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The Weight of Gender

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Introduction

I remember sifting through comments on some of my favorite female physique competitors' FaceBook pages one day and the feeling of frustration consuming me. Many of the comments I read were bashing these women's bodies due to its hyper-muscularity. Comments such as "you're too manly" "no one will ever want you" and "eww, that's gross" were common along with the rare supportive commentary. I knew, as a woman, that our bodies came under a lot of scrutiny but what I was reading perplexed me.

I decided soon after that my Honor's project would be a documentary that recorded local competitor's stories; interviewing men and women and looking at the ideas about gender that they used to give meaning to their participation and to interpret the bodies and identities of male and female competitors

I will begin by stating that I do not have a background in film but the idea of making a documentary seemed like the best way to get my point across. Prior to interviewing competitors, I attended a few bodybuilding shows to truly get a sense of what goes into preparing for a competition. I also completed a literature review on the topics of femininity and muscularity, women's bodybuilding, barriers to weightlifting and looked at the societal/cultural impact all of these topics have on peoples' perceptions of their ideals of beauty.



Interview Questions

What is the reason you began to compete in bodybuilding shows?

Do you believe the mandatory poses, makeup, etc have an impact on how feminine you are viewed while on stage?

When you are out by yourself or with others, do people respond positively or negatively to your appearance?

Do you think within the different divisions i.e. bikini, figure, physique, bodybuilding, there's an emphasis in keeping women feminine?

Is this to ensure there is a clear distinction between the two sexes (men and women)?

Describe what it means to be feminine/masculine.

Is there a point when a female is too muscular? At what point?

Do you believe women are pushing the boundaries and defining their own version of femininity by building muscle or is it contradicting?

What advice would you give to someone wants to lift weights?

How do we go about decreasing the myth that a female will become bulky if she lifts weights?

Why do you think people are so resistant to muscularity on a woman?

References

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Messner, A.M. (1988). Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5, 197-211.

Rosdahl, J. (2014). The Myth of Femininity in the Sport of Bodybuilding. *Social Alternatives*, 33(2), 36-42.

Weight of gender

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Traditional Gender Stereotypes.

Feminine.

*Not aggressive.
Dependent.
Easily influenced.
Submissive.
Passive.
Home-oriented.
Easily hurt emotionally.
Indecisive.
Talkative.
Gentle.
Sensitive to other's feelings.
Very desirous of security.
Cries a lot.
Emotional.
Verbal.
Kind.
Tactful.
Nurturing.*

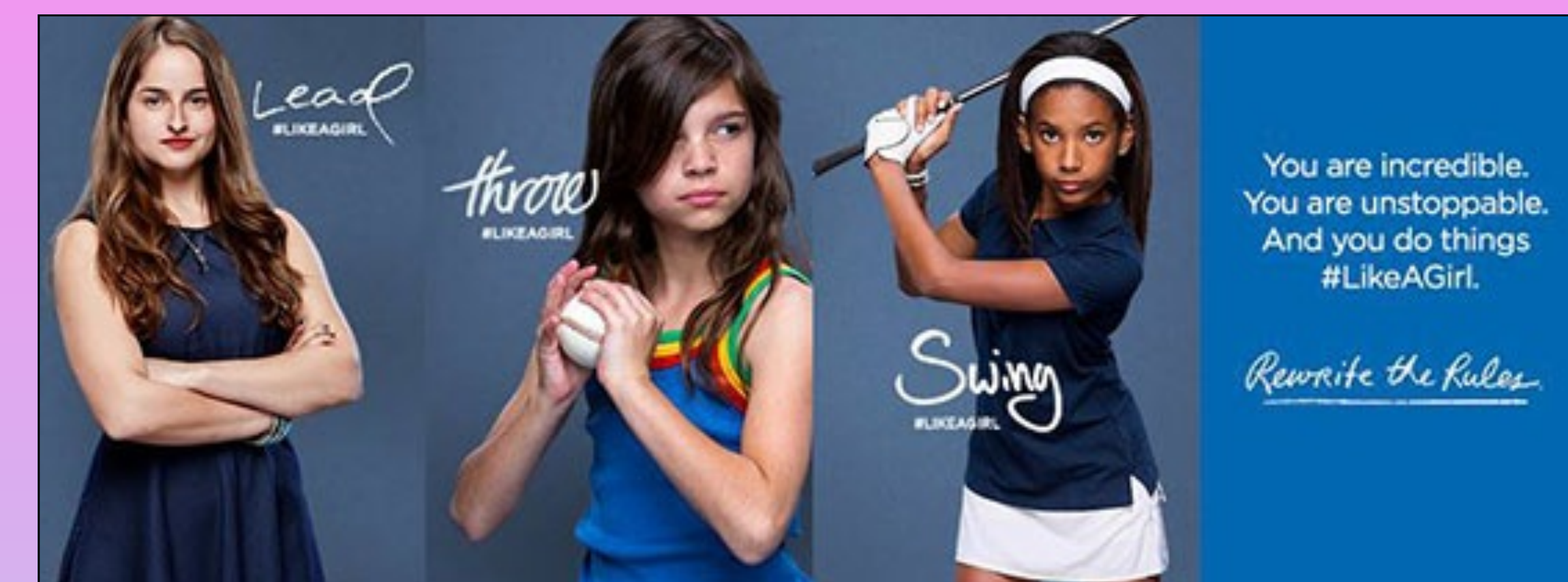
Masculine.

*Aggressive.
Independent.
Not easily influenced.
Dominant.
Active.
Worldly.
Not easily hurt emotionally.
Decisive.
Not at all talkative.
Tough.
Less sensitive to other's feelings.
Not very desirous of security.
Rarely cries.
Logical.
Analytical.
Cruel.
Blunt.
Not nurturing.*



There is something profoundly upsetting about a proud, confident, unrepentantly muscular woman. She risks being seen by her viewers as dangerous, alluring, odd, beautiful or, at worst, a sort of rare (sic) show. She is, in fact, a smorgasbord of mixed messages. This inability to come to grips with a strong, heavily muscled woman accounts for much of the confusion and downright hostility that often greets her.

Chapman and Vertinsky 2010: 11



Discussion

- Through research and interviews, it was found that there were competing definitions of femininity and masculinity.
- Women bodybuilders challenge normative performances of gender that assume that only women can be or should be feminine.
- Their performances are particularly shocking to those who believe gender stereotypes to be true because women bodybuilders' bodies/muscles challenge the very idea that gender (masculinity & femininity) is biologically based and determined.
- Their muscles show some women act masculine through being strong, tough, determined, athletic.
- As Jamilla Rosdahl states in *The Myth of Femininity in the Sport of Bodybuilding* (2014), "the muscular female body challenges Western understandings of the traditional female body as being 'naturally' feminine in appearance and physique" (p. 36).
- "It is obvious that the new image of women being forged by female bodybuilders is itself fraught with contradiction and ambiguity as women contestants and judges constantly discuss and argue emotionally over the meaning of femininity. Should contestants be judged simply according to how well-muscled they are (as male bodybuilders are judged), or also by a separate and traditionally feminine aesthetic?" (Messner, A. M., 1988 p. 203).



- I have found that it is acceptable for women to lift weights and want to increase their muscularity as long as they remain "womanly." This womanliness was described by one male competitor as having the hourglass figure i.e., small waist, shapely legs and glutes, and a slightly larger upper body.
- Many scholars have noted that women who continue to build muscle regardless of what society deems acceptable are pushing the boundaries—they are going against the dominant culture and feeling empowered in what they do.
- Female competitors are judged not only on the degree of muscularity and muscle tone but also make-up, skin tone, poise, beauty flow, etc.



- Subtle gestures are noted in the female competitor in order to adhere to the softness that is femininity.
- Poses with heels, open hands instead of closed hands, make-up depict the female in a soft, non-aggressive manner.
- "There are some clear tensions between the judging criteria specification for an ambiguous feminine quality said to exist within the female body, and between a female form that displays muscularity and strength" (Rosdahl, J., 2014 p. 38).
- Female competitor's have taken it upon themselves to create their own definitions of what femininity is but are performing gender unbeknownst to them.
- It is important for the female competitor to perform gender consistently so as to not be mistaken for a man simply due to their muscularity.