Fit for Life:

A media analysis of the socially constructed meanings of exercise and the fit body

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the representations of exercise and the fit body within a Norwegian media context. The data were derived from newspaper articles, the web sites of health clubs, and an online discussion forum. The aims of the study were to identify the possibilities of subjective experience that were opened up and closed down through the discursive constructions of exercise and the fit body and to discuss likely implications of this for people's experiences of embodiment. A critical discourse analysis was carried through. The findings revealed a complex interdiscursive web of discourses implicated in the constructions of exercise and the fit body, which, in short, were represented in terms of an individual consumer project, where health and beauty were closely intertwined with the meanings of fitness. The fit body was represented as a site for challenging and reproducing mainstream norms at one and the same time, especially with respect to gender. Finally, and of especial importance, exercise and the fit body were constructed in terms of scientific truths. I suggest that the discursive production of fitness in the media is highly restrictive of the range of available embodied possibilities, as it excludes a great number of people, whose bodies will never conform to current mainstream ideals. I thus argue for a wider understanding of fitness, which takes into account individual differences in bodily prerequisites.

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Introduction

> At the postmodern health club (...) leisure is work, impulses are harnessed into repetitions per minute, and the conscience, now of the body as much as it is of the soul, is only as strong as its owner's heart and as firm as her thighs.
>
> (Glassner, 1989, p. 187)

Obesity has become a growing health- and societal problem in Western and developed countries (Morrison & Bennett, 2006). In 2008, one out of four Norwegians was overweight. This is an increase of 7 percent during the last ten years (Statistics Norway, 2009a). At the same time there are, however, more people who engage in exercise, among adolescents as well as adults (Statistics Norway, 2009a, 2009b). In line with this, exercise as a trend and the fit body ideal are strongly evident in Western media and popular culture (Olivardia, 2002; Lindwall, 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007; Gruber, 2007; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

At the individual level, surveys have shown that the most important reasons for working out are to feel in good, physical shape, to improve or maintain health, and to feel that one achieves something. Other common motives are interest, joy, competence, weight control, looks, stress management, self-image, moods, challenge, competition, and social acceptance (Lindwall, 2004; Morrison & Bennett, 2006). It is, however, necessary to adopt a socio-cultural perspective on this as well. The strong focus on exercise and looking after the body may be viewed in terms of reflecting central values and attitudes in today's mainstream Western society, such as self-control, self-discipline, individual responsibility, and hard work. Alongside this, the slender and fit body has become a symbol of these values as well as of good health, youthfulness, energy, success, happiness, social acceptability, competence, strength, and power (Loland, 1999; Olivardia, 2002; Lindwall, 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Grogan, 2008; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

Research problem

With the above in mind, I want to look into Norwegian media representations of exercise and the fit body. Thus, my overarching research question is:

What are the various meanings given to exercise and the fit body in the context of the Norwegian media?

The research questions formulated within this are as follows:

What are the represented effects of exercise for the individual? And asked in the opposite way: What are the represented effects of not exercising?

What are the represented meanings of exercise and the fit body for women and men, respectively?

Through the meanings that are ascribed to exercise and the fit body, which opportunities for subjectivity are opened up and which ones are restricted?

What possible consequences may the representations of exercise and the fit body involve for people?

I have derived data from three types of sources; that is, newspaper articles, the web pages of three fitness chains, and an online discussion forum on the topic of exercise and fitness. This has provided me with three rather different types of material through which to approach my research problem. In analyzing the data, I have carried through a *critical discourse analysis*. This method is suitable for a media analysis, as it is highly sensitive to the taken for granted and ideological nature of *media representations*; that is, social constructions of the world through the media (Giles, 2003). The overarching aim of a critical discourse analysis is to identify dominant as well as undermined voices (discourses) on a given matter, often trying to say something about likely reasons for and implications of this as well. Of course, a discourse analysis will not be able to specify the actual effects of discursive constructions on people, as the results will inevitably be subjective interpretations and speculation on the analyst's part (Fairclough, 2001; Giles, 2003).

Some hold the view that psychological research should always involve real participants; however, gaining an understanding of the material at hand is necessary before we can study the consumption and actual effects (Giles, 2003). In general, psychological research in the area of media representations of exercise and the fit body as well as the effects of this on people is limited (Olivardia, 2002; Davis, 2002; Martin & Lichtenberger, 2002). Additionally, research on the media in general has traditionally been neglected within psychology (Giles, 2003; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). From what I have come across, a media analysis within the field of psychology on the represented meanings of exercise and the fit body does not seem to have been carried through on Norwegian material. Moreover, I have not found any other media analysis that is based on data from web pages of health clubs or an

online discussion forum on exercise. This supports my argument that my study will be relevant and interesting to psychology and the social sciences in general.

Definition and clarification of relevant concepts

Firstly, I need to define the concepts of exercise and fitness, as they are central to my study. Exercise (i.e. *physical* exercise) is commonly viewed as a subtype of the wider concept of *physical activity.* While physical activity can be defined as "any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure", exercise refers to "planned, structured, repetitive bodily movements in which people engage for the conscious purpose of improving or maintaining physical fitness or health" (Lindwall, 2004, p. 42). Fitness, then, may be defined as "a combination of strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular endurance" that "can be quantified and evaluated relative to established benchmarks" (Maguire, 2008, p. 1). These definitions represent a purely scientific view of exercise and fitness. In everyday understandings of fitness, however, fitness is also about beauty and living up to expectations (ibid.). In line with this, my analysis revealed a complex web of socially constructed meanings of exercise and the fit body.

What constitutes the media? Traditional versus new media

As I am carrying through a media analysis based on data from three rather different types of sources, a definition and clarification of what I consider *media* would be appropriate. At the present time, a prevailing consent among researchers as to what exactly constitutes the media seems to be lacking. This is not strange considering the media's rather short history, complex nature and rapid development. Giles (2003) locates *mass media* at the intersection of mass communication, culture and technology. This understanding includes all media that rely on electricity, yet excludes media with a mere communicative function. Newspapers and magazines are included as well, even though they do not require any technological input from their readers. Giles considers the Internet problematic with respect to this, since it is a *multifaceted* medium; that is, a medium containing functions which are compatible with traditional mass media, such as the World Wide Web, as well as mere social functions, such as e-mail and chat rooms.

The concept of *digital media*, however, includes the Internet as well as "all forms of media content that combine and integrate data, text, sounds, and images, are stored in digital

formats, and are distributed across networks" (Flew, 2002, p. 4). *Social media* refers to "activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media" (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 6). Digital and social media are part of what is commonly referred to as *new media* (Flew, 2002). Hence, on one hand I am exploring the meanings of exercise and the fit body in a *traditional* media context (i.e. in newspaper articles); on the other hand, I am drawing on *digital* and *social* media sources (i.e. web pages of health clubs and an online discussion forum). Moreover, I have derived the newspaper articles from a database on the Internet – an illustration of as well as a justification for the presently ongoing and inevitable merging of 'traditional' media with 'new' media, in practice as well as in theory.

Body Image

Much research on media representations of the body and the effects of such representations on people involves the concept of *body image*. Grogan (2008, p. 3-4) defines body image as "a person's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about his or her body" and argues that it is "a psychological phenomenon which is significantly affected by social factors". Thus, one needs to adopt an ecological perspective on body image. A person's body image is subjective and open to change through social influence, and there is not necessarily any connection between an individual's subjective experience of her/his body and the impression of an outside observer (ibid.).

The concept of body image may, however, be problematic due to its origin in the field of traditional experimental psychology. As both Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) and Giles (2003) note, much psychological research has been *problem* driven rather than *proactive* or driven by curiosity and interest. This has resulted in a lot of research on the body image of women with eating disorders and weight concerns. Although this research focus has generated important and useful knowledge, it has undermined research in other areas of body image, while at the same time reproducing the associations of body image to women and bodily dissatisfaction (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Giles, 2003).

The latter point is emphasized by Blood (2005) in her discourse analysis of women's magazines. Blood sheds light on how the experimental psychological research on body image has achieved a powerful and legitimized place within the discourse of popular culture on women's body image. This has resulted in a widespread commonsense assumption of negative body image as something that affects *all* women to some extent, and which is due to

a lack of ability to see one's body *objectively*. This lack of ability is claimed to be caused by a disturbance in the perceptual processes in the brain or emotional distress. The likelihood of bodily dissatisfaction being socially constructed is thus undermined. Blood is therefore careful to avoid using the concept of body image herself, talking instead of *experiences of embodiment*.

Embodiment

Until recently, the body as an object for research has been more or less neglected within the social sciences, which have preferred to focus solely on the mind. In counteracting this, Burkitt (1999) and Crossley (2006) are eager to challenge the traditional Western dualistic notion of the body and the mind as two separate entities. The concept of *embodiment* entails that the body and the person cannot be separated, thus it is not possible to hold an objective view of one's body in the first place (Burkitt, 1999; Crossley, 2006). By acknowledging this one accepts that not being able to see one's body objectively is not a lack – it is inevitable.

Nevertheless, we are able to think about our bodies as something separate from ourselves, such as when we are forming an image of our body in our mind. Burkitt (1999) suggests that the problem with body image is that it is partly a symbolic construction, which never corresponds exactly to the physical body; hence, what is commonly referred to as body image disorders more easily occur. At the same time, however, changes in the body may indeed alter its symbolization. Burkitt therefore argues for a multi-dimensional approach to the body and the person, which conceives of human beings as composed of both the material and the symbolic, rather than divided between the two.

Crossley (2006, p. 1) defines *reflexive embodiment* as "the capacity and tendency to perceive, emote about, reflect and act upon one's own body; to practices of body modification and maintenance; and to 'body image'". By calling our embodiment *reflexive*, Crossley is assuming that the object and the subject of for instance a feeling or an action directed at the body are one and the same; that is, "we are our bodies" (ibid.). Moreover, we are *productive bodies* (Burkitt, 1999). Contrary to body image, then, *experiences of embodiment* become something the individual *do* rather than *have*. Although these experiences will inevitably be influenced by nature, culture, and other people, as well as by one's individual physical and psychological prerequisites, the individual is granted with a greater freedom of choice and a bigger potential of change. This being said, I am not proposing that the concept of body image is in opposition to the concepts of reflexive embodiment and experiences of embodiment.

Rather, I am suggesting that reflexive embodiment is a more inclusive term than body image, as it comprises body image *and more*, and stresses a reconciliation of the person and the body.

Relevant literature and research

The thin body ideal

From the Middle Ages, the female body ideal in Europe was voluptuous, as this was associated with good health, fertility and eroticism. In Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome it was the slender, muscular male body that was idealized. Alongside the rise of the fashion industry in the 1920s, the thin female ideal emerged; however, from the 1930s and into the 1950s the full-figured body ideal for women dominated once again. The thinness trend got its breakthrough in the 60s, when the fashion model Twiggy became a role model for women of all social layers. From the 1980s on, idealized images of the male body became common in Western media as well, and traditional boundaries between men as viewers and women as the viewed began to diminish (Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Grogan, 2008).

The thin body is still a prevailing ideal in the Western world, especially for women. While slenderness symbolizes self-control and success, being overweight is associated with laziness, stupidity, and a lack of self-control (Tiggeman, 2002; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Grogan, 2008). The link between being thin and being in control is not a recent association, but can be traced back to Christian asceticism in the Western Judeo-Christian world (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). Some scientists suggest that being slim is healthy and hence that the slender body ideal is biologically based. Research has, however, shown that it is only extreme overweight that is damaging to health, and that moderate overweight may be health promoting in some cases. Additionally, the thin ideal is not universal. A few examples are how being overweight is associated with wealth and good health in China and India (Grogan, 2008), and how African Americans overall endorse larger body ideals than Caucasian Americans (Celio, Zabinski & Wilfley, 2002; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007). Based on studies of historical and cultural differences between body ideals, many researchers today believe that the basis of body ideals is mainly cultural (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007; Grogan, 2008).

The fit body ideal

Even though the thin figure has appeared among male models in recent time as well, the slender and muscular ideal has remained the overall favorite for men (Grogan, 2008). During the last couple of decades, this body ideal has increased its influence on women as well. The present idealizing of slenderness "links the spare, thin, feminine ideal with the solid, muscular, masculine ideal" (Grogan, 2008, p. 10). However, while men commonly want to look bigger in terms of muscle mass, women prefer a slim, toned shape (Gruber, 2007; Thompson & Cafri, 2007; Grogan, 2008; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Moreover, culture seems to play a significant role in the desire for muscularity, as this has proved to vary across cultures. With some exceptions, the muscular ideal appears to be most prevalent in the Western part of the world, where the actual need for a muscular physique is quite small (Gray & Ginsberg, 2007).

In line with this, Thompson and Cafri (2007) write that the focus within the area of psychological research on body image has moved from the thin ideal to the muscular ideal during the last decade. They list three main-reasons for this: Firstly, the pressure on looks is greater than ever and has taken its hold on men as well; secondly, professional as well as amateur sports have increased significantly over the last 15 years, in terms of popularity, media coverage and competitive spirit; thirdly, a new type of body dysmorphic disorder has been identified: muscle dysmorphia. Muscle dysmorphia is characterized by "a pathological preoccupation with one's musculature" (Olivardia, 2007, p. 137). Although the disorder does occur among some women, especially within the bodybuilding- and weightlifting-milieus (Gruber, 2007), it is primarily affecting adolescent boys and young men (Olivardia, 2007; Thompson & Cafri, 2007).

The athletic and muscular body is not really a new body ideal; however, previously collective and nationalistic motives for exercising have been replaced by more individualistic ones, like the responsibility of the individual for her/his own health, happiness and self-improvement (Lindwall, 2004; Maguire, 2008). Additionally, consumerism strongly emphasizes the importance of physical beauty. Exercise, then, offers a road to good health *and* beauty, as "the benefits of exercise are written on both the internal organs (…) and the body's surface" (Maguire, 2008, p. 51). Moreover, exercise provides a way to negotiate the conflicting demands of consumer culture, which encourages pleasure and restraint at one and the same time (Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). In line with this, Markula and

Pringle (2006) argue that the fitness trend may be understood in terms of a disciplinary practice that produces docile utile bodies through the self-surveillance of the individual.

Media representations and audience effects

The media emphasize the importance of bodily appearance. As there is widespread agreement today that the media reflects as well as shapes social norms and influences people's body images, this is unfortunate (Tiggeman, 2002; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002; Blood, 2005; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007; Gruber, 2007; Grogan, 2008). The significant gender difference in body and weight satisfaction, with women clearly being more dissatisfied with their weight and looks than men, is commonly blamed on the much more extensive objectification of the female body in Western culture, not least through the media (Wolf, 1991; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Grogan, 2008). Furthermore, the ideal man is usually presented as someone of normal weight, slender and muscular, while women tend to be presented as underweight (Grogan, 2008). Due to the extent of it, the bodily dissatisfaction among girls and women today is commonly referred to as a *normative discontent* (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Wolf (1991) blames this on the cultural script of the *beauty myth*, which constructs physical beauty and thinness as a demand on women in order to sustain a dominant patriarchal ideology. Media images of the thin ideal have proved to exert a significant and negative influence on girls' and women's degree of bodily satisfaction, mood, self-esteem, and self-value (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002; Blood, 2005; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008).

Even though the thin female ideal is still prevalent in the media, there is a tendency for the ideal woman to become increasingly fitter and more muscular (Gruber, 2007). Gruber (2007) argues that this is due to girls' and women's increased participation in sports during the last three-four decades as well as the development of the fitness industry. Harris (2004) suggests that social, cultural, and political changes have caused young women to be constructed into the role as "the future girl" - a young, educated, career oriented, glamorous consumer with power, possibilities and success. In line with this, the female, physical self is no longer only to be admired and touched, but strong, powerful and capable. This is expressed through a female body ideal that is slender, fit and defined.

Perhaps striving for this 'new' body ideal is healthier, as the focus is more on fitness than thinness. Martin and Lichtenberger (2002) note, that because society does not have strictly defined fitness ideals for women, it may be easier not to compare oneself with a

certain standard. Alternatively, the new super fit women in the media may produce an ideal that is just as difficult for girls and women to achieve as the skinny ideal. However, more research on the effects of this 'new' body ideal on women is called for (Gruber, 2007).

As for boys and men, an increment in bodily dissatisfaction has been observed alongside an increase in the objectification of the male body during the last decades (Olivardia, 2002; Corson & Anderson, 2002; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2007; Grogan, 2008). While the female ideal is still mainly about slenderness, the body ideal for men is somewhat more complex. At one and the same time, the ideal man should be muscular, with a low fat percent and a certain shape; that is, tall with broad shoulders and narrow hips (Corson & Anderson, 2002; Grogan, 2008).

Similar to the thin ideal, some theorists have proposed a social evolutionary explanation for the muscular ideal, as muscularity is claimed to signify dominance and success. As already mentioned, however, the muscular ideal is not universal and is most prominent in cultures where the need for muscularity is at a minimum. The muscular body has lost its associations to physical work and has come to symbolize good health, dominance, power, strength, sexual virility, energy, control, and threat (Olivardia, 2002; Grogan, 2008). Some researchers propose that the muscular ideal for men may actually be caused by the move away from physical work in the Western part of the world; a rapid change that has resulted in a masculinity crisis. Threatened masculinity theory implies that increased parity has pushed men to find alternative ways to define their masculinity. Since their body is the only thing that will forever distinguish them from women, many men turn to body work in the form of exercise (Olivardia, 2002; Seidler, 2006; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007). Following this, "the gym has taken the cathedral's place as the home of the masculine spirituality" (Seidler, 2006, p. 99).

Media images of the ideal male proportions have become steadily more unrealistic during the last couple of decades (Corson & Anderson, 2002; Olivardia, 2002; Tiggeman, 2002). Alongside this, studies have shown that one third of adolescent boys want to become more muscular, while about one third wants to be thinner. However, the wish to get thinner may reflect a desire for less body fat rather than a smaller body size. Underweight boys and men have proved to have extremely poor self- and body images, and a low BMI in boys is associated with the use of anabolic steroids (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2007).

Studies have revealed that exposure to media images of the ideal male body influences the body images of boys and men negatively (Olivardia, 2002; Tiggeman, 2002; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007). Hargreaves and Tiggeman (2009) found that men felt more dissatisfied with

their bodies immediately after viewing commercials which emphasized the muscular ideal. Farquhar and Wasylkiw (2007) found that the focus on the male body in advertisements in Sports Illustrated had changed significantly from *performance* to *esthetics* during the period of 1975-2005. They also found that pictures of male models which emphasized esthetics had a negative impact on teenage boys' body image, while pictures of male models which stressed performance actually had a positive effect on body image.

In a controversial article, Heinberg, Thompson and Matzon (2001) propose that some degree of bodily dissatisfaction may actually be beneficial, as it can motivate people to engage in exercise and other types of positive health behavior. However, the level of bodily dissatisfaction in contemporary Western societies is so pervasive that it could hardly be called beneficial. Additionally, a lot of people who experience bodily dissatisfaction are actually of normal weight and body shape. Moreover, weight- and bodily dissatisfaction is closely related to low self-value, depression, additional weight-increase, eating disorders, muscle dysmorphia, and other body dysmorphic disorders (Corson & Anderson, 2002; Olivardia, 2002; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007; Grogan, 2008).

It is important to point out that people are not passive consumers of media content. At the same time as media figures, like actors, models and sports people, have proved to exert a significant influence on people, studies have demonstrated that people are critically aware of unrealistic body ideals and the way that the media manipulate their experiences and views of their bodies (Grogan, 2008). Moreover, different audiences interpret and react differently to media messages based on socio-cultural context, social influence, personal experiences, and individual differences in physical and psychological traits (Giles, 2003; Gray & Ginsberg; Kvalem, 2007; Grogan, 2008). However, as noted by Markula & Pringle (2006), studies have also shown that while people who exercise are critically aware of, as well as annoyed by, body ideals in the media, they nevertheless continue trying to achieve them. Through interviews with Norwegian people, Fugelli & Ingstad (2009) found that many expressed contempt and admiration towards exercise enthusiasts at one and the same time.

Exercise, exercise motivations, and body image

During the last couple of decades a lot of research has tried to establish that improvements in physical condition lead to a more positive body image; however, the relationship is not that simple. Positive effects of exercise on people's body images have been demonstrated in women as well as men, and in adults of all ages. Moreover, exercise has been shown to

produce positive effects on mood, anxiety, depression, stress, self-esteem, and feelings of happiness. However, there appears to be a 'dose-response' relationship involved, with a moderate level of exercise yielding the most positive effects (Martin & Lichtenberger, 2002; Lindwall, 2004; Hellevik, 2008).

Moreover, age and gender appear to be important factors. Some studies have shown that level of exercise is negatively associated with body satisfaction in young women, while being positively associated with body satisfaction in older women and men. This may be due to a greater emphasis on appearance in younger women (Davis, 2002). Loland (1999), on the other hand, observed a lack of difference in body image among physically active and non-active young women. She suggests that this may be due to the fact that exercise does not make that big of a difference with respect to appearance and fitness during adolescence and the twenties. Moreover, the reason why bodily satisfaction increases with age among moderate/high active women and men, and decreases among those who are inactive, may be understood in light of the 'ageist' society that we live in, which makes 'old and fit' a more lucrative alternative than 'old and unfit' (Loland, 1999).

People's *motivations* to exercise seem to be of crucial importance to their body image. A focus on health, improved fitness, abilities, and enjoyment is associated with a positive body image, while exercising primarily for appearance-related reasons is associated with a more negative body image (Davis, 2002; Martin & Lichtenberger, 2002; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007). In sports with a strong focus on appearance, such as bodybuilding, the level of bodily dissatisfaction is higher than in sports where the focus is more on 'the functional body', such as ski-jumping (Loland, 1999). At the same time, bodily dissatisfaction and eating problems are more common within sports that put a great emphasis on weight and a lean physique (Davis, 2002; Lindwall, 2004). Athletes and professional sports people have more positive body images than other people, yet it remains unclear whether this is due to feelings of physical competence or appearance. Athletes and sports people who engage in a sport that fosters a physique which matches that of the mainstream ideal have, however, proved to be most satisfied with their bodies (Davis, 2002).

Important motivations to exercise for women as well as men are increasing one's appearance, popularity and attractiveness (Corson & Anderson, 2002). This is further evident through the dramatic increase in the use of anabolic steroids and other muscle-enhancing substances (Thompson & Cafri, 2007; Bahrke, 2007; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2007) as well as in the number of people seeking cosmetic procedures to enhance body shape, making it look more athletic and muscular (Sarwer, Crerand & Gibbons, 2007). The causal relationship

between exercise and bodily dissatisfaction has so far proved difficult to identify (Davis, 2002). Following social comparison theory, Lindwall (2004) claims that people may experience more bodily distress through exercising, because the point of reference to which one compares continuously shifts. He argues that if exercise is to foster positive experiences and body images it is important that it takes place within healthy contexts accompanied by a critical awareness of unrealistic and unhealthy body ideals.

Methodological approach: Discourse analysis

Epistemological framework

Discourse analysis constitutes a broad methodological field. A shared view among the three discourse analytic approaches that I draw on is that the ways in which we use language are not neutral reflections of our world, identities and social relations; rather, they are actively shaping, sustaining and changing these (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). I have made use of a combination of *Foucauldian discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis* and *discursive psychology*. I will come back in more detail to what characterizes each of these approaches and how I have combined them.

Discourse analysis involves a *relativistic* ontology; that is, the world is not seen as determined and fixed, but flexible and ever-changing. Accompanying this ontology is an emphasis on the multitude of interpretations available. Discourse analysis falls within the epistemological frameworks of *post-structuralism* and *social-constructionism*, as it understands language as structured in certain patterns or discourses, and social phenomena as products of discursive interaction. These epistemological frameworks imply an anti-essentialistic view of the social world and a critical view of commonsense knowledge. Our understanding of the world is seen as dependent of the socio-cultural and historical context of which we are part (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; McKinlay & McVittie, 2008).). If we want to know something about the world, then, we must do so through language and social practice in general, always keeping in mind that what we come up with is merely one of many possible interpretations, which itself could be a subject for analysis. The last point is related to the role of the researcher.

The role of the researcher: Reflexivity

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

Oscar Wilde

The methodology has implications for the role of the researcher in the research process; that is, to what extent one is concerned with *reflexivity*. Being concerned with reflexivity implies being concerned with how the researcher impacts on the research. In discourse analysis, the researcher is regarded as an author of her/his interpretations (as opposed to a witness), since the researcher's findings and report will necessarily constitute discursive constructions in their own right (Willig, 2001). Since the view of discourse analysis is that discourse constructs versions of reality, the only access we have to the 'truth' goes through representations of it. This way, the analyst's interpretation becomes that of an interpretation of an interpretation (Fairclough, 2001), and should be read as such. This does not, however, have to imply a relativism that sees all representations as equal. Representations may be compared in terms of how partial and complete they are, and what, and who's interests they serve (Fairclough, 1995).

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) note that by seeing the world through a particular scientific theory we are able to distance ourselves from some of our taken for granted assumptions and ask other questions of our material than we normally would have. In Oscar Wilde's words: By putting on a scientific *mask,* we become more capable of saying something about 'truth'; or more correctly about the *relative* truth or untruth of particular representations of reality (Fairclough, 1995).

However, since *objectivity,* in terms of separating one's own assumptions and values from the research, is not really possible in qualitative research (Toma, 2000), it is important that the researcher is explicit about his/her own assumptions and motivations, as well as the assumptions and influences that naturally follow from the methodology, since these will necessarily impact on the research process and the findings. Willig (2001) refers to this as *personal reflexivity* and *epistemological reflexivity*, respectively. As for epistemological reflexivity, the assumptions of the nature of the world and what we can know about it depend on the methodology's ontological stand (in this case relativism) and its epistemological framework (in this case social-constructionism and post-structuralism). A relativistic ontology entails a focus on *interpretations* of the world, while a social-constructionist and post-

structuralist epistemology constrains our research questions to those of *how*; that is, questions around "the social and/or discursive construction of phenomena" (Willig, 2001, p. 20).

In carrying through a critical discourse analysis, I am bound to be sensitive to how language serves to legitimize, naturalize, oppress, and oppose, as well as potential consequences of this for people. However, a limitation of the method is that it is not able to draw any conclusions regarding the actual consequences of discursive constructions. In order to do that, one must study people's consumption, interpretations and experiences (Fairclough, 1995). Furthermore, it is important to treat discourse as an analytic concept; that is, as something that the researcher projects onto reality in order to create a framework for study. What becomes important, then, is that the researcher explains and justifies his/her delimitation of discourses by drawing on existing literature within the given area of interest. The researcher will then be able to see if what she/he finds coincide with previously identified discourses, or not (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Personal reflexivity

I have exercised and participated in different sports throughout my life, hence I have a personal interest in the topic of exercise. To me, exercise has always been a source of joy and contentment. I experience it as healthy, and I like the idea of looking – to some extent – fit. However, in the aftermath of an exercise session I feel not only refreshed and relaxed, but also in a state of good conscience. The origin of this feeling is not easy to grasp or explain, since I believe it exists somewhere in between physiological processes (as a natural consequence of such) and the socially constructed world.

Being a committed exerciser has made me aware of the social desirability of exercise. Numerous times I have received positive and envious comments from other people regarding my exercising, such as how *good* or *self-discipline* I am (as if it was a matter of fulfilling a duty), or how one envies me my motivation to exercise. At several occasions I have also heard people talk about how they should start, or are soon going to start, exercising. As if exercise was something that everyone at some point *ought to* begin with. During my research process, I overheard a girl on the bus one day telling her friend how she had not exercised as planned that day. And then she added: "But I worked out yesterday as well as the day before, so I do have a good conscience".

Based on personal experiences and observations in relation to exercise and fitness, I developed a curiosity in the socially constructed meanings of these phenomena. Giles (2003)

writes that modern technology has blurred the boundary between culture and media to such an extent that the present study of media is practically synonymous with the study of popular culture. Moreover, he notes that the area of body ideals is one of the few within psychology where 'culture' and 'media' are treated synonymously. This supports my argument that a media analysis of the represented meanings of exercise and the fit body can yield important insight into socio-cultural norms surrounding these phenomena.

Theoretical background of discourse analysis

In the 1970s the 'turn to language' was adopted by social psychologists, and discourse analysis developed within their field as a critique of cognitivism and its dualistic view of the individual and the society. Discourse analysis came to see language as constitutive of social and psychological life (Willig, 2001; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The concept of *discourse*, however, has been defined and applied in various ways. According to Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 1), the general idea underlying this concept is that "language is structured according to different patterns that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life", and that discourse analysis is the study of these patterns. They go on to define discourse as "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (ibid.).

Commonly, discourse refers to both talk and written text (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). Some discursive researchers, for instance within Foucauldian discourse analysis, regard *all* types of social practice as discourse (Willig, 2001). Even though his main emphasis is on discourse as spoken and written text, Fairclough (2001) notes that *visual* language is a very important aspect of discourse as well; both in terms of body language and in relation to written, printed, filmed or televised material. The latter is especially true for contemporary society, because of the media. Due to practical concerns, such as space, I will, however, base my analysis solely on *written* text.

The particular meanings that are constructed of given phenomena (in this case, exercise and the fit body) in discourse have consequences for how we conceive of them. However, there exist many different discourses at the same time that struggle over the right to define the truth within a given social domain. Moreover, discourses exist in several layers (Fairclough, 2001; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Within the overarching media discourse on exercise and the fit body, I have, for example, identified a scientific discourse and a gendered

discourse, to name but a few. Thus, conflicting voices appear between as well as within different discourses.

I will now give a brief introduction to the three discourse analytical approaches on which I have based my combined discourse analytical framework.

Discursive psychology

Discursive psychology (DP) is inspired by ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and Foucauldian theory, and is heavily influenced by the work of Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (Willig, 2001; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Potter and Wetherell (1987, 1992) view discourse as all forms of text and verbal interactions, narratives, and accounts. DP views instances of language use as constructions of the world oriented towards social action. The analytic focus is on discourse as situated language use (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Potter and Wetherell (1988) refer to the discourses that people draw on in social interaction as *interpretative repertoires*. An interpretative repertoire consists of "a limited number of terms that are used in a particular stylistic and grammatical way" (ibid., p. 172).

Psychological phenomena and activities are understood as *discursive actions* rather than *cognitive processes*, which function to serve interpersonal and social goals. They are considered something people *do* rather than *have*. Thus, the concern of DP is *what* people do in talk, *how* people employ discursive resources, and the effects of this. This is referred to as *the action orientation* of talk and text (Willig, 2001).

Foucauldian discourse analysis

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) is strongly influenced by the post-structuralist ideas of Michel Foucault, who is commonly known as the founding father of discourse analysis. In FDA discourses are understood as sets of statements that construct objects and a range of subject positions, which in turn imply certain ways of seeing, and being in, the world. Thus, discourses enable and constrain what can be said, done and experienced, by whom, in what contexts. Foucauldian discourse analysts are especially interested in the *discursive economy* of a culture; that is, the available discursive resources and the implications of this for people (Willig, 2001).

FDA emphasizes the historical and power aspect of discourse; language structures change over time and shape and reflect social and institutional practices as well as subjectivity. Discourse is determined by processes of power, and dominant discourses get to

be regarded as common sense (Willig, 2001; McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). Foucault's notion of power is that power is *productive* as well as *constraining*, and that power is spread across different social practices. "Power constitutes discourse, knowledge, bodies and subjectivities", and facilitate and limit possibilities for the social (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 13).

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is especially concerned with how dominant ideologies manifest themselves in language and discourse. One seeks to understand how social inequalities are produced and reproduced in language, as well as coming up with suggestions to how such problems may be challenged. CDA is interested in the actions that people perform through language, while at the same time emphasizing the wider socio-cultural context (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). Unlike traditional FDA, which sees the individual as determined by discourse, CDA ascribes the individual a greater say and stresses that people are both the products and producers of language (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) point out the rather vague and broad nature of CDA, which on one hand is used by Norman Fairclough to describe the approach that he has developed, while on the other hand being a label for a much wider and quite inconsistent approach. I am drawing on the ideas of Fairclough (1995, 2001) in relation to CDA, and in the following I present some of his main theoretical notions relevant to my own study.

Norman Fairclough

Fairclough's (1995, 2001) aim is to unite a linguistic and social-scientific approach to discourse analysis; however, applying some of his ideas without the same focus on linguistic features is not a problem. Fairclough (1995, p. 18) presents two main definitions of discourse and argues for a synthesis of these in his own understanding of discourse: 1) Discourse as *social action* and *interaction* in real social situation – a definition which dominates in language studies (and in DP, as we have seen); 2) Discourse as a *social construction* of reality, a form of *knowledge* – the dominant view of discourse in post-structural social theory (including FDA). Fairclough understands 'discourse' as social action in its own right, while seeing '*a* discourse' as a particular way of talking about and constructing a matter.

Unlike Foucault, Fairclough (1995, 2001) regards discourse as language use conceived as social practice; thus, to him discourse makes part of social practice, but all social practice is not discursive. Moreover, Fairclough views discourse as not only constructed by power, but *constructive* as well. This makes more room for social struggle, alternative voices and change. Fairclough's agenda is to shed light on the strong and important significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of social power relations, and to increase people's awareness of how language contributes to some people's and group's domination of others. His main interest is in the ideological nature of much commonsense, and how power relations rely on the manufacturing of *consent* (as opposed to *coercion*) through such ideological taken for granted assumptions.

Why a combination? The advantages of multiperspectivalism

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) argue that by combining different discourse analytical approaches to form a *multiperspectival* framework one may obtain a broader understanding of the social phenomenon in question. This involves a careful weighing of the approaches up against each other, in order to identify the kind of knowledge that each approach can provide (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). What these three versions of discourse analysis have in common is most importantly the view that ways of using language construct social and psychological reality. Some researchers claim that the differences between approaches within the social-constructionist field of discourse analysis have only to do with differences in emphasis and focus (Willig, 2001). Nevertheless, portraying a separation between the approaches has made it easier to grasp the important differences that in fact do exist.

I suggest that a combination of these three approaches is fruitful, as they fulfill and complement each other. As Wetherell (1998, referred to in Willig, 2001, p. 105) states, it is only through a synthesis of DP and FDA that one is able to produce a reading that takes into consideration both the situated and shifting nature of discursive constructions *and* the wider social and institutional frameworks within which they are produced. Roughly speaking, one could say that the primary interest of DP is *what people do with discourse*, while the main concern of FDA is *what discourse does with people*. CDA (in terms of Fairclough) is concerned with both. Additionally, even though all three approaches are to some extent critical, CDA goes further in its emphasis on social inequality and social change.

I shall now move on to present my discourse analytical framework.

Discourse analytical framework

In analyzing my data, I followed Willig's (2001) six stages for carrying through a Foucauldian discourse analysis. These stages make up the 'skeleton' of my analytical framework. I will describe the guidelines in turn:

1) *Discursive constructions*

   In what ways are the discursive object constructed in the text?

2) *Discourses*

   What are the differences between the constructions? Here one should also try to locate the constructions within broader discourses and look at how the discourses relate to one another.

3) *Action orientation*

   What is gained from constructing the object in a particular way at a particular point in the text?

   What is the function of the construction and how does it relate to other constructions in the text?

4) *Positioning*

   What subject positions are constructed and made available in the text?

5) *Practice*

   In what ways do discursive constructions and subject positions enable and constrain opportunities for action?

6) *Subjectivity*

   What can be felt, thought and experienced from within the different subject positions?

   (Willig, 2001, p. 109-112)

As can be seen from stage 3 – *Action orientation* – Willig has integrated important notions from DP as well. This may improve our understanding of what the different constructions may actually achieve within the text (Willig, 2001). The concept of interpretative repertoires makes it easier to distance oneself from the view of discourses as abstract phenomena, focusing instead on discourses as flexible resources drawn upon by people in order to accomplish social actions in talk and text (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). I regarded both understandings of discourse as useful to my research project; not mutually exclusive, however mutually reinforcing of each other.

In order to make the analytical framework more complete, I added Fairclough's (1995, 2001) level of *socio-cultural practice*. An analysis at the level of socio-cultural practice may involve the situational context, the wider context of institutional practices, as well as the context of society and culture. This provides a broader understanding of what Fairclough terms the *communicative event* (i.e. the particular discursive practice) and makes more room for considering possible consequences of some discourses being drawn upon at the expense of others.

All three approaches hold the view that in every discursive practice it is necessary to draw on earlier meaning productions in order to be understood, and that the combination of certain elements in new ways can produce a change in the discursive structures (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). With respect to this, Fairclough (2001) provides the useful analytical concept of *interdiscursivity*, which refers to the intermingling of discourses and the way that elements from different discourses are combined within a text, ultimately resulting in hybrid discourses. Through my analysis, it became evident that different and occasionally conflicting discourses worked together and overlapped in interesting ways in the discursive production of exercise and the fit body.

Data generation

I decided to use the following three types of data sources: Newspaper articles, health clubs' web pages, and an online discussion forum. I based the generation of data on certain criteria related to my research questions; that is, the data should engage with ideas around what exercise and the fit body mean to people or to the society we live in, refer specifically to gender and exercise/the fit body, and/or refer to exercising or not exercising as having consequences for people. Moreover, I wanted my sources to be widespread and easily accessible.

Based on searches in the database of *Atek*st, I chose *Aftenposten* and *VG* to serve as my newspaper sources, as they came out the two nationwide newspapers that wrote most articles about exercise. I searched for relevant articles in *Atekst* with the combination "trening AND/OR trene" ("exercise AND/OR exercising"). Since this provided a large number of relevant hits, I did not operate with alternative search words. I read 680 articles from within a time frame of three months (June 30th 2009 – September 30th 2009) and decided on which articles were relevant based on the criteria related to my research questions. I excluded articles from *Aftenposten Aften*, as this exemplar is only given out in Oslo and Akershus. All

in all this left me with 64 articles to serve as an inspirational background for my analysis. In the actual report, I have drawn examples from 11 of these to illustrate and justify my claims.

As for the health clubs, I chose the Norwegian web sites of three large chains. Since I want to signal that I do not intend to compare these health clubs with one another, I have chosen to keep their names confidential. My aim has not been to criticize particular health clubs as such, but to reveal socially constructed meanings of exercise and the fit body as they manifest on the web sites of health clubs as well as in other media material. In October 2009, I went through the web sites, extracting all the text that in some way seemed relevant in relation to my criteria. Altogether, this left me with a Word-document of 73 pages.

Finally, I picked an online discussion forum that was Norwegian, publicly accessible and centered on the topic of exercise. In September 2009, I picked out relevant discussions for analysis on which there had been some activity (i.e. postings) within the last three months or so. This provided me with 92 Word-pages of data, from which I chose particular sections for further analysis.

Ethical concerns

The media is characterized by a blurring of the boarder between the public and the private (Fairclough, 1995). In line with this, Waskul and Douglas (1996) stress the *publicly private* nature of online interaction. An online discussion forum may be publicly accessible; however, participants are often chatting from their homes and may conceive of the situation as private. Because of this, Waskul and Douglas note that the researcher should distinguish between what is publicly *accessible* and what can be publicly *disseminated.*

McKinlay and McVittie (2008) note that in cases of discursive studies that draw on public archives, and where fulfilling the goal of anonymity might be difficult, researchers will often take the view that since the data is already made public, the right to privacy does not need to be met according to normal expectations. When it came to analyzing material from newspapers and health clubs' web sites, I decided to take this view. The newspaper articles that have provided me with empirical examples will be listed in an appendix in order to promote transparency. As for the fitness clubs, they would probably not be very difficult to identify. Nevertheless, I do not consider this a very big problem, since exposing individuals is not of interest to my research aim.

With respect to the online discussion forum, the matter of anonymity and confidentiality is partly solved, since people chatting there are anonymous (unless they have

chosen otherwise) in the first place. In the list of rules and regulations it is established that the web site does not hold any responsibility for the information and the opinions that people put out there. Moreover, it says that by entering the web site one is automatically accepting and bound by its valid rules. Thus, by participating on the forum one has in a way accepted that one's utterances might be used by others, although the participants themselves might not see it that way. It is therefore important to be concerned with what Jensen (2002) refers to as *reverse copyright*; that is, protecting people's right not to be associated with the information they have provided. In other words, the researcher should let participants speak as *anybody,* not *somebody* (ibid., p. 290). I have decided to keep the name of the web site as well as the members' user names confidential. I have also been careful not to reproduce any personal information or other information that could potentially reveal anyone's true identity. Because Norway is a small country, I consider it necessary to take double precautions with regard to anonymity.

With respect to the question of informed consent, Waskul and Douglas (1996) suggest a distinction between open access and closed forums. The forum I chose is open to everyone regardless of whether you are a registered member or not. Besides, gaining an informed consent from the members would in itself have been restrictive on their anonymity. Additionally, it could have reduced the quality and authenticity of the data. The same might have happened if I registered and participated on the forum; thus, I decided to remain an outside observer. After all, I wanted to study naturally occurring talk in a naturalistic setting.

The question of ownership easily becomes problematic in relation to analyzing data from the Internet. Again it may be helpful to separate between open and closed sites (Waskul & Douglas, 1996). On the web site, it says that the site's content is copyrighted. At the same time, it is stated that one is personally responsible for the information that one posts there. I sent the webmaster an e-mail and informed him shortly about my project, asking for permission to go through with it. I suggested putting a notice on the site, which informed people about my 'lurking' and my intention, so that they would not become victims of deception and were given the opportunity to let me know if they did not wish their postings to become subject to my research. The editor, however, said that they were fine with me going ahead with my project as intended and did not respond to my suggestion of putting a notice on the site. Thus, I have retrieved the informed consent of the webmaster and conclude that in this case that is sufficient.

Kvale (1997) argues that the consequences of a study should be evaluated in terms of potential damage to the participants and the groups they represent, as well as expected

benefits. He is, however, referring to an interview situation, which obviously has somewhat other implications for the ethical considerations than research on published media texts. Since the aim of this study has been to identify and shed a critical light on prevailing socio-cultural constructions of exercise and the fit body as they manifest in the media, and I have been careful with respect to anonymity, I argue that the potential damage on individuals and groups is minimal. As for the potential positive consequences of a study like this, I argue that it may contribute to an increased critical awareness of the opportunities for subjectivity that are opened up and closed down through the socially constructed meanings of fitness. This may facilitate alternative understandings of fitness that include a wider array of body types, which would be especially beneficial to people who feel excluded and suppressed by the current mainstream idealizing of fitness.

Findings and discussion

Through the analysis it has become evident that the ways in which the meanings of exercise and the fit body are constructed within the media context in question are very much a matter of *interdiscursivity*. At an overarching level, I have identified an *individualistic* and a *consumerist* framework of understanding, which, in short, construct the meanings of exercise and the fit body in terms of an individual consumer project. Alongside a *scientific* discourse that links exercise and fitness with the notion of health, I have identified a *moralistic* discourse, which draws upon scientific knowledge as well as individualistic values in constructing the matter of what I have termed *health-related exercise* as a moral good and an individual responsibility. Closely intertwined with the discourse of health-related exercise is the *beauty* discourse, which constructs fitness as a matter of *looking* healthy and beautiful as well. As I shall illustrate and argue throughout the presentation of my findings, the subject produced through these interdiscursive constructions is that of the ignorant, disempowered and bodily alienated consumer.

Whereas all the discursive frameworks mentioned are present within my data in general, there are certain differences as to what framework of understanding appears most dominant within each of the three media contexts. Hence, I will present my findings in three main parts, one for each type of source. I will let the findings from the newspaper articles introduce the discourse of health-related exercise, while the consumerist framework of understanding will be thoroughly illustrated and discussed based on the findings from the health clubs' web sites. As for the online discussion forum, a *gendered* discourse is prominent

in the data and will hence be introduced in the presentation of the findings from this context. Through this framework of understanding, the members construct the fitness arena as a site for both reproducing *and* challenging traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity, as well as dominant representations regarding exercise and the body. Thus, these findings reveal people's potential for self-liberation from socially constituted 'truths'.

Health-related exercise: A necessary evil

"Everyone dreams of winning. Nobody dreams of exercising".

Cato Zahl Pedersen

Markula and Pringle (2006) discriminate between *health-related* and *skill-related* physical fitness. In the media, skill-related physical fitness, which refers to the development of physical abilities needed in order to perform well in sports, is commonly associated with competitive sports, sports people and athletes. Outside that, talk about exercise and fitness is largely related to health (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). My findings support the above notions; exercise is constructed as a road to good health and the fit body is represented as a healthy body. In relation to this, the question of what exactly constitutes the understanding of *health* becomes interesting. Markula and Pringle (2006) claim that within health-related fitness texts good health tends to be narrowly constructed as *the absence of disease*. Exercise, then, becomes a means to fight off disease. As argued by Maguire (2008), however, the marketing of risk has caused the understanding of health to move away from a view of health as absence of disease to *at risk*. Thus, in this sense, exercise becomes a way of *preventing* disease.

Drawing on Markula and Pringle's (2006) concept, I have termed what I consider to be the dominant discourse on exercise and the fit body within the context of the newspaper articles, a discourse of *health-related exercise*. As I shall demonstrate, the subject constructed within this framework of understanding is constantly at risk of poor health and a range of other negative states associated with this. Following this, exercise is constructed as a necessary evil to ensure the individual's good health and well-being, and the fit body is represented as the incarnation of a range of culturally valued characteristics associated with good health and fitness.

The documented nature of health-related exercise

In the newspaper articles, it is, for example, stated that exercise "prevents cardiovascular diseases and premature death" (A1) and leads to a "strengthened immune system" (V1). Besides informing people about the health benefits of exercise, the newspapers are also providing advice on how to start exercising and how to exercise in the 'best and most efficient' way. In an article concerning Oslo Marathon, for example, an expert of exercise physiology is referred to when we are informed that: "Marathon runners should have trained for one year minimum, running at regular intervals. During that time, one should exercise at least three times a week and take a run at between 20 and 30 kilometers at least every other week" (A2). Markula and Pringle (2006) refer to such guidelines as *exercise prescription*; a concept that connects the scientific knowledge with the practice in the discursive field of physical fitness.

Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note that because the discourses of fitness and health are commonly seen as operating within the realm of science, their constructions of the body are rarely disputed. In line with this, scientific 'truths' are never questioned in my data; rather, they are drawn upon in order to justify claims and hence further supported. I argue that when the press draws upon a scientific discourse, it positions itself as an objective communicator of facts. Moreover, it constructs a subject that is not in possession of this kind of knowledge and hence dependent on the information that the press provides. Thus, the status of scientific knowledge and the press are reproduced and supported at the same time, and the readers are left with few other alternatives but to understand exercise as crucial to good health.

Naturally, my point is not that people should not be informed about health benefits of exercise. However, as I aim to demonstrate, the taken for granted nature of much knowledge surrounding the relationship between exercise, health and the body may be restrictive on people's experiences of embodiment. While Foucault (1977) held that the institution of prison normalized individuals into utile, *docile bodies* through disciplinary practices, Markula and Pringle (2006) suggest that the field of fitness may function in a similar manner; inter alia through the narrow definition of health, which "leads to tightly disciplined bodies that only move in certain, scientifically proven ways to avoid disease" (ibid., p. 65). Other ways to be physically active and different motives for exercising are hence undermined, such as the enjoyment of the movement in itself (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Maguire, 2008). In one article, it is, for instance, stated that: "A lot of people stroll along and believe it is beneficial to their health. But it is high intensity and increased pulse that matter" (A1). As I shall argue

throughout my thesis, this produces a subject that does not *know* her/his body; what it is like, what to do with it, and how to use it.

The moral body

Alongside the scientific construction of exercise and fitness as healthy, runs the moralistic representation of good health and fitness as *virtuous*. In an article on the fitness trend among top politicians, it says: "While the world leaders of yesterday could drink, smoke and gorge; today's top politicians should appear as athletic health apostles in order to win the trust of the voters" (A3). Thus, exercising and 'showing off' good health are proof that one is trustworthy and competent, and the possibility of being in poor health while at the same time being a competent political leader is thereby closed down. Furthermore, exercise is associated with the value of *authenticity*. It is, for example, argued that: "They [the voters] would like their political leaders to have something authentic about them and be easy to relate to. An energetic president who enjoys jogging satisfies this need" (A3). About Norway's Prime Minister, it says that he "still trudges the mountains and rows his boat at Tjøme" (A3) – leisure activities that a lot of Norwegians can relate to. In these cases, being authentic is about being *popular* (i.e. 'one of the people') and exercise is represented as a normalizing activity. Thus, an exercising person is constructed as a 'normal' person, or in Foucault's (1977) term, a docile body.

Loland (1999) suggests that the association between physical activity and increased bodily satisfaction with age may be due to an experience of looking young for one's age and hence conforming to cultural body ideals to a greater extent when being fit as opposed to unfit. In line with this, exercise is represented in the media as a necessary means for those who wish to signal youth, as illustrated by the following example: "The politicians are obviously just a part of the general health wave we're all surfing. Deep inside we hope to cancel age; yes, perhaps even trick death" (A3). Considering the fact that getting older is inevitable, however, the construction of the fit and healthy body as a young body may be problematic with respect to people's experiences of embodiment, because the possibility of being elderly and fit, elderly and healthy, or elderly and satisfied with one's body, is more or less closed down.

To avoid exercising is constructed in terms of laziness, as exemplified by this extract: "If you don't feel like exercising, ask yourself honestly: 'Am I lazy, or do I need rest?'" (V2). The same article advises: "In order to increase your motivation it would be wise to remember

all the good reasons to exercise, such as: Keep the weight under control, reduce stress and symptoms of depression, experience enjoyment from the activity itself, get improved self-esteem, reduce the risk of cardiovascular diseases, and the opportunity of being social". Thus, exercise is talked of as something one *ought to* do. Moreover, certain desirable outcomes of exercise are taken for granted. The subject produced, then, is aging, lazy, unmotivated, overweight, stressed, passive, insecure, and in poor health – or *at risk of* all these things. I am not implying that this is an intentional act on behalf of the newspapers or given journalists; what I suggest is that this subject position is the result of culturally constituted meanings of exercise and the fit body as they come across in the media – in this case the press. Thus, whether intentional or not, this is the subject that is produced through the action orientation of talk.

A discourse of individualism: The individual fitness project

Closely related to the construction of fitness as a moral good, is the idea that it is an *individual responsibility* to exercise and take care of one's health. Maguire (2008) notes that, in the media as well as in people's narratives, health is constructed as something that *can* and *should* be managed and controlled by the individual. In one article, it is, for example, stated that "Everybody should do something to keep in shape", and that avoiding exercise is like "gambling with your health" (V1). The individualization of responsibility, for one's health, life course and identity construction, as well as the understanding of the body as a metaphor for identity, is characteristic of contemporary Western societies (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Hence, "in the context of individualization, the body is the individual's first and most important project" (Maguire, 2008, p. 41).

Exercise as self-improvement

In the newspaper articles, exercise and fitness are talked of in terms of typical individualistic values, like self-realization, achievement and the pursuit of the good life. We are, for instance, told that: "You will experience a great feeling of self-efficacy as you manage new exercises. When you've first got started, it is often easier to keep it up; it becomes a habit" (V2). Here, exercise is constructed as a process that may be hard or uninspiring to start with, but as one goes along one will experience pleasure from the improvement. This is in line with Maguire's

(2008) notion of how fitness media construct the idea that pleasure is not to be found in the exercise itself, but in the effects.

Following this, exercise is represented as a road to improved quality of life. In the next example, we see how the discourse of health-related exercise draws upon the medical discourse and the moralistic discourse: "When you exercise, you're producing endorphins, the body's very own antidepressant. Thus, you become happy and uplifted; precisely the state which makes it easier to resist temptations, and which is at the other end of the continuum to that of comfort eating" (V3). The concept of comfort eating implies some feeling of dissatisfaction or melancholia as well as being overweight. As fitness, slimness and vitality are prevailing cultural values, I suggest that a moralistic discourse is involved here as well; that is, counteracting comfort eating (and thereby melancholia and overweight) is represented as a virtue that can be fulfilled by means of exercising. Thus, fitness is represented as the opposite of being overweight and feeling down.

This contrast is problematic; the same applies to the taken for granted association between being overweight and experiencing melancholia and/or dissatisfaction. Research has indeed demonstrated that negative body image is often associated with being overweight; however, studies have also shown that bodily satisfaction is not determined by a person's *actual* size or weight, but by the person's subjective evaluation of what it means to have that kind of body within the particular socio-cultural context of which she/he is a part (Grogan, 2008). Following this, Rosen (2001) argues that it is quite possible to develop positive body images in overweight and obese people regardless of whether or not they lose weight. Moreover, some researchers have challenged the view that being overweight is necessarily unhealthy and incompatible with being fit (Rothblum, 1990; Basham & Luik, 2006). In relation to this, the strong association between (all levels of) being overweight and poor health has been blamed on the deeply ingrained devaluation of obesity in contemporary Western culture (Rothblum, 1990; LeBesco, 2004; Basham & Luik, 2006). Following this, I argue that the media representations of fitness are detrimental to cultural attitudes towards overweight people as well as to overweight people's experiences of embodiment, as they close down the possibility of being overweight, healthy, fit, and happy at one and the same time.

The status of low resting pulse

The distance between fitness as moral and fitness as status is a short one; that is, in addition to being a symbol of the motivation to take care of oneself, the fit body is represented as a *status object*, so too are the places and ways in which it is tended (Maguire, 2008). This can be exemplified by the following extract: "In earlier times, the finest restaurants had big windows, in order for those who could afford eating there to be spotted by people passing by. Today, every new fitness center has equally large windows. Every bench press can be observed by the unfortunate lowlifes on the outside" (V4). Thus, not being member of a fitness club is associated with being an *unfortunate lowlife*. Moreover, it is argued that "The number 1 status symbol of the business life is low resting pulse" (V4). In an article concerning "Birken", a popular Norwegian cycling race, it is referred to the vast amount of money that participants invest in this arrangement: "Big sums race across the mountain" (A4).

In the above examples, exercise is associated with higher socioeconomic status; exercising in certain ways, at certain places, with certain equipment are ways to – literally speaking – exercise success. Exercise and fitness have suddenly become expensive and exclusive products that are only available to those who can afford them, economically and/or socially. In line with this, Maguire (2008, p. 62) notes that the commercial fitness field has constructed fitness as "an opportunity for the social display of status". The subject positions that are opened up, then, are those of the successful, exercising subject on one hand and the unfit, unfortunate and failed subject on the other.

To understand the association between fitness and socioeconomic status we may look to the statistics showing that people of higher socioeconomic status do in fact exercise more and are healthier than people of lower socioeconomic status (SSB, 2009b; Morrison & Bennett, 2006; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). In relation to this, Maguire (2008) argues that health has become a key element in the identity construction of the middle-class. Furthermore, she argues that the representation of exercise as a leisure activity and an individual responsibility is an important reason for the significant class difference with regard to exercise engagement. When adding the matter of cost, this becomes even more understandable; not everyone have the same opportunities to engage in exercise, especially not in the commercial fitness field. This being said, I argue that when the association between exercise/fitness and socioeconomic status is reproduced in the media, alongside a consumerist construction of exercise and fitness in terms of consumer goods and services, it may cause

people of lower socioeconomic status, who do not exercise, to feel even less fortunate and empowered, and help sustain social inequality.

A discourse of consumerism: The product of fitness

Hågvar (2007) remarks that the objective of a lot of contemporary journalism is to provide the reader with good advice on practical matters. While *service* journalism provides advice on how people should live their lives, *consumer* journalism gives recommendations on what products to buy. Today, the genres of news, service and consumer journalism are commonly mixed. Consequently, it may, for example, be difficult to differentiate between health advices and consumer tips. In explaining this discursive shift, Hågvar refers to Bauman's (2000) notions of the celebration of the individual in late modernity. Following this, the main role of journalism has become that of ensuring the self-realization of the individual in an increasingly open market (Hågvar, 2007).

A few examples of service- and consumer oriented journalism are: "If you're insecure it would be wise to invest in help; a few hours with a personal trainer can help you get started" (V2), and "jogging continues to be a simple, cheap and easily accessible activity that most of us can manage" (V5). Through well-meaning advices like this, the subject constructed is the ignorant consumer who is responsible for taking the action required with respect to getting in shape. When it is stated that jogging is an activity "that most of us can manage", the subject position further implies a view of oneself as abnormal if one can not carry through this activity. Obviously, the narrow representation of fitness as only available to certain bodies (i.e. the young, fully functional, socioeconomically privileged bodies) is unfortunate, as it excludes bodies that are poor, old, or disabled.

Physical capital: The beauty of health

The concept of *physical capital* (Bourdieu, 1986; Shilling, 1991) refers to the ways in which physical traits and abilities "serve as resources that may be used for economic or social gain" (Maguire, 2008, p. 24). Maguire (2008) argues that health and appearance are two forms of physical capital especially relevant to the fitness field. Roughly speaking, these correspond with the body's function and form, respectively. However, they are not mutually exclusive and often overlap in understandings of the meanings and rewards of exercise and fitness (Maguire, 2008).

In accord with this, the boundaries between health, physical beauty, and fitness are commonly blurred within popular culture and the media (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). In my data, this is evident from how the two related aspects of fitness commonly appear together. It is, for example, argued that "As a natural consequence of increased sweating, you'll drink more water, which is exactly what the experts recommend for a better health and smoother skin; thus, doubled bonus" (V3). Another example is: "Norwegian boys want less muscularity than before, while the girls desire more curves. The idols are celebrities like Cristiano Ronaldo, David Beckham, Beyoncé, and Jessica Alba. The focus on health and a healthy life-style has increased significantly during the last decade" (V6). Hence, the fit body is not merely healthy, but beautiful as well.

Maguire (2008) even argues that today, the matter of health is often reduced to physical appearance, as the body's symbolic value has outclassed its value of use. In a physical culture where we are encouraged to judge each other based on how we look, well-known media figures, such as top politicians and celebrities of various kinds, are often evaluated in terms of their physical appearance. Sometimes it may actually be quite difficult to differentiate between what exactly is admired about an idol: the personality, the abilities, or the person's looks. About Michelle Obama, for example, it is said that she "has become an icon and increasingly more women want to become like her" (V6). Furthermore, it is explained that "They admire her because she is a strong and independent woman, and unlike former First Ladies, she comes off a real human being of flesh and blood" (V6). However, when it is claimed that "women want to become like her", this clearly does not imply that they want to become strong, independent and "a real human being" as much as they want to *look* like it. This argument is supported by the following extract from the same article: "She has a confident way of dressing, and a sexy fit body that she's obviously proud of and respects. We all know how hard it can be to find time to exercise next to a job and a family. When the US First Lady can do it, she shows that we can all do it". Hence, being a certain way (strong, independent, "a real human being") and looking a certain way (fit, confident, sexy) are represented as two sides of the same coin; the body has come to speak by and for it self. This accord with the notion that today, *seeming* or *appearing* is valued above *being* (Loland, 1999; Corson & Anderson, 2002).

The construction of a fit, healthy and beautiful person as an authentic, or even *real*, human being provides support to Markula and Pringle's (2006) notion that the 'ideal' body is constructed as the 'normal' body in the media in order to make people feel that they have to obtain this ideal. Needless to say, this construction is potentially problematic to people's

subjectivity. Because what, then, about those people who are not considered fit, healthy and beautiful, either by themselves or by others – are they not *normal*, or even *real*? I argue that the strong association between health and beauty may have unfortunate consequences, as people less privileged in one or the other risk 'losing' both, in the eyes of society, others as well as themselves.

Luckily, consumer culture tells us, fitness and beauty are for sale. The reader is, for example, informed that "Now there are offered specific exercise programs in order to achieve just as fit and beautiful arms as the US First Lady" (V6). This is a good example of how the body is talked of in reductionist terms; that is, as an object consisting of parts that can be evaluated and shaped in separation from each other as well as from the person. Another example of this is the following statement from an interviewee: "- It is [the looks of] a soccer player I am aiming for; however, a bit more muscular than Ronaldo. Yet, getting Ronaldo's stomach would have been a dream" (V6). I argue that the subject constructed here is separated from her/his body and shaping it, piece by piece, into the state of an ideal image. Moreover, I suggest that such a reductionist view of the body may easier lead to feelings of bodily alienation, as the body is conceived of in terms of an object and a rehabilitation project rather than an integral part of the person. The increase in the number of people experiencing bodily dissatisfaction and developing eating disorders and different body dysmorphic disorders, alongside the pervasive objectification of the body in contemporary consumer societies supports this assumption (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2007; Grogan, 2008). I will return to the discussion of the body as compartmentalized in the last part of the presentation.

A necessary evil

By and large exercise is constructed as *a means* to achieve physical capital and represented desirable effects related to this, rather than a goal in itself. Additionally, exercise is more often talked about as strenuous and painful than fun and enjoyable. In one article, we are comforted that "Pain after exercise is a good reminder of how good you've been at using your body" (V7). Here we see how the physical pain caused by exercise is talked of as a generator of pleasant feelings, because it is a sign of competence and hard work. Thus, the good body is a body in pain. This view of the body does not represent a new idea, but may be traced back to asceticism in the Western Judeo-Christian world, where enduring strict fasting was considered a moral good (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

Due to the (expected) physical discomfort of it, exercise is further constructed as an activity demanding motivation and self-discipline. In order to help you on your way, one article offers "20 tips on how to deceive yourself to a fitter life" (V7). This involves pretending that you are not actually exercising: "Don't call it exercise "or "Pretend you're a robot. That you're programmed to go through with the exercise session – even if you don't feel like it" (V7). Thus, the subject produced is unmotivated, but easily manipulated; in fact, the subject is literally compared to a *robot*. Furthermore, exercise is constructed as a way to earn rewards, as exemplified here: "Some advice in the beginning is therefore to give yourself a reward after following through a few times, for instance when you've cycled to work ten times" (V2). This coincides with an understanding of exercise as a way to negotiate the conflicting demands of consumer culture; that is, pleasure and enjoyment on one hand, and hard work and restraint on the other (Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

Altogether, I argue that exercise is constructed as a necessary evil within the context of the newspaper articles. My findings confirm Maguire's notion (2008) that within the media discourse on exercise and fitness, exercise is primarily constructed in instrumental and rational terms. Hence, as far as pleasure goes, this is mostly viewed in terms of a motivational device and associated with the effects of exercise rather than with the exercise itself. If emphasis is put on the experience of pleasure in the actual movement, it is usually represented as a matter of experiencing pleasure *through discipline*, and hence ultimately motivational (Maguire, 2008). The fit body is represented as the embodiment of a range of culturally valued characteristics, such as good health, beauty, energy, youth, and competence, and hence the fundamental objective, motivation and outcome of exercise. The subject position embedded in this is that of an ignorant, unmotivated and lazy person with low self-discipline, who is dependent on professional advice in order to start a better life through exercise.

Maguire (2008) refers to fitness media as an education in the fitness lifestyle, ultimately aimed at producing bodies that are *fit for consumption*; that is, fit to consume and fit to be consumed by others and society. Based on my findings, I argue that the press takes part in this as well. I will now move on to the presentation of my findings from the web sites of the health clubs, in which the consumerist constructions of exercise and the fit body will be further accounted for.

Exercise as a service and the fit body as commodity: A consumerist framework of understanding

The commercial health club emerged in the US in the 1970s and spread rapidly to other consumer societies. It was directed at the middle-class, service-oriented, centered on individual activities associated with femininity as well as masculinity, and unisex. Moreover, it constructed exercise as a leisure activity. Today, the commercial health club is the primary site for the production and consumption of fitness in the US (Maguire, 2008). In line with this, numbers from Statistics Norway (2009b) reveal that the amount of health club memberships in Norway has increased steadily over the last few decades. Moreover, people of higher education tend to exercise more overall, while health club memberships occur more frequently among people of high education *and* high income (ibid.).

In my presentation of the following analysis, I shall demonstrate how a discourse of consumerism constructs exercise as a service and the fit body as commodity on the Norwegian web sites of three different fitness chains. Furthermore, I will discuss the accompanying subject position and the possibilities that are opened up and closed down through this.

Exercise as a service

In the following extract, we see how exercise is constructed as a service: "[Our] premises and exercise equipment shall always be of the highest quality, and the centers shall offer a wide and good variety of services and offers which make sure that the largest possible part of the population will find a product that is of interest to just them". Here, the interpretative repertoires of consumerism and service economy are drawn upon, as the various forms of exercise are referred to as *services, offers* and *products* of the *highest quality*. Following the representation of exercise as a service is the construction of the subject as a consumer. Moreover, the text represents the consumer as someone with an individualistic and exclusive taste.

Buying into goals: Health, beauty and well-being

When the service of exercise is bought, what is actually received?

Closely related to the consumerist framework of understanding is the discourse of individualism. The individuality of the consumer is strongly highlighted on the web sites,

coupled with an emphasis on reaching individual goals, as can be seen from the following example: "Our moderators, class instructors and personal trainers will at any time stand ready to help you achieve your goals. (…) Our goal is that you will find an exercise form that suits just you". At the same time, however, the health clubs point to specific reasons for, and benefits of, exercising by drawing on the discourse of health-related exercise. It is, for example, argued that: "People who exercise regularly are happier, healthier and live longer", and by exercising "you will have increased energy, better mood, improved performance, and an enhanced sex-life".

The represented goal of weight-loss is a good example of the cloudy border between health and beauty. On one hand, being overweight is associated with poor health: "Obesity is a global problem that affects 300 million people worldwide". Following this, slenderness is encouraged on the web sites because it is assumed to be healthy. On the other hand, losing weight is related to improved appearance. It is, for example, argued that: "Without a healthy and sensible diet it can often be difficult to achieve the desired results from the exercise. The trick is not to starve yourself down to match-weight or into the favourite jeans". In the following extract, we see how health- and appearance-related motivations to exercise are intermingled:

> Most people who exercise have a desire to reach a goal. Some want to lose weight. Others want to counteract a loss of muscle mass. Some want to delay the aging process, while yet others want to impress the ladies.

Fairclough (2001) notes, that textual cues typically elicit one particular interpretation at the expense of possible others. With reference to the above extract, the goal of losing weight, counteracting a loss of muscle mass or delaying the aging process could refer exclusively to the matter of improving or maintaining good health. However, due to the context in which these motives for exercising are presented, I get the impression that on this particular point in the text these motives are first and foremost related to appearance. The reason is that in the following paragraph it says: "Sometimes the desire to look like a thriving Baywatch-star during the course of six weeks needs to be somewhat adjusted, while others have to be motivated into raising their ambitions a bit".

Exercise is also constructed as a joyful experience; in other words, the service of exercise should provide you with "pure, sheer exercise enjoyment" by "demonstrating that the movements one performs in a fitness center isn't anything new, but a lot of the same that we did on the playground as children". I argue that the association of exercise with children's

play counteracts the aforementioned representation of exercise as a necessary evil. However, based on other, more prominent representations of exercise and fitness on the web sites, as well as the notion that the commercial fitness field in its entirety is founded upon the overarching goal-orientation of improving fitness in order to meet health- and appearance-related concerns (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009), I question the actual meaning of this representation. The movements of exercise surely cannot be the same as those of children's play as long as the idea of exercise is founded upon scientifically verified and controlled ways to move in order to improve fitness. A playing child is not concerned with rational and instrumental movement, but surrenders itself to spontaneity and embodiment. Hence, as far as the representation of enjoyable and playful exercise goes, this is probably more a matter of rationalizing pleasure as a motivational device (Maguire, 2008).

On one hand, then, exercise is constructed as an individual project; on the other hand, it is represented as a way to achieve particular desirable outcomes. An important paradox is embedded in this, as the constructed desirable outcomes are *taken for granted*; thus, the consumer is not really encouraged to come up with alternative desirable goals. The subject is constructed as ignorant and in need of expertise and guidance on how to achieve physical improvement. As I shall demonstrate next, the need of improvement is constructed as a more or less unconditional and permanent trait; that is, no matter how fit you are or how fit you have become, you could always get fitter.

The virtue of progress

The value of personal progress, efficiency and quick results is prevalent within individualistic societies, and this is reflected on the web sites of the health clubs as well. The association between reaching individual goals and being assisted by a personal trainer is recurring. Moreover, exercise is constructed as an *infinite* process; something at which you could always improve and progress. This is well illustrated by the following extract: "And just when you're utterly content, your PT [personal trainer] raises your ambitions even higher. But no whining; this is exactly what generates results!" Thus, becoming utterly content is not really an alternative. The latter counts no matter how fit you are, as can be seen from this example: "Whether you're completely new at this and wish to make your body tighter, or you're top trained, our trainers will make a motivating exercise program which is guaranteed to take you one step further!" I suggest that the increasingly popular service of personal training is

implicated in this, as this service would not really be called for if people simply felt the need to maintain a certain level of fitness and were capable of managing this by themselves.

Another interesting thing about the latter example is the association of being a novice in relation to exercise and wanting to make one's "body tighter". In this text, it is taken for granted that if you are new at exercising, then for sure you would want to make your body tighter, while other motives for exercising are bound to appear at a later stage. Studies have shown that appearance and weight actually seem to be the most important motivations for initiating exercise, while other motives appear later (Lindwall, 2004). I nevertheless think that by reproducing such common sense assumptions, self-fulfilling prophecies may arise also where they perhaps otherwise would not have. In addition, the subject position of the novice encourages the experience of one's body as floppy and not good enough, while the subject position of the top trained person involves the feeling that one could always get better. The value of continual improvement and competition involves "a fundamental faith in change; in that the body as a mental project can always become more of something which is already a lot" (Barland, 1997, p. 221, my translation). Hence, from the subject positions created within the commercial fitness field, reaching a point of utter content becomes very difficult no matter who you are.

The fit body as commodity

While exercise is constructed as a service aimed at providing the individual with a range of desirable outcomes, the body is represented as the primary object of exercise; it is the *body* that must be worked on in order to become fit, healthy, and beautiful. Hence, I suggest that, to a far extent, it is also *the fit body* that is being bought, and bought into, as a cultural ideal as well as a biological manifestation.

In the most appearance-related sense, the body is constructed as something that can be shaped and molded by the 'right' kind of exercise and life-style, as well as by means of specific exercise products. A few obvious examples are exercise classes named *Body Sculpture* and *Body Design.* Here, the fit body is literally referred to in terms of a *design.* Other examples are offers like "Bikinis don't lie!" and "LOSING WEIGHT". About the latter product, it says: "We are so certain that we can provide you with the recipe on how to achieve your goal that we are giving you a 100 % satisfaction guarantee; if you have not reached your goal within 3 months, we will give you your money back!"

By means of the interpretative repertoires of consumerism and service economy, then, the fit body is constructed as a commodity that can be bought in terms of particular products that offer you the *recipe* on how to achieve the ideal body. Just as if you were buying a DVD player or a new jacket, you are even getting a warrant – satisfaction or your money back. More importantly, such products *define* the commodity; that is, the nature of the fit body. The possibility of being fit and having some extra kilos at the same time, for example, is not opened up in the texts.

Measuring your bodily worth

Is the fit body that is being bought really the body that *you* would have envisioned?

At some health clubs, they offer so-called life-style analysis and body analysis aimed at mapping the quality of one's everyday life-style and body composition. One of the health clubs writes the following about its life-style analysis: "Life Style Analysis measures how active you are 24 hours a day and yields advice on how you can live smarter. By help of the bracelet developed with medical precision, daily calorie consumption, quality of sleep, rest, everyday activity, exercise, exercise effect, and number of footsteps are registered". About body analysis, it is said that: "(…) you can have a Body Analysis and get a thorough calculus on what your body consists of! With the advanced measurement apparatus, Tanita MC-180, we measure your bodily composition". And moreover: "You can use the results to tailor your own exercise- and diet program, and watch how your body changes from the right kind of exercise and diet". Here, the health clubs are drawing upon a discourse of medical science by talking about the body as something that can be *analyzed* and *measured* by way of methods and instruments developed with *medical precision.* Furthermore, it is suggested that the results can be used to alter the body. Thus, the body is constructed as a scientific object that can be measured and manipulated. This representation of the body as a machine, or a techno-body, can be localized within the kind of medical rationale stemming from the Enlightenment and the technological development following modernization (Balsamo, 1995; Lewis, 2002).

On their web sites, the health clubs encourage people's individual goals and desires. Hence, on one hand a person is encouraged to have her/his personal and unique idea of what constitutes a fit body. On the other hand, when health clubs offer scientific methods and instruments to measure the state and composition of a person's body, what constitutes a fit body is no longer up to the individual; it has become a scientific 'truth'. The fit body that one buys, then, is a *scientifically verified* body. Again, we see how the subject is constructed as

fundamentally ignorant with regard to his/her own body and how to live in it. Hence, the subject is in need of scientific knowledge and fitness expertise in order to get to know the 'truth' about her/his body and what to do with it. Consequently, being content with one's body as it is becomes harder, since what is 'good enough' is not really up to you to decide after all.

The bodily alienated subject

In one very important sense, the fit body is symbolic in nature; that is, it is an *idea* of how a fit body looks. Moreover, it is an idea of what a fit body *is*, and what kind of person might have or want a fit body. As I have noted before, the fit body symbolizes a range of cultural values and is represented within the media as the ideal and the normalized body at one and the same time. In the presentation of the findings from the online discussion forum, it will become evident that what is considered a fit body may vary significantly between people. At the same time, however, mainstream culture and the media construct certain overarching ideas of what being fit involves. At times, these may come into conflict, as Western culture in general relies heavily upon scientific knowledge and consumerism at the same time. On one hand, then, being fit is about being healthy (and thus morally good); on the other hand, being fit is about being beautiful (and hence successful), and this may conflict with what is healthy from a scientific perspective (Maguire, 2008). Sometimes, however, scientific knowledge is made use of in order to determine what is beautiful, as I have just demonstrated. Notwithstanding that such methods of body analysis are aimed at improving health, I suggest that they are ways to design and produce ideal, normalized, docile bodies.

In sum, I argue that when exercise is constructed as a service aimed to fulfill particular desirable outcomes for the individual, and the fit body is represented as an unquestionable scientific truth, certain restrictions are imposed on people's freedom. This is not to say that people should not be informed about benefits of exercising, or that it is not perfectly fine to desire a fit body; what I am suggesting is simply that when such benefits of exercising and understandings of the fit body are presented as naturalized common sense, this leaves people with few alternatives. When the individuality of the person is emphasized as well, culturally constituted ideals and taken for granted assumptions are more likely to be experienced as individual desires and choices, and may be more difficult to scrutinize and challenge. I argue that this can have potentially positive as well as negative consequences for people's experiences of embodiment.

On the positive side, the commercial fitness field may hold a liberating potential and benefit some people; however, at the collective level, consumerist representations of exercise and fitness are deeply restrictive (Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). I will get back to this point towards the end. For now, I would like to stress the problem of how consumer culture shapes, maintains and benefits from people's bodily discontent. Scientific knowledge is heavily drawn upon by consumerism, and as such knowledge is especially legitimated in our culture, it can exert an even stronger influence on people's experiences of embodiment. When identifying with the subject position of the ignorant and disempowered consumer, one is ever more likely to feel dependent on the expertise of the fitness field in order to know one's own body and feel good about oneself. I suggest that when the body is constructed as an object and a machine separate from, and more or less unknown to, the person who inhabits it, this will easier lead to experiences of bodily alienation. I think that 'objectively' measuring and evaluating the body in order to tell people how they should live and exercise is much more likely to produce *negative body images* than *positive experiences of embodiment.*

Gendered meanings of exercise and fitness

One of my research questions concerns gender; that is, I wanted to look at differences and similarities in the represented meanings of exercise and the fit body for women and men, respectively. Since I found a gendered discourse to be most prominent in the data from the online discussion forum, it will be by means of empirical examples from this context that I illustrate how exercise and the fit body are constructed through a gendered framework of understanding.

From a discursive social-constructivist perspective, gender is something we *do* rather than *have*. Gender can be defined as "the structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena" (Connell, 2002, p. 10). Hence, gender is a *declarative* category that serves to define who and what we are. This category has, however, shifted from institutionalized positions connected to social class and status, to that of representation of and through the body (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007). Consequently, the fit body is very much a *gendered* body, as will become clear throughout my presentation of the following analysis.

Related to gender are the concepts of femininity and masculinity, which are commonly understood as those practices, behaviors, ideas, and representations that are associated with women and men, respectively, in a given socio-historical context (Whitehead & Barret, 2001). Moreover, they are discursive constructions that are constantly being produced and

reproduced in discourse; hence, their meaning is not fixed. In late modern society, identities founded upon secure ideas around gender are increasingly fragmented and threatened. Gendered subjects are constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions and meanings, which are often contradictory and in conflict with each other. This gives rise to alternative gendered and sexual identities (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007).

In line with this, the members of the online discussion forum construct different femininities and masculinities in their talk about exercise, fitness and the body. Moreover, the discourses of *masculinities* and *femininities* are not mutually exclusive, but overlap and interfere in interesting ways. Given that this particular context is strongly characterized by a *heteronormative* framework of understanding, certain taken for granted assumptions nevertheless reemerge throughout the data; ultimately reproducing the traditional view of the female body as something (that should be) *less* than the male body. As I shall illustrate towards the end, there is one voice, however undermined, challenging this view; the voice of *the regendered subject*.

A discourse of masculinities: Exercising power and independence

On the online discussion forum, the discourse of masculinities constructs the fit body as a strong and capable body that reflects an equally strong and capable person, and exercise as a way of expressing masculine values, such as strength, control, power, self-discipline, functionality, and independence. There are, however, apparent differences in how the male and the female body and subject are represented. I argue that, on the whole, three subject positions are opened up through a masculinity framework of understanding; that of *the macho man*, *the independent woman* and *the practical body*.

The macho man: "Strong as a monster"

Overall, the fit body is talked of as a *muscular* body; however, there are different and conflicting views as to what muscular involves. The muscular male body is on one hand represented as extraordinarily strong and big, as exemplified by the following quotation: "I lift in order to become strong as a monster". The same member argues that: "If you need to undress in order to look 'muscular', then you're not muscular at all, you're DEFINED! (…) When you're muscular there isn't any clothing in the world that can hide the fact that you're

huge as a fucking barn door!" As exemplified by the next extract, what other people say looks good is rejected in favor of the ideal of the huge body:

> Some say I shouldn't get any bigger, supposedly I'm big enough, if I get any bigger it won't look good. What the fuck! I only weigh 86 kg with a height of 1, 85 m! That is sick, that's all I have to say…

In order to call yourself muscular, then, you need to be really strong and *big* in terms of muscle mass. When being big in this sense is associated with being "strong as a monster" and "big as a beast", a focus on beauty is downplayed. Moreover, it is basically said that other people's opinion does not matter, because a 'real' man knows best himself what being masculine involves. Hence, I argue that the subject position opened up here is that of *the macho man.*

The macho man is positioned in stark contrast to popular cultural idols, such as Brad Pitt, who in the following example is referred to as a *mini-man*: "I'm SICK (!!!!) and tired of reading that women write trash of the kind 'some muscle mass is nice, but not too much', commonly followed by a picture of Brad Pitt or another mini-man from the film 'Fight Club'!" Another example is: "My impression is that girls dislike big muscular men… but fancy feeble men like for example Brad Pitt?!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Isn't it nice to have a man who can watch out for you??" Here, it is suggested that 'men like Brad Pitt' lack the ability to "watch out for" a woman, which ultimately reproduces a traditional view of gender roles, where the man functions as the provider and protector of the woman. In the next extract, we see how popular cultural idols, in this case Beckham, are feminized: "I don't mind that some throw themselves at the metrosexual trend and wear make-up etc, as long as those who wish to be men are allowed to stay men. Maybe there's something wrong with me, but I think Beckham looked like an anorectic on that picture on the fashion forum".

When idols like Pitt and Beckham are talked of as *feeble, anorectic mini-men* that *wear make-up*, they are constructed as the exact opposite of what is here defined as ideal masculinity; monstrous bodily size and strength. Hence, these members are drawing upon a discourse of femininities as well in order to construct such men as feminine and hence less threatening. Moreover, I argue that the members apply an interpretative repertoire of *machismo* by means of an aggressive and sexist language in order to define as well as defend the boundaries of (traditional, patriarchal) masculinity.

Another member expresses her disappointment as she went into a night club full of what she refers to as "skinny-skinny BI-'metros' with square-patterned shirts that revealed parts of pathetic skinny-packs, slick haircuts and crocodile skin shoes". She goes on exclaiming: "What the hell, I wasn't interested in paying a single penny to roll my eyes over boys I could have benched! I wanted a barn door!" Here, we see how a member is crossing boundaries of traditional gender stereotypes by taking on what could be called a *masculine* or *macho femininity*; that is, the member is a woman who is drawing upon an interpretative framework of machismo and objectifying the male body. This is a good example of how masculinities and femininities are drawn upon and mixed across sexuality and gender. However, at the same time her point is that she does not want a man she "could have benched". Thus, she nevertheless reproduces a heteronormative view of a male-female-relationship, where she positions herself as the feminine part in relation to a man who is ultimately stronger than herself.

The independent woman: "'Fit for fight' against the prejudice of society"

Through a discourse of masculinities, the ideal fit female body is constructed as a muscular, strong and capable body as well. Embedded in this is an awareness of, as well as resistance towards, mainstream prejudice against muscular women, as exemplified by the following extract:

> As a girl with visible muscularity and "way too many tattoos", I guess I mostly meet the part in here who thinks that muscles on women are wrong. Actually, I rarely get any feedback that my body/I look good, and that the exercise I do is ok. (…) But I exercise for my own sake and not in order to get men, so then I'm happily single for now, heh heh. Occasionally, it gets lonely, but yes; then it is actually the exercise keeping me up and further fit for fight against the prejudice of society.

Here, then, exercise is constructed as something the person does for *her own sake* as well as a means to help her endure as well as *fight the prejudice of society*; which in this case appears to be the prejudice of the heteronormative gaze. The subject produced is the strong and independent woman, whose body becomes a site of empowerment. This accord with Maguire's (2008) notion that exercise and fitness offer opportunities of empowerment for women who are not necessarily politically active feminists.

In the next example, the fit female body is constructed as symbolic of a strong, capable and determined person: "I'm impressed by girls who exercise with continuity, heavy, and who are goal-determined. Girls that know what they want and have a plan how to get there, and not merely slouch around waiting for the progression to appear by itself. As a consequence of this, I'm impressed by women with a good physique and/or strength". What is actually said here is that a strong and muscular physique is impressive *because* it is a sign that the person is goal-determined, knows what she wants and how to get there. The attention is on how the fit body signals masculine values, such as functionality, skill and rationality. Moreover, personal goal-achievement and progress are typical individualistic values. Thus, I argue that the member is here drawing upon a masculinity as well as an individualistic framework of understanding.

On the forum, it is repeatedly argued that physically strong and muscular women may intimidate men. In response to this, one member writes: "In total, I can draw a parallel from the negative feedback – little boys who wish they were bigger or girls with puberty fat who wish they had a clue". Here, the member chooses to refer to the people giving her negative feedback in terms of *children* (i.e. boys and girls), which may be viewed as a way to ridicule and disempower them. I suggest that the subject position of the independent woman involves a resistance towards traditional gender stereotypes of what is appropriate for a woman in terms of bodily appearance and body work. I argue that this is a way of promoting and defending the woman's right to decide for herself how her body should be like and what to do with it; in other words, it becomes a way of defining and defending what could be termed a form of *masculine femininity.*

In the following extract, the image of the physically strong woman as threatening to men is highlighted: "Women who train with weights a lot are often given the evil eye, because they lift heavy; and men don't want anyone that might be stronger than themselves. If you're one who exercises A LOT and is strong yourself, this won't be a big problem". Here, the taken for granted assumption is that, by the end of the day, the man must be stronger and more muscular than the woman in order for the balance to remain intact. This way, a traditional heteronormative view is reproduced. The same point can be made based on the next example:

> Yikes… he who finds Pauline [a fitness competitor] masculine and not very
> feminine… he must be very little masculine himself! Pauline isn't a very big thing. A

little hardcore Swedish girl… I believe some experience their masculinity threatened by tough girls.

By referring to the fitness athlete as not "a very big thing" and "a little hardcore Swedish girl", the member is defending her against a masculine image while at the same time feminizing her in order to protect the boundaries of masculinity. The term "tough girls", then, becomes a way of classifying certain women as physically stronger and more muscular than the average; yet, still feminine and not posing a threat to male masculinity. Referring to a woman who lifts weights in terms of a child in this context is ultimately disempowering and helps sustain a patriarchal moral order, where the woman is inferior to the man. Altogether, then, the point is not so much how strong and muscular the woman is, but how strong and muscular the man is; the man as the norm and the woman as the other that confirms the norm are hence reproduced.

This accord with the notion of the female athlete as liberated and oppressed at the same time. On one hand, exercise and sports offer opportunities for empowerment and the construction of alternative gendered identities; on the other hand, however, the construction of women's sport as something less than the male version, as well as the representation of female athletes as sex objects for the male gaze, is continuingly reproduced in the media (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). In line with this, Balsamo (1995) argues that in order to maintain the 'natural order of things', the body displays of female bodybuilders are neutralized in the media through a sexualizing of their bodies, so that their physical competence is overshadowed by their sexual attractiveness.

The practical body: "The muscles can't be in your way"

The subject position of the macho man closes down any other possibility than that of the big muscular body. However, some members open up another subject position by drawing on a discourse of masculinities as well; that of *the practical body*. The practical body is a body capable of efficient movement and action; hence, the focus is on *function* rather than *form*. This involves motivations for exercising such as "to endure more in everyday life", or "I hate being bad at things and improved strength can make me into a better sportsman".

The practical body is sometimes constructed as the antagonist to that of the big body, as in the following example: "Who wants a 130 kilos guy that sleeps half the day, eats, works out, and stands in front of the mirror the rest of the time?" Here, the "130 kilos guy" is

deprived of his manliness as he is represented as someone overly concerned with his physical appearance and good for little else than to work on his body. Another example is this: "I do things where I need to be able to run fast, lift my self up easily, have the balance of gymnastics, and at the same time have explosive strength (max strength and endurance). Thus, the muscles can't be in your way (which they basically are if you're a 100 kilos bodybuilder)". With reference to the latter two examples, then, the big and bulky body is represented as a somewhat clumsy and unpractical body as opposed to a body with a leaner physique. Hence, masculinity is redefined and becomes a matter of how *functional* and *efficient* rather than how *big* and *monstrous* the body is. However, this is more a matter of constructing different masculinities within the available range of possibilities offered by the traditional Western understanding of masculinity – what Connell (2002) refers to as *hegemonic masculinity* – rather than promoting any form of 'new' masculinity.

Altogether, then, the only possibility that is opened up for men based on these understandings of masculinity is that of the muscular, powerful body. The body may be powerful in terms of a highly muscular appearance, the ability to lift heavy, and/or good functionality. Ultimately, however, the male body must be *more* than the female body. Such understandings of masculinity render it difficult for men who do not conform to this ideal to feel good about themselves. In line with this, research has, for example, shown that underweight men tend to have very poor self- and body images (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2007). With respect to women, this masculinity talk opens up the opportunity of a masculine femininity; however, in the end, the male body limits the range of possibilities for the female body, since the underlying assumption is that the female physicality should not exceed that of the male in terms of physical strength and muscularity. This is restrictive of women's freedom, especially for those women who wish to engage in systematic muscle enhancing exercise, since the muscular body is represented as a constant threat to the woman's femininity. Hence, wanting to be muscular and feminine at one and the same time may be experienced as problematic for some women.

A discourse of femininities: The beauty project

The discourse of femininities is closely bound up with the beauty discourse. In combination, they construct exercise and the fit body in terms of a beauty project. Hence, there is a focus on *form* at the expense of *function*. The subject positions opened up are those of the beautiful and objectified woman and man, who exercise in order to look a certain way and find themselves

attractive in the eyes of other people. Embedded in this are also the subject positions of what I have termed the *difficult* and the *fractured* body.

Male beauty: "Good clean bodies"

Within a femininity framework of understanding, fitness involves an emphasis on shape, muscle definition and a low degree of bodily fat. With regard to the ideal male body, it is, for example, claimed that "Most girls prefer bodies with a low fat percent, V-shape and a nice butt", and that one should "Train the whole body; people that only train the upper body look stupid!" With respect to male beauty, the disagreements commonly center around what *amount* of muscularity is the more aesthetically pleasing and attractive one, as illustrated by the following two examples: "Most girls don't think boys who look like the Hulk or who are extremely thin and feeble are deadly hot"; "Yuck, Ronaldo is thin. Personally, I like muscular guys, preferably of BB-caliber [i.e. body-builder], with a lean off-season". In the next extract, the traditional heteronormative assumption that the man should be more muscular than the woman is again reproduced: "I've met boys that I could easily have beaten up, and that isn't exactly romantic". Again, the subject produced is *the muscular man*; the possibility of *not* being muscular as a man and yet attractive at the same time is ultimately closed down.

Moreover, the beautiful male body is represented as a *natural* body; that is, a body free of anabolic steroids or other types of muscle enhancing drugs. One member writes that he wants to become "big and strong", but not like "bulky fuckers [i.e. men on steroids] who can't get through the door of the gym". Another member writes that "Most girls probably like good clean bodies" as opposed to "huge anabolic bodies". Thus, the *good clean body* is a body full-filling certain requirements by *natural* means. Based on earlier notions regarding the interrelatedness of health, naturalness and moral in relation to fitness, I argue that this is a way of constructing the fit body as a healthy and hence morally good body.

The beautiful woman: "Feminine, sexy and yet strong as a bear"

The latter point applies to the representation of the ideal fit female body as well, as seen from this example: "As long as she's not doing drugs there can't be too much muscularity; it only gets hotter as long as it's natural!" However, while the notion that men should be muscular remains unchallenged on the forum, this is not so when it comes to women. A few examples will help illustrate this: "Girls are supposed to be FEMININE, but they can of course have a

little muscularity"; "Personally, I can get a little intimidated by women with highly defined biceps, abs or shoulders…"; "Muscular women are beautiful and tough"; "one can be feminine, sexy and yet strong as a bear". Thus, there is disagreement as to whether or not muscular women are feminine, and how muscular a woman can get before she is considered masculine.

When a woman complains that her husband says she will start looking like a man if she continues training with weights, one of the answers she gets goes as follows: "Who doesn't want a girl with a firmer bum and tighter thighs, with a delicate ripped stomach and v-shape? Dilemmas like that you can often solve simply by quit training biceps, since that is what people notice the most and, oddly enough, associate more easily with a masculine trait…" On one hand she receives support for her exercise, while on the other hand she is objectified and given the advice of quit training her biceps in order to look less masculine and solve the problem with her husband. Hence, working out in order to please *herself* is not an alternative. Another member writes: "Girls shouldn't be muscular. A little abs is ok, but when the biceps, thighs, back and so on get big, it's kind of like being with a feminine man…" Here, the muscular woman is associated with a *feminine man*; thus, the man sexually involved with a muscular woman would consequently feel that he was with a man. This is a good example of how alternative gender representations (i.e. the muscular woman) may disturb a sense of social and moral order within a heternormative framework of understanding (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007).

Ultimately, the subject position that is opened up through these texts is that of *the feminine woman.* Female beauty is strongly associated with femininity and the masculine woman is not an option. There are conflicting views as to *how* muscular a woman can be before it threatens her femininity; however, no matter how muscular, the woman should still be feminine. Consequently, the desire for women to be very muscular and considered feminine and attractive at the same time may come into conflict.

The difficult body

Across gender, the fit body is constructed as a *difficult* project. Shaping it the way you want and achieving the desired results are commonly talked of as hard work. For example, it is stated that: "Usually it takes an extreme amount of exercise to get a defined body and increase it". Another example is: "Losing weight is often a hard job, though; more strength training and one must TOIL. More cardio, three days a week is not sufficient". The subject position

opened up here implies a rather dualistic relationship to one's body; the body is conceived of in terms of an object and a project, and exercise is primarily a way for the person to discipline and modify his/her body.

Moreover, the body is constructed as somewhat unruly; a thing that is not always cooperative and may get out of hand. The next two examples illustrate the despair experienced when the exercise does not produce the desired results: "I exercise more heavily than ever before (…). But today, when I stepped on the weight, I had gone UP! I don't understand anything, and I get really frightened"; "I've been training seriously with weights for 1,5 years and I've really hit brick wall. I'm having a MAJOR hard time progressing in bench press and it's driving me nuts (…)". Hence, not achieving the desired results produces feelings of fear, confusion, craziness, and frustration. Moreover, the idea that continuous progress is a virtue is reproduced in the latter example; hence, being content at the level you are is not an option.

Furthermore, the female body is constructed as more difficult than the male body, as can be seen from the following extract: "A fitness athlete/girl that does a lot of strength training/bodybuilding may be pretty rigid when it comes to diet, partying and lifestyle in general, and that may be the biggest problem, since you men burn better than us, and it takes less for you to get in good shape (…) We therefore need to work more and sacrifice more". Again, the male body is represented as the norm against which the woman compares herself. Moreover, the member is referring to the more difficult nature of the female body as a potential problem in a relationship. This view is further supported by another member: "I know that getting together with those women who exercise extremely much is not a smart move. Then you'll have to listen to a lot of whining, oh no, I'm so fat, bad conscience every time they 'fall through' and have themselves a piece of chocolate etc."

Embedded in these texts is a reproduction of the traditional gender stereotype that women are more dissatisfied with their bodies than men. This belief is recurrent on the forum. It is, for instance, stated that "I still haven't met one girl/woman who's satisfied with her body (oddly enough, the boys are content)". The representation of bodily discontent as something that affects 'all' women accords with the general view within research and society at large, that bodily dissatisfaction among women in the Western world has become normative. Wykes and Gunter (2005) explain this in terms of how new expectations of women have not replaced old ones, but merely been added. Consequently, contemporary media represent the ideal woman as thin, beautiful, fit, restrained, chaste, sexual, liberal, career-oriented, and motherly – all at the same time. Food is on one hand associated with femininity and motherly warmth;

on the other hand, it is constructed as an enemy, especially towards the female body. Such conflicting constructions create ambiguity and insecurity, causing more women to feel dissatisfied with themselves and their bodies than men (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). This being said, I argue that normalizing bodily dissatisfaction among women in everyday talk and in the media will only work to sustain it.

The next text is a response to a girl who complains she has excess fat on her belly: "Hi, I doubt that it is 'fat' on the lower part of your belly… it is very normal, at least for slim girls, to have this 'shape'. (…) I also think that the typical shape will fade if you get some more muscles (?)" There is an important paradox embedded in this text, as the member is on one hand arguing that "this 'shape'" is common for girls, while on the other hand suggesting that weight-training may reduce "the typical shape". Hence, the person is actually arguing for working *against* what is assumed normal rather than accepting it. This contradiction may be understood in light of the conflicting demands imposed on people by consumer culture; that is, on one hand we are encouraged to look natural, while on the other hand we are offered a range of (unnatural) products to help us look natural (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

The fractured body

The construction of *the difficult body* produces a subject who is working *against* the body rather than *with* it. I argue that this is caused by, as well as sustains, a dualistic view, where the person is conceived of in terms of the rational mind that aims to control the unruly body. Ultimately, dualism causes a separation of the person from his/her body. Moreover, I argue that it produces a separation of the body *from itself*. The following extract will help illustrate this: "It is, for example, possible to change the shape of the upper arm without adding many cm in circuit. At the same time, it is possible to have big and strong arms that don't look so good because they're lacking in esthetics. They're lacking in shape (…)". Here, then, the body is not only constructed as an object, but as an object that can be *taken apart*; that is, the different parts can be focused on and treated separately. This adds to an understanding of the body as a machine, of which the person is the operator. Moreover, the body is a *fractured* body, broken up from the person as well as from its own unified whole.

For a better understanding of this, one may look to Balsamo's (1995) notion of how the human body has been reconceptualized as a boundary figure in late modernity, simultaneously belonging to the traditionally dichotomous meaning systems of the organic/natural and the technological/cultural. The body becomes the place where anxieties

about the 'natural order of things' occur and are ideologically managed. Following this, "techno-bodies are healthy, enhanced and fully functional – more real than real" (Balsamo, 1995, p. 216). I believe that this may offer an explanation of the paradox embedded in the strong evaluation of naturalness in a culture where altering one's body and appearance by 'unnatural' products and means is quite common; that is, the natural body, which is also the ideal body, has achieved a significance extending far beyond traditional notions of naturalness. The natural body has become a matter of 'supernatural' perfection, of pushing biological limits by the aid of technology and cultural means. In this sense, the idealized fit body is a *hyperreal* body (Baudrillard, 1994).

Furthermore, Balsamo (1995) argues that new body technologies are rationalized as life-enhancing and medical authorities encourage us to monitor what we consume by means of various technological devices. Methods of body- and lifestyle-analysis, which I dealt with in the presentation of the previous analysis, may serve as examples of such devices. Balsamo notes that such devices contribute to the medical and technological fragmentation of the body into functional parts and bodily states, which in turn fosters self-surveillance and disciplining of the body. While some people may find pleasure and experiences of liberation through such an understanding of the body, I nevertheless argue that it is detrimental to people's experiences of embodiment. Firstly, it makes the task of constructing an ignorant, disempowered and bodily alienated subject considerably easier; secondly, it excludes a great amount of people whose bodies can or will never conform to current cultural ideals of the fit, beautiful, and healthy body.

A regendering of meaning

Roughly speaking, the body is constructed in terms of *function* (as a tool) and *form* (as an object) within the discourse of masculinities and the discourse of femininities, respectively. The discourses of femininities and masculinities are, however, closely intertwined, and people are to varying degrees drawing upon both in their talk. Although the fit body is represented as strong, capable and empowered within the discourse of masculinities, this does not mean that a discourse of femininities is not involved. On the contrary, the strong, capable and empowered body is also a body looking a certain way; thus, masculinity is expressed through the body's form as well. On the other hand, even though the discourse of femininities constructs the fit body in aesthetic terms, the beautiful body can indeed be a means by which

to express and act out masculine values and experience empowerment. Hence, the aesthetic body may well have a functional aspect.

Maguire (2008) writes that women and men do not passively accept gendered norms regarding behaviors and body ideals within the fitness field; rather, socio-cultural norms make options more or less available depending on gender and sexuality (as well as other factors, like age, class, etc.). In line with this, we have seen that even though alternative femininities and masculinities are constructed, the underlying, taken for granted assumption that a man should ultimately be stronger and more muscular than a woman is running through the whole material. Following this, people who express a preference for a type of bodily appearance in a man or a woman that challenges gender stereotypes are met with prejudice on the forum. The subject position of the macho man implies a view of women who do not like big and muscular men as "fat", "unfit", "ugly", "middle aged", and "married to fat guys who've never ever done a shit good for their bodies!" Moreover, they are claimed to be "feminists who feel even more suppressed by the view of a nicely fit man". These representations should be seen as ways to confirm and defend a form of hegemonic masculinity.

It is important to note, however, that the massively big and muscular male body is not necessarily a gender stereotype traditionally speaking. According to Lehnert (1997, referred to in Fasting, Pfister & Scraton, 2004), bodybuilders promote a new body ideal, which does not correspond with a regular body, neither for women nor men. Thus, I argue that, in line with the theory of a masculinity crisis in late modernity, this body ideal becomes a way for some men to reproduce a traditional hegemonic masculinity through their bodies, when other ways of acting out this form of masculinity (such as through work, position in the family etc.) have faded or vanished. Alternatively, the body's form may simply offer a way to experience and express independence and empowerment at a time of uncertain gendered relations, as expressed by this member: "And here they [women] want equality of status, so why can't we be allowed to take care of our bodies?"

On the other hand, members who express a preference for very muscular women are automatically assumed gay. The following example is retrieved from a discussion around pictures of muscular women: "Well, she looks like a boy, so if you think she looks good, then I guess that makes you gay?" Here, the possibility of heterosexual men preferring women who break with conventional gender role expectations – in the sense of having a more masculine look than commonly accepted within a heteronormative framework of understanding – is closed down. This illustrates the tendency to associate appearance in terms of masculinity or femininity with sexual orientation (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007). I

argue that this becomes a way of defending the boundaries of traditional heteronormative femininity.

At one and the same time, however, alternative constructions of the fit body do challenge gender stereotypes. Within the discourse of masculinities, the muscular female body is represented as a body claiming independence and empowerment, while the muscular male body is constructed as the protector of traditional gendered boundaries. Hence, on one hand, this could be viewed in terms of a reproduction of traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity, where the woman represents the threat against the male moral order. On the other hand, however, this is indicative of actual change in a gendered social structure; that is, women *have* become more independent and liberated in some cultural contexts, and this is reflected through their bodies as well. These observations are in line with the notions of Fasting, Pfister and Scraton (2004), who found that female football players challenged gender stereotypes through the construction of alternative femininities, while at the same time reproducing traditional notions of femininity.

Within the discourse of femininities, the fit male body is represented as an objectified body as well, and this too reflects a change in gendered meanings; the male body *has* become more objectified over time. These findings accord with Fairclough's (2001) notion of how people are liberated and restrained at one and the same time; that is, one may be liberated but only within the available range of possibilities. Moreover, in line with my methodological framework of understanding, this regendering of meaning within the area of exercise and fitness does not merely *reflect* cultural and societal change, but contributes to the *shaping* of it as well.

The regendered subject

Finally, I have identified an oppositional and strongly undermined voice to that of the heteronormative, which I have chosen to term *the regendered subject*. The regendered subject crosses traditional gendered boundaries regardless of gender and sexuality. This subject position involves the awareness that the individual is constructing his/her own identity, including gender; thus, it is embedded within an individualistic framework of understanding. In response to being called gay because he expressed a liking in highly muscular women, one member puts it like this: "The definition of what is 'ugly' and what is 'nice' is individual, and I for my part like women with a looks that 'stick out', whether one way or the other". Another member writes: "I don't understand people who exercise BECAUSE OF the opposite sex.

(…) Why not shape the body and the personality in order for YOU to get satisfied, and if someone comes along and likes you for YOU, then great! That must be the biggest compliment one can get!" Implicated in these texts is a resistance towards socio-cultural norms regarding gender, looks and personality. Following this, the fit body is constructed as an *individual* project in the full extent of the word.

Across gendered boundaries: Fitness as physical capital

Across gendered boundaries, fitness is constructed in terms of physical capital; that is, exercising and maintaining a fit body signal health, beauty, and personal responsibility. These interrelated aspects of fitness are, for instance, evident in the following extract: "My motivation is primarily having a body that looks ok now and that will hopefully look ok when I get older, as well as maintaining good health, something I think everyone under the age of 30 should manage without ANY problem!" Moreover, the physical capital that fitness produces is talked of as a means to success in life, as illustrated by this text: "Having a hot body makes almost everything easier for the person, as one will usually radiate more self-esteem, look better, be stronger than others, often faster and quicker, have a better hold on the ladies". Thus, the fit body is a body 'fit for survival'.

Moreover, exercise and the fit body are represented in terms of an *individual* body project. As can be seen from earlier examples, fitness is on one hand represented as a way for the individual to exercise individuality and independence. On the other hand, the fit body is talked of as a means to impress and attract others. Independence and acknowledgment from other people are both individualistic values. The disagreement over whether one should exercise and stay fit for the sake of oneself or others can be viewed in terms of a struggle between traditional notions of masculinity (subjectivity) and femininity (objectification), respectively. I argue that the overarching discursive frameworks of individualism and consumerism construct the meanings of the body project in terms of both; that is, the body is an arena for expressing individuality and conforming to socio-cultural norms and values at one and the same time.

Following this, a fit body can lead to experiences of liberation and empowerment through its symbolic capital and the effects that this produces within mainstream society; in other words, a person can experience pleasure as a result of conforming to socio-cultural values. However, the fitness field may facilitate experiences of empowerment and liberation by offering an opportunity to *resist* mainstream norms as well, for instance by means of

'sticking out'. I argue that these contrasted motivations to exercise apparent in people's talk may be understood as a result of consumer culture's two-faced agenda: On one hand, consumerism promotes an individualistic morality by encouraging us to improve our individual selves, bodies and lives. On the other hand, however, we are basically told how we should live in order to lead a good and successful life. This includes being told how to exercise and take care of the body, as well as what constitutes a fit body.

Exercise and fitness as positive experiences of embodiment

Despite dominant media representations of exercise and fitness in rational and instrumental terms, which have also proved prominent in my data, the data from the online discussion forum revealed alternative possibilities of exercise as positive experiences of embodiment as well. Firstly, the fitness field and the fit body were constructed as a site in which the person could claim, gain and experience empowerment. Secondly, members expressed motivations for exercising related to enjoyment and embodiment, such as: "Because I love to sweat and feel that I'm using my muscles" and "If I hadn't thought it fun to exercise, I wouldn't have bothered either". This accord with previously findings from interviews that reveal opportunities for experiencing non-instrumental pleasure of exercise as well, such as feelings of liberation, competence, and the enjoyment of physical movement in itself (Maguire, 2008; Fugelli & Ingstad, 2009). This being said, Fugelli and Ingstad (2009) also found that while people generally agreed that physical activity was important to good health, there were conflicting views as to the best ways to be physically active. Exercise as such was of many considered something one *should* do rather than something that was motivated by lust; in other words, a necessary evil. Some even regarded exercise as a threat to the good life, which is quite the opposite understanding of exercise to that represented in the media.

Even though the online discussion forum offered a rather different approach to the social construction of fitness to those of the newspapers and the health clubs' web sites, enabling some insight into people's own understandings of these phenomena as well, the overarching subject positions that were opened up in the data correspond with the findings from the other sources. In sum, the subject positions that are opened up are that of the good-looking, healthy, responsible, successful, functional, *physically fit* person, as opposed to the unattractive, unhealthy, overweight, immoral, lazy, unsuccessful, dysfunctional, and *physically unfit* person. I will now move on to a discussion of this in relation to the wider socio-cultural context, emphasizing potential consequences for people's subjectivity.

Discussion at the level of socio-cultural practice

"How do we recognize the shackles that tradition has placed upon us? For if we can recognize them, we are also able to break them".

Franz Boas

Based on my findings, an important question arises: Why the immense focus on health and beauty in relation to fitness? However obvious the relationship between health, exercise and personal responsibility may appear, it is not an objective, universal fact; in some cultures, the concept of health does not even exist. In the language of the San people in Botswana, for example, the closest one gets to an expression resembling health is *Quú-quú*, which means "Now he is fat, so now he is well" (Fugelli & Ingstad, 2009, p. 15, my translation). Moreover, the way physical beauty has been granted with the power to signal good health as well as a range of other related and valued characteristics in our culture is disturbing in itself.

Structural explanations of the interrelated aspects of health and beauty in relation to fitness, as well as the construction of health as an individual responsibility, can be found in the increase in lifestyle diseases and health economics on one hand, and the pervasive focus on aesthetics, images and appearance in consumer culture and service economy on the other (Lewis, 2006; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Maguire, 2008; Dworking & Wachs, 2009). Consequently, the fit body serves the national economy in terms of being productive *and* consuming at one and the same time. In other words, the nation's economy benefits in a double sense from individuals that strive to maintain fit, healthy, and beautiful bodies.

Some researchers have stressed that at the collective level, the health-related and consumerist representations of fitness do not produce the effects that they apparently set out to; rather, they help sustain social inequality (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). As noted by Dworkin and Wachs (2009), it is the *privileged* bodies of the middle- and upper middle-class that can afford to negotiate the conflicting demands of consumer culture through the commercial fitness field and experience an everlasting tour of small successes, while those unprivileged are stigmatized as disadvantaged, immoral and lazy. In relation to this, Maguire (2008) suggests that the fit/fat paradox characteristic of contemporary consumerist societies is the outcome of addressing a social, structural problem with an individualized solution. She argues that individualizing of responsibility is only healthy and constructive insofar as it is accompanied by a collective responsibility for handling social problems by means of collective solutions.

At the individual level, the commercial fitness field may hold a liberating potential. Giddens (1991) argues that through the reflexive project of the self, the subject may actually experience liberation and empowerment through routes advocated by 'experts'. Furthermore, Haug (1987, referred to in Dworkin & Wachs, 2009) claims it is quite possible to experience pleasure through objectification when this is a matter of subjective choice. Hence, exercising in order to look a certain way, for instance, may potentially involve positive feelings of liberation and empowerment rather than negative feelings of restraint. Moreover, the fitness field offers the opportunity to make use of oneself in a meaningful way and gain a sense of control in an uncertain world (Barland, 1997; Maguire, 2008). Besides, in a sedentary everyday lifestyle the fitness field may provide people with a sense of liberation simply through the facilitation of physical movement (Maguire, 2008). As outlined in the introduction, research has indeed demonstrated a range of positive psychological and emotional effects from exercise.

Main implications of my findings

On one hand, then, the individual can experience liberation and pleasure from the exercise itself, the effects that exercise produces, as well as from the associations having a fit body invokes. However, the potential downfall lurks in the shadows of an uncritical faith in the represented power of fitness. When the desired results are not achieved like one had imagined, or when one gets trapped in a vicious circle of small successes and failures, only to find that one will never become utterly content, then the distance from liberation to imprisonment may suddenly appear short. Consequently, the body may become the enemy, causing the dualistic split between the person and the body to grow even larger. This may lead to experiences of bodily discontent and alienation, and even depressions, eating disorders or other body dysmorphic disorders. Thus, the question of *who* defines liberation and empowerment becomes interesting with respect to the bodies that are socio-economically privileged to engage in the commercial fitness field as well. As noted by LeBesco (2004), 'empowered' people may indeed eat, starve, or exercise themselves to ill health or even death.

Based on my findings, I argue that the media representations of fitness strictly limit the available range of valued embodied possibilities. I suggest that the way exercise and the fit body are constructed in terms of scientific truths is especially to blame for this. What is more, the fit body is represented not only as the ideal body, but as *normal* and *natural* as well. Finally, the fit body is constructed as a site for the sustainment of traditional gendered

boundaries. Obviously, this excludes a great number of people from being enabled to consider themselves, as well as being considered by others, as fit, healthy, and attractive. Examples are overweight, elderly, and disabled people, whose bodies can never fit with the current mainstream ideal, as well as women and men, whose bodies do not conform to traditional gendered norms.

This excluding discursive production of fitness does not pay justice to the variety of local body ideals and alternative understandings of health and fitness that exist in society. The rise of the fat acceptance movement is a response to this and a way of trying to reconstruct dominant understandings of fatness. This involves research that promotes the possibility of being overweight, fit, healthy, and happy at the same time, which I mentioned earlier. Moreover, the dominant understanding of health in the media, which is closely intertwined with the representation of physical beauty, youth, and optimal bodily functioning as interrelated aspects, strongly restricts alternative experiences of health, which do not include some or all of these aspects. Fugelli and Ingstad (2009) found that people's own understandings of health involved a view of health as a *subjective experience*, such as feelings of managing well in everyday life. Moreover, some expressed an understanding of good health as the absence of *health* (i.e. not having to think about health) rather than of *disease* or health as *at risk*. In general, people expressed power to define their own understandings of health; however, there were also messages of bad conscience, low self-value, and feelings of inadequacy in relation to dominant constructions of health and fitness (Fugelli & Ingstad, 2009).

The above being said, I would like to emphasize that the current popular cultural idealizing of fitness, which to a far extent involves a *hyperreal* body, may be experienced as hard to achieve for anyone. However, when this ideal is supported by scientific knowledge and even represented as natural and normal, people will more likely feel that they should achieve it. I suggest that this experience is further encouraged by the construction of the subject as disempowered, ignorant, and bodily alienated, as well as by the representation of fitness as something at which one could always improve and progress – which makes the possibility of becoming utterly content difficult.

Methodological discussion: Advantages and limitations

This study does not allow me to say anything about the actual psychological and emotional effects of the media representations of exercise and the fit body on people. However, addressing the actual effects has not been the aim of this study either. Rather, I wanted to look into socially constituted meanings of exercise and the fit body as they manifest in the media based on the assumption that socially constructed meanings are significant to people's experiences of embodiment.

On one hand, the subjective nature of my findings may be problematic insofar as they may be rendered unintelligible by others. Due to a personal interest in exercise and fitness I might also be biased with respect to distancing my own views and assumptions as much as possible from the analytic process. However, through a careful illustrating of my claims as well as a substantial amount of literature supporting these claims, I hope to have made my analysis transparent as well as illuminating. Moreover, I believe that if I were severely biased by my own interest in exercise this should have caused me to see the media representations of fitness in a more favorable light, since I have a positive experience with respect to the fitness field myself. Rather, I have found the discursive production of fitness in the media deeply restrictive.

With respect to the data generation, I have drawn upon sources of a popular and mainstream character. This was intentional, as I wanted to explore mainstream understandings of exercise and the fit body. It is important to keep in mind, however, that 'the media' is not a universal category. Hence, it would be interesting to address media sources of a less mainstream character as well in order to further explore alternative and undermined representations of exercise and the fit body.

The online discussion forum as data

One advantage of analyzing data from an online source is that it becomes a form of natural observation and unbiased in the sense that the research setting and the researcher do not impact on the participants. It also provides access to a context in which people who share an interest in the topic under investigation come together. When communicating anonymously via their computers, people may also be more open and honest. Furthermore, research on the Internet enables a wide geographic coverage (Evans, Elford & Wiggins, 2008).

On the disadvantageous side, however, Internet use remains far from universal; males and young people are more likely to use the internet than others. Another disadvantage relates to the matter of self-presentation; that is, people may present themselves differently than they would have in other forms of communication. Consequently, they may be *less* sincere and serious, and more frivolous, when interacting in this way. The researcher is also unable to take into consideration body language and facial mimic (Evans et al., 2008). As noted by Mann and Stewart (2000), people may also display *flaming*; that is, hostility characteristic of an electronic environment. Moreover, members of chat rooms are expected to adhere to the so-called *netiquette* (i.e. the informal code of practice) of the site (Evans et al., 2008).

Because of these things, my interpretations of people's utterances may be less accurate than they would have been based on interviews with research participants. Besides, people's utterances on an online discussion forum yield much less information than a full interview and are not centered on a stated research problem. In Robinson's (2001) words, the Internet yields 'unsolicited narratives'. This being said, how people talk about exercise and the fit body on an online discussion forum are nevertheless ways to construct certain meanings as opposed to possible others, as well as evidence of available discursive resources within the socio-cultural context of which they are part. Additionally, as "use of the internet in qualitative research is in its infancy" (Evans et al., 2008, p. 329), research based on online sources is interesting in itself.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the represented meanings of exercise and the fit body within three different contexts of Norwegian media. The aim has been to provide some insight into dominant understandings of these phenomena, as well as to point out important implications of particular discursive meanings being produced at the expense of possible others. Through the analysis, I have identified a complex interdiscursive web of discourses, which constructs fitness in terms of an individual consumer project, where exercise is represented as a necessary evil that will provide the individual with the physical capital needed in order to lead a good and happy life. Following this, the fit body is represented as a symbol of a range of culturally valued characteristics bound up with health and beauty. As for the notion of gender, the fit body offers a site for exercising individuality and independence, as well as resisting gender stereotypes. At the same time, however, it functions as a maintainer of traditional gendered boundaries. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the fit body is represented in terms of a scientifically verified design, which is idealized and normalized at one and the same time.

The discursive production of meanings and norms surrounding exercise and fitness in the media severely limits the range of subjectivities that are made possible. In response to this, I argue for an understanding of fitness which makes room for a greater selection of body types. As argued by some researchers, being overweight and fit at the same time is indeed possible. Moreover, fitness has proved to foster increased bodily satisfaction with age. Hence, fitness as well as health and beauty should to a greater extent be viewed and represented in terms of individual states, which take into account people's bodily prerequisites. This further opens up the possibility of being disabled while at the same time feeling healthy and fit. The NRK production, "Ingen Grenser", where disabled people are challenged to push their physical limits, is a good example of an alternative way to understand and deal with fitness. Moreover, this TV-show is indicative of a change in the discursive production of fitness.

Based on my findings concerning the gendered body, I argue for a wider range of possibilities in terms of fitness and bodily appearance as well. In real life, bodies come in all sizes and shapes. Moreover, people have different preferences, although body ideals in the media would have you think otherwise. An increased focus on the rich variety of body types and body ideals that exist in society at large will open up for a greater array of subjectivities with respect to fitness, beauty, masculinity, and femininity. I hope that research such as the study I have carried out can contribute to the raised critical awareness of the socially

constituted meanings of exercise and the fit body, as this may foster discursive as well as actual change with respect to socio-cultural understandings of fitness, health, and beauty.

Finally, I argue for a greater emphasis on the concept of embodiment within psychology, as this concept is highly suitable for a reconciliation of the person and the body (Burkitt, 1999; Crossley, 2000). Moreover, it encourages a deeper understanding of people's *own* meanings in relation to their bodily experiences. This involves acknowledging that people have the power to define and create their own experiences and hence also to change them (LeBesco, 2004; Blood, 2005). At the same time, however, it is important to take into consideration that as much as people are liberated they may only be so within the available range of possibilities (Fairclough, 1995, 2001). The way that psychological research on body image is drawn upon within the popular cultural discourse on body image is sometimes destructive insofar as it may move the focus away from people's experiences of embodiment, stressing instead that what one is told by science and the media is more true than how one conceives of oneself (Blood, 2005). I suggest that a greater emphasis on the concept of embodiment within psychological research might reconcile the concepts of body image and embodiment to a further extent, such that they are conceived of as two sides of the same coin. As noted by Fugelli and Ingstad (2009), *having* a body and *being* a body does not have to be mutually exclusive.

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Appendix

List of newspaper articles

(A1) "Hvert skritt teller lite", *Aftenposten Morgen,* 2009-09-19.

(A2) "Het trend i svette løpesko", *Aftenposten Morgen*, 2009-09.27.

(A3) "De selger seg med svette", *Aftenposten Morgen*, 2009-08-01.

(A4) "Bedrifter gir alt for Birken", *Aftenposten Morgen*, 2009-08-29.

(V1) "Er du immun mot trening?", *VG*, 2009-09-27.

(V2) "Holder unnskyldningene dine?", *VG*, 2009-09-20.

(V3) "Trening endrer tankene", *VG*, 2009-07-12.

(V4) "Gladtrent pulsmafia",*VG*, 2009-08-23.

(V5) "Jogg deg i form!", *VG*, 2009-08-09.

(V6) "Biceps som Beckham", *VG*, 2009-07-24.

(V7) "Lur deg i gang",*VG*, 2009-08-09.

Source:

Atekst/Retriever (2009). Retrieved 2009-30-09 and 2009-01-10 from
http://ret-web01.int.retriever.no/services/archive.html?redir=true