

Exploring news media representations of women's exercise and subjectivity through critical discourse analysis

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Despite the importance of media work from a critical perspective being established, much is to be learned about how women's exercise is (re)presented within news media discourses and the implications for women's health promotion. Health promotion researchers need to further consider the media environment in which health-related meanings are constructed and compete. Building on media research from a critical perspective, the current paper used critical discourse analysis to explore the construction of exercise narratives in 40 stories within a 'women's health' section of a Midwestern US newspaper. Analysis of this media feature offers researchers the opportunity to explore taken for granted assumptions and prevailing meanings about women's exercise and health and the implications for self and subjectivity. Two primary discourses were identified: a discourse of exercise and appearance and a discourse of consumerism. Subject positions identified included: *the unfit woman*, *the ignorant/irrational woman*, *the expert* and *the responsible consumer*. The implications for women's health and exercise promotion are discussed in light of these findings.

Keywords: discourse analysis; media; women's exercise

Introduction

When promoting women's exercise, media sources (e.g. fitness magazines and fitness advertisements) often invoke stereotypical images and ideals concerning gender (Duncan 1994, Eskes *et al.* 1998, Markula 2001, Berry and Howe 2004, Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Such representations are connected to appearance discourses constructing an ideal body that is thin and supposedly healthy and fit. In turn, women's exercise and fitness promotion narratives tend to rely upon narrowly defined images of femininity (e.g. thin, toned and white) linked to ideologies of individualism, consumerism and heteronormativity (Smith Maguire 2007, Dworkin and Wachs 2009, Markula and Kennedy 2011).

Researchers have problematised 'thin is fit and healthy' narratives because when women's bodies do not meet appearance ideals – and these cannot be attained (Bordo 1993, Mutrie and Choi 2000, Markula 2001) – women feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Fallon and Hausenblas 2005, Prichard and Tiggemann 2005). Feeling dissatisfied with one's body is linked to avoidance of public places to be active

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(Eriksson *et al.* 2008), avoidance of particular forms of exercise (e.g. weight training) or over-exercising (Prichard and Tiggemann 2008), withdrawal from exercise when appearance-related motives are not attained (Segar *et al.* 2006), and disordered eating (Fallon and Hausenblas 2005). Given that two-thirds of the population does not achieve minimum physical activity guidelines to gain associated health benefits with women being 15% like less likely to meet physical activity guidelines when compared to men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Research 2007), the foregoing is of great concern.

Studies on news media have further problematised medical and scientific discourses circulating around fitness and fatness. This is because newspaper representations of health and fitness are often framed within fear of fatness and moral panic discourses (Saguy and Riley 2005, Boero 2007, Murray 2008, Saguy and Almeling 2008). While this media work has not explored representations of women's exercise, such discourses reinforce morality-based fears surrounding the 'thin is good fat is bad' doctrine permeating women's health and fitness discourse (McGannon and Spence 2010, McGannon *et al.* 2011). Moreover, by positioning women as morally obligated to exercise to fix their flawed selves, healthism (i.e. women are held personally responsible for their health) becomes favoured in health promotion discourse over structural or societal solutions (Crawford 1980, Hodgetts *et al.* 2005, Zanker and Gard 2008, Dworkin and Wachs 2009).

The preceding adds to a growing body of literature (e.g. Dworkin and Wachs 2009, McGannon and Spence 2010, Kennedy and Pappa 2011, Markula and Kennedy 2011, McGannon *et al.* 2011) challenging discourses of morality and individual responsibility in women's exercise promotion. Such literature argues for the revaluing and politicisation of women's bodies, that one can be 'fit and fat' (Sui *et al.* 2007), and that not all fitness promotion and subcultures need focus upon thinness pursuits. Expanding this work is important because health psychology needs to further consider the media environment in which health-related meanings are constructed and compete with health promotion messages (Randolph and Viswanath 2004, Hodgetts *et al.* 2005, Berry and Spence 2009, Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Despite the importance of media work from a critical perspective (i.e. socio-cultural and political realms are analysed in the context of power issues; see Lyons 2000, Dworkin and Wachs 2009), much is to be learned about how exercise is (re) presented within news media discourses and the implications for women's health promotion.

While sport studies scholars have produced informative critical analyses of news media representations of female athletes and women's sport (e.g. Kane and Lenskyj 1998, George *et al.* 2001, Messner *et al.* 2003), limited research has explored representations of women's exercise within news media (an exception is Theberge 1991). In addition to analyses of women's fitness magazines and advertisements, newspapers are useful cultural sites to investigate portrayals of women's exercise in everyday life (McGannon *et al.* 2011). Research exploring representations of men's health in newspapers (Gough 2006, 2007) underscores the importance of critical methodologies (e.g. discourse analysis) to understand gendered portrayals of lifestyle practices (e.g. diet).

Building on media research from a critical perspective, the current paper interrogates the construction of women's exercise narratives within a special interest section (i.e. ACCENT) of a Midwestern US newspaper (i.e. Cedar Rapids Gazette, Iowa). Referred to as the features section, the information provided in ACCENT on

health is skewed toward women. Analysis of this media feature offers researchers the opportunity to explore taken for granted assumptions and prevailing meanings about women's exercise and health. Intensive scrutiny of ACCENT narratives draws on techniques from critical discourse analysis (Wetherell 1998, Willig 2000, McGannon and Spence 2010) and aims to identify dominant representations of women's exercise and the implications for subjectivity and health promotion.

Critical discourse analysis: theory and methodology

Discourse analysis is increasingly being used in health psychology (see Willig 2000), exercise psychology (see McGannon and Spence 2010) and to study gender issues in health and lifestyle practices within news media (see Gough 2006, 2007). A broad name given to a variety of approaches that study texts, discourse analysis draws upon different theoretical traditions (e.g. social constructionism and post-structuralism) (Wetherell 1998, Willig 2000). As such, there is not one prescribed method or best approach to carrying out discourse analysis (see McGannon and Spence 2010).

Our work draws upon the writings of Foucault and post-structuralism (Weedon 1997) and the work of McGannon and Mauws (2000, 2002) and McGannon and Spence (2010) who have extended these ideas into exercise psychology to study the self and women's exercise participation. The term *discourse* is grounded in Foucault's (1978) concept of discourse to understand the relationship between socially constructed forms of truth and power and the implications for self-related knowledge and behavioural practices. Discourse refers to an interrelated 'system of statements that cohere around common meanings and values ... (that) are a product of social factors, of powers and practices *rather than an individual's set of ideas*' (Hollway 1983, p. 231, emphasis added). Discourse can also be understood as providing the meanings – in the case of our media analysis, meanings about 'women's exercise' – that constitute everyday practices (e.g. what people may say and feel about themselves in relation to exercise, the type of exercise one does and/or the types of exercise one avoids) (McGannon and Spence 2010).

Central to a discursive project from this perspective is the exploration of subject positions and the implications for self-hood and women's bodies (Weedon 1997, McGannon and Mauws 2000, 2002, Willig 2000, McGannon and Spence 2010). People acquire a sense of self and interpret the world from a particular perspective (i.e. subject position) by participating in discursive practices that allocate meanings to particular categories and images (e.g. fit female body/unfit female body and healthy/unhealthy). The self is then positioned in relation to storylines articulated around categories and images and people have particular psychological and emotional experiences associated with that world view (Davies and Harré 1990, McGannon and Spence 2010).

To identify dominant discourses and subject positions within ACCENT, an eclectic approach to discourse analysis was adopted (see Gough 2006, 2007, McGannon and Spence 2010). In line with a Foucauldian perspective, an eclectic approach focuses on the constructive nature of discourse within texts and how it constitutes objects (e.g. fit/unfit body, exercise and fitness). Also of interest are how linguistic categories (e.g. rhetorical strategies) not only construct objects and form particular discourses, but how they are used within discourses to bring off particular effects (e.g. social, cultural and behavioural) (see McGannon and Mauws 2000, McGannon and Spence 2010).¹

Method

Data collection and analysis of the ACCENT feature was guided by the following research questions: How does ACCENT construct women's exercise on a daily basis? How does the use of metaphor, concepts, rhetorical strategies, and particular words and phrases structure discourses and subject positions? What effects (e.g. social and ideological) result and what are the implications for health promotion? Data were collected daily for three consecutive weeks over two time periods (i.e. 20 December 2004–9 January 2005 and 14 February–6 March 2005). Readership survey figures for the Cedar Rapids daily Gazette is 170,400 with about half of readers being male ($n=85,700$) and half female ($n=84,700$). During the data collection period, 144,300 people read ACCENT, with 83,000 being female readers and 61,300 male readers.

Taking an inclusive approach, any unit of meaning on or around the subject of women and exercise was collected, whether an article was about a particular woman (e.g. celebrity) and exercise or on health-related advice implicating exercise. This approach yielded a large corpus of data with 40 stories collected. Tag lines appearing on the front page of ACCENT were also collected, yielding a total of 13 exercise-related phrases. Data collection also included visual pieces (e.g. photographs and advertisements) as these further contextualise stories (Bell 1991). A total of 10 images depicting women exercising on various forms of equipment, using exercise products, or being assisted by an expert (e.g. trainer) accompanied stories. An additional eleven advertisements for fitness products or services (e.g. 'toning' shoes and gym memberships), six for health screenings (e.g. heart health, colon cancer and bone density) and five advertisements for body modification (e.g. plastic surgery) accompanied stories.

Following Bell's (1991) suggestions for making sense of news media, stories were catalogued using a coding sheet that included: name of target article, target audience, type of story (e.g. human interest, health advice and personal behaviour change), other stories and advertisements appearing on the page, content summary and lead paragraph (i.e. a micro-story in the news story encompassing the values into a single sentence). Attempting to remain open-minded to unanticipated themes, Gough's (2006, 2007) suggestions for analysis of news media on masculinity and health were followed. Thus our initial analysis used concepts from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), coding the entire data-set line by line to generate a range of themes which were contrasted and refined. To identify discourses and subject positions, discursive strategies (e.g. metaphors and rhetorical strategies) and potential effects (e.g. ideological and behavioural) were noted (Wetherell 1998, Willig 2000, McGannon and Spence 2010). This dual analytic focus allowed us to capture the content (i.e. what was said) and process (i.e. how it was presented) of the news features.

Results and discussion

Results are presented within the context of the dominant discourses and the subject positions identified within these discourses. Findings indicate that texts primarily drew upon a discourse of exercise as beautification to construct women's exercise. Subject positions identified within this discourse included: *the unfit woman*, *the ignorant/irrational woman* and *the expert*. A discourse of consumerism was also

identified within the stories, which further created the subject position of the *responsible consumer*. This discourse intersected with a discourse of exercise and beautification, reinforcing the subject positions of *the unfit woman*, *the ignorant/irrational woman* and *the expert*.

As feminist texts/readings (e.g. Duncan 1994, Markula 1995, 2001, Choi 2000, Dworkin and Wachs 2009, Kennedy and Pappa 2011) were drawn upon to help identify the discursive features and the implications in the media texts, results are discussed in the context of this literature. Presenting the results and discussion together is consistent with physical activity and media research from a critical perspective (see Dworkin and Wachs 2009). The dominant discourses and associated subject positions are explored in greater detail below with a focus on the potential implications.

Discourses and subject positions

Exercise as beautification: unfit woman, ignorant/irrational woman and the expert

Twenty-five of the 40 articles constructed women's exercise within a discourse of exercise as beautification. As alluded to in our introduction, a discourse of exercise as beautification constructs an 'ideal version' of the fit female body that is slim with toned and sculpted musculature. Bodies that look this way are promoted as moving with grace and ease in social space which is linked to impossible ideals and standards for women to attain by promoting a narrow version of beauty and femininity (Markula 2001, Markula and Kennedy 2011). Together, these notions constitute the 'normal' fit female body that and can (and should) be attained by woman via particular gendered forms of exercise such as dance, lifting light weights/toning exercises, targeting certain body parts/problem areas and group exercise/fitness classes (Lloyd 1996, Choi 2000, Dworkin 2003, Markula 2003, Brabazon 2006, Markula and Kennedy 2011).

The fit female body further gains its meanings in relation to what constitutes an unfit female body within this discourse. Within a discourse of exercise as beautification, an unfit female body is constructed and normalised as overweight and lacking in muscle tone or lacking the right amount of muscle tone in particular 'spots'/body parts. Implicit within this discourse is that an unfit female body is not attractive or as beautiful as it could be because it does not have the attributes of a fit body (e.g. discipline, motivation, control, grace, lean and toned) and instead has the attributes of lacking motivation and lacking discipline and self-control. Women with an unfit body are further positioned as weak and ignorant because they have transgressed exercise practices in some way (and implicitly are not attaining a fit body).

Combined with the meanings concerning the fit female body, the message concerning an unfit body within this discourse is clear: the way to avoid *being unfit* (i.e. having an unfit identity) and unattractive is to become more knowledgeable about exercise, engage in the correct forms of gendered exercise, and therefore be more disciplined and in control (Dworkin 2003, Markula and Pringle 2006, Dworkin and Wachs 2009, Markula and Kennedy 2011). Finally, within a discourse of exercise as beautification, women are promised health and happiness when they strive to attain, or if they attain, a fit body; the opposite is the case for those with an unfit body (Markula 2001).

A discourse of exercise as beautification was identified in the current study through the presence of particular gendered forms of exercise within the stories, which further emphasised a particular expression of female sexuality (i.e. heterosexuality). Such stories achieved this effect by also drawing upon dominant and stereotypical images of men, masculinity and heterosexuality in relation to exercise and the male body (e.g. men are knowledgeable about weight training, men lift heavy weights to be strong and attractive to the opposite sex). This discourse was also identified by stories use of the attributes of a fit female body (e.g. confidence, gracefulness, control, strength, muscle tone of certain body parts and sexiness) in contrast to the attributes of an unfit female body (e.g. lack of confidence, lack of exercise knowledge and weakness).

The following news story appearing 27 December 2004, entitled, 'Can't stomach another gym class try belly dancing', exemplifies the foregoing discursive strategies:

I am a belly dancing convert. I used to be among the uninformed. I used to think of it as some silly dance veiled women did thousands of years ago to lure bearded men away from their camels and into their tents. Now I know better ... Not only is it a great workout for the abs, it puts some guys in touch with their feminine side – hip-wiggling scarves will do that – and as every woman knows, that's a plus in any man. Other good things about belly dancing include: It improves your body, breathing and mood. Belly dancing is a low-impact aerobic dance activity that builds both muscle and confidence. The undulations, hip circles and snake arms are just a few of the many moves that tone and firm your glutes, abs, back and torso ... Belly dancing also delivers a better attitude about your own body. Women begin to see their round bellies as strong and beautiful, and with six or seven weeks, they feel more confident and graceful ...

This extract reveals that a particular form of gendered exercise (e.g. belly dancing is a low impact aerobic dance activity; undulations, hip circles and snake arms) is promoted to attain the fit female body and the associated attributes (e.g. it improves your body, breathing and mood; it builds muscle and confidence; women begin to see their round bellies as strong and beautiful; they feel more confident and graceful). The extract further reinforces belly dancing as a gendered practice by which all women can attain, or approach attaining, an ideal fit body by compartmentalising certain body parts/'problem areas' (e.g. it is a great work out for abs; many moves that tone and firm your glutes, abs, back and torso). Ultimately, within this discourse, a subject position of 'unfit woman' is created via the discussion of specific body parts that can (and should) be fixed and controlled, via the creation of the attributes a fit body has which are implied as lacking in an unfit body (e.g. confidence, a good attitude toward one's body) and via gendered forms of exercise such as belly dancing.

Despite this primary subject position of 'unfit woman' it is worth noting that there was one form/glimmer of resistance within the discourse of exercise as beautification – when it was acknowledged that women could 'begin to see their round bellies as strong and beautiful' via the practice of this particular form of exercise. Statements such as this, while still equating women's exercise (i.e. belly dancing) with a certain standard of beauty, reveal that it is possible to resist the narrow meaning of beauty and the narrow version of a fit female, by virtue of changing how women are positioned in the discourse. In this one instance within the story,

women's bodies were repositioned as strong and beautiful and still fit in relation to more realistic standard (i.e. having a round belly) rather than as weak and flawed and in need of change conforming to an impossible standard (e.g. a flat stomach with no body fat). Recently, it was shown that individual women can and do experience these moments of resistance in their own lives when they actively renegotiate and/or transcend dominant discourses of femininity through repositioning themselves within discourse. Such 'subject repositioning' further translates into different meanings of what constitutes physical activity and enhanced well-being (e.g. leisure activity as communing with nature which enhances spirituality, or changing 'exercise' to movement which enhances enjoyment and autonomy) (Raisborough and Bhatti 2007, LaFrance 2011, McGannon *et al.* 2011), making it more likely that women are active and gain the associated psychological benefits.

At the same time, women's exercise gains the dominant meanings outlined within this discourse by referring to men in order to imply a particular sexuality: heterosexuality (e.g. it puts some guys in touch with their feminine side – hip-wig-gling scarves will do that – and as every woman knows, that is a plus in any man; I used to think of it as some silly dance veiled women did thousands of years ago to lure bearded men away from their camels and into their tents). Here, the implication of these phrases is that women and belly dancing go hand in hand with landing a man. Discussing a particular version of female sexuality serves as an important rhetorical strategy, reinforcing that an unfit woman can and should want to attain the ideal fit body to be sexually attractive to men, which ultimately results in a fulfilled and happy life (since implicitly unfit women are unfulfilled and unhappy).

Another way that this extract achieves the foregoing effects is through the creation of a subject position of 'the ignorant/irrational woman', which reinforces women's subject position as unfit because they lack the knowledge as to how to exercise to attain a fit body and the rationality to chose correctly (e.g. I am a belly dancing convert. I used to be among the uninformed . . . Now I know better). In turn, women are 'schooled' about their exercise and positioned as needing help from others (e.g. a belly dancing instructor) to learn how to exercise 'properly' in order to 'know better'. Another example of this comes at the end of the belly dancing story:

... most of all I recommend finding a good teacher and getting expert instruction. Belly dancing, done correctly, is a low-impact aerobic activity, but if you don't ease into it, learning proper technique along the way, you can hurt your lower back and shoulders. Find a teacher who emphasizes proper form, and don't overdo it.

Within this extract, another subject position is created that further reinforces the subject positions of ignorant/irrational woman and unfit woman – that of 'the expert'. Within the exercise as beautification discourse, the expert ultimately holds the information, knowledge and power to give women more agency and control over their unfit bodies. The subject position of the expert creates a clear indication of who owns the knowledge (i.e. the fitness industry) and who does not (i.e. unfit women) within an exercise as beautification discourse.

Another rhetorical strategy identified within the exercise as beautification discourse was the highlighting of 'real women's' stories about their experiences with personal trainers who helped them lose weight. The stories entitled 'Getting smaller with a little help from my friends' (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 28 February 2005) and 'Fine tuning: fitness routine makeovers for 2005 – tips from a pro'

(Cedar Rapids Gazette, 3 January 2005) exemplify this strategy. Within each story, women were positioned as unfit and ignorant/irrational until they hired a personal trainer (e.g. with a little help from my friends; tips from a pro) who provided them with the ability to control their bodies through exercise:

One month after my initial assessment with Fran Burian, a personal trainer at Core Fitness in Iowa City, I've got good news to report. I weighted in then, Jan. 10, at 165 and my body mass index was 27.5 . . . On Feb. 4 I weighed in at 161 lb. My BMI had dropped to 26.8. (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 'Getting smaller with a little help from my friends', 28 February 2005)

And

Our exercisers had plenty to be proud of. Both are off to a great start with habits that have helped them shed pounds and improve their overall health. Improvements always can be made, through, and Pritchett, a certified personal trainer, had a few more suggestions to take their routines to the next level. (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 'Fine-tuning: Fitness routine makeovers for 2005-tips from a pro', 3 January 2005)

The further message from these stories is that women can become more disciplined and in control of their bodies and exercise by becoming better consumers of fitness services (see Smith Maguire 2007, Dworkin and Wachs 2009, Markula and Kennedy 2011). This notion will be discussed again when we present a discourse of consumerism and the subject position of the good consumer.

Further exemplifying the subject position of the expert and the way(s) in which it reinforced the subject positions of unfit woman and ignorant/irrational woman within an exercise as beautification discourse are the Nancy Cole 'Get fit' advice columns. Written for the Miami Herald, this fitness advice column for women is picked up every week by over 600 newspapers worldwide, one being the Cedar Rapids Gazette. Similar to the belly dancing story, 'Get fit' columns continually invoked gendered forms of exercise which also emphasised heterosexuality and a primarily narrow version of the fit female body. This effect was again achieved by drawing upon stereotypes of female sexuality and femininity and stereotypes of male sexuality and masculinity. The ideal fit female body constructed within the exercise and beautification discourse was also vividly illustrated through the use of images of Nancy Cole, a thin, large breasted, white woman wearing form-fitting exercise clothing who demonstrates various 'women's exercises'. Consider the following 'Get fit' article appearing 21 February 2005 entitled, 'Give your arms, shoulders a lift: ladies, work out an upper body routine':

Do you have to be strong-armed into training your upper body? Many of us do, especially women. Most of us tend to focus on our lower bodies, while men tend to favor developing their upper bodies. Which gender has the winning strategy for a strong, sexy body? . . . It's all out war for full body symmetry. Not just for aesthetic appeal but for something more important: remaining free of injuries . . . Worried about being the weaker sex just because your upper body is weak? You don't need a shoulder to cry on – you can shoulder the burden alone through effective training. You can get strong and sculpted while retaining your feminine wiles. And that upper body training you've been sweating will soon have you looking sensational. But keep up the pace because men will be hot on your tail (I mean trail). You'll still have an advantage though. You can always drop your weights and stroke their egos.

Within this extract, the subject position of 'the expert' figures prominently, as exercise advice is dispensed and 'correct' form is shown to women who are too ignorant to know any better when it comes to their exercising upper bodies (e.g. Most of us tend to focus on our lower bodies). In turn, women are again positioned as unfit and having the attributes of being too weak unmotivated and unwilling to exercise (e.g. Do you have to be strong-armed into training your upper body? Many of us do, especially women; worried about being the weaker sex just because your upper body is weak?). Additionally, the story clearly invokes gendered exercise stereotypes (e.g. Most of us tend to focus on our lower bodies, while men tend to favour developing their upper bodies) to further reinforce an ideal fit female body and the exercise practices promoted to achieve it as desirable in order to land a man and/or be attractive to the opposite sex (e.g. You can get strong and sculpted while retaining your feminine wiles; but keep up the pace because men will be hot on your tail (I mean trail). You can always drop your weights and stroke their egos).

As with the belly dancing story, the exercise advice given within this article and the other weekly 'Get fit' columns could also be read as a form of resistance from the dominant messages often conveyed in exercise as beautification discourses, as women *are* encouraged to weight train beyond appearance/aesthetics to gain strength and independence (e.g. You do not need a shoulder to cry on – you can shoulder the burden alone through effective training). In line with this notion, researchers have related women's weight training to feelings of agency, power and independence (see Heywood 1998, Dworkin 2001, 2003, Krane *et al.* 2004). However, such notions are not straightforward, with some women acknowledging that weight training will make them feel empowered and strong, yet they do not do it as they fear being 'too big' (Dworkin 2003). These points reveal the complexity of these discourses and the way(s) in which women's exercise is constructed and viewed within them, as it is possible for women to be empowered or disempowered depending on how they position themselves within the discourse (McGannon and Spence 2010, Kennedy and Markula 2011).

Further reinforcing the complexity of these discourses and their effects, a closer reading of these narratives in the above extract again reveals that gendered forms of exercise are primarily upheld to obtain a narrow version of a fit female body (i.e. training with light weights to tone and sculpt), with women positioned as ignorant/irrational within the discourse and in need of expert advice, lest they hurt themselves or perform the exercise incorrectly. For example, the current article goes on to tell women that 'You'll want to start out light – 3–6-pound weights – because form is critical. The weights will feel heavier with increasing repetitions'. Further advice is given on how to work various body parts (glutes and abdominals) to gain toned muscles in the right areas and to avoid being 'too weak' in these problem areas.

Three other 'Get fit' stories dispensed similar advice, encouraging women to strength train on the one hand (a potential act of empowerment) but at the same time reinforcing the narrow version of an ideal fit female body. This was again accomplished through the use of gender exercise stereotypes and imagery, and by compartmentalising female body parts, to create heterosexual desire:

You want to get strong, lean and lithe? Set your sets on Smith – the Smith Machine. Yes, it's that ominous looking large machine sporting a fixed bar across its middle. Don't let it scare you ... If you take a wide-stance with your toes turned out and des-

cend below where your thighs are parallel to the floor, you will increase the workload on your glutes. Smith may just be the safe, secure and stable partner you've always wanted to be set up with. (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 'Raise the bar with Smith Machine', 27 December 2004)

Ultimately an effect of the foregoing was that women were again positioned as unfit (e.g. You want to get strong, lean and lithe?) and ignorant/irrational (e.g. Yes, it is that ominous looking large machine sporting a fixed bar across its middle. Do not let it scare you) and therefore in need of help to attain the knowledge to perform and choose exercises correctly. Ultimately performing exercises correctly on particular body parts (e.g. increase the workload on your glutes) will lead women to attain the ideal fit female body (e.g. lean and lithe) to be more attractive to men as evidenced by comparing the Smith machine to a date with a man (e.g. Smith may just be the safe, secure and stable partner you have always wanted to be set up with).

Other rhetorical strategies invoked within the ACCENT stories that normalised the fit body and particular forms of exercise promoted to attain it, included the use of exercise science terminology (e.g. core training, multi-joint exercises and functional training), the citing of research studies (e.g. a study by researchers at McMaster University) and/or statistics (e.g. over 50% of US adults are sedentary) and the listing of official titles or credentials of experts (e.g. Ph.D., exercise physiologist and certified personal trainer). The use of these concepts and terms further reinforced the subject position and role of the expert as an important keeper of knowledge/advice for unfit and ignorant/irrational women within the exercise as beautification discourse. Ultimately, such reinforcement further legitimated the notion that a fit, beautiful and more desirable body is available through the attributes of self-control, hard work and by applying the principles of good science and enlisting the help of an expert.

The notion of hard work and fortitude drawn upon in the stories functions as a particularly noteworthy discursive strategy, since Midwestern values (in this case Iowan values) are stereotypically based upon hard, honest work, thus creating a potentially appealing image of strength and overcoming adversity, to Midwestern consumers of the ACCENT narratives. For example, a story about movie actresses training for movie roles (e.g. Hilary Swank in *Million Dollar Baby*), 'Movie toned: a hard body take hard work, even for Hollywood' actresses (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 21 February 2005) exemplifies the ideal fit body (e.g. movie toned and hard body) promoted within the exercise and appearance discourse. These discursive strategies again reinforce the attributes associated with a fit body and Midwestern values such as personal commitment, dedication and perseverance (e.g. a hard body takes hard work) present in many of the stories. However, it is the use of the 'expert fitness consultant' and exercise terminology as rhetorical devices within this story that further legitimate and reinforce these claims within the exercise as beautification discourse:

Not so fast say the fitness consultants to these stars. It's true that celebrities enjoy perks such as private training and nutritionists, and have plenty of time and motivation ... But the consultants say the Law of Physiques aren't suspended for the rich and the famous. Biel, Swank and Garner earned their bodies the old fashioned way: Eating right and exercising hard. A combination of cardio and weight workouts were central to all three actress' regimes.

A further example which invoked research studies to reinforce the subject position of the expert (i.e. personal trainer) as necessary to help unfit (i.e. women new to exercise) and ignorant (i.e. women who do not how to exercise) women attain the attributes of a fit body (e.g. motivation, confidence and able to set proper exercise goals) comes from the story, 'Trainers give newbies a lift' (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 3 January 2005):

A study published in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* suggests that people new to an exercise activity perform better with the help of an expert than if they go it alone ... 'When a fitness expert conveys goals to an exerciser, his or her vision could instill goal acceptance and confidence by creating the belief that, "If an expert thinks I can do it, then I must be able to do it"' the study said. The study was small and limited but the conclusion supports a widely held belief in the fitness field: Having a pro help you design a program and set goals will advance your fitness better than if you try it yourself.

In contrast to the 'Movie toned' extract which invoked the fitness expert/consultant to reinforce personal agency and 'old fashioned' Midwestern hard work, within this extract, while an expert is positioned as helping women attain similar attributes of a fit woman (e.g. goal acceptance and confidence), the power and knowledge for doing so is placed solely with the expert (e.g. having a pro help you design a programme and set goals will advance your fitness better than if you try it yourself). Within this story, the study cited and the quoting of expert credentials serves to legitimate claims in the story. In turn the individual is stripped of agency, as women are told that they cannot gain the attributes of strength and fortitude on their own, though they can gain them with help. Regardless, as with the 'Movie toned' story, women are again positioned as unfit and inadequate because they lack the attributes of those who are fit and knowledgeable when it comes to exercise.

As with the weight loss stories, both of the above stories ultimately suggest that the attributes of a fit body can be gained if women become better consumers (i.e. both stories suggest hiring a personal trainer) in order to 'fix' their unfit bodies. This is further evidenced by recommendations made later in the *newbie story*: 'Personal training costs \$60–100 per hour, but don't view it as a recurring cost. Think of a trainer as a consultant helping you start a project ...' (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 'Trainers give newbies a lift', 3 January 2005). As mentioned, an additional discussion of the discourse of consumerism follows in the next section.

Another story appearing 27 December 2004, 'Don't get burned by counting heavily on after-burn: post-exercise effect provides limited benefit', further exemplifies the above use of rhetorical strategies and associated effects within the stories, as a misinformed/ignorant writer discusses confusion and concern regarding the caloric expenditure of her exercise regime after having eaten too much food at a holiday party:

I read on the internet that my body was continuing to burn calories at a higher- than-normal rate even after my workout. But waddling home, I wondered about the extent of that so-called after-burn, formally known as exercise oxygen consumption. 'The magnitude of the effect is exaggerated' says Cedric Bryant, chief exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise. Bryant, who holds a Ph.D. in physiology has reviewed numerous studies on the effect and concludes that after burn –which can last two to 15 hours after a workout, depending on exercise intensity – amounts to about 10 to 15 calories for every 100 calories burned during actual exercise.

Within this example, we again see that despite her best efforts at using exercise to offset her caloric intake and implied overweight body (e.g. But waddling home), the woman in the story is positioned as ignorant/irrational as she obtained her information on the internet. The title of the article – ‘Don’t get burned by counting heavily on after-burn: post-exercise effect provides limited benefit’ – further positions women as ignorant and naive, suggesting that women may be fooled, but the information in the story will help them become more informed. The expert quoted within the story further legitimates these claims. Cedric Bryant not only has a Ph.D. but works for the American Council on exercise, and is thus able to set women ‘straight’. His expertise and the accuracy of his claims are further evidenced through the research studies he has assessed and exercise science terminology used to explain the truth (e.g. after burn – which can last 2–15-h after a workout, depending on exercise intensity – amounts to about 10–15 calories for every 100 calories burned during actual exercise).

Later in the story, another expert, ‘Conrad Earnest, director of the Center for Human Performance and Nutrition Research at the Cooper Institute in Dallas’ explains that after-burn may be possible, but only through hard, intense exercise. By invoking an additional expert, the subject positions of unfit woman and ignorant/irrational woman are further reinforced, as further research and exercise terminology (e.g. excess post-exercise oxygen consumption [EPOC] effect, lifting to failure and mid-intensity cardio) are used to suggest that most women will not achieve after-burn due to ‘choosing’ less intense exercise, largely due to ignorance of the exercise–caloric–expenditure relationship:

Key studies have shown that an elevated EPOC effect for people who lifted very heavy weights: 90 minutes sessions of lifting to failure, compared to lighter lifting or mid-intensity cardio work. But, Earnest says, such heavy lifting ‘is not what the average soccer mom is doing in the gym’ – nor what she’s likely to do to justify that extra bite of candy.

Ultimately, by constructing women’s exercise within a discourse of exercise as beautification and positioning them as unfit and ignorant/irrational, as with previous studies, healthism is perpetuated (i.e. women are held personally and morally responsible for their bodies’ shape, weight and size) (Murray 2008, Zanker and Gard 2008, Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Additionally, in line with what Dworkin and Wachs (2009) found in their media analysis of health and fitness magazines, our news media analysis further identified that the idealised fit and unfit body messages were intimately tied to consumer culture. We now turn to consumer discourse and its role in the ACCENT narratives.

Consumerism: the responsible consumer

Thirty of the 40 articles constructed women’s exercise within a discourse of consumerism. In light of our earlier discussion concerning the subject position and/or role of the expert, a discourse of consumerism can be further shown to intersect with a discourse of exercise and appearance, reinforcing the subject positions of unfit woman and ignorant/irrational woman in order to market particular forms of expert help in the form of products and services. Within the context of exercise and fitness, a discourse of consumerism therefore emphasises the purchasing and/or use of products (e.g. fitness equipment, magazines and fitness/exercise DVDs) and

services (e.g. gym/fitness facilities and personal trainers/fitness consultants) so that ignorant women may gain knowledge to take control of their bodies and attain the attributes of the fit body constructed within exercise as beautification discourses.

Within consumerist discourse, it is implicit and at times explicit, that readers of fitness texts – in this case readers of *ACCENT* – are a captive audience who can be stimulated to purchase exercise and fitness products and services, to preserve dominant cultural gender and body ideals through policing their exercise behaviours (Markula and Pringle 2006, Smith Maguire 2008, Dworkin and Wachs 2009). In the context of exercise and fitness, consumerism (i.e. the act of purchasing products and services to build and attain a fit body) is thus a disciplinary practice/activity which further ensures and reinforces the gendered ‘norms’ of exercise and the ideal fit female body discussed earlier.

While feminist researchers interested in women and exercise and the implications have acknowledged the media saturated consumer culture as important in the shaping of women’s subjectivity (see Markula and Kennedy 2011), an explicit analysis of consumption and consumer culture of media narratives has at times been overlooked by some feminist analysis (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). However, in their recent analysis of fitness magazines, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) summed up consumerism discourse and the implications for women,

In consumer culture, an endless array of goods and services become critical to self-construction and display. Through goods, services and rituals of display, each body is part of an endless process of marketplace definition. In such an environment, the consumer begins to see her body as an alien object that must be constantly managed through consumption to preserve position and identity. (p. 10)

A subject position of ‘the good consumer’ is therefore created within consumer discourse whereby women are positioned as moral and good if they continually consume and/or purchase the various means to achieve a fit feminine body and identity (Markula and Kennedy 2011). This subject position has the effect of ensuring that ‘the bodies of the privileged are legitimated and idealized as moral actors’ (Dworkin and Wachs 2009, p. 11). The further implication is that those individuals unable to be ‘good consumers’ of exercise and fitness products due to being in less privileged social and class locations are viewed as morally lax.

One way that a discourse of consumerism was identified in the present study was through the pervasive use of terms related to the consumption/purchase of specific goods (e.g. fitness equipment) and services (e.g. hiring a personal trainer and joining a gym) within story headlines. Consider the following the array of headlines from the Cedar Rapids Gazette: ‘Fitness equipment: tips for navigating the home gym jungle’ (7 February 2005), ‘Balancing act: new equipment challenges muscles’ (7 February 2005), ‘Stepping to the forefront: new videos give dance-based classes a boost’ (15 February 2005), ‘Trim your body on a slim budget’ (21 February 2005), ‘Greed diet exchanges pounds for dollars’ (27 December 2004), ‘Virtual support program for weight loss’ (3 February 2005), ‘Personal trainer: Part skiing, part skating’ (20 December 2004), ‘Purdue offers aspiring trainers course of action’ (3 January 2005), ‘Weighty decisions: how to choose a health club that’s right for you’ (20 December 2004) and ‘Health clubs/do research when picking a gym’ (20 December 2004). All of these headlines clearly equate women’s fitness and exercise

practices with the consumption/purchasing of goods and services in the form of programmes, gyms/health clubs, personal trainers and/or the use of fitness equipment.

Images and advertisements which positioned women's bodies as unfit, flawed and in need of a product and/or service to attain a fit or better body, were further used to identify a discourse of consumerism. For example, 10 images depicting women exercising on various forms of equipment, using exercise products, or being assisted by an expert (e.g. trainer), accompanied stories. As indicated earlier when discussing *The 'Get fit' column* by Nancy Cole, images featured a young, white, sexual, fit body ideal demonstrating exercises in a gym, on equipment (e.g. a Smith Machine) or holding equipment (e.g. light weights). Where images accompanying stories were of an older woman with a more 'average' body type, as in the case of two weight loss stories 'Getting smaller with a little help from my friends' (28 February 05) and 'Fine-tuning: fitness routine makeovers for 2005-tips from a pro' (3 January 2005), such images were accompanied by pictures of a female personal trainer who exemplified the body ideal, again reinforcing the importance of being a good consumer (i.e. hiring a personal trainer) in order to work harder and attain a fit body.

An additional 11 advertisements for fitness products or services (e.g. 'toning' shoes, gym memberships) and five advertisements for body modification (e.g. plastic surgery) accompanied stories. Together, these advertisements not only reinforced the subject position of an unfit woman in need of expert help, but the Midwestern attributes of self-control, discipline and hard work were positioned entirely in monetary terms (i.e. if women become good consumers and spend money on exercise and fitness products they will be rewarded with a fit female body and its associated attributes). For example, an advertisement for the 'Gold Pointe Fitness Club' (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 3 January 2005) supposedly makes it easy for women to 'come be a part of our grand new jazzercise class' (a gendered form of exercise) by offering them '\$50 off a Platinum Membership that Includes Tanning!' The use of the terms of 'platinum' and 'tanning' further imply the that fitness is equated with privilege and the rewards of being fit, tanned and rich.

The discourse of consumerism was further identified through the subject position of the expert as the keeper and gateway to knowledge concerning a fit female body and the associated attributes of discipline, control, motivation and confidence. While the role of the expert was discussed in the previous section, it is noteworthy that 22 of the 30 studies drawing upon a discourse of consumerism specifically invoked personal trainers as commodities to be hired, if not required. This practice further reproduces the notion that women are primarily responsible for their own health (i.e. healthism) and they should therefore be good and responsible consumers by hiring personal trainers to help them achieve good health (Smith Maguire 2008, Dworkin and Wachs 2009).

Within a discourse of consumerism then, personal trainers are not only positioned as gatekeepers of knowledge and fitness for the unfit, but they are positioned as 'hot commodities' that hold the key for unfit and ignorant women to gain the knowledge and self-control absolutely necessary to become more fit. A segment of text that appeared to the side of the 'Fine-tuning: fitness routine makeovers from a pro' (Cedar Rapids Gazette, 3 January 2005) within the weight loss story discussed earlier, exemplifies these points:

Makeover your own routine: Consult a certified fitness professional. With the massive amount of fitness information (and misinformation) out there, this will be your best

bet. Remember, when you read something in a magazine or on a Web site on your own, the author is not evaluating you. Contact a certified trainer at a local fitness facility for an evaluation to help you, based on your needs.

Conclusions

The discourse analysis of the ACCENT stories shows that texts used to promote and/or construct women's exercise primarily drew upon a discourse of exercise as beautification and a discourse of consumerism. The former discourse has been shown to be dominant in women's exercise promotion, making it difficult for alternative framings of exercise, women's bodies and subjectivities (and subsequent psychological and emotional experiences) possible (Markula 2004, Saguy and Almeling 2008, McGannon and Spence 2010). Such discourses (re)produce and normalise that women's bodies are unattractive or not attractive enough and inherently flawed and weak, further drawing upon the latter discourse of consumerism to position women as in need of help and/or fixing in order to perpetuate the selling of products, programmes and services when it comes to exercise.

Media narratives in ACCENT also emphasised that women *should* exercise (i.e. there is a tone of urgency), not for enjoyment or wellness reasons – as is often the focus of 'responsible' health promotion campaigns (Randolph and Viswanath 2004, Berry and Spence 2009), but because they may not attain the associated attributes of an ideal fit body (e.g. motivation, confidence, sexiness/be attractive to opposite sex and perform exercises properly) by being responsible consumers. Women were held personally and morally responsible by the media because they had not exercised enough, if at all and/or were not doing the right kind of exercise and should therefore control such transgressions via modes of exercise deemed female/feminine, or literally exercise caution if being physically active. The result was a subject position created for women from which they might experience themselves in relation to their exercise in a narrow and limited manner.

The preceding is problematic because such representations of women's exercise and bodies may normalise negative feelings surrounding the physical self (e.g. feeling guilty about not exercising, feeling ashamed for not exercising correctly or feeling anxious or afraid that our bodies do not measure up) (Bordo 1993, Scott-Dixon 2008, McGannon and Spence 2010, McGannon *et al.* 2011). What is further lost and subverted in these media-level discourses, is the ineffectuality of weight loss and body shaping regimes which are marketed and sold, and the damage that such programmes may do to the psychological and physical self. Subverting the reality that weight loss regimes can be damaging and/or that they do not work ultimately excludes promoting more healthful practices of exercise and ways of viewing the female body, fitness and femininity.

Finally, by drawing upon a discourse of exercise as beautification and a discourse of consumerism, social difference in ACCENT stories was erased with texts emphasising heterosexual, white, middle class women in order to perpetuate the purchasing of products to fix unfit, flawed bodies. Thus only women with the time, money and inclination toward a narrow version of femininity and beauty in relation to exercise may reap and experience the benefits and rewards of power, status and moral superiority that supposedly accompany a fit body (Bordo 1993, Murray 2008, Zanker and Gard 2008, Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Because such positioning is

politically charged by the ideologies of consumerism and economic interests (e.g. the diet and fitness industry), challenging and changing such discourses can be difficult.

Apart from larger institutional changes, this research allows us to further consider how resistance practices can highlight the power of individual action in the process of resisting dominant discourses, reconfiguring the discourse/power nexus. Such resistance points to women becoming politically aware and literally *actively* resistant, questioning the limits of 'natural' identities and practices in exercise formed through the games of truth that may disempower women (see Markula 2004). Previous studies have shown that women challenge/resist dominant discourses by *consciously* embracing their shape as fit and feminine regardless of weight/size, building a muscular body apart from appearance aspirations, changing the meaning of the term 'exercise' to movement, and enjoying the freedom that comes from movement apart from appearance, reconfiguring dominant discourses of femininity (Markula 1995, Haravon Collins 2002, Kennedy and Pappa 2011, Laffrance 2011, Markula and Kennedy 2011, McGannon *et al.* 2011).

It should be acknowledged that the process of consuming or resisting the dominant discourses and subject positions identified in ACCENT and other forms of media (e.g. fitness magazines and advertisements) is not straightforward. Research has shown that women experience liberating features of exercise in varying degrees (Krane *et al.* 2004, Brabazon 2006, McGannon and Spence 2010, McGannon *et al.* 2011, McGannon in press). How and why this is the case may relate to women literally *exercising* agency via the tactical usage of discourses to negotiate new and different subject positions. Indeed, our analysis of the belly dancing story and the 'Get fit' columns raised this possibility in regard to the women's bodies are either being acceptable in relation to more realistic body attributes (e.g. rounded bellies) or the promotion of weight training for women as potentially empowering vs. disempowering. Such findings reinforce the importance of focusing upon, and further understanding the role of, discourse at both cultural and individual levels.

As a means of challenging and changing dominant discourses and associated practices at cultural and individual levels, this paper points to the value of research employing a critical perspective (i.e. post-structuralism and critical discourse analysis) to learn more about news media narratives and women's exercise. As far as we are aware, this is the first study to use a critical perspective in the manner we have to explore women's exercise in newspapers. Using critical discourse analysis allowed us to focus on the nuanced role of language and discourse in constructing women's exercise and discuss the implications for female subjectivities, allowing for feminist consciousness to be further raised (Weedon 1997, Willig 2000). While our research only modestly contributes toward this endeavour, future research can continue to contribute toward resistance of dominant discourses by using critical research methodologies to study media texts (e.g. television, magazines, film and websites) to learn more about how women's bodies are (re)presented, and the implications for psychological and behavioural experiences for recreational (non)exercisers. Critical analyses can contribute toward media literacy by deconstructing what is taken for granted in women's exercise and fitness promotion. Opening such a window is something that researchers and practitioners can benefit from in order to promote exercise in ways that lead to more healthful outcomes for women (Markula and Kennedy 2011).

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Note

1. A more detailed approach to carrying out the critical discourse analysis outlined here has been outlined in our previous article within this journal. Readers interested in further details on how to carry out a critical discourse analysis are referred to the methodology section in McGannon and Spence (2010).

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