

'These chicks go just as hard as us!' (Un)doing gender in a Dutch CrossFit gym

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Abstract

CrossFit is a relatively new fitness movement/sport, where women and men train together in the same space, performing the same athletic movements and gender equality is celebrated in CrossFit marketing, promoting equal opportunities for men and women. This paper explores how the much emphasized gender-equality narrative in CrossFit unfolds in gender performativity in a Dutch CrossFit gym. To this end, we draw from an ethnographic case study through which we examine the gendered narratives and bodily gestures of CrossFitters. Using Butler's heterosexual matrix, we found that gender ideologies emerge in explicit and implicit narratives, materials and organizational structure, and embodied performances in the CrossFit gym. CrossFitters, on the one hand, explicitly challenge gender norms and create a space where women can undertake behaviour that is traditionally considered masculine. However, traditional gender norms, including heterosexual desire, are nonetheless implicitly reproduced through performances, narratives and organizational structures present in CrossFit.

Keywords

body, CrossFit, ethnography, fitness, gender, gyms, heterosexual matrix, muscularity, performativity

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Introduction

‘It was not part of our culture to even consider that women are not equal or that their performance should not be as equally valued’, Carroll recalled (Warekentin, 2018).

This quote from Nicole Carroll, the director of training and certification at CrossFit HQ, reflects the general idea that proliferates in the CrossFit community. The exercise regime is for everyone, and the sexes are valued equally. In this way the sexual ‘equality’ narrative that lies at the heart of CrossFit could be viewed as providing the foundations for a gender-neutral space – a space that challenges gendered hierarchies that exist in more traditional forms of sport and fitness that have constrained opportunities for women and some men. CrossFit explicitly aims to resist unequal opportunity for men and women, but is this done through essentializing gender as sex and thus, with little consideration of the complex gender ideologies? The aim of this paper is to explore how CrossFit’s gender-equality narrative unfolds in the gender performativity in a Dutch CrossFit gym. Before turning to the empirical data and analysis, we first provide the context of CrossFit with a literature review and present our theoretical framework.

Context of CrossFit

In the year 2000, Greg Glassman and Lauren Jenai founded CrossFit: an exercise regime and sport. This movement has since rapidly grown into a billion-dollar international fitness business. There are thousands of affiliate gyms worldwide and the training methodology incorporates fitness trends such as high-intensity interval training and group personal training (Bailey et al., 2017). The CrossFit movement has attracted a young demographic (Rally Fitness, 2017) that is mostly white and middle-class (Heywood, 2016). Furthermore, CrossFit invites both men and women to participate (Podmore and Ogle, 2018), making it a sex-shared fitness and sporting space.

CrossFit distinguishes itself from traditional exercise regimes by using the element of competition to achieve desired fitness results. Members keep score through timing their workouts, counting the number of reps/rounds, or the weight lifted as a way of determining their fitness level. Moreover, CrossFit participants are described as athletes, regardless of their size, shape or ability level, hence the positioning of CrossFit as the sport of fitness (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). In addition to this competitive feature of CrossFit workouts, there are also CrossFit competitions such as the annual CrossFit Open and the CrossFit Games. This aspect of competition, generally associated with traditional masculinity, seems to be a big part of the CrossFit movement.

The CrossFit classes are primarily run in a group setting where everyone performs the workout of the day (WOD). These workouts are promoted as ‘inclusive’ for any ‘committed individual’, meaning that they can ‘scale’ to the specific abilities or needs of participants (CrossFit, 2018). One of the inclusive features of the WODs is the distinction made between male and female participants in, for example, prescribed weights and exercise movements, while still performing the ‘same’ workout in the same space. Through putting these committed individuals together in a CrossFit class, a team-like relationship among members is created that stretches across all CrossFit gyms (Bailey

et al., 2017). Supposedly, the opportunity to be part of a team separates the culture of CrossFit from other commercial fitness facilities (Bailey et al., 2017) creating an inclusive space.

The nature of the CrossFit workouts is another structural aspect that encourages community building. The difficult and exhausting workouts allegedly build a bond among members. Under the gaze of a coach and other participants, CrossFit defines who is fit and unfit. If one is fit, one is regarded as healthy. Performing more work over a shorter period of time makes someone powerful and therefore fit. This approach does not consider what happens after the workout or what one has to do or give up in order to perform that way, to be fit, to be 'healthy'. Nash (2018) concludes that the CrossFit approach to exercise is problematic,

not only because it establishes norms that marginalize people who are not able or who choose not to participate in these types of activities but because it also affirms . . . ideologies which promote the measurement and value of health, fitness, and self-esteem by extreme achievements.

These extreme achievements are gendered constructs, as Nash (2018) links them to masculinity.

CrossFit and gender

Previous studies on CrossFit have also focused on gender. Dawson (2015) suggests CrossFit pushes the boundaries in reference to women's bodies as it encourages visible muscularity, which deviates from traditional femininity. At the same time, Dawson (2015) mentions how 'the representation of gender and body ideals within and beyond the CrossFit community is fraught with contradictions' (p. 363). This is illuminated by the work of Bobbi Knapp (2015a) who concludes that the representation of women in *CrossFit Journal* (a journal published on the CrossFit website) both reinforced and challenged traditional femininity and gender differences. Women were relatively under-represented compared with men, and the images in the journal reinforced the idea that men are physically superior to all women (Knapp, 2015a). The work of Washington and Economides (2016) shows similar findings concerning the manifestation and rejection of traditional femininity in CrossFit women on the Internet. In a separate study, Knapp's (2015b) observations in an American CrossFit gym indicate that women were encouraged to move beyond the traditional norms of 'toning and firming' to push their bodies to become strong, powerful, fit and to even develop a muscular appearance. The men in the gym were encouraged to move beyond the norms of male physical superiority and view women as their equals (Knapp, 2015b).

In addition to the gender norms concerning the body, the oppositional stands on the inclusivity or exclusivity of CrossFit show the complexity of this space. Bailey et al. (2017) claim there is a lack of power and status differentiation between members in the CrossFit gym, suggesting an inclusive culture. On the other hand, Podmore and Ogle (2018: 8) discuss participants' 'diverse array of lived realities' in terms of inclusivity/exclusivity that lead back to gender norms produced in the CrossFit space. This space transgresses the norms of femininity by women showing traits of traditional masculinity

such as strength and aggressiveness. These are appreciated within the gym, but not in spaces outside the gym.

While traditional femininity appears to be challenged in CrossFit, masculinity seems to be mostly reinforced. Nash (2018) argues that masculinity is deeply entwined in CrossFit's origins in military training. In her study on CrossFit, men were often found complicit in the social formations that privileged hypermasculine behaviour in a gym (Nash, 2018). While Knapp (2015a, 2015b) is quite positive about the opportunities CrossFit provides for women to move beyond traditional femininity, Nash (2018) elaborates on how the hypermasculine discourses in CrossFit are problematic. A much-repeated example is the naming of the 'benchmark' WODs, respectively the 'Heroes' and 'the Girls'. The choice of 'the Girls' is explained by one of CrossFit's founders, Glassman, as 'anything that leaves you flat on your back and incapacitated only to lure you back for more at a later date certainly deserves naming' (Glassman, 2003; Knapp, 2015b; Nash, 2018). This positions women as 'sexual vixens' and subordinate objects of male heterosexual desire (Knapp, 2015b). Furthermore, the 'Hero' workouts are almost exclusively male names. Knapp (2015b) powerfully states that 'this lack of representation suggests that either women are not heroes (and thus overlooks their contributions in military, civil service and intelligence agencies) or that women's heroic acts do not matter'. Nash (2018) explains how the masculine character of CrossFit is embodied through its obsession with 'objectivity'. Historically, fitness has been associated with femininity/women, but this has been removed in CrossFit through associating it with hypermasculinity, the military and a specific set of objectives related to performance (Nash, 2018). This strong link with masculinity suggests that the gender-equal space that CrossFit claims to create, is only so when participants are complying with masculinity.

Whereas CrossFit employs a narrative to argue that their sport spaces provide equal opportunities for men and women to participate and therefore create gender neutrality based on the mere participation of both sexes, the aforementioned studies show how that is a limited perspective on equality. In order to create a deeper understanding of the gendered reality of CrossFit, we used the heterosexual matrix by Butler (1990).

Heterosexual matrix

In sport, gender is considered an organizing principle (Anderson, 2010; Hargreaves, 1994) as people make sense of sport based on ideas about what is suitable and acceptable for different genders. This construction of gender is largely embodied in sport, since it takes a serious stance towards the body and its abilities and skills. According to Judith Butler (1990), gender is not a stable notion singularly possessed, but rather a creation recreated through social and cultural practices. Gender is accomplished through performativity, a series of repetitive acts and rituals that lead to a 'natural' gender in the context of the body, 'understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration' (Butler, 1999: xv). Butler (1990) argues that bodies do not always conform to the norms by which their materialization is impelled. She refers to those nonconforming bodies as 'abject bodies', those whose gender performativity diverts from the traditional repetition of historically gendered constructs. This leaves people to grapple with the complexity of performing gender in sporting spaces.

People base their social organization on traditional gender roles: femininity and masculinity (Bartky, 1990). Butler theorized the connection between gender and sexuality through her concept of the heterosexual matrix. She writes, 'for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (Butler, 1990). Acceptable behaviours for men and women are thus signified through heterosexuality, and assumptions of heterosexuality guide 'appropriate' gender socialization (Krane, 2001). Being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate and gentle, are coded as feminine characteristics in Western societies. Women are often judged as (in)appropriately female in relation to these. Men are expected to show hegemonic masculine features, which include strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence and independence (Choi, 2003; Krane, 2001).

Individuals who engage in gender nonconforming behaviours are scrutinized and marginalized by society. Gender performances are deeply embedded in our culture and therefore feminine and masculine behaviours are considered normal (Krane, 2001). The social constructions of gender roles in a particular society lead to the labelling of sporting activities as either 'appropriately' feminine or masculine (Pfister, 2010). However, shifts in the feminine ideal are occurring, as several scholars argue (Azzarito and Katzew, 2010; Knapp, 2015a; Pfister, 2010; Van Amsterdam et al., 2011). The results of these studies indicate that, in the construction of gender, reproduction of and resistance to ideals coexist.

The resistance to ideals only exists in the presence of norms. In the theory of the heterosexual matrix, normative sexualities are constructed through sustaining gender and sexual inequalities in a complex matrix of power relations. The female/male binary is powerful and rigid, and doing gender and sexuality in non-normative ways is not simply a matter of choice; it involves combating the subjective constraints and the pressure of accepted discursive practices (Davies, 1989; Renold, 2006).

The narrative around equality in CrossFit seems to be based on equal participation of men and women in this sport space and validation of athletic performances regardless of a person's sex. For anyone to belong to CrossFit, individuals only have to show a strong sense of commitment through active participation and interaction. The implication here is that sex does not matter to CrossFit participation: CrossFit is apparently a 'sex-blind' space where sex is a non-issue and anyone can freely behave and exercise in any manner they want. However, the heterosexual matrix indicates that reality is more complex than just sex. Furthermore, considering the literature, gender does seem to be performed in complex ways in CrossFit and we aimed to explore how these performances would unfold in a Dutch CrossFit gym. Through using the heterosexual matrix, we set out to create a more complete understanding of how the relations between gender and sexuality shape the doing and undoing of gender (i.e. gender performativity) in a CrossFit space.

Methodology

This paper draws from an ethnographic study carried out by the first author in a CrossFit gym based in the Netherlands, which we will refer to as *Toujours Mieux*. The case study

entailed both direct and participant observations. During a 3-month course, detailed information about the research subjects was gathered and supplemented with nine semi-structured interviews.

Through participating in the classes, the first author was able to become part of the CrossFit community at *Toujours Mieux*. For four to five evenings a week, direct observations were conducted during the first three evening classes and field notes were taken of comments, behaviour and informal conversations. The researcher participated in the last class of the day among the CrossFitters. Becoming a direct part of their social life provided the opportunity to gather insight into how they created their community (Boeije et al., 2009). By participating in workouts, the first author experienced real-life activities together with the participants and could form an understanding of the sense-making of these events (Edwards and Skinner, 2009). While previous research on CrossFitters and their understandings of gender (Knapp, 2015a) focused on direct observations and interviews, the participatory character of this inquiry allowed the first author to immerse herself at a deeper level of the community. This contributed to a fuller insight of the gender attitudes of CrossFitters.

The field researcher, Suzanne Schrijnder, a 23-year-old heterosexual woman, had experience of an exercise movement similar to CrossFit. This assisted her in gaining an affinity with the CrossFitters. Through performing a determined training ethos and therefore gaining skills and growing stronger, while at the same time being new and unfamiliar with the habits and culture, the first author bonded with several CrossFitters. The participatory nature of the project helped her to understand the informal comments made in the gym and express herself in interviews accordingly and understand the expressions of those interviewed.

In addition to the ethnographic field work, nine semi-structured interviews were held with CrossFitters of *Toujours Mieux*. This allowed flexibility, social interaction and the chance to observe the participants in face-to-face interaction (Edwards and Skinner, 2009). Four women and five men were interviewed, including one of the coaches and the owner of the gym. Anonymity is assured through using pseudonyms for all participants of this research.

During data collection, the field notes were processed into a Word-document and examined for both improving the observations and constructing a topic list for the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. We conducted a thematic analysis of all data (Boeije et al., 2009; Crang and Cook, 2007), which consisted of line-by-line reading of the transcripts and observation reports, followed by coding and regrouping fragments into themes. We compared and discussed the coding at length, refined our initial coding scheme and identified three themes linked to the theoretical framework of the heterosexual matrix that exemplified the ways in which gender is made significant in the CrossFit setting we researched: through narratives about gender equality; through materials and organizational structures; and through embodied gendered performances. Qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, was used to manage the vast amount of data, codes and themes. The original Dutch data was translated into English by the first author.

Discussion

Our data showed how gender and sexuality were (un)done in CrossFit by our participants through narratives about ‘gender equality’, the materials and organizational structures, and embodied performances. Below we discuss these three themes.

Narratives about 'gender equality'

According to our participants, CrossFit is gender equal because anyone can and is welcome to participate. Many participants had joined a regular fitness gym before they started CrossFit and compared their lived experiences in those two contexts. Bob for example stated,

What I have seen in [regular] fitness a lot, there is the strength space and that is where the men are. Women are on the cardio machines and every now and then, they do, although this is very generalized, cardio and some strength exercises on the strength machines and not in the strength space with the dumbbells. (. . .) If you take a look at CrossFit, the thing I like about it and what makes it welcoming and equal, is that everyone does the same things. Maybe that is why everyone views everyone in the same sense.

By 'the same things', Bob referred to the WOD that is the same for all participants in a class. However, the WOD can be done 'Rx' (i.e. as prescribed by the coach) or scaled, adjusting it to an athlete's ability while persevering the same intensity. This structural element is viewed as creating a gender-equal space. The participants used this argument when asked about their view on women and men training together in CrossFit. There are no particular workouts, movements or spaces within the gym solely for women or men, except for the restrooms. Our participants also emphasized that there are many differences amongst people who participate in CrossFit related to age, gender or level of fitness. Sara, for example, said,

Yes, you do everything together, not just men-women, also the variation in people. Anyone can mix, and everyone does it in their own way. Well, their own way . . . with their own weight and what you can handle and [the coaches] take into consideration what fits you.

Like Sara and Bob, the other interviewees explicitly constructed CrossFit as a sport in which men and women participate equally. Concurrently, within their narratives, we recognize how the relationship between sex, gender and heterosexuality is implicitly reproduced. This implicit reproduction of the heterosexual matrix stands in contrast to participants' explicit ideas about gender equality in CrossFit. For example, Daniel stated,

[I think training with women is] fantastic, to start with. I also think it's sexy. Many more women should do it. I think CrossFit could be liberating for women as they are principally equal to men and the men view you as equals. One of the biggest complaints in regular gyms: 'I feel so watched'. That is just not the case in CrossFit. Because there is absolutely no time to look at each other, because you are intensely working on your own workout. Of course, men and women feel attracted to each other, so yeah, if you are all sweaty and taken half your clothes off, you look at each other. But that is okay, I think men mostly look at women in CrossFit with respect, like: holy shit, these chicks go just as hard as us or even harder. That's great and I also think that is great for women.

Daniel views women's participation in CrossFit as positive and is overtly supportive of women doing CrossFit. In his eyes it is liberating when women are doing the same thing as men (or go 'even harder') which results in a 'principal equality' between the

sexes where men respect women. Thus, even though the word ‘principally’ weakens his statement, women engaging in masculine activities is met with acceptance and respect.

This liberation does not include an escape from heterosexual desire, as women’s participation is ‘sexy’. Despite Daniel indicating there is no overt, predatory male gaze because there is ‘no time’, he undermines this viewpoint by later stating that men and women are attracted to each other and will look. His male perspective might also be limited by his experiences of this issue. The first author experienced frequent moments where she felt observed and uncomfortable. Apart from the usual high-intensity WOD, when women perhaps do not have time to worry about the male gaze, a 1-h CrossFit class includes a warm-up, potential demonstrations, skills sessions and a cool-down. These are all generally calmer moments where participants are highly visible and certainly surveilled by coaches.

This CrossFit gym has created a space where women can perform masculine activities and still be sexually attractive to men. In this quote, Daniel produces gender through the expression of a masculinity and femininity that are embedded within a presupposed hegemonic heterosexuality. Women are still subjected to the male gaze and norms around femininity and heterosexuality.

When asked about their awareness of (the meaning of) their own gender in the gym, our participants linked their athletic performances to their gender identity. Women associated a lack of strength and a certain attitude with (their) femininity. Christine expressed this as follows:

[Laughs] Being aware . . . not necessarily that I am aware of being a woman, but more that I am a little weak sometimes and that I am afraid of trying certain things. I think men dare to do more. Men just think: let’s go! [laughs]

During both direct and participatory observations, a certain partner stretch was experienced as intimate by the researcher: she lay on her back on the floor with the soles of her feet touching while her knees were pushed to the ground by her (female) partner to stretch the groin (observation, 22 February 2016). After the class, the field researcher asked her partner how she felt about the stretch exercise. At first, she responded by saying that she thought it was a good exercise as her knees would go lower every time. When asked if she thought the exercise was intimate, she responded,

Yeah, usually the women team up with women and the men with the men. But sometimes they don’t and that is fine too (observation, 22 February 2016).

This suggests that the CrossFitters at *Toujours Mieux* are aware of the other person’s sex and gender but are exposed to a space in which gender and sex differences are not supposed to be taken into account even during occasions that could be regarded as intimate. During the interviews, the interviewees unanimously stated that they find it normal to train with women and men and they do not take gender into consideration as part of their sport

Overall, our results showed that our CrossFitters explicitly construct their sport as gender equal and do not ‘care’ about a person’s sex or gender. Some of the implicit

meanings embedded in their narratives, showed how our participants reproduced the heterosexual matrix that implicates compulsory heterosexuality. Furthermore, the behaviour of these CrossFitters raises the question of how gender plays out in the material and organizational structures in CrossFit.

Material and organizational structures

Although our participants stated their conviction that the CrossFit gym fosters a gender-equal space, the constructed material and organizational structures revealed dichotomous constructions of gender. This is illustrated in the organization of the weightlifting bars. The coaches constructed the bars in a gendered manner when they asked members to grab a 'women's' or a 'men's' bar for the workout (e.g. observation, 29 March 2016). The 'women's' bar is 15 kg while the 'men's' is 20 kg. The latter is also thicker. It seems that because of the bar's weight and size, the lighter, thinner bar is defined as the women's bar, which could be based on the assumption that women are weaker and have smaller hands than men. This dovetails with Knapp (2015b), as she concludes that CrossFit standards do not take men with small hands into consideration, as the norm for men is to take the thicker, heavier bar.

In addition, the workouts at *Toujours Mieux* are organized along the rigid female/male binary. The coach would write the workouts on the whiteboard (Rx). When the workout included weightlifting, two lifting weights, the male and female weights, were written down. The female weight is always lighter than the male weight. Thus, the prescribed weight is a function of gendered construction regarding strength and ability. This corresponds with the taken-for-granted idea that by nature men are stronger than women (Kavoura et al., 2015) and the notion that women need a regulated advantage in mixed sport (Cohen et al., 2014). However, the interviewed CrossFitters said this differentiation makes the sport equal and they find it fair and logical. Emma, for example, said,

I think it is legitimate. You see, a man is always a bit stronger than a woman. And in lifting, it also has something to do with body weight and a man is just heavier than a woman and so it is easier to lift. And yeah, some people think it is unfair, that there is too much difference, but yeah, I think it is legitimate.

Similar explanations for the differentiation in prescribed weight are found in the narrative of Knapp's (2015a) participants. This led Knapp (2015a) to state that by 'demarcating prescribed weights by gender instead of body size or physical ability, trainers are complicit in reinforcing gendered stereotypes about men's and women's perceived 'natural' physical abilities' (p. 50). Although our participants construct men as naturally stronger than women, they also acknowledge that some women can be stronger than some men. Daniel's appreciation of this becomes clear in the following dialogue when he was asked how he likes training with women:

Daniel: Fun.
Interviewer: What makes it fun?

Daniel: Women are different than men. [But] certainly in CrossFit, women go just as hard as men. You know, that is really cool. It is not like, it may sound stupid, but there are a lot of women that play soccer and I have seen that from time to time, and that is just not as good as men's soccer. Unless you look at the top level, but if you compare that to the top level of men's soccer, it is just still not as good as the men's. But if you look at women in CrossFit. . . they are just as good as men. Yes, of course, men are stronger. You know, the only concession made in CrossFit is the adjusted weights and then women are just as strong. But for example, a workout like Murph,¹ with just running, pull ups and squats, Sam Briggs [elite CrossFitter] beats like 50, 60, 70% of the men. That is just really awesome.

Daniel's words are explicitly positive towards women's performances and although claiming that men are naturally stronger, he believes that the structure of CrossFit makes women's and men's strength equal. This CrossFit gender-equality narrative seems to be about acknowledging differences in women and men through creating a space where women can be and do like men, and beat them. It creates a platform where women are allowed to perform masculine athletic traits that are appreciated and accepted. Despite using the word 'concession', which slightly devalues a woman's CrossFit performance, Daniel reformulates traditional femininity into a femininity where masculine traits are celebrated, which can be linked to the organizational aspect of CrossFit being a mixed sport. According to some scholars, mixed sports can challenge the embeddedness of the dominant norm in sport: that men are strong and women are weak (Channon, 2014).

An organizational aspect that revealed the embeddedness of dichotomous gendered thinking became apparent during the observations. During their explanation of the WOD and movements, coaches would ask members to demonstrate a movement to the group. Regardless of their gender and age, everyone who was asked to demonstrate was called a 'demo-girl'. When one of the men challenged the concept of demo-girl by saying, 'Demo-boy for me then right?', the coach replied, 'No, everyone is a demo-girl' (observation, 29 March 2016). This situation was exceptional because it was the only time during the research that the demo-girl practice was questioned. In this instance, it seemed that the coach used the concept as a tool to temper the attitude of the young man who often exhibited hypermasculine behaviour in the gym. Considering that comments such as 'you throw like a girl' and 'don't be such a girl' are regarded as derogatory and offensive (Daniels, 2005; Hively and El-Alayli, 2014; Oransky and Marecek, 2009), the term demo-girl could be viewed as a discursive practice to denigrate the person who is asked to demonstrate. Since the term is utilized when a random CrossFitter's body is used for demonstrating a movement, 'demo-girl' could also be considered to signify passivity and compliance to authority. This organizational practice shows how the female gender is still sometimes implicitly constructed as weak, passive and compliant within this specific CrossFit context.

The coaches have a significant influence on the organization of CrossFit. In our research, they assigned certain attitudes or behaviour to gender. Sara, for example, relayed that when she joined the morning class, the coach told her she did not need to

worry because one other woman would join the class. At that moment, Sara was the only woman in the group. In doing so, the coach constructed Sara's gender as deviant. His action seemed aimed at comforting Sara by telling her another woman would join the class, so she would not be alone. Thus, masculinity was constructed as something women are naturally uncomfortable being around. This is in line with what Podmore and Ogle (2018) found in their study, where women felt uneasy when they were the only woman in a class. In their case, they related this to the heteronormativity in this sex-shared space that led to competition for male-attention and 'drama' around presenting the self as heterosexually attractive (Podmore and Ogle, 2018). This heteronormativity also becomes apparent in the following observation. Peter was the only man in a group of women and the discursive practice of the coach constructed this as favourable for Peter: [In front of the group] 'It's ladies' night and you, Peter, get to join!' (observation, 15 March 2016).

In both situations the coach made gender visible through naming it and thereby reproduced what Channon (2014) calls a 'sexist' way of doing gender as a sports practitioner. While women are constructed as in need of comfort for being the only woman in the class, men are constructed as lucky for participating in a class full of women. In this last construction, the underlying ideology of heterosexual desire seems to give meaning to the gendered experiences of participants in the gym.

In summary, the material and organizational structures that are used in CrossFit exemplify the importance of dichotomous gender constructions in this training methodology. The prescribed weights; the organization of bars along the lines of gender; and the coaches who construct gender differences through their structuring of workouts in the gym all highlight that CrossFit is not as gender neutral as participants believe it to be.

Embodied performances

As the previous themes indicated, some of the observed behaviour and discursive practices in the gym seem to contradict our participants' explicit narrative about gender equality in CrossFit. In this section, we illustrate how gender and sexuality was embodied and performed in *Toujours Mieux* by our participants.

During his explanation of an Open2 workout, the coach reworked the prescribed scaling options (observation, 11 March 2016). The workout contained 'bar muscle ups', a movement that only a few members mastered. The scaling alternative to this movement was 'jumping chest to bar', which meant the athlete would stand on a box and jump towards the pull-up bar and touch it with their chest. The coach called the jumping chest to bar 'gay' and the group agreed as they laughed and commented 'yeah'. Rejecting this bodily movement, the coach gave a different scaling option (ring rows). In this context, the remark 'gay' was used in a negative way, as the group laughed at the movement and the coach refuted it by changing the workout. As Renold (2006) argues, 'hegemonic heterosexual performances are maintained through the shaming and policing of abnormal or Other sexual/gender practices' (p. 493). This discursive practice and the confirmation of the group through their laughter and therewith, the lack of correction, classified the movement as undesired and re-established heterosexual masculinity as desirable.

Another example of a gendered performance occurred when the coach split the group in two: 'the ladies and David, and the men' (observation, 11 March 2016). The coach did

this, because he considered the women unable to perform ‘bar muscle ups’ while he regarded all the men, except for David, capable of this advanced movement. David identified as a man, but because he was considered unable to perform a certain activity, he was not acknowledged man enough to belong to the ‘men-group’. The group laughed about the coach’s comments and David shrugged his shoulders. This situation illustrated how the body and its physical ability is imbued with social meaning and how this is gendered (Caudwell, 2003; Gattario et al., 2015; Markula, 1995) in the context of CrossFit.

A reoccurring theme in the CrossFit narrative is how the training programme is not about aesthetics but about performance. Nonetheless, a main component of CrossFit is cardiovascular exercise, which is well known to reduce body fat (Nash, 2018). In our research, physical appearance emerged as another important issue with regard to embodied social constructions pertaining to gender. Our participants pursued a ‘good-looking’ body and, for many, this was the reason for starting CrossFit. Their definition of a good-looking body was mostly gendered, concurrent with Knapp (2015b) and Nash (2018) who recognize bodily expectations are different for men and women in CrossFit. When asked about the participation of women in CrossFit, our participants often talked about female muscularity. The appreciation of this muscularity was contested as it was considered both beautiful and ugly. For example, Emma said,

I think every woman has that [they don’t want to be too muscular]. You are just a little scared that men will think: yuk. But yes, I have constantly shifted the boundary of what I find too muscular. And now I think there is something beautiful to it and it is also hard work and you will see that [in the visible muscles]. It is more than just muscles.

As Judith Butler (cited in Caudwell, 2003) has argued, muscularity in women could function to challenge and transform gender ideals, and constitute a new ideal of accomplishment. In the above quote, Emma seemed to feel that CrossFit allowed her to expand her sense of appropriate muscularity, which can be considered a shift in gender norms. This shows how female muscularity can be embraced and accepted in a grassroots CrossFit gym. Emma also indicated admiring muscular female bodies because she considered muscularity to be a representation of the physical abilities of the body. This aligns with what several scholars found in their studies on female athletes and the meaning they give to muscularity (Mosewich et al., 2009; Roth and Knapp, 2017; Steinfeldt et al., 2011). These studies indicate that female athletes view muscles as functional, efficient and not only desired but also necessary for performance. Emma, however, also reproduced traditional heterosexual femininity, as she worried about her attractiveness to men. When Daniel was talking about his appreciation of women’s athletic performances in CrossFit, he linked this to their appearance, showing a similar tension between reproducing and challenging heterosexual desire within femininity:

Interviewer: What do you think of [a woman outperforming men]?

Daniel: Really cool. I understand that some people would think about how these women look: yeah, [their appearance is] unattractive. Then I think, *yeah, that’s not what it is all about*. They just train really, really hard, they dedicate their whole lives to their sport, and because they

have that dedication and they have a physical advantage, they look like that and they are able of such [athletic] performances. All I have is respect for that and I sure wouldn't mind if my girlfriend looked like that. She absolutely doesn't have to, but I wouldn't mind either.

At first, Daniel acknowledged the aversion some people might have to the muscular bodies of women in CrossFit. He then detailed how the appearance of a muscular woman is not 'all' about heterosexual desire, but more about the work that has been performed by that body, what it is capable of and how much he respects that. His quote ends with the comment that he 'wouldn't mind' if his girlfriend looked like that, which does bring things back to heterosexual desire. It also shows that appearance and performance are interconnected and unlikely to be separated in the case of muscularity in women (Mosewich et al., 2009). Heterosexual desire remains dominant despite the focus on strength and performance, which dovetails with what other scholars found on muscularity in women (Choi, 2003; Grogan et al., 2004; Shilling and Bunsell, 2009, 2014; Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009; Steinfeldt et al., 2011).

While our research presented narratives and performances that challenge traditional femininity through the appreciation of muscularity in women, we also found narratives that reproduced traditional norms regarding feminine embodiment. Christine, for example, explicitly constructed muscularity in women as undesirable:

Well, I follow some CrossFit accounts on Instagram, and I will see real, for real CrossFit women, they are almost bodybuilders. And I think that is really ugly. I think it's OK for [women in CrossFit] to be a little muscular, but not with huge biceps and very thick, muscular legs.

This quote suggests that there is a 'glass ceiling' for an appropriate muscular appearance in women, because they still need to be considered pretty and attractive (Dworkin, 2001).

Such results indicate that the paradox women face in sport (Krane et al., 2004) also appears in CrossFit. Women perform workouts and are accepted for being athletic, but at the same time, only a certain amount of muscularity is deemed acceptable for them (cf. Mosewich et al., 2009). During an observation (22 February 2016) a female member told the field researcher she did not want to get too muscular as she wanted to remain feminine. The embodied performances of women seem still very much influenced by traditional ideals regarding femininity and normative heterosexuality. The CrossFit space of *Toujours Mieux* offers an example of the different narratives concerning femininity coexisting and leading to different gender performances in women.

The use of clothing in the gym constituted another example of how gender was constructed. During observations, the field researcher noticed that shirts were taken off and people would do their workout bare-chested. There was a clear difference between women and men in this behaviour as only one woman was observed taking her shirt off on two occasions (wearing a sports bra), while multiple men took their shirts off rather frequently. Our interviewees said they were not surprised about men taking their shirts off more often than women. The explanation given for this was that, compared with women, men would be less insecure about their bodies. They considered it normal for

men to work out bare-chested in CrossFit, more so than for women. When women challenged this norm, their behaviour was sexualized. The following observation of an Open workout is an example of this:

The workout was performed in several heats. I was in the second group, while the other woman in the Open group was in the heat before me. Both she and several men had taken their shirts off prior to the start signal of the workout. I decided to also take my shirt off during my heat. I told the woman, 'I am just taking my shirt off too!' She said, 'Yeah, just do it'. When I took my shirt off, one of the men said, 'Whoa, the ladies are going wild! Both taking their shirt off'. He was the only one who commented, and no one corrected him for doing so. Nothing was said about men taking their shirts off (observation, 25 March 2016).

This behaviour is not gender neutral, as it is sexualized for women but not for men.

In sum, the embodied performances at *Toujours Mieux* both challenged and reproduced dominant notions regarding gender and heterosexual desirability. Bodily movements were linked to sexuality that reinforced heteronormativity and rejected other sexualities. The skills and strength of women's bodies were appreciated and the consequential muscularity was both accepted and shunned, but nonetheless linked to heterosexual desirability.

Conclusion

CrossFit is a relatively new sport and training methodology that seems promising with its explicit gender-equality narrative in its sex-shared environment. Our research has shown how the empirical reality in a CrossFit gym to some extent substantiates this narrative. The members of *Toujours Mieux* showed a clear appreciation of the collective nature of the sport and an appreciation of the performances of all members regardless of their sex. In particular, the performances of women in terms of strength and agility were valued. Moreover, CrossFit has created a space where women can be muscular, which indicates a reformulation of femininity, leaving more room for muscularity as a positive attribute (cf. Mosewich et al., 2009; Roth and Knapp, 2017; Steinfeldt et al., 2011). This suggests that CrossFit could be an empowering sport, especially compared with fitness or other more traditional sports.

At the same time, using the heterosexual matrix, our data has revealed that a gender-equality narrative essentializing gender as sex does not remove the complex gender ideologies that are dominant in sport and fitness. The narratives of our participants implicitly showed how difficult it is to avoid dichotomous gender categorizations. For example, the organizational and material aspects of CrossFit revealed the tension between the aspiration for gender equality and the social constructions regarding gender that position men as strong and competitive and women as weak(er) and mainly judged on their appearance in line with heterosexual desire. Use of the 'demo-girl' concept and re-establishing heterosexual masculinity as desired through shaming other sexualities were exemplary of the reproduction of the traditional sex-gender-desire order (Butler, 1990; Caudwell, 2003), which benefits (heterosexual) men more than women. CrossFit provides opportunities for women to participate, and even challenge male supremacy in sport, but muscular fitness remains the purview of men (James and Gill, 2017).

This tension between change and upholding the status quo with regards to gender inequalities in sport, dovetails with the findings of studies on gender in sport (e.g. Choi, 2003; Dworkin, 2001; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Mosewich et al., 2009; Pfister, 2010; Roth and Knapp, 2017; Shilling and Bunsell, 2009, 2014; Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009; Steinfeldt et al., 2011). Our study has exemplified how, in a relatively new sport that formulated an ideology in favour of gender equality from its inception, traditional gender ideology still works its way into the discursive practices, organizational structures and embodied performances. This often happens implicitly and is therefore hard to recognize and change. Since the explicit focus on gender equality is expressed so vehemently throughout the CrossFit community, the ways in which traditional construction on gender are reproduced in CrossFit often remain unacknowledged. Our case study of a Dutch CrossFit gym aligns with findings of other CrossFit studies that suggest that CrossFit partly offers a gender-equal space by providing equal opportunity based on sex, but gender norms still flourish and nourish traditional ways of gender (Knapp, 2015a, 2015b; Nash, 2018; Partridge et al., 2014; Washington and Economides, 2016). As such, CrossFit may not provide the utopian gender-neutral sporting space it claims to. Traditional gender stereotypes and behaviours continue to persist and are difficult to challenge, even in a new sport that puts explicit efforts into creating a level playing field for women and men to participate. Our study has shown that there is still a lot to gain from addressing complex gender ideologies that manifest more implicitly in people's narratives, organizational structures and embodied performances.

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Notes

1. One of the hero workouts explained in the introduction.
2. Worldwide CrossFit competition comprises five workouts (Rx and scaled) over 5 weeks prescribed by CrossFit HQ. The purpose is to find the fittest athletes. It is also seen as an opportunity for any athlete to participate in competition.

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