

Reflections from CrossFitters on the themes of body and community

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Abstract

CrossFit is a form of training and competition that has boomed in recent years. It is part of a fitness culture with a strong focus on the body and appearance, a trend that has become prevalent in today's society. This study closely examined the reflections of CrossFitters based on the following research question: What are the reflections of a selection of CrossFitters with regard to body ideals, body-image pressure and community? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selection of participants (five women and five men) who train at a CrossFit centre in Norway. A qualitative, theory-based content analysis was used whereby the theory dictated the categorisation into the following main categories: body pressure, body ideals and community. Our results showed that the participants primarily associate the body with functionality, health and athletic performance. Several of the participants openly acknowledge that they desire a fit body, but that this is not the most important goal, merely a possible side effect of the training. The participants appear to be highly dedicated to the CrossFit culture, which is perceived as being an identity marker for performance development, training satisfaction and solidarity. The conclusion of the study is that the unique training form and architectural design of CrossFit, as well as the possibility to participate regardless of body size, shape or skill level within a committed and supportive community, appear to contribute to little body-image pressure and less focus on the ideal body.

Keywords: CrossFit, identity, body ideal, body pressure, CrossFit community.

† The article is published post mortem for Arild Boge.

Introduction

There are some who claim that we live in an age where body ideals are especially conveyed through social media (Fischer, 1990). These ideals have changed throughout history (Fallon, 1990). There are several studies which show that both today's young people and today's adults are exposed to idealised body images, which contributes to a perceived dissatisfaction with their own body (Holmqvist, 2013; Javo, 2012; Trekels and Eggermont, 2017). It is also found to be expressed in training and fitness environments (see for example Ackland et al., 2012). At the same time, there are studies within the fitness culture that nuance the picture. Several studies of CrossFit environments, which will be referred to later in the article, show that many of the CrossFit participants experience less body pressure and body comparison than is the case in other training and fitness environments. It is argued that this is partly due to the fact that the CrossFit culture emphasizes an inclusive training environment and that they use a modestly designed training room without any mirrors. It will be interesting to investigate further whether these are trends that also emerge in a given Norwegian CrossFit context.

This study examines how a selection of CrossFit participants reflect on the body and the social aspects of their fitness environment. It will also look closely at what reflections the participants have concerning body ideals, and whether they experience body pressure from social media. With body, it refers to concepts such as body identity, body image, body ideal and body pressure, and the social is related to what in CrossFit environments is often referred to as community.

Before we go further into the study, the concepts of *body identity*, *body image*, *body ideal* and *body pressure* must be defined. In this article, body identity is perceived in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's (1989) phenomenological body understanding. He considered bodily existence as primordial, i.e., as prior to and as a basic premise for the thoughts we establish. Our body is perceived as an integral part of our thoughts, as well as our emotions (Damasio, 2010). Our body identity is thus closely linked to our *personal identity* (Allport, 1961). Mirucka (2017, p. 33) therefore claims that: "... bodiness should be regarded as an aspect of the whole person that interacts with others and the world" (Gibbs, 2006).

We also see such a holistic understanding of body identity in the definition of *body image*. According to Grogan (2008), body image is perceived to apply to a person's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of his

or her body. In other words, body image represents a person's "inside view" of their body – that is, their feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about the body that affect how they behave towards it (Cash, 2004). Body image is therefore a multidimensional construction, linked to an individual's physical self, and which can be both positive or negative (Cash and Pruzinsky, 2002). Furthermore, Grogan claims that body image is particularly affected by how one views one's appearance and body size and shape. That is a body ideal closely related to the aesthetic and sexually attractive body. According to Pam (2013), body ideal is defined as the body type that is considered most suitable and attractive for a person, considering one's age, gender, build and culture. Body pressure is defined by the Norwegian Media Authority (Medietilsynet, 2018) as: "Pressure that is problematic to deal with, and which makes the person who experiences such pressure have a negative body image, feel dissatisfied with their body, or be ashamed or embarrassed about the way they perceive themselves to look" (p. 3).

Glassman and CrossFit

Before we move on to our study, it may be appropriate to say something about what characterizes CrossFit as a phenomenon and some of the research that has been done in the field.

CrossFit is training which consists of high-intensity sessions, with a wide range of exercises and activities, or that which Glassman calls "constantly varied, high-intensity functional movement" (Glassman, 2011, p. 2). He sees CrossFit as an open and dynamic form of training whereby the purpose is increased work capacity, which is achieved by performing various functional movements with high intensity.

CrossFit training takes place in a gym, but the gym is different from regular gyms in that it consists of simple, open spaces, without mirrors and with limited equipment. The gym, or the box as it is often known, normally has Olympic weights, kettlebells, dumbbells, pull-up bars, ropes, rings, medicine balls, skipping ropes and wooden boxes. Organised CrossFit training ideally consists of 10-15 participants being led by an instructor (Hellesten, 2014). In a CrossFit session, the participants take part in a WOD (workout of the day). The exercise(s) can either be undertaken within a given timeframe, with as many repetitions as possible (AMRAP; as many rounds as possible), or within as short a time

as possible. The exercises can be undertaken individually or in a team. The idea of a team is central to CrossFit, with close connections between instructors and participants and between individual participants, which contributes to a sense of belonging and togetherness (Edmonds, 2020; Pickett et al., 2016).

As a cultural phenomenon, CrossFit is part of what we may generally refer to as *fitness culture*. Glassman (2011, p. 2) puts it thus: “In implementation, CrossFit is, quite simply, a sport – the ‘sport of fitness’. We’ve learned that harnessing natural camaraderie, competition, and fun of sport or game yields an intensity that cannot be matched by other means”. CrossFit is, for him, the ultimate fitness sport, combining friendship, competition, intensity and enjoyment of sport. In CrossFit, being fit means being versatile or athletic.

Research on CrossFit and other fitness cultures

Previous international research on CrossFit has focused on injuries (Gean, Martin, Cassat and Mears, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2021), health benefits (Hellesen, 2014; Meyer, Morrison and Zuniga, 2017; Smith, Sommer, Starkoff and Devor, 2013), psychological aspect (Dominski, Serafim, Siqueira and Andrade, 2020), the architecture of the box (Edmonds, 2020) and aspects of social identities and culture (Dawson, 2017; Pickett, Goldsmith, Damon and Walker, 2016; Podmore and Ogle, 2018; Schrijnder, van Amsterdam and McLachlan, 2020; Sibley and Bergman, 2018; Whiteman-Sandland, Hawkins and Clayton, 2016; Woolf and Lawrence, 2017).

There are few studies that focus on body identities within a CrossFit context. Baştuğ et al.’s study (2016), which looked more closely at women’s body image, showed that they developed a more positive body image by training CrossFit. Podmore and Ogle (2018) reported conflicting experiences in women who trained CrossFit, related to body image and self-esteem. Some of the participants experienced body pressure, while others experienced that physical appearance was not emphasized. Some studies of both sexes conclude that CrossFit environments are not unambiguous in what participants emphasize, and point out that both body appearance and physical performance are important (Knapp, 2015; Edmonds, 2020). The study by Knapp (2015), which examined 2,166 pho-

tographs published in the *CrossFit Journal* (2002, 2006, 2008 and 2012), concludes that women are increasingly represented in the magazines, and they appear in masculine ways, showing that traditional bodily gender ideals in CrossFit environments are changing.

Coyne (2019), who has studied women (N=149) in five different crossfit environments, concludes that CrossFit participation was positively associated with body image. They emphasized CrossFit for its community, sense of inclusion, programming and challenging. And they emphasized performance over appearance. This is partly due to the design of the training environment, where no mirrors were used.

In some studies of other more traditional fitness environments where mirrors were used, participants experienced a greater focus on body perfection and body pressure and feelings of anxiety (Dworkin, 2008; Clark, 2017).

The book *Body panic: Gender, health, and the selling of fitness* (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009) provides a good overview of how the fitness industry has grown in recent times and where a strong focus is placed on the aesthetic body. It refers to a global fitness industry where body pressure occurs and where the goal is often to achieve a perfect body appearance.¹

A number of studies within the fitness culture have also focused on the body identities and claimed that there is a high risk for body dissatisfaction (see example Ackland et al., 2012; Prichard and Tiggemann, 2008, 2010; D'Abundo, 2009). And this is often because fitness centers have an interior design and mirrors that facilitate physical comparison, which promotes a sense of physical insecurity.

Thus, the research question for this article is: *What are the reflections of a selection of CrossFitters with regard to body ideals, body-image pressure and community?*

¹ The fitness industry has become a global commercial business. This means that the various gyms have their own brands and are based on a franchise or license system. Crossfit also has the exclusive right to the name crossfit and is based on the license system. This means that greater responsibility and autonomy is given to the individual crossfit owner than would have been the case if it had been based on a franchise system.

Method

The empirical material is gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from a CrossFit gym on the outskirts of a large city in Western Norway. Two of the authors train CrossFit regularly in two different Crossfit boxes. Participants were recruited from one of the boxes.

We have used a methodological approach that can be placed philosophically within a humanistic, phenomenological tradition. At the same time, it must be emphasized that every understanding is based on a given preconception, what Gadamer calls the horizon of meaning (Gadamer, 2004). The present study is valid in the sense that it operates with given concepts and how the various participants perceive these. Typical of qualitative research is that one operates with key concepts that can be given different interpretive content by the individual participant (Nyeng, 2012). The study has followed all ethical requirements with regards to informed consent and confidentiality and has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

Participants

In May 2019, a message containing information about the project was posted to the gym's Facebook page, and interested candidates could register their interest to the researchers via personal messages on the MSN messenger service². 25 people expressed interest in the project. Of these, five women and five men were drawn at random for the study (Tables 1 and 2). To ensure the anonymity of the participants, we have given them pseudonyms instead of their original names. In terms of age and gender, there is a good level of variation among the participants (22-40 years old). Many of the participants have backgrounds in football and handball, as well as many having previously trained in regular gyms. The experience level of the CrossFit participants varies from new beginners to experienced practitioners among both genders.

2 MSN is a collection of online services from Microsoft. It is an online platform where one can communicate via direct message, or instant message (IM) in real-time. Multiple people can be logged onto the platform simultaneously.

TABLE 1 *An overview over female participants*

Participants	Tess	Monica	Christie	Sonia	Christyn
Age (years)	33	40	34	26	24
Previous sports and forms of exercise	Soccer Cheer-leading Gymnastics Gym	Swimming	Soccer Swimming Karate	Soccer Handball Gym	Soccer Handball Basket Strength-training Running
Years with CrossFit-training	2	3	5	4	1
Weekly CrossFit-sessions	4	4-5	5	5-6	5-7

TABLE 2 *An overview over male participants*

Participants	Andre	Eric	Gary	Mike	Jones
Age (years)	22	39	26	28	22
Previous sports and forms of exercise	Soccer	Soccer	Soccer Strength-training	Soccer Strength-training	Soccer Strength-training Taekwondo
Years with CrossFit-training	6-7	7	4	9	2
Weekly CrossFit-sessions	5-7	2-5	3-4	5	4-5

Interview

Interviews are part of qualitative research where the purpose is to present, analyse, and discuss the participants stories, context and understanding of a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Semi-structured interviews have a set topic, but they are open and give the opportunity for follow-up questions (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The first author conducted the semi-structured interviews in the period of May-June 2019. Each interview, which lasted 30-45 minutes was recorded digitally. The

interview was divided into two parts, where the first part was about the participants own relationship with CrossFit, and the second was about reflecting on the body and body identity.

In order to present the participants views, the interviews were conducted in an open and dynamic way, with the possibility to expand on the participants answers with the help of follow-up questions. In terms of theoretical framework, the article resides in the ideographic research tradition, where phenomenology and hermeneutics are key (Moses and Knutsen, 2007). It is the individual participants breadth of experience and opinions which is researched and discussed in relation to body theories.

Analysis

Following the interviews, the audio files were transcribed, and the participants anonymised with fictitious names.

The main categories were chosen based on studies that show that many people experience body pressure in our time. Theoretically, the article is also based on a phenomenological body view. This means that a qualitative, theory-based content analysis was also used, whereby the theory dictated the categorisation (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In summary, it can therefore be argued that the article follows an empirical theory analysis (Anker, 2020).

After transcription, content from each of the interviews were manually organised into the following main categories: *body pressure*, *body ideals* and *community*. The main categories are based on the purpose of the present study, which is to investigate whether CrossFit athletes experience body pressure in their training environment and whether they are particularly interested in developing an ideal body appearance. The *body pressure* category focuses on body pressure and image. It addresses (a) perceived body pressure in general from society and the media, and (b) perceived body pressure in the CrossFit environment. It also discusses whether the individual inflicts body pressure on themselves and compares their own appearance with others within the environment, and whether they consider the training environment to be concerned with physical appearance. In the *body ideals* category, the focus is on whether the participants believe that body ideals exist in society in general and within the CrossFit environment, and whether these ideals have changed. In the *community*

category, a closer look at the role of the collective community is taken in terms of the actual CrossFit performance and the development of the participant's own body identity project.

Results

Body identity and body image

The participants have a common understanding that much of our identity today is linked to the body and appearance. Many agree that people in general today are more focused on themselves and their bodies. At the same time, most participants have a reflective and relaxed relationship with their own bodies. Eric states:

People are more focused on themselves. There are so many ideals about how you should look. You are, in a way, indoctrinated from childhood, with ideals being thrown around everywhere, through media, Internet, TV, movies. I think our identity is largely linked to appearance and the body.

Gary is focused on training in order to stay fit and live a healthy life. He perceives a degree of “bodyshaming” whereby people “bring down others”, and that an “image is formed of how one should look, which is unfortunate”. Mike acknowledges that there is a challenge within CrossFit, whereby participants wear little clothing during training and competitions, especially at a high level, but that this is something that the community is aware of and is trying to address. He refers to the headquarters in the USA where coaches are encouraged to wear baggy t-shirts. Tess believes that many people are concerned with body image at regular gyms, but not within the CrossFit environment:

... here, we come in all shapes and sizes, and I think most people who go here are of the same opinion. How one's body looks does not mean much; we are more concerned with what the body can do. But I think it is a problem at, for example SATS (Norwegian gym chain). There, they are terribly concerned about it. The strongest often stand in the corner, in front of the mirror and think a lot about their body, taking pictures of themselves to post on social media.

All the participants believe that social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat promote body pressure. It is even more strongly expressed among women than it is men.

Some of the participants (Tess and Mike) follow top-level CrossFit athletes in the media, while at the same time considering their own CrossFit environments as being different, consisting of ordinary participants with different body types. Several of the participants consider the younger generation to be more concerned with, and therefore exposed to, body pressure than themselves. Gary says:

I follow [on social media] many from the CrossFit world, because I think it's interesting to see what they're up to and follow their daily lives. But it's clear that easily influenced people around the ages of 12-24 see them, and then it becomes like a norm, that this is how one should look, even though these people online are the complete extremes.

Mike differentiates between top-level CrossFitters and more regular participants:

I think it's exciting. At the top level, when they quickly rip off their t-shirt, and the girls are often wearing short shorts and a sports bra. And there's always a six-pack with both genders. But as soon as you move away from the top level, it's not like that.

Tess is somewhat ambivalent to body pressure:

On my Instagram, it's only pictures of strong CrossFit girls, and if I look at that before I go to bed every night, it sits in the subconscious, but that's not what drives me. There's a lot of bodies on social media in general, but I think it's worse for people who are younger than me.

Christie points out that many are good at "showing themselves from angles and in light which makes them look their best" in order to gain most likes. Sonia mentions all the editing and cheating with pictures, something which she considers frightening. At the same time, she believes it is not something people should get involved with. Christyn mentions influencers with perfect bodies who have many followers. She believes that boys are also affected by body pressure, but that girls are normally more self-critical, while boys are better at supporting one another.

When it comes to body pressure-related issues in the CrossFit environment, few of the participants have experienced this. Eric believes that there is little focus on the body within the environment:

There are very few mirrors here where you can check yourself out regularly. There's much more focus on performance than body. What you do, how you perform, that means more than having a nice bottom. There's all sorts of body shapes here.

Jones was pleasantly surprised, as he was under the impression that CrossFitters usually trained topless in order to show off their bodies. The female participants share the males' impression that there is little body pressure within the environment. It is not the how the body looks but how it performs that is important. Christyn states:

I think that external focus on the body is a myth in the CrossFit environment, I think it's more personal and subjective views within the individual that places pressure on themselves. But here in 'the box', there isn't much focus on the body in training. I think it's more of a focus on mastering skills and performing, which doesn't really have much to do with how the body looks.

Most responded negatively when asked if they trained CrossFit in order to look good physically. It is generally considered a welcome side effect of the training, something to be taken as a bonus. Eric states however:

I'd be lying if I said I didn't, because I have to be honest and say that I want to look as good as I can, but at the same time I want to look natural. If you're just a clump of muscles, it's probably ok for some people [...] I want to be someone who isn't only focused on training. I want to be able to enjoy a glass of wine, eat good food.

Jones previously had a much larger focus on bodybuilding, focusing on strength training, but as a CrossFit participant, he is more concerned with physical performance, variation and functionality.

Monica believes it is pleasant "when my weight goes down and the body works, and the training becomes easier. And if it makes me look better, it's purely an advantage". It is again the body's performance that is the focus, while physical changes are considered a bonus. Christie is mostly interested in obtaining a stronger body and getting into shape. She now has less back pain and is able to perform her job better.

Many of the participants had a clear perception that outsiders seem to have a more judgmental attitude to the CrossFit environment. For example, Sonia perceives that people outside the environment are often a little condescending to Crossfit and thinks it is something completely different than it is. Christyn believes that many outside the environment see crossfit as scarier than it is, and that those who do crossfit are “a little crazy” and that you have to be in really good shape to participate. Or as Mike says:

In the beginning we had a kind of “psychopathic status” where we were a little weird doing this extreme form of sports, but now the focus has changed. Now CrossFit is still a bit tough and demanding, but it has become more open to everyone.

Body ideals

Most participants believe that there has been a change in the ideal body for both men and women. Previously, girls were supposed to be thin and boys large, whereas now the body is supposed to be fit and functional. Christyn believes that there probably are body ideals among top-level CrossFitters, but also a range of body types, because CrossFit requires different physical qualities:

I think there’s probably many who see the ideal CrossFit body as being very muscular, whether male or female. They probably think that being very muscular with a low fat percentage applies to both men and women at a high level. Some are probably a bit bigger and can lift more weight, while others are a little smaller and are better at gymnastics. So, I think overall that many different body types can be accommodated by CrossFit.

Or as Andre puts it:

To be good at CrossFit, you have to be a hybrid in a way, since you have to be good at bodyweight exercises, weightlifting and endurance at the same time.

One highlights words like *versatile* and *all-round body* as being the key. Eric has always been fascinated by the actor Brad Pitt’s well-trained body but thinks that the most important thing is to look healthy and well. Mike admits that it is nice to walk on the beach “without a beach-ball

stomach”, but is still mostly concerned with the health aspect. A common feature is the assertion that it is the functional, versatile and performance-oriented body that is the main focus, not striving for “a perfect physical appearance”. As Mike summarises it: “it is performance we measure, not fat percentage”.³

Several of the participants experienced themselves as athletes, with a focus on developing a functional, strong body, and had less focus on developing an aesthetic, masculine body. Most of the participants are also clear on that those who train in ordinary gyms experience more body pressure and are more concerned with body appearance. At the same time, there are some who believe that there may also be a body focus and body pressure in the CrossFit environment, but that this is less compared to other fitness environments. Tess says:

I got tired of gyms. I felt that I had to put on make-up before I went to training. I experienced that there were so many who were on show, something I did not think was fun. Then my mother and I started Crossfit. We were a little nervous but found support in going together.

Sonia says:

It is a body focus in some. But it also has something to do with what type of person you are. We are different, so you will find it in every training environment, I think.

The social qualities and community of CrossFit

All the participants consider CrossFit to have a distinct social element, with an emphasis on community. It differs from other gyms in that it is geared towards a degree of unity, where everybody supports one another, regardless of training level or physical appearance. They also talk about the social activities after the training sessions, where CrossFit participants gather for a chat over a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, if anyone has brought one along.

Gary talks about the team-building element, and how participants are much closer to one another after a session. He also mentions the

3 As referred to earlier in the article, the individual's performance will be expressed by doing the exercises within a given time frame, with as many repetitions or rounds as possible or within as short a time as possible. The individual athlete also adjusts weights to their skill level.

‘couples’ exercises as being very constructive physically, mentally and socially. Mike mentions friendship and belonging to the club. He was proud when he first got his club sweater. The sweater can be seen as a meaningful symbol, identifying him as part of the CrossFit culture. He adds that this community extends to all CrossFit boxes worldwide. If you go to the USA, you are welcome to participate for free in classes in other boxes, and you will be welcomed with open arms.

Sonia finds that a CrossFit environment is one that allows people to enter it easily and one where trust with one another is built. Christyn says that a strong bond is formed with others when one exposes oneself “at your worst, when you are exhausted”. Andre says:

I don’t believe exercising here can be compared to exercising at a gym [...] We are a group here that all do the same thing together, so if the session is heavy, then it’s equally heavy for everyone [...] Or if there’s a particularly difficult lift, there are more people working to get it done. People cheer each other on, motivate and support each other [...]

Jones describes a sense of empathy and respect for others in the box. Gary talks about real happiness and about how members comfort each other, and how they all help out with cleaning when a competition is being arranged. Mike states:

When someone is doing an exercise, everyone stands round and cheers and encourages them, and when the session is over, everyone gets a high-five, no matter what their time was for the exercise or what position they finished in. This is regardless of gender, weight or body shape. People care about each other! Genuinely! This is fascinating, and I know that regular gyms don’t have this type of community. There are scaling options that allow someone who is overweight and who does not possess the skills required to complete the exercise to still undergo a complete and tiring training session, and they receive the same encouragement and support as a high-level athlete.

The female participants have similar experiences. Christie talks about the cohesion within the box and about the box’s Facebook page. She mentions a time when a member died of cancer and how members from all over the country symbolically marked the occasion by coming to the box to complete a WOD for the deceased. Several are also clear that the coach is a good motivator and support during the training sessions. Tess says: He (the coach) became in a way a personal trainer for me. When I was on

a beginner's course, I got to know him well, and he is a type who takes good care of his members.

We see that our informants often train at the CrossFit centre up to 4-5 times a week, which must be considered a lot for someone who does not compete. Nevertheless, they seem to be little concerned with a one-sided body focus with emphasis on appearance. That they train so much is probably due to the fact that they have developed a good social community. Whether we would have had other results if we had interviewed informants who trained less CrossFit, becomes an open question.

Discussion

Our results showed that the participants primarily associate the body with functionality, health and athletic performance. It can be concluded that the informants seem to promote a fit body in the sense of a fit, healthy, functional and skilled body. It seems that there is less focus on achieving a perfect body appearance, and that "looking good" becomes more of a side effect of training. The possibility to participate regardless of body size, shape or skill level within a supportive community, appeared to contribute to little body-image pressure and less focus on the ideal body.

Bodily health, pleasure, functionality and skills

The focus for many of the participants in the present study was the health aspect, something which also emerges in other studies (Glassman, 2011; Hellesen, 2014; Smith et al., 2013). The participants were very conscious of their own views on the body and stated that their focus was on developing a functional and versatile body rather than a perfect physical appearance. It is what the body can do that is measured, not how it looks. That some well-trained CrossFitters have muscular bodies seems to be more of a side effect of the amount of training they undergo and the performance requirements that CrossFit entails. This is how CrossFit also differs from several other fitness cultures where physical appearance is the focus (Barland, 2016; Maquire, 2001). Although the participants in our study do not perceive that there was significant body pressure in their CrossFit environment, they nevertheless express that their body view and body identity were governed by requirements regarding Cross-

Fit as a training culture. That is, body identity seems to be shaped by given guidelines that apply to the given social context in which they operate (Goffman, 1990).

In the study of Podmore and Ogle (2018) some women perceived that the CrossFit environment confirmed an acceptance of their bodies, and that there was a shift in their mindset from what the body looked like to what their body could do. But at the same time, there were also some women, especially those who had a normal BMI, who were dissatisfied with their bodies and who felt that they were too fat or had a too masculine body. It can be an expression of a paradoxical body ideal that some women in the fitness environment train to get a fit body at the same time as they want to preserve their female forms (Krane et al., 2004). Such a paradox was not found in our study.

Most of the participants in our study perceives CrossFit as different from training at an ordinary gym, where the focus is geared more towards the body, something they can attest to, having had previous experience training at such gyms.

We've seen that many of the participants had a clear perception that outsiders seem to have a more judgmental attitude to the CrossFit environment. Such findings may indicate that the participants use a conscious identity strategy where they need to distance themselves from "the others" outside the CrossFit environment.

We have also seen that several of the participants experience that the CrossFit environment is less body-focused than other fitness environments. Some studies show that CrossFit can differ from other sports cultures in that the participants can identify themselves as athletes, regardless of body size, body shape and skill level (Achauer, 2015; Heywood, 2016). The participants in our study seem to be very dedicated to CrossFit in terms of performance, when the object is to compete, but the participants are primarily competing with themselves, a pattern we also see in other studies (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). Our participants had also a positive attitude towards participating in local competitions, and they note that these competitions are inclusive and social settings, where people cheer each other on. As more and more people practise CrossFit and take part in competitions, the environment will, according to Woolf and Lawrence (2017, pp. 177-178), face a challenge in balancing athletic competitive culture with inclusive exercise culture.

Our informants developed a common identity closely linked to the CrossFit box. The simple architectural design of the box is also high-

lighted as a distinctive feature of CrossFit culture. This design symbolizes, among other things, the fact that the individual athletes have an independent responsibility for the session, even though it is a coach who has planned the WOD and who pushes them along the way (Heywood, 2016). Heywood believes that CrossFit culture is influenced by *neoliberalism*, which emphasizes values such as self-improvement and individual responsibility. She points out that CrossFit is facing a paradox, as the concept itself as a business idea is subject to an elitist, hierarchical structure, as with any high-level sporting environment, whereas the training itself is characterized by its inclusive, horizontal structure. This is demonstrated, among other things, according to Heywood, by the instructor's personal communications and social ties to the members. It is a demanding balancing act, something that we will return to.

We have pointed out that several of the participants appreciate that the CrossFit environment is simply structured, which strengthens the social cohesion within. We have also shown in our findings that the participants like to be pressured to train hard. Furthermore, we have seen that some of the participants perceive the coach to play a central role in the training sessions, both as a motivator and as support. Edmonds (2020) has conducted an ethnographic case study focused on the CrossFit box. He concludes that the design of the room is characterized by nostalgia and a hierarchical social structure where demands were made for high efforts and expected health lifestyle changes. A simple design of the box contributed to the fact that it was the training effort that came into focus, and that the participants established strong, binding ties to each other. Although they paid more to train at Crossfit than was usual at other gyms, they still felt that CrossFit members were considered more dedicated to the training culture, the inner community and to a non-commercial business. The close training collaboration in the box with mutual eye contact contributed to a more committed training regime with requirements to perform to the maximum, which also contributed to the coach gaining greater influence.

We have also seen that several of the participants mention the fact that there are no mirrors in the CrossFit room probably contributes to less body focus and body pressure. The fact that CrossFit gyms do not have mirrors can indicate that the environment is less interested in body image than tends to be the case at other gyms (Dworkin, 2008; Barland, 2016; Clark, 2017). Barland pointed out the mirror's central role in the body-building world. The study by Clark (2017) concludes that fitness rooms

often constitute a territorially gendered room where men and women train partly in different rooms. These are rooms that are subject to different forms of gendered gaze. This is because the room is designed with mirrors and windows where “everyone can see everyone”. In the study by Mahlo and Tiggerman (2016), where they looked more closely at yoga as a form of exercise, the female participants experienced a high degree of body satisfaction. However, in the study by Frayeh and Lewis (2018), in which women also participated, and in which mirrors were used, they discovered that several of the informants reported social physical anxiety and appearance comparisons.

As pointed out earlier, our informants emphasized the body in a functional way. We see the fact that CrossFit places emphasis on training performance in other studies (Glassman, 2011; Hagland, 2013). Hagland examines several participants who define themselves as CrossFitters, and who consider themselves to be part of a training environment where functionality and intensity are key: “The most important aspect is not how big or strong you can become, the most important thing is to have a functional body” (p. 15).

Sibley and Bergman (2018) examine more closely the physical aspect for 322 CrossFit participants, and they conclude that competence is the most dominant incentive for them. This appeared to be more the case with CrossFit than with other training environments. We see with many of our participants that it is the anticipation of mastering new, demanding skills in the box that is most dominant.

It is not unlikely that training in an inclusive and supporting environment has a damping effect when it comes to body pressure. At the same time however, we see that some of the participants seem to have a somewhat ambivalent attitude to body ideals and body pressure. We see that some of the informants still seem to emphasize the appearance of the body, as they follow, and read, crossfit magazines where top athletes with athletic bodies are portrayed.

The pleasure aspect is also highlighted by several participants. They enjoy CrossFit training, which is partly due to the sense of unity, but also the structure of the training. This pleasure aspect may also be related to the fact that CrossFit can be seen as an extension of play culture (Heywood, 2016), and that it consists of exercises which promote what Heywood calls “back to the playground” thinking.

The interviews also clearly indicate that they share the same experiences as those described in other studies, namely that that social media has

a significant impact on young people, that many are subjected to body pressure, and that this especially affects the younger generation (Holmqvist, 2013; Javo, 2012; Trekels and Eggermont, 2017). This may support the assumption that our informants experienced that body pressure mainly came from social medias and to a lesser extent from the CrossFit community itself.

The social qualities and community of CrossFit

We have noted that our participants generally apply a great deal of significance to CrossFit being a social, inclusive environment. This is a conclusion that is drawn in several CrossFit studies (Dawson, 2017; Pickett et al., 2016; Schwarzenberger and Hyde, 2013; Sibley and Bergman, 2018; Coyne, 2019). In Sibley and Bergman's (2018) study, it emerged that the social side of CrossFit scored higher than in other training environments. They explain this by pointing to CrossFit's characteristic organization, the collective boxes and a regular training program.

We have referred to the fact that several of the participants in the present study claim that CrossFit stands out compared to other gyms in terms of the social aspect. This is also the case in other studies (Bailey et al., 2019; Dawson, 2017; Coyne, 2019).

We have noted how our participants support and encourage one another during training and competitions. Bailey et al (2019)⁴ confirm this notion in their study. One of their participant states (p. 203): "yeah, you are pretty much a team; everybody helps everybody out and encourages each other, so it is good that way". Similarly to Mike's description of a similar inclusive culture at all the CrossFit gyms in the world, some of the participants in Bailey's study note that there is a sense of team spirit throughout the CrossFit boxes globally. One is welcome everywhere, and no common language is necessary in order to participate. In Bailey's study, this is explained by referring to the organisational structure and the scaled training programs, which make a sense of inclusion and mastery possible for all.

The sense of community also seems to be enhanced by the fact that the WOD/session is predictable, participants know the day before exactly

4 Bailey and colleagues examined CrossFit culture and undertook focus-group interviews with 17 informants, combining experienced and inexperienced CrossFitters, trainers and owners. They applied an analysis model developed by Schein (2010) that operates with three different levels within organisational cultures: artifacts, expressed notions and values, and silent, or 'taken for granted', notions and values.

what they will do, and there is a common understanding that everyone should do their best. Our participants share a common Facebook page where the following day's WOD is posted. This is how the CrossFit community works together, helping everybody prepare for the next training session. The communal physical effort that is put into a WOD/session, where everyone encourages each other to perform to the maximum, only seems to reinforce this feeling of being part of a community. Our findings are supported by Dominski et al. (2020) who showed in a review article that the CrossFit participants were very motivated, showed high training efforts and a strong affiliation to the training community.

In Dawson's (2017) analysis of CrossFit, she argues that community building in a gym is not unique to CrossFit. The shared experience of extreme training gives members the opportunity to connect. Nevertheless, CrossFit stands out in that it possesses an ethos whereby the purpose is to care for one another and an expectation that one should encourage others. Dawson also points out that a key identity-forming aspect of CrossFit culture is that one is not aiming to "build a body", but to build "a better version of oneself". In other words, CrossFit is perceived to be not only symbolic of a training culture, but also a specific lifestyle, something she calls "evanGYMism". In this sense, CrossFitters build social bonds "outside the box", in the private sphere. As Heywood (2016) points out (cited in Belger, 2012): "...CrossFit culture encourages the development of a 'CrossFit family' that socializes with each other outside of the box". However, a membership to a CrossFit box does not come cheap, which means that the prerogative to be included within the "CrossFit family" is dependent on sufficient financial means. This may contribute to the notion that crossfit is for an exclusive group of people.

Dawson (2017) also pointed out that CrossFit is a place where some people voluntarily submit to a social institution. It is an actively chosen process where the individual seeks an identity transformation through not only linguistic instructions, but also through self-chosen performative regulations. CrossFit training in the box, without mirrors, can give a feeling of autonomy and freedom of action. But CrossFit still has its boards where the daily WOOD is on the program, which everyone must follow. As mentioned, they will also cheer each other on where the goal is to complete the program / exercises in the best possible way. In this way, everyone will be able to look at each other, a practice Dawson believes is a collective expression of control, where the internal environment monitors and disciplines the participant (Dawson, 2017). In other words, what

takes place in the CrossFit environment is a form of performative regulation, interaction and mutual monitoring (Dawson, 2017).

To some, CrossFit may seem like a cult, according to Dawson and Heywood (Dawson, 2017; Heywood, 2016). Such a strong sense of unity helps create a notion of “us against the world” (Heywood, 2016, p. 121). In our study, we saw that some participants had experiences of outsiders seeing CrossFit as exclusive and extreme. Dawson challenges such perceptions and argues that it is more about CrossFit being centered on the idea of self-improvement, and the fact that participants view training sessions and competitions not only as physical activity, but also as a reflection of who they are.

This may indicate that the informants are less critical of CrossFit as a commercial and exclusive form of exercise. This may be because the informants place themselves within a clear sports discourse where they have longer experience of sports participation, also in previous health studies. The fact that the informants are critical of the fact that CrossFit is an exclusive form of exercise may be due to the fact that it has become global and reaches a larger part of the population. The fact that they emphasize their CrossFit training including inclusive and horizontal structures, and seem to be blind to its internal, elitist and hierarchical structures (Heywood, 2016), may be due to the fact that they are “inside” the CrossFit environment. It may also be because they do not train with those who do CrossFit at a more professional level. Finally, one can ask whether our study, which was done in a Norwegian context, can be in consensus with previous international research. We find that this is the case, because CrossFit is a training concept that is common across national borders, with the same exercises, programs, with an instructor and where the participants relate to the same architectural design of the training room. Another common denominator is the fact that CrossFit participants in different countries use social media and media platforms that are international and where the body appearance often comes into focus.

Conclusion

CrossFit participants are aware of today’s body pressure, especially towards children and young people, while they, as adults, seem to distance themselves from this pressure. The participants also experience CrossFit

boxes as being different to normal gyms, where exposure to body pressure is perceived to be greater, something they themselves have had experience of several reasons being given for this view, such as CrossFit's distinctive structure, style of training and its training community. Participants train together in a box with little equipment and without mirrors, and all must follow the current training program (WOD), which also gives less opportunity to focus on others.

One of our participants describes a very supportive and inclusive training environment, where one can participate regardless of body shape or performance level, as the current WOD can be scaled/adapted to the participant's own requirements. We have seen that participants seem to be part of a training collective in which they help one another to achieve "that little bit extra". Training together in a box, often in pairs, with an instructor who is "close to the individual", also contributes to a motivating and supportive training environment.

It has also been pointed out that the participants place emphasis on the internal incentives, such as enjoyment of training, mastery and unity, as well as the external incentives such as performance improvement and physical health. The participants came from a CrossFit gym that caters to CrossFitters of all levels, from casual practitioners to top-level athletes who participate primarily in CrossFit competitions. In any case, one can conclude that CrossFit's distinctive form of training, structural design, and supportive community seem to contribute to a reduction in both body pressure and focus on the 'ideal' body. The participants seem to have a reflective and confident body identity as a result of training in a CrossFit environment where other aspects than body appearances are emphasized, a body approach that seems to correspond in many ways with a phenomenological body perception.

One criticism of the study is that two of the authors themselves do crossfit, and that the first author has trained in the same crossfit-environment as the participants. At the same time, we would like to believe that having first-hand knowledge of crossfit as a phenomenon does not have to be a weakness, but such a pre-understanding may have influenced the study's design, findings and discussion.

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