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Bodybuilding is an art and your body is the canvas: an examination of bodybuilders and the built body

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**“BODYBUILDING IS AN ART AND YOUR BODY IS THE CANVAS”:
AN EXAMINATION OF BODYBUILDERS AND THE BUILT BODY.**

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APPROVAL OF THESIS

We, the faculty supervising the work of Caitlin Greaf, affirm that the thesis, "*Bodybuilding is an Art and Your Body is the Canvas*": *An Examination of Bodybuilders and The Built Body*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the College of Liberal Arts. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the bodybuilding community by conducting interviews and watching the bodybuilding documentaries *Pumping Iron*, *Pumping Iron II*, and *Generation Iron*.

Bodybuilders' performance of the body is not solely acted just on stage for competitions. Rather, bodybuilders are continuously redefining limitations of what we determine a 'normal' body looks like. By using the concept of the gaze, I analyze bodybuilders' bodies as an oddity on and off stage (Mulvey, 1989). The oddity of their body transforms the space it takes up into a stage for entertainment. I then examine gender performances of female and male bodybuilders within the traditionally masculine sport. I argue that although female bodybuilders are participating within a sport that is socially identified as masculine, they are not challenging femininity but representing a particular form of it. I also argue that female bodybuilders expose the fluidity of gender while reflecting various forms of feminine gender performance.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORY

Introduction

Bodybuilding is often discussed by bodybuilders as a sport, a lifestyle, and an art. From an outsider's perspective, bodybuilding may be a sport of freakishness as bodybuilders construct a body that is not normalized within mainstream society. It is the oddity of the bodybuilder's body that positions their body as the "Other." Female bodybuilders are subjected to other forms of gawking and objectification due to essentialist views of gender.

This project focuses on the bodybuilding community. I use social constructionist theory and feminist theory to analyze both male and female bodybuilders. Themes on objectification of bodybuilder's bodies both on and off stage and gender differences within bodybuilding are examined. From these themes, I explore two main questions: 1) do bodybuilders create a stage for their bodies in every space and 2) do female bodybuilders lead people to re-evaluate the essentialist ideals of gender performances? To answer these two questions I analyzed three documentaries focusing on male and female professional bodybuilders and interviewed both amateur bodybuilders and individuals who went to the gym five days or more within a week.

The paper begins with reviewing current literature on bodybuilding and natural and unnatural body types along with social constructionist theory and feminist theory. Chapter two examines the methods used within the project to analyze data collected. Within Chapter three, I provide my findings and analysis of the data collected. Finally, Chapter four discusses the relevancy and conclusion of the findings along with directions for future research with gender performance and bodybuilding.

Bodybuilding

Research on bodybuilding as a sport often describes a bodybuilder's muscles as being hyper-muscular or an exaggeration of the masculine muscular body (Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Ian, 2001; Richardson, 2008; Schippert, 2007). The extant literature on bodybuilding often uses "hyper-muscularity" as a reference for female bodybuilders and their bodies as overly developed muscularity is perceived as a masculine characteristic (Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Richardson, 2008; Rosdahl, 2014; Schippert, 2007). I argue that by using the term "hyper" we are developing an essentialist perspective on muscular bodies. While actual bodies lie on a spectrum of muscularity, the use of the term hyper-muscularity creates a dichotomous understanding of muscular bodies with one body having an overly exaggerated muscular body and the other a supposedly natural looking muscular body. To refer to a thing as hyper or exaggerated, there must first be a fixed characteristic or object of that thing. The term hyper-muscular limits not only the various categorizations of things but also enforces the essentialist ideals of identities.

There is no single type of body and the categories used to describe body types need to be expanded. Even within the bodybuilding community, the degree of muscular development varies depending on the rankings of amateur and professional along with the individual's choice of being "natural" or using performance enhancement drugs. While there is a difference in muscular bodies from so-called athletic bodies to bodybuilding bodies, terms like hyper-muscular in reference to bodybuilding bodies lead one to believe that there is a clear separation between muscular and hyper-muscular bodies.

Research on bodybuilding has examined the performance of bodybuilders' bodies and the power of the gaze both on and off stage. Marcia Ian's (2001) research on female body building

found that “as functionaries of the gaze, the judges at a bodybuilding show how the contestant shapes up in relation to the cultural screen of idealized gender types” (p. 80). However, the bodybuilder’s performativity and their objectification via the gaze does not end once the subject is off the competition stage. Both on and off stage, bodybuilders subject their bodies to social judgement in terms of the acknowledgment of natural and unnatural body types. Such things as gender performativity and the size of a body determine a natural or unnatural body type according to whether these things either align with social norms or deviate from them (Wesely, 2001).

Natural and Unnatural Bodies

Literature on bodybuilding has also focused on the theme of how we determine natural and unnatural bodies (Franklin, 1996; Featherstone & Turner, 1995; Grosz, 1994; Peterson, 2007; Wesely, 2001). The development of the body within the bodybuilding world fixates on upholding the ‘natural’ body to produce an ‘unnatural’ one (Franklin, 1996; Peterson, 2007; Wesely, 2001). Sarah Franklin’s (1996) work on the postmodern body identifies an important aspect when examining how we culturally see bodies as being natural or unnatural. Franklin explains that socially we are always redefining the limitations of the “natural” body. The body being recognized as a product of culture and nature highlights the historical changes of the perception of the body (Franklin, 1996; Featherstone & Turner, 1995; Grosz, 1994; Ian, 2001). With the rise and popularity of health and fitness, how we socially determine the difference between a natural or unnatural body adapts to these social changes.

It is nearly impossible to discuss the body as an independent subject in isolation from other social identities, influences, and agencies (Peterson, 2007). If we attempt solely to discuss the body as either a social or biological object, we fail to discuss the process of how we identify

a body as not only being natural or unnatural but also how we objectively and subjectively identify the body (Butler, 1993; Franklin, 1996; Grosz, 1994; Ian, 2001; Wesely, 2001). Much work on the body has identified the changes in how the body is socially viewed. For example, plastic surgeries are becoming not only more socially acceptable but understood as a means to present the body as youthfully natural (Gagné & McGaughey, 2002). Natural and unnatural bodies consist of anything from technological applications of the body to blurring the bodily lines between female and male body physiques (Wesely, 2001). Bodybuilding is often considered an unnatural body type due to building the body's muscles to an abnormal image and to the common use of performance enhancing drugs. "What it means to be "real" and "human"" reflects not only our socially constructed views of the body but also how we determine natural and unnatural body types (Attwood, 2014, p. 2).

Social Constructionist Theory

Many theoretical arguments regarding the social construction of identities highlight the social power of essentialist views on the gender and sex binary (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1978; Grosz, 1994; Jagose, 1996). In the essentialist view, sexed bodies are perceived to be biological productions or, in other words, natural fixed objects that in turn have social factors placed upon them. How we determine whether the body is biologically sexed a female or male stems from biological features, but it is ultimately determined through the social process of identifying select physical qualities that represent the dichotomous male or female body (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1978; Grosz, 1994; Jagose, 1996).

To understand the social construction of sexed bodies, we must understand the performativity and social subjective 'I' that allows for the body to be both a production and reproduction of social identities within our reality (Butler, 1993; Featherstone & Turner, 1995;

Grosz, 1994; Parker & Sedgwick, 1995). Social constructionism emphasizes the need to step away from the social power and control embedded in our perceived need to categorize the body as one or another sexed body (Butler, 1993; Callero, 2003; Foucault, 1978; Grosz, 1994).

Through our embodied identities, we not only present our own understanding of the self but also are subjected to our social world's constructed ideals of identities (Callero, 2003; Grosz, 1994).

These ideals change over time. The body has been reproduced in a variety of ways throughout history and the social context of how we determine natural and unnatural bodies has historically changed.

There is something to be said regarding both males and females working to develop a muscular body and producing similar results. Bodybuilding competition judges are increasingly subjecting female bodybuilders to perform a feminine physique and performance to receive positive marks although these contestants willingly subject themselves to feminine ideals of the body (Bell, 2008; Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Ian, 2001; Richardson, 2008; Rosdahl, 2014; Wesely, 2001). The binary spectrum of sexed bodies may allow the understanding that while no one individual is placed at completely one or the other end of the spectrum, we are socialized to believe in the idea that there needs to be a separation between the two sexed bodies to reinforce the socially constructed essentialist binary. Both females and males within the bodybuilding community are subjected to societal gender ideals of femininity and masculinity (Bell, 2008; Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Ian, 2001; Rosdahl, 2014; Wesely, 2001). Female bodybuilders they still endure essentialist views of gender because they are perceived as taking on a masculine performance when they develop a muscular body type. (Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Ian, 2001; Wesely, 2001).

Feminist Theory

Bodybuilding and other physical activities have been studied by feminist scholars to analyze gender dynamics along with the performance of the body (Bell, 2008; Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Franklin, 1996; Featherstone & Turner, 1995; Ian, 2001; Parker & Sedgwick, 1995; Richardson, 2004; Richardson, 2008; Rosdahl, 2014; Schippert, 2007; Wesely, 2001). The performativity of the body within the bodybuilding world positions the subject for social approval. Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick (1995) explain that through our performances and social identities, by doing or saying something we are communicating much more than our individual identity; we are also seeking social identification of our performances such as acknowledgment of our gender, sex, and/or sexuality. Marcia Ian (2001) expands on the performativity of the body as she argues that bodybuilding competitions enforce heteronormativity through the clearly judged separation between male and female bodybuilders in terms of their physique and stage performance. The judge's approval or rejection of female bodybuilders' expression of femininity subjects not only both male and female bodybuilders to identify the separation between the sexed bodies but it also communicates to the audience a necessary recognition of the natural differences between the bodies (Bell, 2008; Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Franklin, 1996; Richardson, 2004; Richardson, 2008; Rosdahl, 2014; Schippert, 2007; Wesely, 2001).

The literature on female bodybuilders has argued that judging during a female bodybuilding competition is based on a heteronormative idea of femininity and masculinity (Bell, 2008; Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Franklin, 1996; Richardson, 2004; Richardson, 2008; Rosdahl, 2014; Schippert, 2007; Wesely, 2001). Female bodybuilders during competitions

are judged based on their ability to present a heteronormative feminine figure and appearance in terms of hair, make-up, and nails. Throughout the research on female bodybuilding, the theme of social gender expectations has consistently been found to be expressed by the female bodybuilders not only while on stage but also from their families (Bell, 2008; Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Richardson, 2004; Richardson, 2008; Rosdahl, 2014; Ian, 2001). Jennifer Wesely (2001) examines the muscular development that female bodybuilders try to avoid. Wesely (2001) refers to this as the ‘twilight zone’ of muscular development of female bodybuilders. Through the restricted guidelines of competition rules of the female physique and the social pressure of their families to perform femininity, female bodybuilders who still competed would limit their training to prevent their muscles from becoming too masculine while other female bodybuilders would stop their heavy strength training to enter the dating world again (Bell, 2008; Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Rosdahl, 2014; Ian, 2001). This social reinforcement of heteronormative social roles constrains female bodybuilders as they come under pressure to prevent their bodies from being perceived as too masculine.

Summary

This study will expand the existing literature on bodybuilding, the body, and gender performance. By exploring how participants view the construction of both other bodies and their own bodies, my research will emphasize the need for expanded categories of the socially constructed body along with continuing the examination of bodybuilders’ gender performances. This study will also add to the existing literature on natural and unnatural bodies as what we consider to be natural and unnatural bodies reflects the social acceptance of those bodies. Overall, this study will contribute to literature on the socially constructed body as a form of identity and how the socially constructed muscular body is observed.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Introduction

This study explores the perception of the body from members both in and outside of the bodybuilding community using qualitative grounded theory content analysis (Strauss, 1987). This research was conducted in West Virginia and Ohio during 2015-2016. I used interviews and documentaries to investigate the following themes: the body subjected to the gaze, differences between female and male bodybuilders, and the sport of bodybuilding. This study also focuses on the ways the body is recognized as an object that can be built and constructed by looking at two main questions: 1) do bodybuilders create a stage for their bodies in every space and 2) do female bodybuilders lead people to re-evaluate the essentialist ideals of gender performances?

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants

The majority of my data stem from participant interviews. I also analyzed three documentaries focusing on bodybuilding. After obtaining IRB approval, all participants gave consent for participation. Participants were first chosen from personal networks. I then used snowball sampling from those networks to gather more participants (Weiss, 1995, p. 25). Participants from my personal network included three males and a female who were friends of mine and my friend's trainer. In total, the study included 12 participants: five identified as amateur bodybuilders and seven as being athletic. In order to meet the inclusion criteria set forth by this study, amateur bodybuilding participants must have competed in a minimum of one bodybuilding competition while having no official sponsorships or be working towards participating in an amateur competition this year. Non-bodybuilder participants were selected if

they went to the gym a minimum of four to five days a week while spending a minimum of an hour and a half within the gym. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 35. There were five females, one identifying as an amateur bodybuilder, and seven males, with four identifying as amateur bodybuilders. All but two participants have at least a bachelor's degree in a variety of fields such as sports management, dietetics, psychology, and exercise physiology. All but one of the participants were white, while one identified as bi-racial.

Interviews

Before conducting interviews, I would first ask the participants if I could audio record the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 92). Participants were made aware before interviews that if they wanted to discontinue participation all records and recordings of the participant would be destroyed. No participant discontinued the study. I did not have a minimum or maximum time set for interviews; interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes to over an hour. I allowed the interviewee to choose the setting of the interview. Interviews took place in public spaces and participants' homes. I transcribed the interviews within a week of conducting them and destroyed the audio recordings upon completion of transcription.

Out of the 12 participants, three bodybuilders and two non-bodybuilders were chosen for multiple interviews while the other participants were chosen for single interviews. All names and locations within this study were changed to ensure confidentiality of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured (see appendix B). Employing a semi-structured interview allows "the interviewee to tell a story and produce a narrative of some sort regarding all or part of their own life-experience" (Wengraf, 2001, p. 5) and probe additional relevant material as it arises (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78). By creating a semi-structured interview guide, I laid the groundwork for a free flowing but purposeful conversation instead of a narrow discussion (Berg

and Lune, 2011). I structured my questions around themes of gender, the body, and the sport of bodybuilding. I used questions such as what does it mean to identify as a bodybuilder and why are bodybuilders' bodies often viewed as unnatural. The topics of discussion focused on identifying differences in body types such as athletic or bodybuilding; gender obstacles within gyms; embodiment experiences while working out; and perspectives of the construction of the body (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78). During the interviews, I did not limit the conversation to only bodybuilding, but I allowed the interviewee to discuss their own experiences in sports and perceptions of the body in that sport. The semi-structured nature of the interviews thus allowed for discussions to expand beyond these topics to others such as performance enhancing drugs and other areas of interest to the interviewee (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 92). For those interviewees who either had no contact with bodybuilders or did not identify as a bodybuilder, my questions focused on the sport or sports they performed in addition to their perception of how the body can be built.

Documentaries

Pumping Iron (1977), *Pumping Iron II: The Women (1985)*, and *Generation Iron (2013)* are documentaries that explore the bodybuilding community and bodybuilder's lifestyle leading up to competitions. *Pumping Iron* captures the bodybuilders' preparation for the 1975 IFBB Mr. Universe and Mr. Olympia competitions while *Generation Iron* captures their preparation for the 2013 Mr. Olympia. *Pumping Iron II* focuses on those female bodybuilders preparing for the 1983 Caesar World Cup. Each documentary interviews and follows these bodybuilders. We witness them discussing their personal lives outside of the gym along with how they became interested in the sport. Each documentary highlights rivalries between certain bodybuilders and exposes the hard work and dedication each bodybuilder has toward the sport.

Content Analysis

Content analysis allows for “an attempt made to measure all variables as they naturally or normally occur” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 94). Content analysis also “classifies textual material, reducing it to more relevant, manageable bits of data” (Weber, 1990, p. 5). I conducted content analysis of the documentaries *Pumping Iron*, *Pumping Iron II*, and *Generation Iron* focusing on the male and female bodybuilding communities to find emergent themes within the films. I used content analysis aimed to find similar themes between the content within the documentaries and interviews. I watched each documentary seven times to extract similar themes and content found within the interviews. For both the interviews and documentaries, I looked at themes that may have occurred in the interviews but were not discussed in the documentaries. I chose each documentary based on the depth of information on both the lifestyle and community of bodybuilding along with the documentaries focusing on either male or female bodybuilders.

Using content analysis, I sought to discover similar characteristics and rituals between the male and female bodybuilding community (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 192). Each time I watched the documentaries, I wrote notes based on similar themes I found between the documentaries and interviews. I also looked for similar themes between each documentary. These documentaries allowed an in-depth analysis into the small community of bodybuilding which is even more limited within the Appalachian region where this study was conducted. The following section discusses my coding categories and how I analyzed themes found in the interviews and documentaries.

Coding

Coding for interviews and documentaries included themes of *masculinity*, *femininity*, *bodybuilding*, and *the body*. My semi-structured questions reflected these themes for my

interviews; however, the expansion of these themes arose throughout some interviews. One surprising theme that arose in the documentaries but not in the interviews was racial differences. While the *Pumping Iron* documentaries did represent small scale racial diversity, *Generation Iron* represented bodybuilders from various socio-economic backgrounds along with diversity in races. As I coded the transcripts with these themes, I then analyzed the documentaries looking for similar themes. Themes of gender were prominent within both the interviews and documentaries with discussions regarding female bodybuilders along with expressions of essentialist views within the sport. *Bodybuilding* was defined when participants discussed the identification of bodybuilding or the sport and discussions of the lifestyle. *The body* as a theme represented how individuals both in the documentaries and interviews identified body types and the constructed body. The sections below detail these coded themes found in the interviews and documentaries.

Masculinity

For interviews, I categorize *masculinity* based on how interviewees discussed bodybuilding as a masculine sport along with essentialist views regarding muscles being masculine. *Masculine muscle* was categorized when bodybuilders referenced the male body as naturally muscular. *Masculine bodies* was coded when interviewees' narratives of bodybuilding and the sport revolved around male bodybuilders. When interviewees discussed the gym or bodybuilding competitions and only referenced males or male bodybuilders, I categorized this as a *masculine setting*.

For the documentaries and interviews, *masculinity* was coded when scenes and narratives with the audience, judges, and bodybuilders focused on male bodybuilders being traditionally masculine. I categorized *traditional masculinity* when scenes or narratives included the audience

or bodybuilders referencing essentialist ideals of masculine gender performances toward male bodybuilders along with discussing the sport as being masculine. *Heterosexual masculinity* was categorized for *Pumping Iron* and *Generation Iron* when scenes included male bodybuilders and their wives or girlfriends. The inclusion of this category revolved around the wives or girlfriends being present with them in public space, cooking or preparing their boyfriends' or husbands' meals at homes, and helping their boyfriend or husband apply self-tanner before going on stage for a competition. *Masculine trainer* was categorized when scenes or narratives revolved around male trainers and when bodybuilders discussed their male trainers providing the mental push for the bodybuilders training. *Masculine muscle* was categorized when bodybuilders referenced how the male body naturally builds muscles.

Femininity

Coding categories for *femininity* in the interviews included discussions of essentialist views and stigmas of female bodybuilders. *Traditional femininity* was categorized when amateur female bodybuilder interviewees explained preparation for competition which reflected essentialist views of femininity in regards to the type of hair, makeup, nails, shoes, and muscular development. *Traditional femininity* included discussions of positive or negative experiences in public spaces toward female bodybuilders. I categorized discussions of women in gyms as *traditional femininity* if the narrative focused on women wanting to develop a lean feminine figure. I categorized as *muscular women* discussions of women's experiences in the gym to develop a muscular body exceeding the traditional feminine ideal. *Female bodybuilding* was categorized when interviewees discussed their experiences or preparation for competitions, their own identity as a female bodybuilder, and their opinions of femininity within female bodybuilding.

Femininity in the documentaries was categorized based on scenes and narratives of female bodybuilders on stage at a competition along with references to an image of femininity in bodybuilding. I used the same categorization of *traditional femininity* from the interviews; however, I expanded it by including narratives and scenes of female bodybuilders in *Pumping Iron II* defending essentialist views of femininity in the sport. *Female bodybuilding* as a category was defined when female bodybuilders discussed their views of the sport along with their lifestyle and dedication to bodybuilding. In *Pumping Iron II*, scenes including female bodybuilders working out and narratives of how they define the image of a female bodybuilder were also included in the category of *female bodybuilding*. *Female muscular bodies* as a category included scenes and narratives of the cast, audience, or judges critiquing the muscular development of a female bodybuilder if the muscular body exceeded the essentialist view of the female body. *Female muscular bodies* were categorized when narratives revolved around presenting a new image for female bodybuilding along with discussions of redefining femininity in female bodybuilding.

Bodybuilding

Bodybuilding as a category was coded the same for both the interviews and documentaries. I categorized *bodybuilders* when interviewees and narratives in the documentaries discussed the lifestyle of being a bodybuilder such as their everyday routines, details of dieting, their motivation to get into the sport, and what makes someone a bodybuilder. I categorized discussions of supplements and performance enhancing drugs used by bodybuilders as *bodybuilding stereotypes* as much of the narrative in the documentaries and interviews revolved around opinions and media presentations of these things. Bodybuilders in the

documentaries did not endorse or discuss the usage of performance enhancing drugs, but they explain the media's representations of them.

The Body

The Body was coded in interviews when interviewees spoke of natural and unnatural bodies and essentialist views of female and male bodies. *Natural body type* was categorized based on the interviewees' explanation of what they determined a natural body looked like and its ability to function like normal body types. *Unnatural body type* was categorized in a similar manner but the interviewee explained their opinion of how they determine an unnatural body. *Essentialist body type* was categorized when interviewees discussed the body having natural limitations in regards to female and male bodybuilders.

For the documentaries, *the body* was categorized around narratives of constructing a bodybuilding body, essentialist views of the body, and objectification of the body. I categorized the *built body* when scenes and narratives focused on bodybuilders, the audience, and trainers critiquing the body on and off stage. *Female body* was categorized as scenes and narratives in *Pumping Iron II* expressed limitations for female bodybuilders' muscular development due to having a female body. Other essentialist discussions about female bodybuilders' bodies were categorized as *female body*. *Male body* was categorized when scenes and narratives in the documentaries praised male bodies for having a muscular developed body along with narratives of preferring to see muscles on a male body as opposed to a female body. Objectifications of bodybuilders' bodies on and off stage, in public spaces, and in the gym, were categorized as *the gaze*. For this category, the objectification stemmed from bodybuilders themselves, the audience, trainers, or judges discussing the built body in a positive or negative manner along with scenes focusing on bodybuilders deconstructing their built body for areas of improvement or weakness.

CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS

This research analyzed the social construction of the body and gender performativity in the sport of bodybuilding. My findings expose essentialist ideals of the gendered body in bodybuilding. I found that bodybuilders' bodies are deconstructed through objectification of the body on and off stage. However, essentialist views of the body and gender performances are reinforced through the stage presentation guidelines for female bodybuilders and how individuals gender the muscular body. Some of the most reoccurring themes I found in the documentaries and interviews were the essentialist views of gender performances toward female bodybuilders. The theme of essentialist views toward female bodybuilders arose out of both my interviews and the documentary *Pumping Iron II* as both the cast and interviewees discussed gender performances of female bodybuilders taking on a masculine appearance. Another prevalent theme was the bodybuilders' bodies being a form of entertainment as their bodies being an oddity attract gawks and stares from audience members on and off stage. The following sections present the analysis of interviews and *Pumping Iron*, *Pumping Iron II*, and *Generation Iron*.

Bodybuilding

Bodybuilding as a topic of research has grown in popularity since the 1970s when Arnold Schwarzenegger moved the sport into the light of popular culture with the release of *Pumping Iron*. Much of the literature on bodybuilding focuses on a variety of topics such as differences between male and female bodybuilders, hyper-muscular bodies of bodybuilders, and explorations of the bodybuilding community. This research is limited, however, as it often addresses topics of gender performances from an essentialist perspective. By failing to acknowledge that bodybuilding as a sport to develop muscles is gendered due to essentialist views that muscles are

part of a masculine gender performance, research neglects to understand the influence and performance of social identities imposed on the sport and the participants. To recognize how topics such as the performance of the body and gender identities are important within the sport of bodybuilding, we must first identify what the sport of bodybuilding is and how the participants who have accepted the sport as a lifestyle define it.

“Bodybuilding is not aimed at mass-conformity...On the contrary building an even more ‘freakish’, weird, unbelievable body is the goal” (Richardson, 2008, p.158). Richardson’s explanation of the sport of bodybuilding reflects only one aspect of how individuals understand the sport and the bodies within the sport. How bodybuilding is defined varies between those who participate in the sport and the audience members observing the sport as a form of entertainment. The stage competitions and magazine covers, which often are the first thing that people think of when the topic of bodybuilding is brought up, do not accurately reflect the sport or lifestyle of bodybuilding. The sport of bodybuilding is more than merely meatheads throwing around weights with the only goal in mind being to be physically big.

In *Generation Iron*, Phil Heath discusses the marketing ploy of supplements to the public and the public’s misuse of these items. In this discussion, he mentions the stereotype often depicting bodybuilders:

People go to the stores and buy some product and they just take it all hoping for the best. They don’t know how that [supplement] actually works. They don’t know the science behind those actual supplements. They don’t care and I get it, they aren’t supposed to I get that. But yet, we’re the dumb dumb and we are the people that don’t know anything but just being a box of rocks with weights and all this other stuff. We are the meatheads. We’re the idiots. We’re able to do something that 99.8% on the earth can’t do which is lose fat and gain muscle at the same time. (Mejia and Yudin, 2013)

Heath acknowledged the stereotypes that surround the sport of bodybuilding. When I asked one interviewee, Aaron, who has competed in strongman competitions and has trained as an amateur bodybuilder, how he would describe a bodybuilder he states that “much of bodybuilding is a

mental sport and being able to persist in both training and nutrition.” The stereotype of bodybuilders being “a box of rocks,” as Heath described, is challenged as the sport revolves around extended knowledge of the body both in training and nutrition. Building the body to a size most would consider unnatural cannot be accomplished by an individual who does not understand not only the body but also the body’s capabilities and limitations. Time and dedication to any subject or sport will allow an individual to grow in comprehending information not known to those outside of that sport or subject.

Bodybuilding as a sport is more than merely understanding the body but also developing an artistic mind to construct the image of a near perfect body using structured dieting and workout routines. The documentaries *Pumping Iron*, *Pumping Iron II*, and *Generation Iron* focus not only on professional bodybuilding competitions but also on the participants’ everyday activities preparing for stage competitions such as Mr. Olympia and the Caesars World Cup. Each documentary interviews professional and amateur bodybuilders, follows them to the gym, watches them eat, and finally films them on stage at competitions. Their daily lives are cycled through the films leading up to competitions as we witness and hear their thoughts on their lifestyle choice and the sport of bodybuilding.

Within each film, we watch as the bodybuilders precisely examine their bodies during their workouts and within their homes. Both male and female bodybuilders within each film expressed similarities between bodybuilders and artists or sculptors. In *Pumping Iron*, Schwarzenegger’s description of bodybuilding is that:

A good bodybuilder must have the same mind when it comes to sculpting than a sculptor has to analyze. When you’re looking in the mirror and you say ok, I need a little more deltoids, a little more shoulders so I can get the proportions right. So, what you do is you exercise and put those deltoids on. Whereas an artist would just slap on some clay on the side which may be the easier way. We [bodybuilders] go through harder ways because we use the human body. (Butler and Gary, 1977)

His comparison between artists and bodybuilders redefines the sport of bodybuilding as both a sport and an art. The dedication to the body, whether it is to redefine the limitation of growth or construct a new image of one's body, shapes the sport of bodybuilding for those individuals who participate in it. Bodybuilders act like artists as they construct their ideal body image. The body in both cases is constantly critiqued by the artist or bodybuilder as they strive to construct their own perfect image of the body.

In *Generation Iron*, bodybuilder Phil Heath states that “you’re trying to take your body and sculpt it to where everything is in proportion. Everything from the right side to the left side is equal and being just a true work of art” (Mejia and Yudin, 2013). Both Warren and Heath’s identification of bodybuilding is a reiteration of Schwarzenegger’s initial description of the individuals within this sport. The art of constructing and reconstructing the body through pain and dedication is a major aspect of the everyday self-examination required in the sport of bodybuilding.

The sport of bodybuilding is an individual sport. Branch Warren, a professional bodybuilder, gives another description of bodybuilding in *Generation Iron*; he says that “bodybuilders by definition are selfish. Most of them will tell you that they’re self-centered and selfish. Even if you’re not that type of person, you become that type of person because you never get away from it [bodybuilding]” (Mejia and Yudin, 2013). Warren’s description of the sport emphasizes the lifestyle of the sport reshaping individuals’ everyday interaction as they must be conscious of their meals while also acknowledging how others outside the sport may perceive bodybuilders. Within the documentaries, the focus of their lives within the gym and on stage allows audience members to acknowledge that bodybuilders not only compete against others while on stage but against their own bodies from previous competitions and while in the gym.

The Gaze

The body, whether in film or everyday experience, is always subjected to the gaze. The gaze can be defined as a voyeuristic desire or a “pleasure in looking/ fascination with the human forms” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 7). The gaze has often been used in film research to identify the sexualization and objectification of “the Other” (Mulvey, 1989). The gaze toward bodybuilders provides an understanding of how the audience, judges, and bodybuilders objectify the body as a form of entertainment. This section will use analyses of interviews with bodybuilders and documentaries to examine ways in which bodybuilders are objectified. Bodybuilders’ bodies are positioned as the Other, as bodybuilders construct their bodies in what is thought to be an unnatural image while also redefining acceptable images of the body. I argue that the gaze is used both by the audience and the bodybuilders themselves to objectify their body as they create a stage in all spaces. Whether it is on stage at a competition or in the gym, bodybuilders’ bodies are constructed as Other. For bodybuilders, the art of sculpting the body positions them to take on the role of a judge by objectifying and criticizing their own bodies. This kind of critique is not always the same when audience members are using the gaze upon the bodybuilder’s body. Instead, both audience and bodybuilders themselves “Other” the body of a bodybuilder.

A Walking Stage

We as audience members watching a screen or others in our everyday lives use the gaze to associate similarities between bodies. The body has always been a subject of debate regarding whether it is simply a product of nature or also a vessel in which we experience our lives and embody cultural identities. Our use of the gaze on other bodies furthers our own socialized understandings of what is defined as a body. Bodies on stage, whether in films or at

bodybuilding competitions, assume the role of the subject being objectified by the audience. The gaze, moreover, is gendered, as Mulvey (1989) explains:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure. In their exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” (p. 808-809)

While her explanation of the gaze is about the depiction of women and men’s bodies on screen, the gaze for bodybuilders is an everyday experience as their bodies are the subject of the audience’s gawking and stares. Bodybuilders are a walking stage. Their presence in the gym, on stage at a competition, and in public may result in the audience having different perspectives on the body relative to the context. Gym and competitions are spaces that accept the bodies of bodybuilders. They are spaces where the bodies are admired for being constructed to display a finished muscular project. Other public spaces outside of the gym reposition the bodybuilder’s body. Instead of being praised, bodybuilders may endure gawking and stares as these public spaces are not filled with bodies like theirs.

“Athletic training aims to extend the body’s capacities, to rebuild and retune the body, and to reshape the body itself” (Franklin, 1996, p. 99). In bodybuilding and many other sports, the body becomes the main focal point for both the athlete and the audience. Whether it is individuals at a sports game or a competition, the athletic body is subjected to the gaze while on and off the field or stage. When it comes to bodybuilding and other athletic sports, these individuals are subjected to the images and social ideals of how the body naturally functions within the sport and the body’s capabilities and limitations both within the sport and in other contexts.

Pumping Iron and *Generation Iron* capture both judges and audience members gawking at bodybuilders outside the gym and on stage at the competitions. While on stage, the films focus as much on the audience's facial reactions to stage competitions as they do to the bodybuilders on stage. In *Pumping Iron*, we witness Schwarzenegger standing outside a building in the middle of a circle of people. We as the audience along with the individuals making the circle watch as he begins to pose and make jokes. We watch as the audience within the film gawks, gasps, and praises the size of his body through statements such as "he's a big dude" and "he's got a beautiful body." With each different pose, the audience claps with enthusiasm. In the next scene, we watch as Schwarzenegger and Franco Columbu work out at Venice Beach, CA while people passing by stop to watch. The open gym layout invites others to watch bodybuilders pump iron. The setting of this gym allows people passing on the street to take on the role of an audience member as they observe the bodybuilders.

In *Generation Iron*, Phil Heath is shown in a gym post-workout as a group of tourists come into the gym. While the tourists gawk and stare at Heath as he poses, the narrator explains that "for all bodybuilders the experience is similar, they are an oddity. Stares and pointed fingers. They run a freak show with no tent to hide away in" (Mejia and Yudin, 2013). The audience and their gaze toward bodybuilders not only creates a stage for bodybuilders in every space but also position bodybuilders as a form of entertainment.

The Body as Entertainment

Naill Richardson's (2004 & 2008) work on male and female bodybuilders discusses their bodies as being intentionally, freakishly big. In regards to male bodybuilding, Richardson states that bodybuilding's "subversive potential lies in the fact that it has been assimilated by mainstream, heterocentrist culture, even though it celebrates grotesque, physical freakiness"

(2008, p. 63). Bodybuilders' abnormal body size is a rare image for the public to observe. The abnormal size and their freakishness, per Richardson results in bodybuilders being a form of entertainment. Victor Martinez, a professional bodybuilder portrayed in *Generation Iron*, explains that "the audience wants to see a spectacle. When they go to see a show, they don't want to go and see someone who looks like them. They want to see something extreme. So, we have to get huge. We have to go to the next level" (Mejia and Yudin, 2013). Both Richardson and Martinez's description of bodybuilders are that they are a physical oddity. This comes from the audience's perceptions on and off stage, which are informed by how we are socialized to recognize what a "normal" body looks like. The audiences from Martinez's explanation leads bodybuilders to push their freakishness for both entertainment and for competition purposes. When discussing how people view bodybuilders, interviewee Tim, who identified as an amateur bodybuilder, explained that "although I think they look awesome, their [bodybuilders] hard work is seen as producing a freakish size body." The term freakish to reference their bodies not only reflects Martinez's statement, but also perpetuates the essentialist ideal that there are natural limitations to the body that bodybuilders redefine.

Interviewees Kim and Craig, who have competed in multiple amateur bodybuilding competitions, described their experiences while in public spaces as both positive and negative. Kim states, "as a fairly muscular woman people are always going to say something to you. They squeeze your arm or say hey you have man arms. Of course, I also get stares and heads turn when I'm just walking in the mall." Craig explains that "I would always get told that I look really good and asked if I was on steroids. People just want to stare at you because they don't see people like us every day." Although Kim and Craig's experiences differ due to essentialist ideals

of men and women having muscular bodies, both recognize that their bodies in public spaces lead them to attract attention.

Being constantly subjected to the gaze, bodybuilders experience their bodies as forms of entertainment in every space. We are socialized to view the body as a product of nature with its own natural limitations; however, “human subjects never simply have a body; rather, the body is always necessarily the object and subject of attitudes and judgments” (Grosz, 1994, p. 81).

Attitudes towards what is defined as a deviant body are relative to the space and time the body is in. Within film, the body and the space it is in resonate with the audience to either reflect their own bodies or be an image of the Other. Both within the films and in person, audience members recognize the body of a bodybuilder as an object reflecting their own body while also disassociating the body as unnatural. Ian (2001) claims that “the competitive bodybuilder recognizes and reclaims her [or his] atomized flesh only in the presence of the gaze by submitting to its judgement” (p. 88). However, as the body of a bodybuilder is continuously positioned as an object of entertainment, it is also subjected to judgement whether the bodybuilder submits to it or not.

Posing

The gaze is often discussed as the audience’s stare at a fixed individual or body (Mulvey, 1989). Bodybuilders reposition the gaze self-ward, in that they objectify their own bodies. Bodybuilders recognize their own image and body as a form of entertainment and visual oddity. While on and off stage, spectators are not the sole audience observing the bodybuilding body. Instead, bodybuilders adopt the role of the spectator for their own examination of their body as an object. Bodybuilders must take on the role of the judge while off stage to critique their body. They acknowledge that their body is built for entertainment on stage. One thing that

bodybuilders do is posing, which consists of forming various stances to show the targeted muscles of that stance. Their breakdown of the body into areas of weakness or those in need of improvement during this process is like an artist's eye for improvement of the final product.

Within *Pumping Iron*, *Pumping Iron II*, and *Generation Iron*, the viewer watches as these bodybuilders stare into the gym mirrors observing every angle of their body. They take in their body as both an artist and as a judge. Each film shows the cast at the gym staring at their bodies from different angles while often posing to gain a glimpse of what the judges will see. While posing in front of the mirror to see areas that need improvement, the cast in each film either praises or criticizes their body parts, like how a judge would remark on their body while they are on stage.

In the beginning of *Pumping Iron*, we witness Arnold and Franco in a ballet studio. We watch as a ballet instructor is teaching them posing techniques that will allow them to show off certain muscle groups along with how to move from one pose to the next in a flowing motion. In both *Pumping Iron* and *Generation Iron*, Kia Greene, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Dennis James discuss posing as a movement to connect the mind to the muscle. Greene explains posing in *Generation Iron* as

a very valuable tool to build a physique that is historically the physique that is bodybuilding. It's not just enough to go to the gym to train and lift weights. There's an internal connection with the contractions that your muscles make. What I'm really talking about is the presence of the artistic mind that ultimately sculpts the physique. (Mejia and Yudin, 2013)

Greene identifies the mind and body connection made by contracting the muscles while observing the body in the mirror and on stage. Through posing and self-critique of the body, bodybuilders position their bodies as both the active subject and passive object of their own use of the gaze (Mulvey, 1989). While posing on stage at competitions, bodybuilders and the

audience acknowledge the bodybuilder's body as a product for visual objectification. Grosz (1994) discusses the body as an object which is both defined by and redefines the space it is in along with the objects around it (p. 87). Within the space of a competition, posing next to other bodybuilders in front of both judges and audience members provides a space of acceptance for objectifying bodybuilders' bodies. Off stage, bodybuilders use the gaze on their own body as a tool to critique their body. In the documentaries, bodybuilders are caught posing in front of the mirrors that appear on every wall in the gym. While posing in the gym, bodybuilders become both competitor and a judge. Greene's explanation reveals that during posing or workouts, bodybuilders experience a deeper connection with the body and muscle. Bodybuilders recognize that their bodies are more than objects or machines that can be built through various physical activities but also objects for entertainment and display.

Gender and Sex

There is a fascination when it comes to bodybuilder's bodies. This fascination revolves in part around gender and its performance. Judith Lorber (2004) states that "gender is such a familiar part of life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced" (p. 55). The common understanding of gender is that it is a natural product of one's sex. This essentialist view of gender and sex influences how individuals socially acknowledge or reject certain gender identity performances. The essentialist view argues that boys and men are naturally masculine while girls and women are naturally feminine (Butler 1993; Foucault, 1978; Franklin, 1996; Grosz, 1994; Wesely, 2001; Jagose, 1996). These essentialist ideals are imposed on everyday life and our experiences.

In contrast to essentialism, the social constructionist view of gender argues that it has no basis in nature. Instead the identity, image, and performance of gender is the result of language and other practices that are recognized as fitting into the dichotomous categories of masculinity and femininity. All identities are social performances (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1978; Parker & Sedgwick, 1995). Judith Butler (1993) explains that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (p. 2). In other words, our socialized ideas of these repeated acts and performances are identified as either masculine or feminine. The existing identities that categorize things such as sex, gender, race, and sexuality limit available performances. We continue to socialize and justify essentialist ideals regarding things such as gender being a natural reflection of sex.

We cannot deconstruct one identity without discussing and deconstructing another identity. Our identities are not independent from one another. Instead, the social expectation of how identities are performed can conflict. For example, how we socially view femininity and the idea of womanhood does not include female bodybuilders. Female bodybuilders take on a sport and performance that is socially identified as masculine. Female bodybuilders are challenged in their everyday realities by traditional essentialist ideas of feminine gender performance. These ideas shape their realities compared to a woman who may fit into those traditional feminine gender performances.

Feminist writing often tackles the issues of inequality between women and men while examining categories such as “female bodybuilder” to argue that women challenge traditional ideas of femininity (Chananie-Hill & McGarth, 2009; Franklin, 1996; Ian, 2001; Richardson, 2008; Rosdahl, 2014; Schippert, 2007). Femininity like masculinity, is both a performance and a

socially constructed identity. I argue that female bodybuilders are not challenging the performance of femininity but instead are performing a different form of femininity. Essentialist views of femininity limit the idea that gender performances naturally oppose one another. By recognizing the social construction of gender performances, we not only deconstruct the gender binary but also recognize the reality that one cannot experience their daily lives outside of this heteronormative gender dichotomy. Instead, we can expand the present essentialist views of gender, sex, race, and sexuality.

Bodybuilding as a Masculine Sport

The constantly perpetuated social belief that gender and sex are biological reflections of one another is both challenged and justified through the stage performances of female bodybuilders. The sport of bodybuilding is perceived as a masculine sport as its main goal is building a muscular body. Socially, we associate a muscular body with a masculine gender performance. While muscles are not gendered, how we perceive a muscular body and its performance is (Butler, 1993; Schulze, 1997; Moore, 1997; Holmlund, 1997; Fisher, 1997; Wesely, 2001; Ian, 2001; Schippert, 2007). When it comes to bodybuilding and the bodies of men and women within this sport, researchers often argue whether women are challenging femininity and how it is performed. One example of this is Jamilla Rosdahl's research on female bodybuilders, which emphasizes the argument that femininity is being challenged through female bodybuilding. Rosdahl (2014) states:

Because muscle is associated with people with male bodies and therefore with masculinity, women who participate in male-dominated sports such as bodybuilding do not conform to standards of 'feminine' identity and display of 'womanhood' or 'femaleness'. The muscular female body challenges Western understandings of the traditional female body as being 'naturally' feminine in appearance and physique. (p. 36)

Rosdahl's argument is validated in the sense that femininity is often portrayed as being passive and weak. However, Rosdahl fails to acknowledge that muscular women also perform a form of femininity. Although muscular bodies are viewed as being a masculine gender performance, muscular women have been becoming more acceptable as a feminine performance.

Pumping Iron and *Generation Iron* capture male bodybuilders in the gym surrounded by men who, as they state, can push them past their limits. In *Generation Iron*, Branch Warren discusses masculinity within the gym. When talking about the stresses of preparing for Mr. Olympia, Warren states that "some people cry and bitch about it like babies or little girls. A man has issues; he sets it aside and focuses on what his job is... You got to take care of business at the gym with the boys." Warren's view of the gym and bodybuilding as a sport revolves around traditional views of masculinity. While no other bodybuilder within the documentaries or interviews used such derogatory language to clarify their opinions of the gym being a masculine setting others have commented on gender and trainers.

Roelly Winklaar, a bodybuilder in *Generation Iron*, is asked about his trainer who is an older retired female bodybuilder nicknamed Grandma. Winklaar stated that when he was first introduced to Sibil Peeters he thought it was a joke. He explained that his concern was how an older woman could train him to get to Mr. Olympia. Like Warren's description of masculinity within the gym, Winklaar expressed doubt that Grandma could be a successful trainer because she is a woman. Both Warren and Winklaar's views reflect essentialist ideals that femininity and masculinity are separate dichotomous gender performances. The assumption is that in the gym, being masculine will lead a bodybuilder to greatness because masculinity is about strength and power, in contrast to femininity which involves "crying" like a baby.

Essentialist ideals of gender may restrict some bodies from being considered feminine due to their muscular development. These essentialist ideals of gender and gender performance limit both men's and women's construction of their bodies. Attitudes and beliefs of men's and women's gender performance and physique are reflections of the essentialist understanding of gender, sex, sexuality, and the body. These essentialist ideals of gender and how one builds their body is addressed in Leslee Fisher's (1997) explanation that "bodybuilding is a context fraught with contradictions, compromises, and tension that are exuded between mainstream and marginalized femininities; bodybuilding empowers and at the same time enslaves women" (p. 135). Here, Fisher recognizes that the sport of bodybuilding does have a mainstream spotlight placed upon it through its competitions and stage performances while also affirming the marginalized position of women both in the mainstream culture and within the sport.

A woman with a muscular body expands the options for gender performances which are limited through the socialized essentialist ideals that shape how we understand who participates within which sports. Before the competition, Francis gives her opinion on the current image of female bodybuilders. She stated that "in the past the winners have been women that to me aren't really bodybuilders. They are sort of thin that look like ballet dancers but are still called bodybuilders. Now I'm going to come in and get real big like a male bodybuilder but let's see if the judges like it" (Butler, 1985). We come to find out at the end of the documentary that the judges were not accepting at the time of female bodybuilders pushing past the lean traditionally natural feminine look. Another example of the female muscular body expanding gender performance is when Rachel McLish watched Francis workout before the competition then was asked by the director what their conversation was about. McLish stated that she asked Francis not how she got so big but what bodybuilding meant to her. McLish first explained that

bodybuilding to her meant that “while I’m on stage I want every woman to just want to look like me. Or try to achieve what I have and have a perfect body with a tiny little waist, perfect legs, and small muscles” (Butler, 1985). The director then again asked what bodybuilding meant to Francis. In response to McLish, she stated “that she [Francis] is taking it a step beyond that. She’s under the impression that she had the perfect feminine muscular body and she decided to take it further. It seemed like to me that she skipped this point” (Butler, 1985). While Francis’ goal of expanding the limited idea of how a feminine muscular body should look, the judges, audience members, and some female bodybuilders retain essentialist ideals of natural feminine bodies in the sport.

How an individual identifies their gender performance may not be accepted by others based on whether their gender identity fits the social perception of that gender performance. Peter Callero’s work on the social construction of the self and the examination of agency and power of the individual through identities highlights the possibility of conflicting identities from the individual and social world. Callero (2003) explains two stances regarding the self:

In the first instance, the self [as social construction] is examined as a bounded, structured object- Mead’s “me”-whereas in the second stance, the self [as social construction] is examined as a fluid, agentic, and creative response- Mead’s “I.” The distinction captures the core principle of a socially constructed self, namely the self is a jointed accomplishment, neither completely determined by the social world nor pre-given at birth. (p. 121)

The dual category of the self as a “me” and “I” in Mead’s terms clarifies the conflicting identifications that can occur for the individual with performances such as gender. *Pumping Iron II*, which focuses on female bodybuilders, captures this clash between the gendered self identity and social perceptions of gender. Many of the women within the documentary such as Rachel McLish, Bev Francis, and Carla Dunlap are asked to discuss femininity and how they remain feminine within this masculine sport. However, within *Pumping Iron* and *Generation Iron* the

male bodybuilders are not asked the same questions regarding masculinity. The directors' need to discuss femininity with only the female bodybuilders is not solely about their curiosity regarding feminine gender performances, but also reveals the assumption that a bodybuilder's identity is assumed to be male. The judge's explanation of the female bodybuilder rule book for judges along with some participants in *Pumping Iron II* expressing essentialist ideals reinforce the image of what a feminine body looks like. Often within the film, participants would discuss the difference between the current lean muscular bodies found in bodybuilding compared to Francis's goal of pushing that image to the next level. The idea that one could be feminine while having a muscular body like Francis's did not seem likely to the judges or some participants. The body to them was an additional factor for natural femininity.

One interviewee, Kim, explained that "for the competitions we [women] had to have our nails and make up done before going on stage. This was part of the routine and judging on top of having the best physique." Kim's statement reflects the themes found within *Pumping Iron II* as we witness female bodybuilders preparing for competitions. *Pumping Iron II* shows female bodybuilders getting their nails and make up done to physically appear traditionally feminine. This emphasis on femininity for female bodybuilders is not for the contestants but for the audience as well. As their examples show, competition rules are designed to visually show the audience that female bodybuilders can maintain their femininity and womanhood.

Simply put, "sex [and gender] is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time" (Butler, 1993, p. 1). The construction of the embodied identity performances are shaped by the changes in society. The boundaries of the body and gender performance are limited from our socially constructed knowledge of the body's natural capabilities which shapes our reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Essentialist ideals of the body both in terms of gender and the

body's natural ability results in the body being a form of entertainment when it exceeds these expectations. For example, female bodybuilders are pioneers when it comes to building the body beyond the essentialist views of what a female body can naturally become. Female bodybuilders creating a muscular body may lose breast fat by building the chest muscle. In *Pumping Iron II*, McLish is accused by a judge of wearing a padded bra while on stage which as he states is against the rules because it emphasized the feminine body. McLish's attempt to pad her bra for a more feminine body reflects the dichotomous gender categories and expectations about what it means to look feminine.

Both interviewee Kim and *Pumping Iron II* reveal a restricted feminine gender performance. Another interviewee, Maria, who has competed in two bodybuilding competitions stated that:

there definitely is a stigma associated with female bodybuilders. Female bodybuilders who only compete at the bikini level are treated as being too vain from other women. If a female bodybuilder competes at the figure level which are the more muscular women, they are met with a different kind of stigma. It is assumed that you are taking performance enhancing drugs which is funny because I would say that 90% of those athletes are taking them. Then you are seen as being mannish for having too much muscle.

The bikini category at a competition consists of women with lean muscles who still fit into an acceptable feminine gender category. On the other hand, the figure stage of a female bodybuilding competition consists of bulkier women who still must do their hair, make up, and nails along with wearing high heels. Interviewee Kim discussed that even though she has always competed in the figure competitions and the competitions revolve around bodybuilding, she has had points taken off by judges who thought she looked too big. Kim explained that even though the figure category is meant for amateur female bodybuilders, there is a muscular limitation that women must adhere to if they want to win.

Performativity in Bodybuilding

Within the sport of bodybuilding, male bodybuilders may be considered as ‘freakish’ due to their large muscular physiques; however, their determination to construct a muscular body is accepted as not only a masculine trait but also a natural result of being male. As gender performances are socially believed to reflect biological sex, male bodybuilders are performing in a sport that reflects essentialist views of masculinity and males. This is not to also say that it is socially believed that all men must be muscular but that muscularity and masculinity are believed to reflect one another.

Within *Pumping Iron*, *Pumping Iron II*, and *Generation Iron*. the staged performances of the various bodybuilding competitions capture more than just the symmetry and proportions of competitors’ muscles. The subject of gender was brought up only in *Pumping Iron II*. When discussing the differences between female and male bodybuilders, interviewee Tim stated that “male bodybuilders are more socially acceptable than females at this time” while another interviewee, Erin, explained that “female bodybuilders are considered to look like men.” Other interviewees like Dante express that “women [female bodybuilders] do get a more negative rap for it [bodybuilding]”. When I asked Dante why he felt that female bodybuilders received negative attention he explained that “it is assumed that those women are taking steroids and they kind of take on the more masculine appearance.” Their explanations reflect the essentialist view that bodybuilding as a sport is a masculine performance as women participating within this sport are adopting a masculine performance while neglecting to acknowledge female bodybuilding gender performance as another form of femininity.

When discussing if he saw a difference in the treatment of male and female bodybuilders’ acceptability, interviewee Frank stated, “yeah I do. In the gym, it’s probably more acceptable for

a man to be a bodybuilder than it is for a woman. The majority of woman I see in the gym do lift weights but they want to keep a natural look.” The natural look which Frank discusses is about those women who want to remain traditionally feminine in appearance while reflecting the essentialist ideals of muscular bodies being masculine. In other words, Frank explains that women within his gym seek to retain a traditional essential feminine figure like McLish’s description of the perfect female figure.

The topic of masculinity and male bodybuilders was not explored within the documentaries or my interviews. When I discussed gender in bodybuilding, interviewees brought up the topic of female bodybuilding. The themes they often discussed revolved around the criticism of female bodybuilders and the social stigma associated with female bodybuilders for being too muscular. Within *Pumping Iron*, the commentator described the cast as attempting to achieve a Greek god image. The normalized discussion of male bodybuilders both within my interviews and the documentaries reveals that although male bodybuilders can be described by some as building a freakishly big body, they still adhere to “normalized” standards as they occupy what they think of as a typical bodybuilder.

The documentaries *Pumping Iron* and *Generation Iron* provide a view of the male bodybuilding world; these documentaries neglect to discuss their counterpart the female bodybuilders. *Pumping Iron II* focuses on female bodybuilders preparing for a competition allowing audience members to get a glance at the often unseen lifestyle of female bodybuilders. Often within *Pumping Iron II*, the female bodybuilders are seen wearing make-up and feminine attire. Their attempt to express their femininity through mainstream identification of what is considered feminine may lead individuals to recognize the various performance of femininity.

Female bodybuilders are attempting to feminize their bodies while engaging in a socially recognized masculine sport and body.

Pumping Iron II does not capture the audience members at a competition or watching female bodybuilders workout as *Pumping Iron* and *Generation Iron* do. Shown in *Pumping Iron II* are the trainers' and female bodybuilders' facial reactions toward Bev Francis as she works out. Francis's muscular body is positioned as an oddity to her fellow contenders as they gawk and compare their idea of a feminine body to Francis's. Francis is an oddity to other female bodybuilders because of the idea of female bodybuilding at the time along with the difference in muscular size between Francis and her fellow contenders. In *Pumping Iron II*, female bodybuilders discuss their goals of achieving a lean feminine body, which were the only types of bodies present during competitions until Francis. Within the film, Francis often states that she hoped to push her body beyond the current image of female bodybuilding. On stage at the final competition, Francis' body varies in size from the other female bodybuilders as their bodies possess a lean muscular figure. While McLish presents herself with traditional feminine hair, Francis deviates from the traditional feminine performance. Francis' relaxed stance and short hair oppose McLish's long hair and appearance of posing to appear bigger in her stance.

We can see this in the differences of stage performance from *Pumping Iron II* and contemporary female bodybuilding competitions. Discussions of bodybuilding in *Pumping Iron II* centered on how the participants defined female bodybuilding as a separate sport from bodybuilding. This came from many discussions of how female bodybuilders should look. Bev Francis built a muscular body that had not been seen within the world of female bodybuilding at that time. Much of the discussion with the female bodybuilders in the film, such as Rachel McLish, define female bodybuilding with an essentialist view as she explains to the camera that

Francis's muscular look is not a natural feminine look like her own. On the other hand, Carla Dunlap finds that Francis's muscular look is one that she wants to achieve "but on a different frame." The argument around building a feminine body in the world of bodybuilding seems to take precedence over Francis's own argument that the sport of bodybuilding is to build a defined muscular body compared to those lean bodies she competed against.

Butler (1993) argues that as gender is an act, a performance, and a constructed identity, both individuals and observers "come to believe and to perform [gender] in the mode of belief" (p. 540). Female bodybuilders competing and training within this socially determined masculine sport often lead others outside of the community and some within to determine female bodybuilders as having an unnatural body. While female bodybuilders may be identified by others as performing masculinity, their own identification as feminine has just as much importance and impact as social determinations of gender performances.

The female bodybuilding cast in *Pumping Iron II* repeatedly stated that they identify as being feminine. When discussing stage presentation and preparing for the competition in *Pumping Iron II*, Rachel McLish described herself: "I've always been a powderpuff but I've always considered myself a really strong powderpuff." Bev Francis in *Pumping Iron II* stated that she "wants really wants to shock people [on stage at the competition]. In a good way. I want to show them that a woman can develop muscle and still look like a woman. Strong and like a statue. Like a Greek god." Francis's muscular body often redirected the questions to what feminine bodies look like, rather than whether female bodybuilders mirror a male masculine body. Before a competition Carla Dunlap argued with a judge that the idea of a feminine body within bodybuilding needed to be expanded to meet changing bodies. The judge responded, "the very first sentence in the women's rule book [for bodybuilding] really covers it. Judges must

remember that they are at a women's contest. Competitors must still look like women... It is the winners of the contest that will set the standards for femininity." Carla Dunlap's argument stemmed from Bev Francis's goal to push the existing body image of female bodybuilding and redefine a feminine body. Many of the female bodybuilding contestants made passive comments during group conversations that they "wished the judges chose a more natural feminine look" along with Francis's body being "too much muscularity." At the end of the documentary, we come to find out that Francis did not place within the top three because the judges felt that she did not fit the image of a feminine woman.

Francis's muscular body was a source of controversy among the participants and judges. But much of today's female bodybuilders mirror Francis's body image or they have built their body beyond her image. Today, female bodybuilders are not limited to the lean muscular body image when competing. Contemporary female bodybuilders such as Dana Linn Bailey and Iris Kyle have developed a muscular body exceeding Francis' controversial body in 1985. Contemporary female bodybuilders have redefined limitations for female muscularity through their developed bodies as some mirror amateur male bodybuilding bodies.

In *Pumping Iron II*, Francis's body exceeded the expectations of how muscular a female body can be. While her fellow female bodybuilders have what they describe as lean muscles, Francis' body is what Martinez states as a "new spectacle" (Butler, 1985). Her contender's bodies are different in size and muscular development. In *Pumping Iron II*, the female bodybuilders are lean as McLish explains that female bodybuilders need to keep a traditional feminine lean body. Before flying to Las Vegas to train for a competition, Francis states that she wants to get big like a male bodybuilder. Not only does she recognize that the image of female

bodybuilding at the time revolved around a lean muscular body, but that constructing a developed muscular body is socially viewed as masculine.

Within the literature, female bodybuilders are found stating that they want to either regain their femininity or limit their muscular growth to adhere to a feminine body. To perform femininity these female bodybuilders recognize that they are limited when constructing and performing their body. For the female bodybuilders in *Pumping Iron II*, their performance within the sport and masculinity was accepted first as they had to explain and clarify not only their identity with femininity but the ways they remain feminine. Even for my interviewees, their own explanations stated above of female bodybuilders performing in a masculine role and their appearances resembling men both makes their gender performance masculine while also limiting the performance of femininity. Instead what should be acknowledged is an additional way to perform femininity through the female muscular body. *Pumping Iron II* presents various types of female bodybuilding bodies. Their bodies range from lean muscle to a large, muscular female body that can be found at competitions today. The range in female bodies visually shows the variety of feminine muscular bodies. As gender is socially constructed, acknowledging that muscular female bodies are a form of femininity deconstructs essentialist views of female bodies while expanding feminine gender performances.

The creation and socialization of heteronormative identities enforced by the social body restricts expansion of identity category/ performances for sex, sexuality, and gender (Foucault, 1978). Bodybuilders then should be “celebrated as a queer activity with the potential of challenging the hegemonic sex-gender-sexuality continuum” (Richardson, 2004, p. 63). The “freakish” bodies of both men and women bodybuilders leads both the audience and bodybuilders to reexamine the limitations of the body and the essentialist identities performed by

the body. From the films, we as the audience recognize the deviant body of female bodybuilders as the image conflicts with our socialized expectations of feminine bodies and performances. For bodybuilders, their on and off stage body leads audience members to reevaluate the dichotomous categorization of heteronormative identities.

Summary

The sport and lifestyle of bodybuilding is to literally build the body by rejecting essentialist ideals that the body is naturally limited in terms of growth. Bodybuilders' unique attention to their own bodies results in them comparing themselves to artists. The dedication to the lifestyle along with the artist's mind required to construct a body are the ground workings for a bodybuilder.

I have used the gaze as a theoretical tool to identify ways in which the body of a bodybuilder is objectified. Bodybuilders are an oddity. Their position as an oddity leads them to become a form of entertainment during competition and in public spaces. The audiences', judges', and bodybuilders' gaze objectifies the body to critique it. The bodybuilder's body as an abnormal image recreates public space into a stage. Bodybuilders also turn the gaze upon their own bodies when posing in front of mirrors. Through this practice, bodybuilders further the objectification and entertainment value of their bodies.

Gender performances in bodybuilding are often socially viewed as being masculine. The essentialist understanding of muscular bodies being a masculine gender performance restricts the acknowledgment that female bodybuilders can have a feminine gender performance. I argued that female bodybuilders present one form of femininity. As gender is socially constructed, female bodybuilders in a masculine sport display the fluidity of gender performances. Female

bodybuilders can signal a change in contemporary views of the female muscular body as being one form of femininity.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This project analyzed both gender performances and the objectification of the body in the bodybuilding community. I examined two questions: do female bodybuilders lead people to re-evaluate the essentialist ideals of gender performances and do bodybuilders create a stage in every space? This study sought to widen the current understanding of gender performances in bodybuilding while also examining how and if the gaze is used toward bodybuilders (Mulvey, 1989). This chapter addresses the findings, limitations, and future research.

Bodybuilding

When it came to the sport of bodybuilding, bodybuilders often communicated that they considered the sport to be more of a lifestyle. In the films, bodybuilders rarely discussed their workouts in the gym. Instead, they would repeatedly state that the gym is but a small percentage of what it takes to become a bodybuilder. The films expose the lifestyle of bodybuilders as their lives revolve around dieting and preparing for competitions. The individual part of bodybuilding does not solely rely on the bodybuilder going to the gym and pumping iron to develop a muscular body. Rather, the individual bodybuilder must have self-control and dedication to the lifestyle outside of the gym which is stated to make a champion. Knowing how to control everyday interferences such as food outside of one's diet or constructing the body to produce muscular development takes a bodybuilder years of training to understand.

Often within the films, bodybuilders express their mindset as one of an artist. Understanding how to exceed the body's own limitations and recognizing weaknesses and proportioning muscular symmetry completes the identity of a bodybuilder. Bodybuilding in the films was explained as not simply an identity. Bodybuilders as artists identified their bodies as

unfinished products even while they are onstage at a competition. For bodybuilders, their constructed body was never completed. To them, their constructed body did not have a final finished product. Instead, their constant critiques of their own bodies lead them to exceed the current image of their body.

The Body

Objectification of bodybuilder's bodies was one finding which arose continuously throughout the interviews and documentaries. While the gaze or "pleasure in looking/ fascination with the human form" is often associated with an audience, the bodybuilders turn the gaze upon their own bodies (Mulvey, 1989, p. 7). This finding is relevant to further understanding the sport of bodybuilding as both individuals in and outside the community objectify the body.

Throughout the films, individuals and bodybuilders discuss the body as both an object to critique and a subject of their identity. The objectification of bodybuilder's bodies is not necessarily a sexualized view. Objectification was a necessary tool used by bodybuilders to achieve their goal for stage competition. I found both the audience and bodybuilders objectified the body to critique the body for improvement.

The body was an object for entertainment. Bodybuilders often acknowledge their abnormal size within the films and the attention they receive from it. They recognized their lifestyle of bodybuilding revolved around exceeding the idea of natural limitations of the body. It was this attention which bodybuilders in the films expressed when accepting their role as entertainers. While the body of a bodybuilder may be an object of entertainment, this is not to say that their bodies are accepted by those outside of the community. Instead, their abnormal size is rejected by mainstream society as being freakish or an oddity as it rejects what is socially considered to be a normal body type.

Femininity

Gender performances and the questions regarding femininity and female bodybuilders was a reoccurring topic. Both my interviews and the films discussed gender performance as a female bodybuilder issue. The debate of whether female bodybuilders were performing femininity was neglected. Instead, identifying that female bodybuilders were taking on a masculine performance was often associated and discussed in regards to female bodybuilding. *Pumping Iron II* exposed much of the essentialist views held by those in and outside of the bodybuilding community. The judge's approval or rejection of a female bodybuilder's feminine gender performance revolved around their own essentialist views of performing a traditional feminine figure. Judges, audience members, and some female bodybuilders in the film argued the necessity for female bodybuilders to remain traditionally feminine. To these female bodybuilders having a traditionally feminine hair style, make up, and nails was not enough to present a feminine figure. They presented arguments that a lean muscular figure instead of a larger muscular figure was not only more attractive but naturally feminine for women. These essentialist ideals shifted the film's examination from bodybuilding to femininity in bodybuilding unlike *Pumping Iron* and *Generation Iron* which sought to explain the sport, bodybuilders, and the lifestyle of bodybuilding.

In *Pumping Iron II*, female bodybuilders defended their feminine identity within the sport. For some female bodybuilders, appearing with traditional feminine characteristics was necessary to express their womanhood while achieving the ultimate feminine identity. Other female bodybuilders sought to shift the current image of female bodybuilding and femininity. They were both attempting to present a new image for female bodybuilding while also displaying their feminine identity. While female bodybuilders such as Bev Francis may not have been

consciously trying to expose the social construction of gender performances, they attempted to alter the current acceptable feminine body in female bodybuilding competitions. Instead, they were presenting another figure for female bodybuilding to accept as a built muscular body. As gender is socially constructed, femininity and masculinity as performances can be expanded. Female bodybuilding represents this expansion as bodybuilders' gender performance can express a new form of feminine identity.

After the release of *Pumping Iron II*, Bev Francis, who was a pioneer for female bodybuilding, continued to exceed the current lean figure which was female bodybuilding. Her constructed body which was often discussed as being too masculine has reshaped female bodybuilding from remaining within a traditionally feminine physique to building the muscular body beyond its own limitations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the sport and community of bodybuilding continues to rise in popularity within public space. Although many individuals may not want to participate in the sport, there is still an interest in the oddity of bodybuilders' bodies. Their bodies as a form of entertainment, whether it be gawking or admiration, results in bodybuilders being positioned as the Other. The oddity of bodybuilders positions their bodies to create a stage within the spaces they occupy, which leads the audience to objectify the body of a bodybuilder as both a form of entertainment and curiosity. Their constructed bodies can challenge essentialist views of the body. Male and female bodybuilders endure similar and different experiences as a result of essentialist ideals of gender performances. Female bodybuilders' gender performances expose not only the fluidity of gender but also the expansion of how we recognize gender performances. Although female bodybuilders are performing within a socially perceived masculine sport, their feminine gender

identity allows yet another type of femininity to be performed. Female bodybuilders present another performance and image of femininity within a masculine sport. Ultimately, bodybuilders reflect how gender and the body are socially constructed through their performances and spaces. While in the gym, bodybuilders will experience different reactions to their bodies compared to public spaces outside of the gym or at competitions. As bodybuilders build their bodies, the essentialist views of natural limitations of the body are redefined. This is not to say that bodies do not have limitations. Instead, bodybuilders' construction of the body reveals the ability of the body to be built and reconstructed.

Limitations of the Research

A significant limitation for this study was the geographical location. Although I had social connections to bodybuilders, the Appalachian region was limited in the number of bodybuilders who had competed on stage. I was also limited in attending competitions due to travel and my work. These limitations lead me to the documentaries as sources for settings, participants, and diversity in bodybuilding experiences.

Future Research

Future research could explore demographics within the community of bodybuilding by looking at sexuality, race, class, or geographical differences in the experiences of bodybuilders. These differences in experiences may affect progress or lack thereof for an amateur bodybuilder to get their pro card or geographical differences may reflect inclusion vs. exclusion within the community. Further research on bodybuilding and the body can contribute to existing literature on the fluidity of gender performances along with challenging essentialist ideas of the body. By positioning female bodybuilders as expanding the current images of femininity, future research

can explore how gender performances may be changing due to the exposure of muscular athletic women.

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APPENDIX A

IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board
One John Marshall Drive
Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205
IRB2 #00003206

February 26, 2016

Robin Conley, PhD
Sociology/Anthropology Department

RE: IRBNet ID# 871585-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Conley:

Protocol Title: [871585-1] "Body building is an art and your body is the canvas": The Social Construction of Performance within Body Building.

Expiration Date: February 26, 2017

Site Location: MU

Submission Type: New Project APPROVED

Review Type: Expedited Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(7), the above study and informed consent were granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Chair for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire February 26, 2017. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Caitlin Greaf.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTION SET

- 1) Tell me a bit about yourself.
- 2) Could you explain how you got into bodybuilding?
- 3) How would you describe the bodybuilding community?
- 4) In your opinion, what does it mean to identify as a bodybuilder?
- 5) How does your family react to you being a bodybuilder?
- 6) Describe to me the atmosphere at a competition.
- 7) Can you take me through your preparations before and during competitions?
- 8) Do you think there is a difference between views on your body on and off stage at a competition?
- 9) Would you say that there is a difference in how the body is viewed between the bodybuilding community and the general public?
- 10) Would you say that female bodybuilders undergo social pressure to remain feminine within their physiques while male bodybuilders lack this restriction?
- 11) Would you say there is a difference in how female and male amateur bodybuilders are viewed within the gym you go to?
- 12) Do you think that both female and male bodybuilders possess equal status inside and outside the bodybuilding community?
- 13) Could you describe some experiences or reactions toward your body outside of the gym?
- 14) Can you explain some stereotypes about bodybuilders and the community?
- 15) The term hyper muscular is often used to describe the body of bodybuilders. What does this term mean to you?