

# Notes

## Introduction: Bodies, Consumers and the Ethnography of Commercial Gyms

1. Both focused on the US, these are in fact two quite different endeavors: a more polemic and general reflection on late-modern body culture the former, and a more precisely focused institutional study of the fitness industry the latter. To these I must add my own earlier ethnography of two fitness gyms in Italy (Sassatelli, 2000c) and Kari Steen-Johnsen's (2004) work on keep-fit exercise in Norway, both of which take more seriously the perspective of the fitness consumer. Linda Spielvogel's (2003) monograph on female fitness participants in Tokyo may also be mentioned as a perspective on a non-Western reality which provides interesting observations on the domestication of American-driven trends in Japan especially among fitness professionals.
2. While the commercialisation of the fitness sector has been very strong in the last decade in the USA (see Smith Maguire, 2007), in Italy and Britain the pace of commercialisation appears to be clear and yet slower (see also Crossley, 2006). Of course this needs to be further qualified in terms of other institutional variables, as Steen-Johnsen (2004) has shown for the Scandinavian context, where, given very similar levels of economic development, there is a marked difference in penetration rate between Denmark, on the one hand, and Norway and Sweden, on the other. A larger and more complex non-profit fitness sector exists in Denmark, where there is a mix of fitness centres owned by voluntary sports clubs, by municipalities and by independent non-profit institutions often belonging to the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations, with the result that commercial fitness clubs are less widespread than in the other two Scandinavian countries. Other important factors may be the urban configuration of a region or nation, with large metropolitan areas being those where, generally, commercial fitness penetration among the population is stronger.
3. Interaction entails a notion of "procedural order" or "operational consensus" (Goffman, 1959, 20–1). This makes it possible to take into consideration the "conditions and limits placed on the way in which aims are sought, or activities brought to a conclusion", considering them as relatively autonomous from the "choice of goals or the way in which these goals can be integrated into a single system of activity" (Goffman, 1971, x–xi, 1963a, 7–8, 1982).
4. I have not in any way wished to compare the many fitness gyms I have observed: via the use of a variety of sufficiently different, if not extreme cases – ranging from women-only informal studios, to up-market health centres, from local leisure centres to international chains – my main aim was to describe what characterises fitness gyms as a specific social environment and reach a number of analytical generalisations on mechanisms witnessed in different gyms.
5. Through fieldwork I tried not only to address clients' various social profiles in terms of gender and class, but also, their gym careers (interviewing neophytes, regular gym-goers, enthusiasts, irregulars and quitters) and training preferences (from aerobics lovers to weight-lifters). Trainers were mostly chosen from the premises

I visited or via email contacts to increase variety. The choice of informants was made according to the principles of “theoretical sampling” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) with a rather loose interview schedule that has helped cover some key areas (Seidman, 2005). While fitness fans were easier to get hold of, quitters were difficult, and the sample is clearly skewed in favour of more regular and enthusiastic gym-goers. In order to put interviewees at ease, most clients were interviewed in their homes, while most trainers were interviewed in the gym. All the interviews were recorded, some were very long and lasted over two hours, others were much briefer taking less than one hour. Words or phrases in inverted commas, unless a specific biographical reference is made, have come directly from interviews and informal conversations, or were spoken during gym activities. In analysing the material I have used typological plans and identified relations, contrasts and similarities (Silverman, 1993).

6. This mediation is creative, but it is predicated on the interaction between production and consumption. As proposed by Paul Hirsch’s (1972) well-known model of the “cultural industry system”, mass-marketed cultural goods are the result of a collective process of production which entails various different actors (artists, gatekeepers, talent scouts, managers, journalists) responding to different institutional and personal interest and, what is more, involves considerable feedback from consumers (Du Gay et al., 1997, Miller 1987).
7. In particular these are: *Salve, Starbene, Vitality*, and *Silhouette* for Italy; *Ultrafit, Health & Fitness, Zest* and *Top Santè* for Britain; *Shape, Self* and *Men’s Health* for the USA. Much more could have been done in terms of discourse and visual analysis of these rich and varied texts. However, also because my initial ethnography did not (regrettably) rely on directly recorded images of training bodies, I preferred to use them more to complement my understanding of expert and commercial discourse on fitness than use them in their own right.
8. Many of these texts are available both in English and Italian, thus allowing for the local-global dialectic. An interesting spin-off of such concern is the dialectic between McDonaldised fitness premises and local appropriation (O’Toole, 2009, see Chapter 7).

## 1 The Cultural Location of Fitness Gyms

1. On the commercialisation of physical recreational activity, see Andrieu (1987), Green (1986) and Hargreaves (1987) who maintain that this particular cultural collocation kept a check on the increasing tension between the disciplined utility of the body and disorderly hedonism. The removal of exercise from the explicitly political sphere had ambivalent outcomes. On the one hand, it had a liberating effect, encouraging the development of public or private initiatives which were not necessarily bureaucratised (Hargreaves, 1987), and giving rise to flourishing activities not related to those sanctioned by national sports federations (Perrin, 1985) and the search for new forms of exercise (Grover, 1989; Jackson Lears, 1981; Pociello, 1981). On the other hand, it weakened the political impact of physical activity, and reclassified it, so that it simply became a form of youth entertainment (Defrance, 1981).
2. Aerobic workouts were originally developed by Kenneth H. Cooper in the 1960s to improve astronauts’ and pilots’ level of fitness and established the basis for this specific kind of aerobic training (Cooper, 1967). “The Cooper Institute” elaborated different training methods that enhanced endurance, based on ideas of variation,

moderation and balance. This model was further developed in the 1970s to address beauty as well as health through the work of Jackie Sorensen, who created a dance programme for US cable television based on Cooper's ideas of aerobic fitness training. Rhythmic dance music was integral to this, and became a feature of the slightly more aggressive vision of aerobic exercise proposed by Jane Fonda's idea of the "workout" (see also Chapter 2).

3. In his subsequent and classic work on distinction and taste, Bourdieu (1984) more fully conceptualises taste – including attitudes towards one's own body – as an expression of *habitus*. *Habitus* is a set of dispositions which guides actors in their choices. It varies according to different capital endowments (economic, cultural and social) which it helps to reproduce as an infinitely applicable and creative classificatory instrument. Taste is therefore seen as a form of "symbolic power" through which objective and subjective classifications coincide, enabling a naturalisation and reproduction of the existing system of differences (Bourdieu, 1977 see also Leberge and Kay, 2002; Wacquant, 2003, 2005 for a broader view of Bourdieu's theory as applied to sport activities).
4. Taking seriously the formation of taste as negotiated in actual consumer practices whose structure is not co-terminous with income or occupational structure, and indeed considering the role of such practices in the consolidation of a "middle-class identity" is being recognised as important in contemporary studies of class and class *habitus*. On this basis, what has been traditionally called "middle class" can be considered as a social space where one may share, but also competitively confront, tastes, goods and lifestyles. In other terms, rather than being considered dependent variables, consumer choices are co-constitutive elements of social standing (Sassatelli et al., 2008).

## 2 Spatiality and Temporality

1. This is part of a larger trend, comprising the organisation of work as well as of consumption, which is well captured by Boltanski and Chiapello in their book *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalism* (1999). Looking at management manuals they consider how the logic of "project" – which requires a total investment on the part of the worker mixing work and leisure – is taking over many productive realities (see Chapter 7).
2. The notion of "passage ritual" only partially accounts for the changing room. A classic passage ritual is one-way, occurs between rigidly defined, mutually exclusive identities, and provides the "liminal" space in which the implementation of new attributes is strictly prescribed and symbolically sustained. For Turner liminality is a "structured anti-structural moment" where clear ceremonial rules and shared symbolic meanings allow for the collective management of meaning transformations. We may consider changing rooms as primary examples of the individualisation of the liminal, something that Turner (1977, 1982) called the "liminoid".
3. The wellness wave is probably part of a larger culture of wellbeing (Sointu, 2005) and responds, partly, to the very practical need of participants to "do something without fatigue".
4. Gym instructors, and more broadly, fitness trainers, defy the distinction between task and emotional leaders that is often made in small group research. As I shall show more fully (see Chapter 3) they are probably better understood as experts,

task and emotional leaders (on their role in the emotional structure of gym scenes, see also Chapter 5).

5. This, of course, is not true of circuit training, a type of machine-based exercise, whereby a group of clients is led jointly through a sequence of machines (see Crossley, 2004). Also, the joint use of machines is promoted in some female-only studios, such as that studied by Leeds Craig and Liberti (2007). These types of exercise, mixing machine workout, light sociability and trainer leadership are quite often characterised by some kind of gender reappraisal (see also Chapter 6).

### 3 Interaction and Relational Codes

1. The kind of environment which is provided by community sports centres and informal and local gyms may partly respond to similar anxieties: where such options are less available, such as in the USA, there seems a trend for the development of women-only studios (Craig and Liberti, 2007). This points to the continuous articulation between the differentiation within the fitness industry and its public.
2. Incidentally, these sentiments have been tapped into by the fitness industry broadly understood, not only with home videos, but also with manuals such as *The Kitchen Gym* by Anne Maria Millard (2005) where the whole house, with its shelves, steps, chairs and so on, and its cleaning and maintenance routines becomes a rather familiar training arena for the housewife.
3. In my experience, in most fitness gyms marginalisation compels groups who are overtly homosexual to either use the gym outside its busiest hours, or to choose a premise frequented by like-minded clients (Chapter 2). For research into physical activity and sexuality, see Aoki (1996), Klein (1993), Lowe (1998), Mansfield and McGinn (1993), Monaghan (1999) and Wacquant (1995). See also Alvarez (2008) for an insider perspective on gym gay culture.
4. On this, we may add a note concerning what associations are often considered conducive to, that is, politics. A recent study conducted on sports clubs, scouts and environmental groups has shown that while cultural or environmental associations (concerned with some form of common or public good) are conducive to political active members, membership of leisure and sports associations (concerned with more individualistic goals) tends not to command increased political participation (Quintelier, 2008).
5. This may be a rewarding aspect of the job, which has paradoxical effects. As a survey-based research of fitness instructors in Queensland, Australia, has shown, a disproportionately young, female, casual workforce may be "willing to trade-off standard condition of employment" for emotional rewards such as the "exposure of physical capital or bodily prowess" (Sappey and Maconachie, 2009).
6. Currently, the three main formats are BodyStep, Body Pump and BodyJam; they are offered in some 10,000 venues across 55 countries with an estimated 4 million participants a week (<http://www.LesMills.com>).
7. By and large, in contemporary consumer capitalism, McDonaldisation (the efficiency, predictability, calculability and control which increasingly characterise global commodity production and circulation) is countered by aestheticisation. The latter takes the form of local, quality oriented business and retail, of various kind of associations which promote taste refinement, tradition and

territorial awareness and, above all, of consumer practices which stress quality and uniqueness, and may pursue irregularity as a sign of charismatic elements (Sassatelli, 2007).

8. This is a rather broadly distributed magazine, reaching more than 25,000 subscribers (including owners and operators of fitness centres, health clubs and YMCAs) (<http://www.athleticbusiness.com/fitnessmanagement/>).
9. *Il Nuovo Club*, 2, 1999, p. 7. Although more developed in Britain and especially the USA than in Italy, publications for trainers and fitness managers are generally becoming very important. While there is research available on fitness magazines for the general public (see Markula, 2001; Smith Maguire, 2007), there is still a shortage of research on marketing and exercise discourse addressed to trainers and gym staff. This endeavour would certainly be important to capture the figure of the personal trainer as opposed to the gym instructor.

#### 4 Framing Fitness

1. Goffman develops an idea expressed by Gregory Bateson in his famous essay on play and fantasy (see also Chapter 5). Bateson (1972) showed that play illustrates the human being's capacity to create relatively separated areas of meaning which temporarily overturn "normal" expectations. Goffman (1961, 1967) has used the concept of "frame" in his work on games, and later developed this idea in detail in *Frame Analysis* (1974) in which he analyses the experience of social actors in everyday life as an absorbing oscillation of a multiplicity of different frames (see Gonos, 1977; Tannen, 1993; Verhoven, 1984).
2. Even if the development of athleticism from the nineteenth century onwards has long been acknowledged (see Bourdieu, 1978; Gruneau, 1983; Guttman, 1978; McIntosh, 1963), other sport styles may be identified. In studying rugby, for example, Alain Garrigou (1987) maintains that athleticism gains ground against two other styles, stressing community (*fête*) or warlike-utilitarian motives (*travail*), both referring to values external to sport. The author relates the increasing dominance of athleticism to the relative autonomisation of sport, and to its professionalisation.
3. Here I have reworked the well-known Weberian distinction between modern and pre-modern forms of legitimation (Weber, 1922, vol. 1). This helps understand the rise of bourgeois techniques of the body and the birth of physical education (Chambat, 1987; Defrance, 1976, 1981; Hargreaves, 1987; Vigarolo, 1978, 1988; see also Chapters 1 and 7).
4. Body building and keep-fit training appear quite different in terms of both the physical characteristics they promote and their motivational logics. Professional and semi-professional body building works on contests. Body builders will periodically enter into competitions and compete against other contestants. At a difference with sport, rather than being the public display of a highly specific task performance, these competitions are a display of highly specific physical appearances (see Courtine, 1991; Klein, 1993).
5. Bateson starts from the idea that meta-communication – that is, communication on how to interpret signals – is crucial for framed activities as play, thus creating relatively autonomous spheres of meaning. Far more than in other daily situations, in which meta-communication and communication are continually intertwined, as a framed activity keep-fit training provides relatively clear meta-communicative indications on what is right or wrong and on what is expected of the participants (see also Chapter 5 for a comparison with play).

## 5 Discipline and Fun

1. Goffman (1961, p. 38) defines framed activities as those in which “the world made up of the objects of our spontaneous involvement and the world carved out by the encounter’s transformation rules can be congruent, one coinciding perfectly with the other. In such circumstances, what the individual is obliged to attend to, and the way in which he is obliged to perceive what is around him, will coincide with what can and what does become real to him through the natural inclination of his spontaneous attention.” Similar to Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) and drawing on Goffman, I have tried to offer a sociological perspective on emotions, observing the way in which involvement can be favoured by a particular local organisation of experience. This, incidentally, amounts to considering “frames” less as structural givens and more as toolkits for the ongoing negotiation of social reality (see Reese, 2007).
2. The characterisation of play as an intrinsically pleasurable activity, as an aim in itself, has been widely used, starting from the classic works of Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (1958). The de-contextualised and uncritical adoption of this definition of play has, however, inspired considerable criticism, summarised in the well-known essay by Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne (1984). On the difficulty of drawing an immediate analogy between athleticism and play, see Booth (1993), Giulianotti (2005) and Guttman (1978).
3. Role distance can be defined as behaviour geared towards expressing personal identity, which involves introducing a specific “margin of freedom and manoeuvrability, of pointed dis-identification between himself and the self virtually available for him in the situation” (Goffman, 1961, p. 117; see also Turner, 1968). In every situation there is always, therefore, a simultaneous multiplicity of selves, yet the situations vary according to how the moments of dis-identification can be managed, and of how much room for manoeuvre is left to the subject.
4. On the different importance of “physical capital” for the social classification of individuals into different categories, see primarily Bourdieu (1978; 1990), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Shilling (1993) and Wacquant (1995).
5. Seppo Iso-Ahola’s (1989) reviews of social psychology studies on free time shows that they view analogous phenomena as being the result of a trade-off between intrinsic motivation (carrying out an activity for the pleasure of doing so) and extrinsic motivation (to include external control, ultimate benefits and competition). What can be observed in the gym clearly shows that there is a strong correlation between informality – in other words, the possibility of deviating from the rigid requirements of role and interaction – and the perception of doing something which corresponds to the expression of oneself, and between these two characteristics of interaction and the definition of something as enjoyment (Samdahl, 1988). Nonetheless, this should not lead to an idealisation of the notion of free time (see Allison, 1993; Horne et al., 1987; Rojek, 1985, 2000).
6. See, for example, the work by Robert Yeung and David Hemsley (1997) which shows that the perception of being able to follow the exercises explains alone the 15 per cent variation in effective capacity to continue an aerobics programme through time.

## 6 The Culture of the Fit Body

1. The relationship between knowledge and discipline is crucial in Foucault’s work. As we know from his work on disciplinary institutions (Foucault, 1975, 1977; see also

Rabinow and Dreyfus, 1983, pp. 168–209), disciplinary techniques have both passive and active subjectivity effects: they subject individual bodies to specific control techniques, while simultaneously embodied subjects acquire ability and knowledge. In commercial institutions, such as fitness gyms, the active effects appear to be accentuated: emphasis is on the sentient participant to be kept motivated, the demanding client to be kept satisfied.

2. See <http://www.together.uk.com>. By and large, this may be a function of the increase in obesity. But such trends are mediated by context-specific cultural and social configurations as well as institutional features. The Italian fitness industry, for example, has been much slower in jumping on the bandwagon of weight control compared to the British one, partly as a feature of its fragmented, small-scale nature, which limits the offering of a variety of secondary services; partly as the management of diet is far less medicalised in Italy, being still largely conceived as a “family” matter.
3. Something of the kind has been suggested by Goffman in his *Stigma*, when dealing with how individuals deal with stigmatising attributes, essentially via direct attempts to correct the attribute, indirect correction through the pursuit of success in other, apparently incompatible areas and through the breaking of social reality – that is, “employ[ing] an unconventional interpretation of the character of his social identity” (Goffman, 1963b, p. 19). Feminist readings of aerobics may be seen as one such unconventional interpretation (see Collins, 2002). More broadly, the view of keep-fit activities as coping devices through which normative femininity, and gendered embodiment more in general, is negotiated rather than reproduced are corroborated by recent fieldwork research, in Canada and the USA, among women gym-goers (Leeds Craig and Libeti, 2007; MacNevin, 1999).
4. Body ideals may be analytically placed on a matrix defined by the intersection of the surface/depth axis and the means/measure axis (Sassatelli, 2000c, 2003; see also Feher et al., 1989; Turner, 1984). The ensuing four analytical dimensions may thus refer to different ways of intervening on the body: the body can be modified and ameliorated as a tool or a sign to be preserved, a tool or a sign to be presented. Health is typically something to be preserved, beauty something to be presented. Fitness culture appears to work at the intersection of health and beauty, indeed contemporary commercial gyms reframe both beauty and health in terms of fitness.
5. Numerous studies on the development of medicine in modern times have stressed that the body has been seen as an organic, pure system, threatened on all fronts (Crawford, 1985; Haley, 1979; O’Neill, 1985, pp. 118–47; Turner, 1984). The development of a positive idea of health (Park, 1994) and, later, of medicine centred on genetics (Haraway, 1991) is partly contributing to the modification of this image, and shifting attention to the use of the body and the flow of information within it.
6. In addition, Anne Bolin (1992) stresses that other activities, in addition to body building, can make the most of women’s athletic qualities: in other words, the female body should not be fat in order to challenge dualistic definitions of gender.
7. While body building is the clearest example of muscular work for aesthetic ends (Courtine, 1991; Klein, 1993), in most exercise techniques there are movements involving muscles which are rarely used in everyday life, and seem to serve more to improve body appearance than to increase its functionality (Kagan and Morse, 1988; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995). And yet the study of Pirikko Markula (1995, p. 443) on women and aerobics shows that those who exercise



may begin to doubt the “logic” of certain exercises “since they have no functional value” and demand “uncomfortable” or “unpleasant” positions.

## 7 Fit Bodies, Strong Selves

1. A number of different dimensions may be considered in looking at the use of space for fitness and sporting reasons. On the one hand, even reimmersion in nature can happen via more rationalised – fitness-like – procedures, such as evident in the current development of Nordic walking (see Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Nordic walking combines displacement and emplacement in that paths come complete with expected times, lights and even calories. On the other hand, phenomena such as Parkour – that is, the use of the urban built environment as a “gym” for spectacular moves – appear to rely on forms of non-commercial institutionalisation akin to sub-cultural formations of an “anarcho-environmental kind” (Atkinson, 2009). There seems to be a dialectic between the “immuring of physical activity” and the aspiration to “go back into the open” (Heichberg, 1998) which finds expression, among other things, in the provision of virtualised natural settings inside ever more “green”, rounder, natural-looking gym environments.
2. Giddens (1990, pp. 27–9, 1991, p. 81) asserts that “as tradition loses its authority, the cumulative choices that combine to form a lifestyle define the central nucleus of a person’s identity and the continual invention and re-invention of their character”, even if they feel unable to rely purely on themselves and feel compelled to seek “expert” opinion that will guide them in those choices.
3. Clearly, fitness discourse participates into a current trend towards what I call *promotional reflexivity* (Sassatelli, 2009), which is evident not only in the marketing strategies of an “alternative” cosmetic company such as The Body Shop but also in initiatives taken by more traditional multinationals, such as the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, whose consultant was feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach.
4. In comments made by clients, the idea of the “mind” often refers to the “self” or at least to the characteristics that appear to distinguish it. It corresponds perfectly with a common practice in our culture that depicts the mind as the key dimension of the self. One talks about the mind in order to question the individuality and autonomy of the “human being” (Feher et al., 1989; Haraway, 1991; Rorty, 1980).
5. A similar interpretation has been deployed not only to understand fitness activities beyond the gym such as jogging (Gillick, 1984), but also gym activities beyond fitness such as body building (Klein, 1993).
6. Of course there is an element of ambiguity in the cross-referencing between recognition and self-recognition. Fitness fans are often quite vocal about the fact that how “other people see you” depends on how “you feel about yourself”. However, how you feel about yourself may depend on how much you manage to consider yourself “adequate” – “to your age”, “your body type”, “your work”, that is, to a set of generalised cultural ideals which, as suggested, are mediated by practices such as keep-fit bodywork. While self-recognition relies inevitably on addressivity (Perinbanayagam, 2006) fitness training is organised in non-dialogic form, emphasising another paradoxical trait of the gym.
7. For a discussion of how Protestant asceticism and hedonism have been intermeshed in the consolidation of modern consumer culture see Campbell’s classic work (1987). See also Lears (1981, 1983), Green (1986) and Grover (1989) for a discussion applied to the development of the leisure industry in the USA.



8. The phenomenon is relatively small, but merits consideration. A recent, exploratory study of exercise addiction in Britain found that out of 100 self-selected gym participants (who are likely to be themselves among the most regular and enthusiastic participants) around 8 per cent could actually be classified as exercise addicts (Warner and Griffiths, 2005).

## **Conclusion: Embodiment, Subjectivity and Consumer Culture**

1. In leisure studies and marketing, decisional models for consumer choice tend to make a clear distinction between various dimensions of action (cognitive, affective and conative) and seem to separate them into those befitting rational choice and those closer to the various theories of learning. In the first case, attitude is defined as a mechanism which, following an active search for information and sustained comparison, controls behaviour; in the second case, attitude is defined as an evaluation, a modality which gives meaning to behaviour, which follows purchase and collection of specific information. With regard to services, those who defend the more rationalistic approaches also tend to recognise the fact that consumers do not have many other possibilities of being aware of the attributes of an activity unless they try them. For a review of decisional models used in sports psychology, see Godin and Shepard (1990).
2. In studies on sports psychology, the geographical proximity of the exercise environment (to home or work) has been identified as being one of the clearest indicators of attendance at a fitness programme (Le Unes and Nation, 1996, p. 528 ff.). However, very few of the regular clients I have encountered were prepared to change their gym for one which is nearer. Indeed, they say that they left more convenient, well-known or cheaper gyms because they did not offer what they were looking for.
3. See, among others, Mannell and Zuzanek (1991) and Vanden Auweele et al. (1997). The most frequent justification given by those who say they are interested in but do not practise physical activity – “lack of time” – seems to be a way of recognising the social value of fitness and a rationalisation of the lack of any deep subjective interest.
4. Nagi Noda, who died in 2007, created this video for Panasonic’s “Ten Short Movies – Capture the Motion” series for the 2004 summer Olympics. The film is a word-for-word parody of American fitness guru Susan Powter’s first workout video except the video’s instructor is dressed in a body suit giving her the appearance of having muscles shaped like the fur of a groomed poodle dog. Also, exercising with her in the video are six actors dressed in dog costumes, with actual live dogs’ heads superimposed over their real heads. The video, circulating freely on the Internet, features Californian model Mariko Takahashi, and has become very popular and debated.

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