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Strong is the New Sexy: CrossFit, Consumption, and Hegemonic Femininity

When 70 athletes arrived at a ranch in California to compete in the 2007 inaugural CrossFit Games, they could not have known how quickly and immensely the sport would explode. That the contest would have over 138,000 competitors by 2014 and over 324,000 just two years later was beyond the realm of imagination (“About the Games: History”). Moreover, none of the men and women who competed in the first three workouts at the Carson Ranch could have known just how massive the cultural impact of CrossFit would be. Yet, in just nine years since those first Games and sixteen years since the franchise itself was formally established by gymnast Greg Glassman, CrossFit morphed from a relatively unknown method of exercising in warehouses and garages with a small cult following to a nearly household name, purchased by Reebok and aired on ESPN (“Origins of CrossFit”). Not only did the “high intensity, constantly varied” workout format catch on nationwide and beyond, but conversations about strength, beauty, musculature, and functionality related to CrossFit women in particular have become hot topics. Videos of women with prominent deltoids and quadriceps squatting with 300 pounds on their backs gather thousands of likes on Instagram, and photos of bikini-clad athletes with defined abdominal muscles are shared across social media sites with tags labeling them “goals” or “fit-spo” (short for fitness inspiration). It would seem that CrossFit has managed to push back against traditional female beauty standards, inspiring women to be proud of their strength and the

bodies that result from it. However, CrossFit, as it has become more mainstream and commercialized, has managed to achieve something immensely paradoxical: it promotes athleticism and muscularity in women while maintaining hegemonic feminine beauty standards. Because of CrossFit's nature as a business in a capitalist marketplace, the product it sells, as transgressive as it may wish to be, is forced to mold itself into a form that is consumable by a mass audience. The company does celebrate muscular women, but it focuses on women who fit other hegemonic beauty standards, exaggerating and exploiting their sexuality and praising whiteness and middle to upper class status.

As Christine Aimar, Shannon M. Baird, Y.L. Choi, Kerrie J. Kauer, and Vikki Krane explain in their study on female NCAA Division 1 athletes and body image, "Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity and Muscularity," "...hegemonic femininity is constructed within a [w]hite, heterosexual, and class-based structure, and it has strong associations with heterosexual sex and romance. Hegemonic femininity, therefore, has a strong emphasis on appearance with the dominant notion of an ideal body as thin and toned" (82). The muscular female athlete has always been contentious in American culture, as muscularity is traditionally reserved for men, and "bulky" muscle does not fit the "thin and toned" beauty standard. Thus, once women were invited to formally compete in athletics, which was a decision that came after great debate and took decades to be fully realized, there were careful rules enforced to ensure that they still remained "feminine enough" (Cahn and O'Reilly xiii-xxx). For example, in a controversial and pivotal 1912 article for *Ladies Home Journal*, Dr. Dudley A. Sargent wrote that women should be allowed to participate in the same sports as men, but he argued that "...changes should be made in many of the rules and regulations governing the sports and games...to adapt them to the

requirements for women” (58). Not only did Dudley fear that women were physically incapable of the same movements as men without injury, but he was weary of the masculinization of women, noting that “...all forms of athletic sports and most physical exercises tend to make women’s figures more masculine, inasmuch as they tend to broaden the shoulders, deepen the chest, narrow the hips, and develop the muscles of the arms, back and legs, which are masculine characteristics” (57). One of the first avenues through which women attempted to push back against this societal fear and dislike of female musculature was female bodybuilding.

According to Anne Balsamo, culture and gender theorist, in “Feminist Bodybuilding,” female bodybuilding became popular and grew into its own subculture in the 1980s (345). To the women who competed in the sport, bodybuilding represented a chance to form their bodies into a shape they personally found appealing and to proudly display the product of their hard work. Ideally, female bodybuilding defied existing norms of who and what a beautiful woman could be, and it was a sport by and for women. Unfortunately, as Balsamo explains and Michael Messner elaborates upon in his piece “Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Ideological Terrain,” bodybuilding was, and is still is, held back by many of the same structures it was intended to help overthrow. Balsamo points to sexist standards that women competing in the contests are expected to uphold, from not having “stretch marks, surgical scars, or cellulite” to being able to “walk and move gracefully (346). After interviewing contestants and judges and reading the handbooks that govern how bodybuilding is judged, Messner asserts that, in order to do well, the women are required to be “feminine enough” that they “don’t look like men” (72). Though musculature is praised and encouraged, it still has to fit within the confines of a femininity defined by whoever is judging, and, as Messner explains, “...since the official is

judging the contestants according to [their] own (traditional) standard of femininity, it should come as no surprise that the eventual winners are not the most well-muscled women” (72).

Because of the subjective nature of the judging processes of the contests and the internalized expectations the judges likely have for the women, hegemonic femininity becomes a requirement for the trophy at these competitions. However, the issues that female bodybuilding run into are, in many ways, notably absent from CrossFit.

CrossFit goes further than female bodybuilding as a form of body empowerment in that it allows women to display not only the full muscular potential of their bodies, but also the full potential of those muscles to be used for sport. Moreover, the sport is not graceful or balletic like the smooth posing of bodybuilding is; CrossFit women sweat, spit, and grunt while heaving objects over their shoulders, throwing weights around, climbing, jumping, and sprinting. In bodybuilding, women are judged solely on their appearance and their musculature, and the winners of the contests can be carefully chosen to ensure that hegemonic beauty standards are met. In CrossFit, however, the only role judges serve is to determine if a rep of a movement is completed correctly or if one athlete crosses the finish line a split second faster than another. The eventual champions are therefore actually the fittest and often among the most muscular of all competitors. It would seem then that CrossFit’s format has conquered one of the greatest barriers that holds female bodybuilding back from being a fully realized feminist sport; if function is as appreciated as form, have they not redefined beauty standards? However, CrossFit is a company, and it is limited by the profit-driven system it functions in. In order to remain a fitness giant and to continue to grow and flourish, CrossFit must continue making a profit. Therefore, the product of CrossFit, and by extension, the people who define the CrossFit brand, must be marketable.

To counterbalance the anti-hegemonic femininity of CrossFit women's muscles, the company (and the athletes themselves, though they should not be held to blame for the oppressive systems they have to navigate and comply with in order to achieve "success") highlights the women who do fit the standards of hegemonic femininity in other ways and over-exaggerates their femininity, especially in regards to their sexuality. A similar phenomenon was examined by Aimar, Baird, et al. who, in their study on NCAA athletes, noted that, "For some athletes, 'doing girl' was seen as important in sport, such as when the volleyball players wore bows in their hair to remind people that although they were athletes, they were still women" (97). In CrossFit, the effort to showcase athlete's stereotypical femininity and to make sure they are identifiably "woman" can be seen first in the way Games athletes are dressed and in the kinds of clothing CrossFit women at all levels are encouraged to wear.

The sportswear of CrossFit is minimal and sexualized, a trend that can be found in modern fitness culture generally. Jennifer Hargreaves recognized this trend as early as in 1994, arguing in *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* that, "Modern sportswear is manufactured specifically to promote a sexy image...it both reveals and conceals the body, promoting an awareness of the relationship between being dressed and undressed." She further notes that "...sportswear is combined with other beauty aids to construct a total image," giving examples of makeup and elaborate hairstyles as unnecessary additions to athletic wear that serve to make a woman more conventionally attractive while she exercises (159). In the CrossFit community, women's clothing is designed to be revealing, eye-catching, and sexy. Most elite athletes are only filmed or photographed working out in elaborate sports bras and tiny "bootie shorts." In fact, the Reebok CrossFit line of clothing for women features no

shorts longer than four inches, and all the variations are either called “bootie shorts,” “shorty shorts,” or “ass to ankle shorts,” names that are provocative and insinuate that the shorts are made to draw attention to women’s backsides (Reebok). In the televised 2016 Games, all female competitors sported these kinds of shorts multiple times, and there were countless shots of the women taken from behind, framed to accentuate their curves. Further, when the cameras zoomed in on the women’s faces, most were clearly wearing some form of makeup, a not only unnecessary but also inconvenient choice when exercising. Of course, women wear makeup for many, often personal, reasons, and they should not be automatically faulted for doing so, but when analyzed in conjunction with the rest of their attire at the Games, it seems that the purpose of the CrossFit women’s makeup was to increase their perceived beauty and sex appeal.

Not only are CrossFit women’s bodies put on display, but there are particular kinds of bodies that are praised, namely those of white, conventionally attractive women who, even with their muscle mass, maintain the kinds of curves and features that are considered sexually appealing by mainstream standards. Among the most famous and publicized athletes are Katrin Davíðsdóttir, Sara Sigmundsdóttir, Brooke Wells, and Camille Leblanc-Bazinet, all of whom have massive fan followings, social media popularity, and extreme name recognition for fans of CrossFit, and they are all sexualized as athletes in different ways.

Davíðsdóttir and Sigmundsdóttir are Icelandic women whose “foreignness” is constantly highlighted. Even though CrossFit is an international brand, it was founded in and is highly focused on America, with Reebok even selling CrossFit branded American flag lifting shoes (“Reebok”). Further, the man who programs all the workouts of the Games competition, Dave Castro, is a former Navy SEAL, and he is unapologetic in his hyper-patriotic and politically

libertarian views (“Dave Castro: CrossFit’s Games Maker”). Thus, the Dóttir women are portrayed as foreigners in the CrossFit Games, but to an American culture rooted in white supremacy and eurocentrism, they are the “acceptable” kind of foreign; they are blonde, soft-spoken, non-political, and beautiful. Therefore, their sexual appeal can be, at least in part, rooted in their non-American identities.

On the other hand, some athletes are sexualized for their perceived Americanness, and their bodies are almost read as patriotic. For example, Brooke Wells is marketed as “the girl next door.” She is a white, Christian, Missouri native, but she also is sexualized and billed to fulfill a pornography-esque fantasy of being a “good American girl” with a “naughty side.” (Notably, this definition of “American” is inseparable from whiteness in its construction.) Wells herself even plays off of her sexualized and Americanized popularity, posting photos online like one that features her wearing minimal clothing and holding a large American flag for Veteran’s Day (“Happy Veteran’s Day!...”). First page Google headlines for “Brooke Wells,” after her social media site links and basic biography, include “Brooke Wells Posts Booty Shot, Internet Explodes,” “Brooke Wells’ Booty Breaks the Internet Again,” and Brooke Wells Hottest Girl in CrossFit.” The parts of her body that fit conventional standards are praised, and her impressive athleticism is underplayed in lieu of articles about how “sexy” she is.

Similarly, Camille Leblanc-Bazinet’s social media sites are filled with videos and photos of her completing feats of extremely elite fitness, but the responses to her posts do not focus on this. For example, on one recent Instagram photo of Leblanc-Bazinet completing jump rope triple-unders (an incredible athletic feat), comments included dozens of heart-eye emojis and explicit descriptions of her attractiveness (“Working on my skills...”). For Leblanc-Bazinet,

Davíðsdóttir, and Sigmundsdóttir, much of their popularity is likely related to the fact that they have all won or podiumed in recent Games. However, the kinds of attention they receive online makes it clear that much of the fame of the athletes is related to their looks and the sexualization of their bodies. It also cannot not be ignored that, though Sigmundsdóttir, Davíðsdóttir, Wells, and Leblanc-Bazinet are sexualized in different ways, they are all white, and their whiteness is a large part of what makes them beautiful according to the standards of hegemonic femininity.

While there are no hard statistics available on race and ethnicity in CrossFit, mainly due to the fact that the company does not require its affiliates to record or report any data on its members, there is a commonly accepted notion that CrossFit is mainly white. Gene Demby and Web Smith, both black men who participate in CrossFit, though not on an elite Games level, discuss CrossFit's homogeneity in their respective articles "Who's Really Left Out of the CrossFit Circle" and "Actually, I do like CrossFit." Smith writes that he often jokingly calls himself "one of CrossFit's 22 black guys," and Demby adds factual evidence for this point, noting that there is currently only one major, popular CrossFitter of color: Elisabeth Akinwale. Akinwale has not only competed in multiple Games from 2011-2016, but she has done so as a mother, an impressive fact that she blogs about regularly (Demby). However, even though Akinwale is a prominent figure in CrossFit, she is still not as well known as many other athletes (such as Leblanc-Bazinet), and labeling her as "famous" is really only appropriate if the term is used relatively when she's compared to other athletes of color in CrossFit, not when she's compared to all CrossFitters.

In fact, there has only ever been one woman of color to make it to the Games podium in its entire history, 2010 champion Kristan Clever ("About the Games: History"). Clever is not



considered a particularly famous athlete though, in part because she peaked athletically right before CrossFit really took off as a cultural phenomenon, but also arguably because of her more masculine gender presentation. Clever sports short, mohawked hair, exercises in long basketball shorts and more modest tops, and wears no makeup. As a muscular, athletic woman of color who fits few hegemonic beauty standards, Clever is simply not marketable for the CrossFit brand. Because of the small sample size of women of color in the sport, it is not possible to completely assert that the factors that push Akinwale and Clever out of the CrossFit spotlight would apply to all non-white athletes, but it is highly probable that there is a link between the societal associations of women of color, (including masculinity and a lack of beauty), and the absence of diversity in the Games.

It is also important to realize that CrossFit as a hobby is extremely expensive, with memberships to gyms often costing over \$200 a month, just slightly under the price of an entire year's membership at Planet Fitness ("Membership Types"). For most working or middle class people, spending this amount of money on a gym membership is unreasonable. Further, becoming a professional CrossFitter requires a significant amount of time and dedication to working out, a luxury that is not accessible for many people who need to work to earn a living. Even though many elite athletes are sponsored and paid, getting to that level requires an immense sacrifice and investment of time and money that is not available to all. Class privilege is also historically linked with white supremacy, and the lack of diverse representation in popular CrossFit athletes likely has roots in even more issues than just eurocentric beauty standards. Years of economic oppression of people of color in the United States, particularly black people, have made class mobility difficult if not impossible, and poverty in communities of color is a

massive, institutional issue (Coates). While being able to afford an arguably overpriced workout class is by no means one of the most important causes for people of color, it does shed some light on one variable that leads to the lack of representation of people of color in the Games.

Class privilege is also identified by Aiman, Baird, et al. as a more subtle, often ignored layer of hegemonic femininity (82). CrossFit's need to appease a mass audience by offering them a sexualized, whitewashed product is a direct result of their nature as an American business, so the degrees of separation between beauty standards and economics are not as great as one may assume. Femininity as a construct is associated with particular looks, actions, and mannerisms that are closely linked with class. In their study "Young Girls' Embodied Experiences of Femininity and Social Class," Jennifer Francombe-Webb and Michael Silk analyze a group of young, middle to upper class girls and find that much of what the girls use to define their femininity is related to their class. To the girls, how nice of clothes a woman is wearing signals whether or not she is successful, confident, or socially popular, and they notably use words like "cheap" versus "classy" to describe different kinds of women, words with loaded economic and social implications. In the CrossFit world, "good athletes" are athletes who pay personal trainers to program workouts for them, buy expensive pre-made meals that fit restrictive, macronutrient-focused diets, and are constantly buying the newest gear. Good women athletes have to go even further, putting in the investment for makeup, beauty treatments, and photo shoots to gain publicity and showcase their sexuality. When there is a price put on their sexuality for the consumption of other people, it becomes all the more expensive for the women to keep themselves marketable, making sure that they're always perceived as sexy but also "classy."

The phrase “Strong is the New Sexy” is plastered across lycra tanks tops in flowy print, and Facebook posts are shared to remind women that “thin girls look good in clothes, but fit girls look good naked.” In a culture of sexism, racism, and consumption, muscularity and fitness are not about reclaiming the body or being proud of one’s strength; they are for the enjoyment of an audience. As CrossFit has discovered, a woman can only be accepted as strong if she is also sexual, and a brand of gender norm-transgressing, muscular women can only be marketable if those women epitomize every other requisite for hegemonic feminine beauty: sexiness, whiteness, and middle to upper class status. CrossFit has made great strides in the perception of female athletes, and the rising fame of women like Camille Leblanc-Bazinet, Brooke Wells, and Katrin Davíðsdóttir has helped widen the definitions of feminine and of beautiful, but the brand is still constrained by systems of patriarchy, white supremacy, and a capitalist, consumption-centered culture.

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