THE WEIGHT OF GENDER

Bintou Marong

University of Rhode Island
Abstract
Gender ideologies form the basis of how we view men and women as masculine and feminine. Through more traditional gender ideologies, men are generally taught to act and look as “manly” as possible while females are to look and remain as “womanly” as possible. So as long as one does not perform gender in ways that disrupt or blur the lines of these ideologies, conflict does not arise. But for women who deviate from the status quo and develop moderate to extreme musculature, their gender and perceived femininity is often questioned and conflict often arises in their lives. Comments such as “don’t get too manly” to “muscles are gross on a woman” are common in those who want to weight lift or compete in bodybuilding competitions. The policing of women’s bodies is quite evident in today’s media/society but for the muscular woman, it seems, it is further magnified. Women who choose to lift weights and/or compete in bodybuilding competitions stray from or resist the traditional ideas defining femininity. These women truly redefine what it means to be a woman. Yet, in doing so, they are often ridiculed and punished for failing to conform to traditional ideas of femininity as defined by society.

Through a literature review and interviews of women who currently weight train and compete in bodybuilding divisions such as bikini and figure, I describe common themes of their experiences as muscular women in every day life, dating, concepts of femininity in and out of competitions, etc. Men who compete in bodybuilding were also interviewed to gauge their opinions of how they make sense of the gendered meanings of women who are heavily invested in weightlifting to build body mass. Consideration was also given to the ways in which the evaluations of the bodies of men and women bodybuilding competitors are guided by traditional gender ideologies.

Keywords: gender, society, bodybuilding, weightlifting, feminine, masculine
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. The more I read, the more frustrated I became. I could not understand why someone would take the time to insult another human being doing what they love and choosing to sculpt their ideal body. I knew, as a woman, that our bodies came under scrutiny but what I was reading perplexed me. I did not have the language to describe what I felt prior to completing this project.

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. I knew it would be difficult but apparently I underestimated the level of difficulty in producing a film while trying to balance my hectic Nursing schedule. Nevertheless, I learned a great deal during my last two semesters at the University of Rhode Island and compiled a miniature version of the film I originally anticipated I would create along with a poster presentation.
Discussion

As someone new to weightlifting, it was discouraging to think that someone would think of my body as disgusting because it pushed the boundaries of a traditional definition of femininity due to increased muscularity. I decided soon after that my Honor's project would be a documentary that recorded local competitor's stories; interviewing men and women and examine 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. Some of the questions that organized my inquiry were: Did women feel they had to restrict their muscularity due to the possibility of being deemed unfeminine? How did the evaluative criteria of bodybuilding competitions actually limit or restrict the muscularity women and ironically emphasize traditional ideas of femininity? Is there a metaphoric glass ceiling as to when a woman is no longer deemed a woman? And what does femininity/masculinity mean to competitors? I was excited to embark on this journey with the help of my sponsor, Dr. Kyle Kusz, who would challenge me to think outside of the box throughout the completion of this project.

Prior to interviewing competitors, I attended a few bodybuilding shows to 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

During my interviews, I asked women the following questions to gauge common themes:

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

• Do you feel you conform to society’s ideals of beauty when during competitions?

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

• What has bodybuilding/weight training done for you in other aspects of life?

• 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?

• Is there a point where men are too muscular?

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

• Women are usually viewed in a sexualized way in sports and magazine covers. Do you think this takes away from their athleticism, why?

• 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?
Through research and interviews, it was found that there were competing definitions of femininity and masculinity. Many of the competitors interviewed had a difficult time describing what those terms meant and failed to realize that gender is a performance learned from our culture. Research over the past twenty years conceptualizes gender as culturally defined and socially learned behavior. Men do in fact act in ways defined in our culture as feminine and women act masculine at any given moment. Women bodybuilders challenge normative performances of gender that assume that only thinner, less muscular 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, etc. For example, soccer player Abby Wambach's strength, toughness, determination, and aggressiveness demonstrates how she performs masculinity. For the muscular woman, the line is blurred because they now have a hyper masculine trait to them that is usually associated with men. The masculinity of a man is not usually questioned because it is expected in our culture. Men are to be dominant, strong, and autonomous while women are to be passive, weak, and dependent. It is easy to see how additional muscularity on the female body would cause confusion since they do not necessarily perform their gender in societally expected ways.
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, and a slightly larger lower and upper body. In terms of competition, it is the notorious v-taper that is sought after by many competitors. The v-taper is represented by having broad, capped deltoids, wide latissimus dorsi, small waist, symmetrical lower body, and of course, “glutes that salute.” It is the expected hourglass figure with a muscularity component. From this definition of what is acceptable for competitors, we can see that although we are allowing for the expression of the female to have an increase in muscularity, we are still confining them to fit into the ideal definition of femininity. A variety of articles and interviewees have also explained that it is fine for a woman to compete in classes such as bikini and figure that do not need an overt increase in musculature but if they want to compete in other classes i.e., women’s physique and bodybuilding, they must be cognizant of the fact that they cannot become overly muscular. With increased muscularity comes the risk of defeminizing the female body. This logic also goes against what is trying to be achieved when one builds muscle and shows the struggle women face in our society.

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. As much as that is true, it cannot be ignored that the ideals of beauty set by society influences those who want to compete or build muscle recreationally. Besides the criteria mentioned before, they are judged on muscle tone, make-up, skin tone, poise, beauty flow, etc. With exception to women’s physique and bodybuilding, all competitor’s must wear heels an accessory not seen in men’s bodybuilding. As one interviewee
states when asked about this mandatory accessory, “It accentuates your butt more and actually lifts it up.” “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). Subtle gestures are noted in the female who competes in bodybuilding shows in order to adhere to the softness that is femininity. Poses with heels, open hands instead of closed hands are all signs that what an audience is looking at is indeed a soft, non-aggressive female.

As stated before, there is a contradiction in allowing women to become muscular but also remain as feminine as possible if one is to adhere to society’s definitions of those two words. Female competitor’s have taken it upon themselves to create their own definitions of what femininity is but are performing gender unbeknownst to them. As one commentator said when describing Lenda Murray’s physique in “Flexing the Tensions of Female Muscularity: How female bodybuilders negotiate normative femininity in competitive bodybuilding” (2005), “you’re muscular but yet still feminine, still shapely, you have a face that still looks like a woman and that’s the ways it’s supposed to be” (p. 137). It is important for the female competitor to perform femininity in a variety of ways so an onlooker can judge them in binary ways. Compared to a male competitor, the female must adorn herself with accessories that help to minimize her muscularity so she can conform to the criteria needed for her class. In a way, competitors are complying to the hypothetical glass ceiling for a woman’s musculature by emphasizing the need for femininity in and out of competition

“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 down-right hostility that often greets her.”

Chapman and Vertinsky 2010: 11
References

