram than I do on Facebook because I've got my grandmother on Facebook, and I know she probably wouldn't agree with a selfie of me flexing my abs. So I try to shield my sweet little grandmother from seeing that...I guess Facebook is more of the PG version of [name redacted] and Instagram is kind of like the no holds barred, hold onto your pants, you don't know what you're going to get version.

Results signified that the participants used Instagram for social comparison.

Many found motivation by looking at famous IFBB professionals as role models. For

instance, giving and receiving feedback from these individuals boosted their self-esteem and determination to achieve their fitness goals. Findings from Ploderer et al. (2008) were similar where participants were attracted to the bodybuilding lifestyle by first admiring famous bodybuilders. This was classified as upward comparison. The participants said they followed other fitness enthusiasts or athletes to see their progress. Downward comparison is intended to increase one's self-esteem because they are judging their bodies against someone who is less muscular than them (Ploderer et al., 2008). Downward comparison was evident in the current study, which implies that they sought to enhance their self-perceptions. Nevertheless, social comparison is a significant factor in self-presentation because people influence each other's identity in different sociocultural contexts (Goffman, 1959).

Every participant used Instagram to compare themselves to other women who were in similar phases of training. Maria stated, "...it motivates me because when I see pictures of people and I'm like, 'wow, she's also five weeks out, I need to get my ass in gear.' It kinda pushes me." Social comparison is unavoidable, yet Maria benefited from it by staying accountable for her diet and workouts. Most of the other participants explained that they tried not to compare themselves to other female figure athletes anymore because it negatively affected their body image and messed with their heads. Further, several women mentioned that comparing themselves to other athletes had similar negative effects as when they compared themselves to mainstream media representations of women. Regardless, the participants valued and portrayed themselves as fit and muscular women and actively rebelled against the mainstream hegemonic

ideals of feminine qualities of thinness and powerlessness. They chose to conform to the norms of the bodybuilding culture because they believed that being strong and muscular was more feminine (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). Further, they brought meaning to how they shaped and identified as female athletes in a contested terrain. Additional information on the psychological aspects of training will be presented in the general dimension of investments and outcomes of training and competitions.

Another main reason for using Instagram was the desire for positive reinforcement through feedback and support from like-minded individuals. Jenn said that everyone who uses Instagram wants some sort of “acceptance” and validation. She went on to explain why she liked posting and how it made her feel:

If I'm posting something, and I find it funny, I want to share that... and someone posts “lol”, or they tag their friend in it. To me, that makes me feel good, you know...it goes back to helping people break out of those shells of self-loathing and searching for self-confidence...

Self-presentations are done to elicit responses from one’s audience, and these responses affect the performer psychologically and emotionally (Goffman, 1959). Further, the participants practiced impression management, which is one component to Goffman’s theory, via their profile posts because they wanted people to perceive them the way they intended.

The participants expressed self-appraisal and obtained validation from their audience by frequently posting selfies. This may suggest they had narcissistic tendencies. Photographs that were commonly used included selfies in mirrors at gyms or homes. More privacy at home allows one to pose with less clothing on and to avoid any “backstage” interruption, which was proposed in Goffman’s (1959) theory. As Ploderer

et al. (2008) suggested, male and female bodybuilders intentionally present their flexed bodies for a few reasons a) they want to show off their achievements like a work of art and b) they seek validation from others in order to enhance their self-perception. Lastly, they wish to present themselves as experienced fitness enthusiasts in the bodybuilding community. Marlo stated that she received an ego-boost when people commented on how good she looked. Because she knew how much dedication and discipline it took to achieve her level of muscularity, Marlo benefited psychologically when she showed her progress in public spaces. She also liked when people asked questions about her training because she could inform others about the healthy side of bodybuilding. These statements are congruent with the rest of the participants because they recognized that bodybuilding is all about aesthetics.

Buffardi and Campbell (2008) suggested that being narcissistic indicates that one is self-absorbed and is apathetic towards others. The participants did not appear to be self-absorbed nor did they indicate that they had a self-inflated ego because they took numerous selfies. Also, these participants deeply care for others, as their main goal for the fitspo accounts was to inspire and support others on similar journeys. However, selfies were taken and displayed for the desire of self-promotion and validation. They were also used for self-expression, motivation, and inspiration for others. Manning (1992) indicated that the social identity refers to an individual's interactions in social spaces, and ego identity is related to self-perception. This concept reflects the current results along with Goffman's (1959) theory. Feedback and validation from others on

social media fueled their muscle ego and aided their desire for impression management of their self-presentation.

Positive feedback the participants received on their posts involved compliments to how much progress they had made. In general, the comments on selfies were things like, “great job,” “keep up the good work girl,” “you look amazing,” “thanks for the motivation on this crappy day,” and “you’re such an inspiration.” Marlo and others reported that it was an ego-boost to get these types of comments. However, she stated that it felt better to get the “thank you for helping inspire me on my fitness journey” comments. Similarly, Irene indicated that she liked it when she received compliments and positive feedback on the words she wrote in her captions; these made her feel better than compliments on her body. She explained:

I don't want people just saying, “oh you're pretty, oh I love your arms.” I'd rather hear something about my personality...most of my feedback is about my positive outlook, or how I motivated them that day...I'll get crazy long emails from girls explaining their story and how what I shared made them feel better or helped them...

Irene also indicated that she believed she was making a positive contribution to society through her Instagram account. She said, “I love the posts I write and I get like 50 comments on it...that kind of stuff makes me motivated to write better things cause I like knowing I'm impacting people without actually being there.” The participants indicated that they were more fulfilled by receiving thoughtful feedback about their words rather than how good they looked. This signifies that they also sought to promote themselves on the basis of their character and the impact they had on others. Bodybuilding is aesthetically driven, yet the participants valued feedback about their thoughts, feelings,

and personalities. This implies that even though they consciously conformed to the norms of the bodybuilding culture, they still wanted to create and present a complete human identity (Krane, 2001).

Cheikh-Ammar and Barki (2014) explained that the term “like” has a few different yet standard meanings in social media. For instance, “liking” a status or picture may mean positive validation for the poster, which is a prominent purpose for using Instagram. It can also allude to the reputation of the poster based on the quantity of “likes” they get. In essence, this type of feedback acts as social approval or acknowledgment in the context of SNSs. This type of feedback might indicate a more positive self-perception and a heightened awareness of communion with a wider community (Cheikh-Ammar & Barki, 2014). For example, the participants of the present study had thousands of followers on Instagram and received hundreds of “likes” on every post. They mentioned that it made them feel good to have so many responses. Moreover, it made them feel connected, motivated, and empowered because so many people accepted and validated them. For example, Irene declared that she felt good when she could write something thought provoking that resulted in a lot of feedback. She liked that she could share things about her life that helped or allowed others to see a different perspective. Results from Ploderer et al.’s (2008) study revealed that members of social support sites like BodySpace necessitated the need for feedback, which was almost always positive. Further, members required this online interaction in order to stay on track and motivated because they did not receive much support in their personal lives. This is why many individuals seek online social networks where people can easily locate

others who share similar values and interests. These findings underline the significance that social support is vital to one's presence on social media.

Another dynamic that was important to the participants' usage of Instagram was their response to positive comments. Monique discussed how strategic she was with her account because she wanted to be an influencer in society. She stated that she responded to everyone who sought her help, and that it was important to treat her "fans" as a significant part of her fitness journey. Again, she mentioned how powerful it was to be a role model to thousands of people. Responses to comments on Instagram included phrases like "thanks for the love," "great job on your progress," "thank you, you look great, too," and "don't give up." Not only were the participants seeking positive affirmations for themselves, but they also sought opportunities to express their admiration and encouragement for others who also had fitness goals.

Feeling connected to a community of people who share the same interests was another significant reason for using Instagram. Irene shared her thoughts on how she was able to make a difference in someone else's life, which would not have happened if it were not for social media. She remarked, "there's at least two or three friends [she made on Instagram] that I've helped completely get over their eating disorder...without them emailing me and sharing their stories, I would never be able to have them in my life." This suggested that Instagram is a way for people to create significant and meaningful bonds with others who may share in similar struggles. Irene also mentioned how much this community meant to her fitness journey. She said, "it's a place for people to feel comfort, to make friends, to learn and grow, to share anything...I know if I didn't have

social media in my life, I would 100% not be where I am right now.” Still others like Romita shared her outlook on social media. She stated that it was weird how you can actually feel that even though you have never met or talked to the person, you can still have a sense of community and support that you might not get from people in your own life. Lastly, Sam agreed that her Instagram fitfam was helpful in the way of expressing herself with others on the same journey:

I have very few people in my actual personal life that are interested in the same things...on social media you have a family of thousands that are interested in the same thing...you can share stories and share your pictures...so it really branches out you circle of people with similar interests.

The predominant reason the participants used Instagram was to help others realize their worth (the way they are) and motivate them to be physically fit. All of the participants said their main reason for their presence on Instagram was to be a positive role model for other women. Moreover, they wanted to share their positivity and help other women who struggled to create the body they want or help improve their self-confidence. Jenn stated that she liked making people feel good, motivated, and inspired, so she would post something that she felt might help with that. Likewise, Romita mentioned that she went through dieting and Weight Watchers, which inspired her to reach out to other women who struggled with their weight. She said that by posting photographs of her successes and failures that she could relate and help motivate other women get into a more positive mindset. She finally realized that the main problem was her inner dialogue. After working on her self-talk, she was able to control her mind and body. It was only through this realization that it helped Romita overcome issues with depression and weight gain. Although she acknowledged the belief that posing and

taking selfies was somewhat vain, it proved to be beneficial to others seeking fitness motivation. She said:

I definitely think I'm no different, it would be a lie and dishonest to say I'm not vain...I want people to know that I am real, I do still struggle, and I'm still vain. I want people to see that my hard work has paid off, and they can do it too.

These women chose to present themselves as real and honest people in the hopes of spreading inspiration to others. Their online performances and interactions confirmed that they sought inclusion and acceptance by their peers and audience (Ploderer et al., 2008).

Similarly, Monique mentioned that branding herself a role model was her method of being an influencer in society. Branding oneself means that one attempts to create an ideal representation of himself or herself in order to show others what they want them to see (Goodings & Tucker, 2014). Van Dijck (2013) argued that people mindfully curate or brand digital presentations to gain popularity and access to the benefits of social connectivity. This directly relates to Goffman's (1959) Self-Presentation Theory where individuals perform various roles in society in order to conform to various societal prescriptions such as gender. For example, Instagram could be considered a stage where actors are influential performers promoting their brand.

This study exemplified that women have a strong voice in society, and they desire to help others with self-improvement and self-actualization just as they have done for themselves. Further, the results suggested that people generally create fitspo accounts to motivate and inspire themselves and others. Romita stated that her fitspo Instagram account was mainly utilized as a teaching tool to help other women who have problems

with their weight and body image. These findings coincided with results from Antunovic and Hardin (2013) where the female participants sought interactions with others that they related to and also provided helpful information for others.

Additionally, Courtney asserted that she wanted to gain as many followers as possible. Her target population was women (moms, in particular) so that she could inspire them to get in shape and feel good about their post-pregnancy figure. Courtney realized that there were many people on Instagram who gave out diet and exercise advice who may not be qualified or educated to do so. She received her Master's degree in exercise physiology, yet was still hesitant to give people diet and exercise plans. She stated, "what kept me going was when people kept asking me for help...I'm like 'okay, I can really help these people with a scientific mindset' versus someone who is giving out exercise plans because they look great on Instagram." Also, Monique expressed the desire to use her account as a means for something greater than merely self-presentation:

I recently came up with the idea that I wanted to put something out there like a cause...I want more of a purpose than, "okay I'm pretty, I have a nice body, so look at me and follow me because of that"...there's people [on Instagram] with thousands of followers and it's because they're showing their butt, and I'm not about that at all.

Monique's desire to influence her audience in a meaningful way is a positive step in the way of challenging hegemonic femininity and representations of women as the weaker sex. One example is how they choose not to post sexualized images of themselves, which could elicit praise for their sex appeal and not their accomplishments.

The instant ability to publish and access a multitude of information was another reason all of the participants used Instagram. Irene explained that she utilized the vast amounts of data on Instagram for food and workout inspiration. She said:

I really like looking at other fitness pages and getting ideas from other people, so I search hashtags a lot...I look up hashtags like motivational ones or anything related to fitness or bodybuilding....I've been trying to look up a lot of good recipe ideas cause a lot of my followers have been emailing and telling me they like when I post creative recipes. I would say I find most of my workouts that I didn't know about before, just from Instagram videos on other accounts that I've come across.

Hashtags are the main information pathway one would take on this media platform, so they will be discussed in this section. One strategic method for gaining followers and exposure on Instagram is researching the more popular hashtags that are associated with other photos. Courtney was passionate about a specific population of women who are pregnant or who have had babies, so she utilized hashtags as a strategy to help them. She explained, "...I search hashtags like 'babyweight,' 'mommylifestyle,' and 'mommylife.' I look for ones that have like over 1000 'likes' because I know that it's a popular one that'll get searched, and I know my picture will be seen." Once she did her research, she used those tags on her photos to add to that specific category. Other common hashtags the participants used for their own photos as well as researching their interests were "fitfam," "fitspo," "fitness," "motivation," "npcfigure," "bodybuilding," and "girlswholift." Additionally, they searched for new exercise ideas by searching specific body part names like "delts," "legs," or "glutes," or exercises like "lunges." For food ideas they searched and used hashtags like "paleo," "protein," "chicken," "fitmom," "cleaneating," and "healthy." Searching hashtags allowed these individuals to connect

with others who shared the same interests in health, fitness, and training for figure competitions. Due to the endless possibilities that are accessible, the participants indicated that hashtags were essential tools for socialization, knowledge, and comparison to others.

Another significant reason several participants utilized Instagram was because it was a free way to advertise and market themselves. The researcher did not locate any previous scholarly work related to this aspect of social media usage, as it was not presumed to be relevant. Nevertheless, it proved to be a significant self-presentation factor and their intentions for using Instagram. Marlo, Courtney, Irene, and Romita indicated that they advertised for nutrition supplements and other companies they were affiliated with. Likewise, they stated that they obtained many clients via promoting their personal training and coaching business on Instagram. Irene and Monique were the only ones with a background in marketing and communication, but they all discussed their strategies for effective self-promotion. One major benefit of Instagram for the participants was that it was a mode of free advertising. This suggested that there are virtually limitless possibilities for entrepreneurs to profit by creating accounts for free and presenting information at their discretion. Participants utilized hashtags on their posts in order to gain more exposure and a bigger audience than just their followers. Popular hashtags like “fitness,” “bodybuilding,” and “fitspo” generated millions of photos when people searched those terms. Thus, their posts got more exposure, and they possibly gained more attention from individuals who were interested in fitness advice or information.

As Irene explained, there is no overhead regulation, so the platform is wide open for people to be “self-made.” Courtney and Irene used this technique to build their businesses. Irene tended to post around five times a day, which had been successful way of promoting herself. Another tactic she used was displaying her email address on her profile. She stated:

I thought that'd be a really good way for people to reach out to me, and it's been very successful....I get like 200 emails from followers every day, and a lot of them become my clients, and I think that's why I'm so successful with my online business...like, if I buy clothes, they'll buy the same clothes, or if I'm offering online training, they're going to buy it.

At the time, Irene had over 30,000 followers, and she attributed that following to her marketing background and being smart about the way she promoted herself. She credited her large amount of followers to the fact that they promoted her for free. One example of this was through creating eight-week challenges for her followers. She described a few details about the competition by stating, “everyone who enters is against each other. They work as hard as they can, and who ever makes the best transformation wins some pretty cool prizes.” The prizes consisted of things like free online training, supplements, and other products. The participants then promoted her for free by using specific hashtags that would lead back to her account name. She said she got a lot of “shout-outs” that way, which also led to an increase in followers. Likewise, Courtney created advertisements to increase her online training clientele. She described a photograph advertisement that she was going to post at the time of the interview to attract new personal training clients. She said she designed it with a photo shoot she did last year, and used captions and other stuff to make it look artistic. Furthermore, she said she was

proud of that artwork considering she had no marketing background. This example shows that SNSs grants people access to resources that may make them successful.

Negative aspects of social media

All of the participants discussed the negative aspects of posting about one's life and interests on social media. Jenn acknowledged that it was easy to post what you want others to perceive, or how you want to represent yourself. Most participants mentioned the term "fake," and it related to the concept that the Internet is a virtual space where people can portray themselves any way they want. Most people prefer to portray themselves in "the best light possible," as Romita stated. Irene also explained how Instagram has its downside where people are not necessarily your friends in real life:

...if you have a lot of followers it doesn't necessarily mean that they're real people that you're friends with...People can make themselves look like something they're not, so especially on fitness accounts, I see people posting only the edited pictures of themselves or pose in certain ways to make themselves look better than they actually are...they give people a skewed image of what women should look like, or [present] unobtainable goals that even that person doesn't even look like.

Clearly, the participants understood that everyone puts on a front, or mask, in order to present oneself the way they want to be perceived. Just as the culture of sport is a political site for gender construction and power, self-presentations on social networks are also spaces where individuals struggle for acknowledgment and acceptance for one's appearance and abilities.

Likewise, all the participants discussed the sexualization of photos, and they agreed that it is rampant in the fitfam. Monique, who expressed her desire to have a respectable "brand" for herself, said that such photos perpetuate the portrayal of women that is depicted in mainstream media. She commented:

Women will put pictures of their glutes with a thong on, and they'll say "this is a progress pic"...that's just an excuse to put your butt on the Internet...you're putting straight up lingerie on the Internet and saying, "well, this is my progress pic of my glutes." I get it, sex sells, but it's just not making it any easier for women to be taken seriously...I'm gonna be seen and respected for something that is powerful and deserves to be respected...If that's the route that women want to take, let them because it makes it easier for me to shine.

Marlo said she had the same reaction when she came across risqué pictures of women.

She explained, "I'm not looking at their physique at that point because that's not what they want; they want sexual attention...they're being so transparent." Similarly, Jenn used to use the application Snapchat. Men started sending her pictures of their penises, so she immediately deleted her account.

All of the participants agreed that they consider overtly sexual photos damaged one's reputation, so they refrained from presenting themselves in that manner. Moreover, they did not indicate that they were objectifying themselves; rather, they viewed and portrayed themselves as strong, independent, real, and feminine women. Also, they took and posted images of their segmented body parts, but they did not perceive it to be a reflection of how mainstream media portrays the female body. Rather, posting those pictures enabled them to present their progress and pride in their hard work. However, participants in Ploderer et al.'s (2008) study indicated that women who posed in semi-sexual pictures were judged as popularity seekers. While the participants in the current study did not say they were intentionally posing in semi-sexual ways, they expressed the desire to gain attention and praise from others. This verified Goffman's (1959) theory yet, the results showed that the participants did not deliberately objectify themselves. In

summary, because of this negative perception had by all of the participants, they claimed not to post anything that they deemed too sexual or degrading to women.

Another negative to social media is the amount of adverse and hurtful messages that people say. Jenn said that negative comments would have greatly affected her if it were not for her high self-esteem and confidence. She had a few damaging comments where she never understood why someone would feel it in their heart to say or post something negative like that. Furthermore, she stated:

To tell someone that they look like a “disgusting mutant man”, or tell someone something scathing or rude just for the sake of saying it, is really wrong...and it speaks more about you if you are going to say something negative than it does me.

Romita similarly expressed that she thought it was interesting and sad how people found it acceptable to criticize someone who was trying to practice self-improvement. Part of the consequence of posting on social media is the idea that individuals put themselves in the way of judgment and criticism. Romita further asserted:

I have more of a feminine look, so I think it appeals to more people. Sometimes I get creepy guys trolling...but I just block it and don't tolerate it. To some degree you're going to get that because you're putting yourself out there, so you have to expect that....I think the more followers you have the nastier it gets.

Sam commented that the only negative feedback she received came from family and friends who told her she was obsessed. She was also told to stop lifting weights because she was going to turn into a guy. Irene also received some critical comments about her body and level of muscularity during the week before a competition. She explained, “I’ll get some people who are just like, ‘that’s too far,’ or ‘that’s too lean,’ but it’s not even rude. It’s just saying that’s not normal, but I know it’s not normal.” This implies that

many members who identify with the figure and bodybuilding communities view themselves as “others” where they are disconnected from the general public (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). However, the participants were being apologetic for their muscularity by adding back feminine features that would give them social rewards (Kane, 2013; Krane, 2001).

According to findings from Grogan et al. (2004), the female physique competitors would ignore the criticism from the mainstream public. They expressed that non-bodybuilders do not understand their sport, so outside judgments were not meaningful. Grogan et al. (2004) revealed that female physique competitors mainly received positive feedback, but they would also get long stares and negative reactions from people in public spaces. These women tended to hide their bodies under ill-fitting clothes to avoid criticisms from others. Alternatively, the participants in the present study did not feel the need to cover up in fear of ostracism because they were able to counter the masculine features by the way they presented themselves.

The current findings resulted in similar fashion to Grogan et al. (2004), however. Comments from others outside of the fitness family were not tolerated by the participants and did not affect their self-perceptions. Also, Jenn, among other participants, said that if she had low self-esteem, negative comments like “you look like a man” would destroy her self-confidence. Negative feedback was uncommon on BodySpace, which may imply that since it was a community of people dedicated and passionate about bodybuilding, people only supported each other (Ploderer et al., 2008). However, Instagram is a site open to anyone but does have subcultures like the fitfam.

Consequently, this allows the opportunity for more negative feedback from the non-bodybuilding community with dissimilar passions for health and fitness. Further non-bodybuilding outsiders may conform to hegemonic gender constructions and dismiss those who fall outside those norms (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). The participants of the current study aptly called this category the “haters or trolls of Instagram.”

Relationship to followers

Social media sites enable its members to interact with each other. For Irene, her relationship with her followers was close. She stated that she tried to make her account not only about her, but rather made it interactive and inclusive. She, as well as the other seven participants, responded to every comment or question they got. They agreed that it was rude to ignore people if they took the time to give feedback. Irene said she received over 200 emails a day, and she responded to every one. Mostly, the emails pertained to getting training or fitness advice, so she built her client base that way. On the other hand, Marlo and Maria did not have significant connections to their followers in particular. For example, Marlo mentioned that when she posted a picture of her dog she would only get about 30 “likes” versus a fitness selfie, which would get more like 70. Some participants had not thought about the relationship they had with their followers. Marlo, along with other participants, was intrigued by this idea of having online relationships considering she had over 500 followers at the time. Lastly, some of the participants felt an obligation to support and respond to posts from their teammates and coaches.

Similarly, all of the participants mentioned that they made significant connections on Instagram with people they did not know in person. Courtney explained that she made

supportive friends through her use of hashtags. Some participants mentioned that they enjoyed getting feedback from celebrities and bigger names in the fitness industry. For instance, Irene said she had received feedback from IFBB professionals like Amanda Latona and Jamie Eason. She explained that it made her excited, but she tried to talk to them like normal people. Also, Maria said that her husband made fun of her when she got excited if a celebrity liked a post. The meaning the women gave to their interactions with others signified that others influenced their presentation and identity. This supports Goffman's assertion that individuals create social discourse by their performances and the way they interact with one another.

Perceptions of selfies

Many of the participants described the selfie phenomenon as ridiculous and out of control. Marlo asserted that she followed a lot of people who only posted selfies. She also wondered, facetiously, what else they did in their free time. As an outcome of this perception, Marlo avoided posting too many selfies because "it gets old." Also, Courtney thought that people were obsessed with posting things to social media for attention. She said:

There's a lot of research that's showing that we're so caught up in taking pictures and documenting what we're doing that we're missing the actual moments...that we actually aren't enjoying life in the moment...[people who take] a lot of excessive selfies are the ones that either have had in the past low self-esteem and they still do, or they have gone in the completely opposite direction, and they're just so obsessed with their physique that they need that validation.

Sam also commented that she thought people were "begging for attention" when they post one selfie after another. She said, amusingly, that she did not understand what the person was trying to convey in one selfie that they did not already present in the previous

47. Moreover, the predominant attitude was that selfies are narcissistic, but it is the new norm for representing oneself on social media. Rosen (2012) and Schwarz (2010) argued that smartphones and social media like Instagram have permitted people to obsess about their appearance. This perspective relates to the current study because the participants are passionate about controlling their appearance, as well as documenting it on their Instagram accounts for others to see. They acknowledged that self-absorption relates to taking and posting selfies, but they chose to present themselves in this fashion for the purposes of self-expression.

Following others

Instagram is not only about posting pictures and receiving feedback, but an individual also has the ability to follow others. This was an important dynamic to the participants, and they had criteria in common for choosing whom to follow. In general, they all followed positive and inspirational accounts. Sam stated that as long as they were positive, upbeat, and funny, she enjoyed watching other people's progress and fitness journey. Having a consistent pattern of posts was also favorable to most participants. They preferred to follow accounts that only post about food, motivation, humorous things, and fitness. Several participants indicated that they would not follow people who only posted selfies however. They also stated that they liked to see other accounts that have numerous posts and followers. All of the participants specified that they followed current IFBB professionals like: Nicole Wilkins, Amanda Latona, Jamie Eason, Rob and Dana Bailey, and Leanna Carr. Further, Monique enjoyed looking at professionals' accounts to see how they trained for shows. She explained that, "if you

know the names of the competitors that are hot right now, you can follow them and see what training they are doing; it sheds light on other people's journeys.” Also, Maria stated that she followed teammates, so she could see what their journey was like and respond with positive things on their posts. Furthermore, Jenn followed a lot of Olympic lifters and Crossfit athletes, because she said it is like watching “poetry in motion.” The participants gravitated towards others who were positive, encouraging, health and fitness-minded, and lighthearted. The participants benefited the most from a combination of these factors because it helped them stay focused on their interests and fitness journey. Their Instagram use was not only for their self-presentations, but also to judge and compare their journeys to other bodybuilding individuals. This contributed to the meaning they gave to their experiences as female figure competitors who use social media for fitness purposes.

Investments and Outcomes of Training and Competitions

The investments and outcomes of training and competitions general dimension included one higher order theme: process and preparation.

Process and preparation

The participants all mentioned how sharing their journey to the NPC figure stage on Instagram contributed significantly to the overall process of training for such shows. The results indicated that photographically documenting their physique progress gave them an outlet to express themselves. Further, their Instagram usage helped fuel and reflect the work they did to get the physique they wanted. This section was comprised of three components of preparation: physical, diet and nutrition, and psychological. These

aspects, though separated, were significantly related to each other. Also, these concepts were highly integrated into the participant's self-presentations on and offline because they attributed their identity to their training regime and lifestyle. Consequently, these experiences and exhibitions were presented via the photos, hashtags, comments, and interactions they had on Instagram. In other words, their online self-presentations directly related to their processes of training, preparation, and affect.

All of the participants described the physical training as having two phases: bulking and cutting. The participants indicated that they counted down the weeks from their competitions in order to prepare appropriately for their body's needs. In theory, bulking was performed to put on as much muscle as possible so that fat could easily come off while maintaining the muscle tissue when cutting. So, they were motivated to lift as heavy as possible. The cutting phase in their preparation was focused more heavily on the cardiovascular training in order to shed body fat. There is still significant weightlifting involved, so they would not lose muscle while losing fat. All participants documented this phase in their training via their presentations on Instagram.

The majority of the physical work was done in a traditional gym setting. However, Crossfit was also a method for training. Sam and Jenn both used Crossfit to help get them in better shape and learn to do the lifts and maneuvers correctly. Additionally, they said they enjoyed the atmosphere more because it was like being a part of a team. Jenn explained that the athletes were united by the same motivations and goals:

I walk into the box and everyone's like "hey how's it going?" We all suffer together, we all cheer each other on, we all rejoice together....everyone's just so

supportive...and you feel like part of the family I guess. And it's challenging. I love to challenge myself because I'm not in any way gymnastic or flexible, and there's a lot of mind-body connection that has to go on with Crossfit.

Jenn went on to say that once her first competition was over she started to see her hard-earned muscles disappear, which messed with her mind. To cope with this loss, she started Crossfit. She said the beautiful thing about it was that it had nothing to do with the way you look and everything to do with how you perform. Moreover, Jenn and Sam valued the team aspect as it contributed to their fitness journey. Team cohesion was a direct reflection of the fitness community on Instagram. The participants all sought a passion-centric space where they could interrelate with others.

The bulking phase for the diet aspect consisted of eating more calories than what was expended in order to build muscle. Again, they presented this aspect of their fitness training on Instagram through photographs and recipes of their food, so they could share with others. The participants all described the cutting phase as somewhat undesirable because it was rough on their hormones and body in general when they were in a caloric deficit. In order to shed the body fat, they mainly reduced calories from carbohydrates. However, throughout both phases, most participants stated that they kept their diet high in protein in order to maximize muscle growth. Many of the participants practiced the clean eating philosophy, which meant they did not eat anything processed.

Consequently, Maria stated that the cutting process made her feel miserable because she was tired, moody, and hungry all the time. Maria, Sam, and Monique used cheat meals as a sort of reward for the week and a break from the strict routine. Monique said that since she was naturally lean, two cheat meals a week would not affect her progress. In

general, many participants described their meals as bland, repetitive, and simply fuel for their bodies. The participants used Instagram as an immense source of relief and a technique for coping with the challenges of training and cutting. This was exhibited through their written statements, beliefs, and positivity in the captions on their pictures. Also, posting pictures of appetizing cheat meals symbolizing hard-earned rewards was prevalent among the participants.

The psychological component appeared to be the most difficult aspect of training and preparing for competitions. Most participants expressed that the training was grueling unless one had inner strength and motivation. So their fitness posts on Instagram gave a realistic representation of how they coped with the difficult training programs. For example, all of them experienced such side effects to the rigorous training and diet restriction as moodiness, muscle pain, exhaustion, hunger, burnout, isolation from friends, and hormone imbalance. Marlo explained that one must have significant will power in order to be successful:

You're kinda at this war between your body and your mind. It's like, do you want that pizza, or do you want to win this show? You have to ask yourself that a lot. Some people want the pizza more, so they'll go and binge and hate themselves afterwards. So, you have to be a very strong person in order to get through your contest prep successfully.

Monique asserted that, in order to have the self-control and dedication to a strict diet, one must take their emotions out of the eating process. The participants stated that through their Instagram usage, they would reinforce the importance of mental toughness in order to be successful in figure competitions and training. Most of the participants indicated that they had a difficult time with the mental aspect of training, so they would express

their feelings in the captions of their posts on Instagram. For example, some experienced the desire to give up because the process can be all-consuming. Maria was a competitor who dealt with the battle between her mind and body. She said:

Your mind becomes so consumed with the whole show when you're maybe three weeks out...you say to yourself, "I'm not gonna be able to do this." From the hormones, you go nuts. Sometimes I'll binge eat, which is horrible, and the next morning I'm a wreck...But when you're so low with your food intake, you have your family, work, your kids on top of it; sometimes you just spiral out of control.

Likewise, Courtney had feelings of wanting to quit after she did her first competition.

Her first coach restricted her calories so much that she knew it was unhealthy, which made her lose motivation. She explained:

I was supposed to completely carb deplete and then carb and water load. I mean, I just looked like crap on stage because my body was [out of whack]...so I stepped off stage and said, "I'm never competing again." Since then, I've found a coach that trains me in a healthier way, and I haven't had that mindset anymore that I want to give up.

Romita, Irene, and Jenn all worked on their mental game year-round. Romita described how her battle with weight fluctuations ended when she started to focus on her internal dialogue. Furthermore, she said that she was more at peace with herself because she was more in tune with how she feels. Romita would use her influence on Instagram to encourage women to find inner peace and balance in order to be successful with weight loss goals. For Irene, she also stated that she focused on the mental aspect year-round. She practiced self-encouragement and tried to find the positive in everything. Also, she said she kept her ultimate goal for becoming an IFBB professional in mind, which helped her stay focused. She used these aspirations to help motivate others to get in shape through her extended written comments on her photos.

Similarly, Jenn used Crossfit to help with her mental focus because it did not revolve around aesthetics. She explained:

Crossfit has really helped me mentally going into off-season because now I focus on getting stronger. That's also helped with my confidence....You have to be so dedicated and so disciplined. It really is more of a mental game than it is a physical one because you have to eat every two hours, and you have to eat THIS every two hours, you have to drink THIS much every day, you have to go to the gym, you have to do cardio, and you can't go out on the weekends with your friends, and you can't eat that birthday cake for your seven year-old niece even though she wants you to. You basically become an automaton...

For all the participants, the dynamics of training and preparing for shows added significance to their lives and experiences. Through the written and photographic documentation of their fitness journey on Instagram, they exhibited their lifestyle for others to view. Further, this process helped them transform their physique into what they envisioned as the ideal feminine body. For example, Jenn displayed her interests in Crossfit on Instagram, which contributed to how she managed her fitness journey. Besides only showing off her physique progress on her account, Jenn decided to represent training as an art form and a meticulous process that should be recognized and respected. As a result, Instagram was the main method for these women to express their passions for fitness and present the bodies they were trying to create.

Limitations

One limitation to this study was that the participants were all females of differing ages. Thus, age could have influenced the results. For example, three of the participants who were in their 30s and 40s had different perceptions than the other five in their 20s. This study was partially based on recollection of childhood upbringing, thus the older participants may have had a more difficult time recalling aspects of their lives compared

to the participants in their 20s. Likewise, participants in their 20s grew up with vastly different technologies and virtual communication, whereas the older participants did not. People of younger generations tend to be more absorbed with their virtual identities and presenting themselves on social media compared to people of older generations (Schwarz, 2010).

Another limitation to the study involved the lack of insight into the influences of racial, ethnic, and cultural constructions that pertained to self-presentations on and off social media. Hesse-Biber et al. (2006) argued that there are significant differences across racial lines in the ways women negotiate their femininity. For instance, White American women are held to the hegemonic ideology of White American men. African American, Asian American, and Mexican American women may be held to those same standards, but their backgrounds dictate how they perceive and present themselves. Further, body image ideals may vary from culture to culture (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006).

Future Directions

There is a need for further research into this category of women, and the opportunities are numerous. For instance, sexuality is a social construction like gender that gives meaning to one's lived-experiences, so this aspect may allow insight into another sociocultural dynamic that affects self-presentation and self-perception. The participants in the current study revealed that they were all heterosexual, however. They all had body image issues in the past and present, which indicates that heteronormative values of being thin, and therefore beautiful, affected their self-perceptions. Krane (2001) mentioned that lesbian athletes are more accepting of higher weight levels and are

less concerned over their appearance as opposed to heterosexual women. Thus, there is a need to look at female figure competitors who also identify with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community.

Similarly, future studies could investigate the ways other female competitors utilize social media for fitness purposes. Further research could examine athletes in other federations and in other categories like bikini and physique. Examining these categories may shed light on how they present and perceive themselves as women who associate with the bodybuilding and fitness community. Bikini and physique athletes are on opposite ends of the perceived gender spectrum in terms of what feminine and masculine traits are suppressed or celebrated. This study looked at a more or less balanced aspect of this gender continuum, whereby the participants were deemed not too masculine but not too feminine by social standards.

Another future direction might include the examination of Crossfit training for NPC figure shows. Only two participants indicated they do Crossfit as part of their training along with the traditional gym routine. Training in these two distinct places made it apparent that the participants had different experiences compared to those who only lifted weights in the gym. For one, the gym culture is mainly where individuals work on their fitness separately from others. In Crossfit gyms, however, working together as a team is an integral part of the experience. This suggested that team unity experiences changed the way these participants viewed themselves and the bodybuilding community at large. Also, including a discussion about teams with regards to one's

experiences of bodybuilding and using social media may help support Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory about team participation and identity construction.

Lastly, more research is warranted which looks across socioeconomic status (SES) and race. The majority of previous research on female athletes has examined student populations at universities and other colleges (e.g., Homan et al., 2008; Krane et al., 2004; Krcmar, Giles & Helme, 2008). This method disregards the experiences and opinions of those who choose not to be students or do not have access to an education. The results indicated that many people outside of universities utilize social media and participate in competitive figure shows. Also, while this study allowed for the research to be broadened to those of different SES backgrounds, it fell short of examining experiences of women from different races. The participants were all born and raised in the United States and were mostly White. Obtaining experiences of women from a variety of different ethnicities could add merit to future research on female figure competitors and their uses of social media for their interests in fitness. For example, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences tend to influence the way men and women perceive themselves, shape their identities, and how they interact with others in social settings.

Conclusions and Implications

The general structure of this study permitted some implications for feminist and sport sociology researchers. However, it is not advisable that the findings be generalized to all amateur female figure competitors. Numerous other factors should be noted in order to obtain a clearer picture of this population such as: SES, ethnicity, sexual orientation, performance enhancement, age, upbringing, prior or current eating disorders,

and method of training, to name several. As Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993) noted, qualitative research provides a meaningful way for people to subjectively understand the world around them. Further, the inductive approach to understanding one's personal experiences was vital to this study because social discourses and contexts are ever changing and complex.

The results of the study indicated that the participants utilized social media like Instagram as a way to express their identity as women and as athletes in a contested terrain like bodybuilding and figure competitions. Social deviance from hegemonic femininity was one outcome of their training and bodybuilding. Their intentions were focused on greater muscularity, and this gave them a significant sense of inner strength and empowerment. Thus, training and sharing their fitness journey with others in a passion-centric social network contributed to their overall sense of identities as women. Even though they strayed from traditional social prescriptions of femininity and beauty, they complied with the prescriptions of the bodybuilding culture. This was evident in their desire to enhance their muscularity as a true testament to beauty and feminine ideals. This notion supports Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory, whereby people play roles and give performances in order to be acceptable to their audience. The participants' performances on and off social media were expressions of what they wanted to exude as members of the fitness community, so these acts were created and constructed to present their best qualities. Construction was found in the posing and preparation stages as well as the editing process before they published their photographs.

Instagram and other media allowed the participants to represent themselves and interact with a wide-reaching audience, which helped shape their identity and the meaning they gave to their experiences as figure athletes. Another significant product of the data analysis was the reasons they used Instagram in particular. The main reason they used their accounts was to document their progress and journey to the stage for figure shows. Coincidentally, through their posts and hashtag usage, they were able to inspire and motivate more people who seek fitness inspiration on social media. The participants unanimously said they were more gratified when they received feedback on how they helped others instead of the flattering comments about their physique. New insight may be gleaned from these individuals who posted photographs of themselves on social media for fitness purposes. For example, the participants conveyed a certain level of narcissism because they sought approval and validation for their aesthetics. This contributed to enhancing their ego and self-confidence. They reaped more personal benefits from feedback about their human identity and desire to help others. Thus, this specific aspect cannot be construed as narcissism because they were driven to help others in a much more selfless manner. Instagram was a tool for them to learn new things about health and fitness, market themselves for business purposes, and share their personal lives with others in a passion-centric space. Further, by examining their experiences the researcher was able to give a new perspective on the ways women use social media to represent themselves in a patriarchal society and the social institution of sport. They negotiated the concepts of being judged based on aesthetics and beauty, but also were driven to express their individuality, character, and personality through their presentations on and offline.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board Approval

**SAN JOSÉ STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Division of Academic Affairs

Associate Vice President
Graduate Studies & Research

www.sjsu.edu/gradstudies

One Washington Square
San José, California 95192-0025
Voice: 408-924-2427

www.sjsu.edu

To: Victoria Lupinetti

From: Pamela Stacks, Ph.D.
Associate Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Pamela Stacks".

Date: August 18, 2014

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

“Self-presentation and social media: A qualitative examination of the use of Instagram by amateur NPC female figure competitors”

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the confidentiality of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Dr. Pamela Stacks, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subject's portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond August 18, 2015 requires an extension request.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2427.

Protocol #S1404011

cc. Jessica Chin 0054

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico, Dominguez Hills,
East Bay, Fresno, Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay,
Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino,
San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

Appendix B

Informed Consent

REQUEST FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Self-presentation and social media: A qualitative examination of the use of Instagram by amateur NPC female figure competitors

NAME OF THE RESEARCHER

Victoria Lupinetti, Graduate Student
Dr. Jessica W. Chin, Supervising Professor
Department of Kinesiology, San José State University

PURPOSE

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine how amateur female figure competitors use the social networking space of Instagram to present images of themselves to others.

PROCEDURES

You will be participating in an interview regarding how you post fitness photos on Instagram. The research will be conducted using semi-structured interviews and audio recordings. Based on circumstances, interviews will be done in person, over the telephone, or via video chat platforms such as Skype. Duration of each interview will be at your discretion; although, the hope is that all interviews last approximately 60 to 90 minutes, so that substantial and in depth information can be retrieved.

POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no potential risks anticipated in this study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

There will be no potential benefits for participants of this study.

COMPENSATION

Unfortunately, there will be no compensation for your time for this study. However, the primary researcher will be happy to provide you with a copy of the thesis once it has been completed.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The primary researcher will conduct and transcribe all interviews. Participants will be referred to in all transcripts and in the actual write up of the research only by generic code names or chosen pseudonyms. All real names of participants, institutions, and organizations will be changed as needed for confidentiality.

A list containing the names and contacts of each participant along with their code name will stay in a confidential folder located in a locked drawer at the home of the primary researcher. This list will only be accessible by the primary researcher and will be

shredded upon completion of the research thesis. The consent form will also be shredded upon completion of the thesis.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the entire study or any part of the study without any negative effect on your relations with San José State University. You also have the right to skip any question you do not wish to answer. This consent form is not a contract. It is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate. You will not waive any rights if you choose not to participate, and there is no penalty for stopping your participation in the study.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, please contact Victoria Lupinetti (916) 813-3317 or by email at v.lupinetti@gmail.com
- Complaints about the research may be presented to: Dr. Jessica Chin, Supervising Professor, at jessica.chin@sjsu.edu
- For questions about participants' rights or if you feel you have been harmed in any way by your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Pamela Stacks, Associate Vice President of Graduate Studies and Research, San José State University, at 408-924-2427.

SIGNATURES

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to be a part of the study, that the details of the study have been explained to you, that you have been given time to read this document, and that your questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records. Also, your signature indicates your permission to allow audio recordings of the interview, which will be erased upon completion of the thesis.

Participant Signature

Participant's Name (printed)

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher Statement

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to learn about the study and ask questions. It is my opinion that the participant understands his/her rights and the purpose, risks, benefits, and procedures of the research and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Appendix C

Participant Profiles

‘Courtney’ was a 29-year-old mother, personal trainer, online health coach, and entrepreneur from Ohio obtained her Masters degree in Exercise Science. She was a gymnast in high school, and she ran track and long distance running events in college. She has done three shows in the last year.

‘Irene’ a 22-year-old is a personal trainer, on-line health coach, and entrepreneur from New York. For most of her life she has participated in sports like: track, cross-country, volleyball, soccer, and powerlifting. She has competed in six NPC Figure shows so far and wishes to become an IFBB pro.

‘Jenn’ was a 23-year-old nurse from Oklahoma and was very active in sports all throughout her youth. She mostly competed in swimming, but had to stop due to a rotator cuff injury. She has competed in four shows and hopes to win the Olympia one day. Her hobbies include: bodybuilding, Crossfit, yoga, and backpacking.

‘Maria’ was a 32-year-old from Pennsylvania and is a mother, schoolteacher, and does online health coaching. She was very competitive and played sports throughout her childhood and still runs half marathons. She has competed in four NPC shows and wishes to become an IFBB pro. She also competes in the Bikini division.

‘Marlo’ was a 26-year-old from Georgia and is a personal trainer and a massage therapist. She was into sports like gymnastics and dance as a child. Although she lost interest in sports in high school and college, her boyfriend got her into bodybuilding two years ago. She has competed in one NPC show and wishes to become an IFBB pro.

‘Monique’ was a 23-year-old from Brooklyn who works as a marketing and sales representative, and she wants to obtain her Masters in the near future. In her youth she played basketball, baseball, and soccer. She started weight training at 18 and has done five shows. She wishes to become an IFBB pro and win the Olympia.

‘Romita’ was a 43-year-old from California who is a hair stylist, personal trainer, and online health coach. She has competed in one NPC Figure show and will consider competing in the future. Her hobbies include: volleyball, skiing, running, and yoga along with weightlifting.

‘Sam’ was a 34-year-old from Idaho who is a mother and a high school teacher. She has competed in two NPC Figure shows. She trains via weightlifting and Crossfit.

Appendix D

Interview Guide

1. How did you become interested in fitness competitions?
 - a. What drew you to compete in the NPC?
 - b. What influenced your decision to compete in Figure competitions as opposed to other categories?
 - c. What do you hope to achieve by participating in Figure competitions?
 - d. How do you prepare for Figure competitions?
 - i. Nutrition? Training? Psychological preparation?
2. Which social media sites do you use?
 - a. What influenced you to select those sites?
 - b. How do you use them (goals)?
 - c. What is your overall perspective on social media?
3. Why did you start an Instagram profile? How did you get into Instagram?
 - a. Tell me about your first post?
 - b. How do you use Instagram?
 - i. How would you characterize your use of Instagram?
 - c. How do you select the content you post on your profile?
 - i. Tell me about your posts...take me through the process? (Preparation? What body part? Where? Number of takes?)
 - ii. How does Instagram differ from posts to Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and other social media?
 - iii. Images? Videos? Comments? Hashtags?
 - iv. What do you get from your posts?
 - v. How does it feel to post?
 - d. What types of responses have you received on your photos?
 - i. How did you react to the responses? Tell me about some memorable feedback? (Positive/negative)
 - e. How would you describe your relationship with your followers?
 - i. Responses by you to others?
 - f. How has your use of Instagram changed over time, since that first post?
 - i. Have your goals changed?
 - ii. What influenced those changes?
4. What other NPC athletes and other Instagram users do you follow?
 - a. What made you follow these people?
5. What is your overall impression of your Instagram profile?

Is there anything you would like to add or elaborate on any topic we discussed?

Appendix E

Content Analysis Results

Raw Data Units	Higher Order Theme	General dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -too much muscle/bulk -beach body: bikini -figure is overall package -masculinity and weightlifting 	Physique qualities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -taking control of health -comfortable in your own skin -strength and muscularity 	Empowerment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -soft curves yet strong/powerful -inner feeling not appearance -being real 	Feminine characteristics	Defining Femininity and Beauty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -vanity -demonstrating muscularity -judged on look not performance 	Beauty pageantry	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -admiration of models in magazines -models considered ideal -comments from significant others -eating disorders 	Influences from media representations	

Raw Data Units	Higher Order Theme	General Dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -started out with no specific direction: random posts of daily life -training for competitions influenced most -physique/fitness related posts -creating a separate fitness account -promotion of products/advertising -currently used for fitness motivation for self and others 	Changes over time	Self-presentation on Instagram
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -appearance -first thing in morning is going to show best results -feeling comfortable asking someone else to take it -looking skinny/feminine -public spaces -after the pump phase -time and convenience -best lighting -selfies 	Preparation	Judging self and others on Instagram
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -segmented body parts -full body shots -best/most admired/most -changed muscle groups -variation of posts -avoidance of leg photos -transformation photo -food -inspirational -quotes/pictures found from -other sources -advertisement for personal -business/training -companies -miscellaneous 	Types of posts	

Raw Data Units	Higher Order Theme	General Dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -use light/shadows to show muscle definition/separation -modifying for artistic effect -showing reality -anti-filtering 	Editing	Self-presentation on Instagram
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -what is represented -description of workout -full recipe/instructions -avoidance of lengthy posts -posting lengthier captions 	Deciding on captions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -social comparison -making connections -accessing information -helping others -(positive) feedback -motivation -accountability -document one's fitness journey 	Reasons for usage	Judging Self and Others on Instagram
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -(negative) feedback -haters/trolls -sexualization of pictures -self-professed fitness experts -fakeness -no privacy 	Negative aspects of social media	

Raw Data Units	Higher Order Theme	General Dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -family/friends -bodybuilding/fitness community/other competitors -responsiveness -insignificant connection -obligation to teammates -acknowledgement from professionals/popular accounts -close relationship with followers -positivity/encouragement reciprocated 	Relationships to followers	Judging Self and Others on Instagram
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -obsession with virtual sharing -attention-seeking -new normal 	Perceptions of selfies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -positive and motivating -fitness-minded -numerous posts -variety of posts -IFBB pros -popular accounts/pages specific 	Following others	Investments and Outcomes of Training/Competing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -phases and types of physical training -phases: diet and nutrition -psychological preparation 	Process and preparation	