

Extreme Fitness Culture: Helpful or Harmful?

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Contextual Description

The following artifact explores the history of fitness culture and how its beginnings have shaped modern discussions of health and exercise. I cover the ethical implications of fitness culture and society, offering a framework to view both the benefits and harms of the modern fitness culture movement. The piece concludes with recommendations for how readers can take back control over their personal health and fitness journeys. In writing this piece, I aimed to create an informative resource to help readers understand the history of fitness culture and to reflect on their own experiences. In doing so, I engaged readers from diverse backgrounds and gained a perspective on how my writing can promote active citizenship and generate positive change for individuals and communities.

Introduction

If you ask people you know about their opinions on exercising, working out, or ‘fitness culture,’ you will probably receive a dozen different responses. However, they will most likely all give some reference to a societal pressure to work out in an attempt to achieve a certain appearance, recognition, or accolades for their efforts. Fitness culture, sometimes also referred to as gym culture, has become increasingly prominent in the last few decades, beginning in the second half of the 20th century. Its storied history has origins in Jack LaLanne’s television show and Jane Fonda’s fitness videotapes but has also been heavily influenced by modern innovations, such as social media. Social media’s explosion in popularity over the last decade has been a major contributor to the pervasiveness of extreme fitness culture, since everyone has easy access to workout content, weight-loss transformations, and celebrity fitness routines. In exploring how extreme fitness culture came to its current status and acknowledging its negative effects, it is also important to define how it is possible to have a healthy relationship with exercise despite the unabating societal pressures.

Early Fitness Culture

The origin of the modern fitness culture has been debated but is widely accepted to be President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s establishment of the President's Council on Youth Fitness (PCYF) in 1956. For four years, the PCYF was constantly featured in the media, reminding Americans that being healthy and in shape was their “civic duty,” efforts that fueled the rapid expansion of the commercial fitness industry in the 1960s (McKenzie, 2013, p. 15). In driving home the importance of youth (and adult) fitness, PCYF began transforming exercise rhetoric by highlighting the merit of regular physical activity for people of all ages and abilities. Television

fitness also played a significant role in shaping the culture of exercise as we know it today. Jack LaLanne, often touted as the “founder of the modern fitness movement,” was an early television-based fitness instructor (Goldstein, 2011). His show, “The Jack LaLanne Show,” first aired locally in San Francisco in 1951 and nationwide eight years later in 1959. His content was directed at women who did not work outside the home, as well as the elderly who were retired and in need of both physical and mental stimulation. LaLanne’s approach was driven by the purpose of fitness being for health, longevity, and overall wellbeing, as opposed to an appearance- or status-based focus. Even long before the launch of his eponymous show, LaLanne had been “preaching [about the value of] regular exercise and [a] proper diet” (Goldstein, 2011). In 1936, he opened the first fitness spa in the United States, foreshadowing his opening of dozens of fitness studios over the next few decades and the future of fitness culture. His widespread influence on fitness, predominantly with the over the thirty-year run of his show, made him a national celebrity. He productively used his fame to encourage all people to take part in exercise despite the limitations of their bodies or those society had imposed. He positively influenced the future of fitness by taking a more balanced approach than his present-day successors.

Women’s Place in Fitness Culture

After LaLanne’s fitness dominance began to fade in the 1980s, Jane Fonda continued to revolutionize the workout industry specifically for women beginning with her first workout videotape, released in 1982. Despite Title IX being passed a decade earlier in 1972 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of one’s sex, “the gym was still seen as the man’s domain” and “Fonda realized that she could bring the workout home to [women]” (Mansky, 2019). Fonda’s efforts resonated with women simply because she herself *was* a woman. Despite the gains

Fonda's workout videotapes made in giving women a place in the fitness world and her assertion of exercise for health, she failed to "establish an inclusive body image by presenting different types of bodies" in her videos (Mansky, 2019). Ultimately, her videos ended up sending a contradictory message to viewers that the purpose of exercise was to achieve (and maintain) a society-defined ideal body type, namely one that was lithe, yet toned. Fonda's videos gained widespread popularity among American women in the '80s, cementing the standard of what it meant to be an active and attractive woman. During the height of Fonda's workout fame, there occurred a shift from LaLanne's approach to fitness. Specifically, fitness and exercise began to be thought of as a method for controlling one's body shape and appearance, as well as a way to establish superiority status for people more physically fit than others. Her videos created a gateway for extreme fitness culture that would continue to emerge over the next several decades.

Social Media's Role in Shaping Modern Fitness Culture

The early storied history of modern fitness culture seems to point more to an emphasis on health rather than appearance and unforgiving workouts. Today's fitness culture, on the other hand, has become dominated by appearance, which includes an emphasis on hyper-toned muscles while also being thin, as well as showing off one's dedication to hours of daily workouts. So how did we go from Jack LaLanne's positivity to 2023's extremism? Social media is partly to blame for the rapid expansion in the past decade of a detrimental fitness culture. Our increasingly digital world allows internet users to see people they know, celebrities, or even complete strangers sharing their workout routines and impressive results improving their appearance with just the click of a button. One of the most prominent social media fitness influencers today is Kayla Itsines, an Australian considered among the most famous trainers in the world with an amassed 16 million followers on Instagram. She is also the founder of the

workout program and app, Sweat with Kayla, and was named to TIME Magazine's 2016 list of the 30 Most Influential People on the Internet (Alain, 2023). However, Itsines also founded The Bikini Body Training Company and authored the ebook series *The Bikini Body Guide*, which illustrates the importance society has placed on having a particular appearance, namely one that is highly attractive and achieved through extreme means of fitness. Itsines' rise to international fame in the fitness industry has aided the promotion of using fitness for appearance with little regard for health.

In regards to the rise of social media, when people feel their habits or lifestyle are not keeping up with those around them or those they idolize online, they find it necessary to pursue drastic measures in order to be accepted. This is, in part, fueled by the fear of missing out, or FOMO, a term that grew dramatically in popularity during—and in the early aftermath of—the COVID-19 pandemic. The ease with which personal fitness goals, achievements, and information are accessible online creates an environment where people feel compelled to mimic the exercise practices of others, often disregarding whether or not their bodies are capable of doing so. While it is widely accepted that social media can create mental health struggles, such as low self-esteem, poor body image, and depression, the impact of online fitness culture has been generally disregarded in these discussions. The exorbitant pressure many feel to align with the ideals consumed online of fitness culture can ultimately cause more issues, such as increased overall stress, disordered eating, physical injury, and poor mental health.

Toxicity vs. Health Benefits

Currently a \$100 billion global industry, the fitness world does not exist independently from society; rather, it is enmeshed in the mere existence of being a human engaging in the modern world. Extreme fitness culture has become so normalized that most people would not

describe themselves or their workout routines as ‘extreme.’ For those absorbed in this world, many describe their zealous devotion to exercise as a sort of religion, in which they “turn their backs on the indulgences of our culture, seeking solace in self-abnegation and suffering” (Havrilesky, 2014). As a young adult, I have often felt that there are two polar opposite sides to the issue—an acute (and sometimes unhealthy) dedication to daily exercise or a sedentary lifestyle. The pressure of fitness culture creates the idea that if you aren’t devoting a significant amount of time, energy, and even money to your workout habit, then you might as well not exercise at all. There exists a hush-hush dynamic of extreme fitness culture that pits the most active and the most sedentary individuals against each other. However, there does exist another side of why people seek out fitness—interpersonal relationships. Since “fostering community has increasingly become a selling point for fitness studios and gyms,” it has become progressively more important for people to align their fitness participation with their “personal identities” and values (Biron, 2019). While recognized, the connection aspect of fitness is rarely discussed and fails to overshadow the social pressure to push oneself to the maximum when exercising, often for the benefit of public acknowledgment.

Lee Boyce, a personal trainer, internationally recognized fitness writer, and author of the bestselling book, *Strength Training for All Body Types: The Science of Lifting and Levers*, explicitly acknowledges the destructive nature of the current fitness culture. “In a world of airbrushing, fake weights, and selfie culture, it’s not a far stretch to say that the internet fitness world and its ‘for the gram’ toxicity does its fair share to take health away from its rightful position in the fitness game...” (Boyce, 2022). The normalization of a ‘toxic’ fitness culture has taken many of its features thanks to the credit of the closely-related sports culture where winning is everything and losing one game defines a person or team as a ‘failure.’

How to Improve the Modern Fitness Climate

With all of the negative features of extreme fitness culture being said, it is clear that, overall, it is more harmful than helpful for the average person with an average body and average athletic abilities. While some pressure to exercise can help people to stick to reasonable goals, such as walking for 30 minutes four days a week, any of the benefits of the modern fitness culture are outweighed by common feelings many have that they are not good enough because they are not in the same level of shape as the next person. How can we revert back to the more modest motivations of Jack LaLanne, with fitness for health and for all? While society is unlikely to let go of its firm grasp on extreme fitness culture, individuals can take control of their own fitness lives with a few simple steps.

Recognizing what the body *is* capable of, rather than focusing on what it isn't is a good starting place. When the world around us only wants to point out our fitness shortcomings, remaining steadfast and confident in the fitness level we as individuals have achieved for ourselves and our long-term health is critical, in attempting to break the cycle of comparison to others. Also, remembering all the things the body does for us each day is helpful. Our hearts continue to function, our brains help us to work, study, and read, and our muscles allow us to take care of ourselves and those we care about. Don't let these seemingly simple daily tasks become trivial in their importance. Finally, we need to admit to ourselves that although we may not be in the same level of shape as a certain celebrity, friend, or stranger, our worth isn't any less. Let's stop defining our personal value and ability to be accepted by the unrealistic expectations that society has created.

Conclusion

Extreme fitness culture has come to dominate many facets of our modern world, especially through the pervading domain of social media. Many people push themselves too far in order to achieve a certain appearance through exercise or begin to struggle with mental health issues from the insurmountable pressure to have a grand workout routine. Fitness culture is here to stay, but by no means does that mean we have to abandon common sense and give way to unhealthy extremism. By seizing back autonomy over our fitness lives, we can combat the feeling of needing to succumb to extreme exercise routines—and their negative physical and psychological effects—to be accepted.

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