

# **Raising the Bar: Women Bodybuilders' Agentic Potential on Instagram**

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## **Inception**

This essay came into being for Dr. Angela Failler's class, "Sociology of the Body," in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies during the 2014–2015 academic year.

How can women bodybuilders exercise their agentic potential beyond the strict constraints of bodybuilding competitions? This paper explores the growing popularity of women's bodybuilding alongside the increasing influence of social media. Female bodybuilders Callie Bundy, Casey Samsel, Ashley Kaltwasser, Yeshaira Robles Rivera, and Lianne McTavish are discussed to present examples of resistance of gender norms in online spaces, particularly on Instagram. Within this paper a textual and photo analysis will be carried out to highlight instances of non-normative representations of women. In addition to a representational approach, this paper will use a feminist and postmodern approach to discuss how the body is given social capital and meaning through sex, gender, and technology.

Part One of this paper briefly outlines some of the main arguments in existing literature on women in bodybuilding and demonstrates that this field of study has lacked a social media analysis. Part Two explores the use of Instagram and the virtual embodiment of women bodybuilders to illustrate how social meaning of the body is constructed online. Lastly, and most importantly, Part Three discusses the negotiation of "the feminine apologetic" (Dworkin 257) and the challenging of gender norms by women bodybuilders in online spaces through a discussion of the "economy of smiles" (Bartky 23), posture, and pregnancy. I contend that, despite limited opportunities within bodybuilding

competitions for resistance of gender norms, bodybuilding women have found spaces online to challenge gender norms and exert agency.

### ***Part One: Women in Bodybuilding Literature***

Women's bodybuilding is seen by some to challenge gender norms because women display signs of strength and muscularity traditionally reserved for men (Ian 69). For example, Laurie Fierstein highlights the revolutionary implications of females' big muscles that affect the way we see gender and the potential for women's empowerment (Ian 70). Furthermore, Ken Saltman claims that bodybuilding upsets dominant power relations and creates "gender confusion" by blurring gender lines and producing an entirely new category (49).

However, Marcia Ian is more skeptical of this narrative. Ian finds that bodybuilding tends to maintain ideals of masculinity and femininity even more strictly than mainstream culture (70). As a bodybuilder herself, Ian reflects on the experience of losing a competition and being told that she "must be on steroids" because of her muscle size, although officials decided not to test her (71). Furthermore, Ian points to explicit rules in bodybuilding competitions demanding that women be judged by an undefined standard of "femininity" (74). This standard of femininity is prioritized over large muscles for women in competition. Ian takes issue with the "feminine ideal" in bodybuilding and the value placed on gender intelligibility (72). She feels gender should be beside the point in bodybuilding; after all, muscle does not have gender, and genitalia are immaterial in bodybuilding (88). Yet judges' preoccupation to enforce and regulate gender difference continues to maintain gender norms and the gender order (Ian 89). In response to ideas of "gender confusion" and gender transgression in bodybuilding, Ian states that regardless of individual meaning-making and experiences, gender transgression is not what bodybuilding is about either (71). Instead, Ian says bodybuilding is a self-reflexive project that occurs to satisfy the self and to embody or resemble an ideal that is inherently gendered (71).

Even if bodybuilding does have the potential to be revolutionary for women, Ian states that female body builders continue to make less money for the sport than their male counterparts (72). However, the recent rise in the popularity of the female-dominated social media site Instagram has provided a platform for women to self-define, attract thousands of followers, and endorse products with social and economic benefits. While many women bodybuilders do still maintain a feminine appearance on their Instagram pages, their ability to present themselves on their own terms constitutes a new opportunity for agency that has not existed before within the formal competitions of bodybuilding.

## ***Part Two: Instagram & Virtual Embodiment***

Instagram is a social media picture-sharing site that was launched in 2010. Users have the ability to create profiles, post pictures with captions, and follow other users. When scrolling through their newsfeed, users have the option to 'like' photos, by tapping twice on the photo, or to leave comments below. Comments often include emojis (small pictures such as smiley faces) and the tagging of other users. Captions and comments can also include a hashtag (#), which connect to other photos and posts that include the same hashtag.

International Federation of Body Builders bikini division competitors Callie Bundy, Casey Samsel, Ashley Kaltwasser, and Yeshaira Robles Rivera each have their own Instagram pages that they use to post pictures of their workouts, competitions, meals and recipes, motivational quotes, and products that they use. Each has created a community of followers that interact with them through exchanges of comments on each competitor's pages. However, some of these women have a larger community of followers than others. For example, of these four women, Ashley Kaltwasser has the most followers at approximately 200,000 while Casey Samsel has the lowest number of followers at 12,000.

Lee F. Monaghan explores spaces of acceptance in online communities for fat men's bodies where self-expression is encouraged in his article "Big Handsome Men, Bears, and Others: Virtual Constructions of 'Fat Male Embodiment.'" Monaghan finds that online support exists for these men who often face, and sometimes hope to challenge, a rigid "real" world that refuses to accommodate or celebrate their bodies (62). This relates to women bodybuilding competitors who challenge normative constructions of gender by partaking in bodybuilding and in some ways are praised for it, but remain abject in many "real" world spaces. The high number of followers on Instagram that some of these women have demonstrates support and encouragement of self-expression. For example, positive comments such as "Nice!!!" by @seeyoulaterleaner on one of Casey Samsel's photos, and "You have my ideal physique. Top notch. I can see how much work you put in. So motivating!" by @missittnessa on one of Callie Bundy's photos are common. Furthermore, many followers comment on these four women's photos with emojis like hearts, smiley faces, and flexed muscles. This aspect of online embodiment illustrates space for acceptance of somewhat non-normative bodies and support for those challenging the idea that muscle is inherently male.

Additionally, Mary Kosut explores how nonconforming avatars behave online with respect to societal standards in her article "Virtual Body Modification: Embodiment, Identity, and Nonconforming Avatars." Kosut explains that body capital can be understood as a type of physical capital that translates into both cultural and economic gains (160). Ashley Kaltwasser has experienced this firsthand. Through increasing her physical capital by constructing the "ideal" body for the IFBB bikini division, Kaltwasser has won Ms. Bikini Olympia two times, and has landed endorsement deals from Liquid Sun Rayz spray tanning, Gaspari supplements, Better Bodies fitness apparel, Muscle Egg liquid egg whites, and *Fitness Rx for Women* magazine (Shapiro). Kaltwasser uses her Instagram page to endorse these products and to promote them to her followers. This transition from physical capital to

economic capital is what many women in bodybuilding strive for while building a brand on their Instagram pages.

In the online game, “Second Life,” media scholar and researcher Mary Kosut finds that visual binary gender classifications are maintained and often include exaggerated gender characteristics (161). Although not necessarily a similar platform, these four bikini competitors’ Instagram pages also include exaggerated gender characteristics. From breast augmentation, to makeup, and to high heels, these women use exaggerated feminine characteristics, possibly to remain socially acceptable as is suggested by the “feminine apologetic” (Malacrida and Low 257). However, Kosut finds that the cyber space of Second Life not only upholds, but also transgresses hegemonic ideals and norms (168). This also occurs for these bikini competitors who occasionally find acceptable space to challenge norms and increase their agentic potential by using Instagram.

### ***Part Three: The Feminine Apologetic and Gender Norms***

Malacrida and Low recognize that women face resistance when trying to gain acceptance in the male establishment of bodybuilding (257). Instead of entering the sport as equals with similar judging criteria, women have been encouraged to maintain the feminine apologetic by restricting muscularity, using ultra-feminine signifiers such as makeup, and having breast augmentations (Malacrida and Low 257). However, the concept of the feminine apologetic is limiting because it is wholly critical of the reproduction of femininity. This eliminates the potential for feminine signifiers to be used in non-normative ways, as is often done in women’s bodybuilding. For example, the presence of feminine signifiers on women in bodybuilding radically juxtaposes two characteristics often not seen on the same body—the masculine appearance of strength and muscle alongside feminine markers such as makeup and high heels. Further, it is not so much the maintenance of femininity in women’s bodybuilding that is problematic, but rather

strict rules dictating that women bodybuilders must appear feminine while simultaneously devaluing femininity. This is apparent in the bodybuilding industry where women do not have equal opportunities, prize money, or publicity. For example, the current prize money for Mr. Olympia is \$657,000 while the prize money for Ms. Olympia is only \$60,000 (*Muscle and Fitness*). This also helps to explain why many women bodybuilders turn to Instagram, a female-dominated social media site, to build their own brands, attract followers, and gain subsequent endorsements.

Callie, Casey, Ashley, and Yeshaira negotiate the feminine apologetic in unique ways and challenge normative ideas of gender on Instagram. While gender is not wholly transgressed by any of these women, ideas of what is expected and considered appropriate by gender is challenged. For example, Casey Samsel uses the hashtags #girlswholift and #girlswithmuscle. These hashtags connect to 5.2 million posts from other Instagram users. This shows a growing culture of acceptance of women's weightlifting and bodybuilding (albeit, the use of the word "girl" still arguably connotes ideas of dependency and immaturity). Callie Bundy also disrupts normative ideas about gender and what is considered acceptable of women. On one of Callie's photos her caption reads, "Trained, ate a burg, watched some college basketball & next up some stages of sleep." This statement goes beyond the narrow representations of women in bodybuilding competitions who are expected to be feminine. One of Callie's followers replied to the photo with the comment, "[K]eep showing the world why it should be considered a positive to #liftlikeagirl." This reclaiming of the phrase "... like a girl," traditionally used as an insult, provides opportunities to redefine what it means to be a girl and to transform the social meaning of the female body.

### **"Economy of Smiles" & Posturing**

Sandra Lee Bartky examines the "economy of smiles" and gendered body postures in her article "Foucault, Femininity, and the

Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” Bartky describes the “economy of smiles” as the expectation and reality that women smile more than men, and therefore, they give more than they receive (23). While the many pictures bodybuilding women include on their Instagram pages depict them smiling, some instances exist where they take strong poses with neutral or fierce facial expressions. For example, Ashley Kaltwasser posted a picture of a notice for an upcoming meet and greet in which she is standing facing forward with dumbbells in her hands at her sides. Her gaze remains upwards, focused on something in the distance with an expression of determination and strength. This post was met with positive feedback from fans, one of which (@kajoland) said, “Defo one of my fav photos of you!” This type of photo is unlike any taken in bodybuilding competitions where women are expected to smile and face the audience at an angle so as to appear thinner at the waist.

Further, Bartky finds that women tend to sit in ways that take up little space (hands folded in lap, legs pressed together, etc.). Men, on the other hand, tend to expand to take up additional space around them. Callie Bundy challenges this norm in one of the pictures on her Instagram page in which she is sitting on the floor with her knees bent in front of her and spread out with each arm hanging draped over each leg. One of Bundy’s followers left the comment “@calliebundy keep kicking ass.” These photos and positive responses by fans provide examples of women bodybuilders creating and using space in the online community of Instagram to represent themselves in the ways they desire to be portrayed.

## **Pregnancy**

Elizabeth Graham and Jacqueline Low extend Mary Douglas’s idea of “matter out of place” to “bodies out of time” in their discussion of pregnant bodies. Graham and Low suggest that “appropriate” or average ages identified for reproductive experiences draw boundaries around what is considered acceptable for women at certain ages. If a woman experiences a reproductive event, such as pregnancy, too early

or too late in life, she is considered to be experiencing a “reproductive body out of time” because her experience does not conform to socio-cultural norms (190). Lianne McTavish, a professor and researcher, underwent an auto-ethnographic research project to become a bodybuilding competitor. While still at a high fitness level, McTavish got pregnant and gave birth at the age of 45. On McTavish’s blog where she discusses her book and research, an individual commented, “What really interests me, Lianne, is: was giving birth (the actual labour) easier for you because you had such a muscular body at that time?” Lianne replies that she credits her ability to get pregnant at 45 to her high fitness level as she was not trying to get pregnant nor was she using any fertility drugs. Lianne also comments that she had an easy, “normal” pregnancy and she was able to exercise every day up until two days before she gave birth. While McTavish may be considered a “reproductive body out of time” by Graham and Low’s definition, she nevertheless experiences some level of social acceptance due to her fitness level. In this way, the online community of women’s bodybuilding provides support for non-normative bodies, including McTavish’s during pregnancy.

Furthermore, Yeshaira Robles, a six-time IFBB bikini pro champ, shares pictures of her pregnancy with her fans through her Instagram page. Yeshaira posts pictures weekly of her bare belly. On one of these photos, Instagram user @andrea\_j\_fit comments, “Nice!!! Let’s keep dispelling the myth that you can’t be fit/active and pregnant!” This comment of support is common to the pictures Yeshaira posts during her pregnancy. This shows the agentic potential of women bodybuilders on Instagram as they are able to post pictures and represent themselves in a way that is prohibited within competition. For example, a woman who did not have visible abdominal muscles would not be considered competitive or acceptable in bodybuilding. Yet, Yeshaira posted a picture comparing an image of her stomach three years ago (with visible abdominal muscles) alongside a picture of her late in her second trimester. Rather than being considered abject or a cultural anomaly, users praise her and her pregnancy with comments



such as “Even more beautiful!” by @feldman\_marcus. This support in an online space demonstrates that women can exercise agency and raise the bar of what is considered acceptable of women bodybuilders beyond competition.

While this paper only highlights some examples of resistance, the overwhelming acceptance and support discussed above demonstrates that agentic potential exists in online spaces, particularly on the social media site of Instagram. Although online communities can facilitate the building of a counter-culture, online spaces do not fully escape normative constructions of gender that translate into bodily capital. Nevertheless, the negotiation of the feminine apologetic shows a complicated relationship between gender norms and women bodybuilders’ experiences. Some women benefit socially and economically from remaining feminine while others challenge gender norms by acting and posing in non-normative ways. The female-dominated social media site Instagram is a tool for some women bodybuilders to raise the bar and challenge normative expectations and expressions of gender. The growing popularity of this site represents an increasing opportunity for female agency and for women to redefine how the body gains social meaning.

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