Reversal, normalization and self-care – three logics of countering body shame through fitness activities among young Danes

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between body shame and fitness through interviews with 20 young Danes (age 15-24) who use a fitness centre at least twice a week as part of a process of self-defined bodily transformation. The analysis shows that body shame is a well-known feeling for a vast majority of the informants and that fitness is used by the informants to counter body shame in three ways: through a logic of 'reversal', where body shame is transgressed by spectacularly reversing the body – from e.g., being small to pumped or large to slender – with the goal of embodying culturally praised ideals; 'normalization', where fitness is used to avoid the negative attention linked to bodily extremes (for instance high body weight) and to be able to pass unnoticed; and 'self-care', where fitness is reframed as a bodily practice not about appearance, but linked to inner motivation, personal empowerment and wellbeing. The complex roles of fitness in relation to body shame, however, are stressed as half of the participants also understand fitness activities as co-producing shame by enabling an environment of comparison and sometimes too demanding levels of activity. Finally, the article discusses if body shame should be conceptualised not as a negative emotion to be eradicated, but rather as indicative of subjective investments in personal transformation and validation.

Keywords: shame, young people, gender, body ideals, fitness culture, the gym

1. Introduction

Shame is a feeling of being "witnessed in one's failure" when it comes to living up to social norms and ideals linked to for instance gender, sexuality and race (Ahmed 2004, 103). The body is an important source of shame, not least because bodily appearance, body control and health have become increasingly intertwined with issues of personality, identity and willpower (Greco, 2019; Mol, 2008; Boge et al., 2022). The growing preoccupation with the body, as indicative of the status and validity of the entire self, has contributed to making fitness activities a central technique for shaping the social visibility and value of the embodied subject (Sassatelli, 2010).

For the purposes of this paper we will define fitness activities as a (variety) of activities that often, but not always, take place in a gym: physical exercise that is not integrated into rule-based sports or organised team play, but rather into activities with an explicit functional, health-orientated or aesthetic focus on effectively improving aspects of the body (Kirkegaard, 2007). In a Danish context, 52% of young people 16–19 years old, and 53% of people 20–24 years old, participate in strength training, and it is a clear tendency in Denmark – as in other Nordic countries (see e.g., Andreasson, 2013) – that young people for various reasons (e.g., temporal flexibility, body ideals) move from team sports to more individual activities (like strength training and running) as they become teenagers and young adults (Rask, 2018).[1]

This makes it increasingly important to understand young people's different motivations for engaging in fitness, and if fitness is somehow intertwined with feelings of bodily and individual failure. The aim of this article is – from a cultural studies perspective – to explore the dynamic relationship between experiences of body shame and fitness activities. In other words, we aim to investigate if and how a selection of young Danish fitness exercisers (age 15–24) experience body shame, their potential use of fitness activities in response to feelings of body shame, but also their perspective on the fitness centre as an arena prone to producing shame. In accordance with these interests, the article seeks to answer the following overall research question through an analysis of 20 qualitative interviews with young Danish people who frequently use a fitness centre and under-

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1   As an example, 35% of Danish teenagers between 13–15 years played football in 2018, while this was only the case for 15% of the age group between 20 and 24. In relation to strength training the opposite pattern stands out. Here 29% of young people between 13 and 15 were active and this number as mentioned increases to 53% of the group between 20 and 24 (Rask, 2018).

stand themselves as involved in some sort of self-defined bodily transformation through fitness:

> How does a selection of young Danish fitness exercisers, who are engaged in processes of bodily transformation, articulate the role of fitness practices in relation to experiences of body shame?

The article shows that body shame is a well-known feeling for a vast majority of the participants, and that they predominantly use fitness activities to alleviate or overcome body shame in various ways. More specifically, the analysis outlines three different logics that the participants deploy to counter body shame through fitness activities: a logic of 'reversal', where body shame is transgressed by radically reversing the body – from e.g., being small to pumped or large to slender – with the goal of embodying culturally widespread and praised body ideals; 'normalization', where fitness is used to avoid the negative attention associated with bodily extremes and to be able to pass unnoticed; and 'self-care', where fitness is reframed as a bodily practice not about appearance, but linked to inner motivation, personal empowerment and wellbeing. Finally, the article suggests that body shame is perhaps not best understood as inherently bad, but rather as indicative of subjective desires for change and a better future for the embodied self.

2. Background: Body shame and fitness

The general concept of shame has a long and complex history and has been theorized in a range of different fields. Many of them are united by approaching shame as a damaging and negative self-conscious emotion, where an individual (or collective) experiences itself as inherently and globally flawed (Zahavi, 2014; Ahmed, 2004; Nussbaum, 2004). In that way, shame is linked to a feeling of being a failure, and not only as the agent of 'wrong' or 'temporarily stupid' actions as in guilt and embarrassment (Nathanson, 1987; Billig, 2001). Shame, according to Dan Zahavi, implies "a global decrease of self-esteem or self-respect and a painful awareness of personal flaws and deficiencies" (Zahavi, 2014, 210), and therefore often triggers a wish to disappear or become invisible in order to avoid (further) exposure. Shame can be mild or strong, acute or chronic and linked to either actual, imagined or expected encounters with the derogatory gaze of others (Wurmser, 1987; Mortensen, 2020; Dolezal, 2021).

Zooming in on body shame as a particular type of shame, the body is involved in shame processes in several ways. Shame, despite its inherent relationality, is always also an embodied feeling that can cause, for instance, blushing and an acute wish to lower or hide the face to avoid the gaze of others. The embodied feeling of shame can both relate to experienced flaws that are mostly invisible (e.g., personality, sexuality, addictions), but also to visible body traits (e.g., skin, weight, height, excess/lack of hair, disfigurement). As a research term, 'body shame' most often refers to something more than shame being an embodied feeling. Body shame instead designates forms of shame linked to these latter aspects of the body that are visible – or imagined to be visible – to external others and that the person in shame believes will be judged negatively. Vani et al., following this line of thinking, define the experience of body shame as related to an individual who "has a negative evaluation of their global self because of a perceived violation of internalised and valued ideals of physical appearance or function" (Vani et al., 2021, 672).

Shame in relation to bodily appearance and function takes different forms and relates to, for example, disability, illness, smell, colour, skin, genitals, body shape and size, and lack of control over body functions and fluids. Body shame can in many ways also be understood as a reflection of the negative affect (like disgust or unease) that the subject is afraid to trigger in other bodies. Shame is thus defined by Paul Gilbert as "an affective-defensive response to the threat of, or actual experience of, social rejection or devaluation (loss of status) because one is (or has become) unattractive as a social agent" (Gilbert, 2002, 7) and as an emotional response that "can appear when we sense that we are failing to elicit positive affects in others, and instead are stimulating their anger, anxiety or contempt" (Gilbert, 2002: 9).

Following this, the avoidance of shame is also linked to impression management – to avoid shame is to be able to communicate a particular positive (and credible) image of the 'self-in-bodily-control' to its surroundings and significant others. Strategies of impression management can have different goals according to Gilbert: "damage limitation or status and reputation enhancement" (Gilbert, 2002, 8). In terms of fitness activities, the goal of shaping the body could thus be to limit damage by 'passing' (Goffmann, 2009), as e.g., 'not-small', or to enhance one's status, e.g., by becoming the object of explicit appraisal by embodying an ideal that is hard to achieve. This also stresses that body shame can potentially be avoided through fitness activities with different visual strategies or goals:

to make the body neutrally invisible (due to its non-deviance) or positively visible due to its ideal shape or extraordinary appearance. In recognising that body shame and fitness can be interrelated in multiple ways, the analysis will take a special interest in exactly how body shame is navigated and acted on through fitness activities with different social goals in terms of shaping the social visibility of the participants.

2.1 *Shame, fitness culture and the gym*

Shame's role in sport and exercise has been researched in relation to e.g., body ideals and dissatisfaction (Grogan, 2017), performance failures among athletes (Ryall, 2019), physical education (Vani et al., 2021; Hunger and Böhlhe, 2017) and often with a particular interest in gender differences and stereotypes and (social) media's role in terms of reinforcing gendered problems (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2021; Holland and Tiggemann, 2016; Probyn, 2000). In the following we will address research on gendered body ideals and the gym as a cultural space that is particularly relevant for this article's analysis.

Sarah Grogan's academic work on gendered body ideals is helpful as a backdrop for understanding the gendered body ideals also expressed by this study's participants. Grogan argues that Western body ideals are increasingly linked to exercise – instead of e.g., dieting. The ideal body is something you must work and sweat for. Today the predominant body ideal is the slim, firm and moderately muscular or 'toned' body, and heavier bodies are also more socially acceptable if they are firm and muscular. Fat is generally approached as undesirable or shameful in a Western context, and women have been shown to concentrate on the areas where they store fat as particularly shameful (stomach, thighs, buttocks, hips). Among men, a still widespread 'Daedalic' V-shaped ideal (with broad shoulders and narrow hips) developed as early as the 7th century BC. Dissatisfaction among men seems to focus more on the upper body: biceps, chest, and shoulders, where men often desire to be bigger and more muscular. The pressure to be bigger often comes from male peers (Grogan, 2017).

The fitness gym is a very particular cultural setting in terms of producing and alleviating shame due to its inherent focus on the performance, appearance, and wellbeing of the embodied self. According to Roberta Sassatelli fitness gyms can be defined as "non-competitive environments aimed at providing recreational exercise to boost physical form and wellbeing" through a vast array of different activities (Sassatelli, 2010: 6). The

'cultural location' of the gym has changed over the last decades from being linked to a subculture, associated with extreme body work/building, to becoming a more mainstream space intertwined with a general preoccupation with the body (Sassatelli, 2010, 6). This implies that the body work done at the gym has also become more complex and multifaceted. Jesper Andreasson and Thomas Johansson argue that fitness culture is today characterized by different body techniques or philosophies promoting e.g., the hard, muscular and disciplined body (e.g., through body building) or the social, flexible and dynamic body (e.g., through collective fitness activities) (Andreasson and Johansson, 2015).

Research has, however, also been concerned with the general risk of supporting negative self-evaluation through fitness. Pritchard & Tiggemann in an Australian study of 60 female aerobics instructors and 97 female aerobic participants, explored to what extent the fitness centre and its practices stimulated 'self-objectification', which has been found to have damaging effects in terms of appearance anxiety and body shame. The study supported the thesis that time spent in the fitness environment correlates with self-objectification compared to doing exercise outside the centre. This is not least due to the bodily objectifications taking place in these centres:

> The fitness center environment contains a large number of clearly objectifying features: multiple full-length mirrors, posters that idealize the female body, the opportunity for direct comparison with other women, scanty and revealingly aerobic clothing, and the presence of men observing women exercising (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005, 20).

Arild Boge et al. add nuance to this claim by showing how the gym as a cultural space is also becoming more differentiated and complex. They for instance distinguish between the traditional gym – often saturated by mirrors and an appearance-orientated approach to the body – and the crossfit gym, which the participants of their study perceive as more open, inclusive and egalitarian and less focused on comparison and mirroring than on personal performance (Boge et al., 2022). Jesper Andreasson has, however, also argued that logics of performance and aesthetics are quite difficult to separate – if people exercise to become strong or improve their performance they often also enjoy how it affects the appearance of their body (Andreasson, 2013).

The existing research on sport and fitness culture outlined above seems to prioritise complexity and critique quite differently. In some studies, the

key concern is the potentially damaging effects of fitness culture in terms of e.g., self-objectification or problematic gender practices, while others stress the ambivalences of fitness culture and its body performances. By analysing the lived experiences of young Danes, who have chosen to use a fitness centre frequently, this article focuses on people's own sense-making in relation to fitness practices that they find meaningful and valuable for their lives. This implies for instance that body shame is not approached as inherently bad or as a 'consequence' of fitness culture, but rather – based on an inductive analysis of the interviews – as an emotion that the participants seem to know well, but also feel that they are able to navigate and alleviate – for instance through their fitness activities. In taking this approach the article sheds further light on the relationship between feelings of body shame and fitness activities and contributes to existing research on shame and fitness culture by showing how body shame is both felt and navigated by young fitness exercisers in different ways.

3. Method and empirical material

By focusing on the complexity and patterns revealed in 'articulated experiences' of informants, the article takes a qualitative approach to exploring how body shame is related to fitness activities. Following Creswell, the article is based on a constructionist ontology, which implies an interest in how participants' actively make sense of their social world and activities (Creswell, 2014). We do not approach the generated empirical material as a simple realist window on the informants' worlds, but rather as data that allows us to understand how informants interpret and construct meaning around fitness practices in relation to body shame. To be able to empirically address this research problem, the article uses semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) and thematic analysis/coding (Bjørnholt and Jacobsen, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The empirical material consists of qualitative mediated interviews with 20 young Danish fitness exercisers conducted in spring 2021. The study includes participants between the ages of 15 and 24 who engage in fitness activities at least twice a week to facilitate and monitor some sort of self-defined bodily transformation (e.g., losing weight, building muscle, looking more toned). The interview guide consists of five main sections – focusing on body ideals, self-measurement strategies, use of social media, body shame and demographic information – where some are more relevant than others to the particular scope of this

article. It focuses especially on the answers relating to experiences of body shame, while other aspects of the material (e.g., the perceived importance of social media in relation to the construction of body ideals) will be analysed elsewhere.

Table 1 *The 20 interview participants*

Age	Gender	Region	Primary fitness activity
15	Male	Zealand	Bodybuilding
17	Female	Capital	Strength training
17	Female	North	Strength training
18	Female	South	Strength training
18	Male	Central	Strength training; Spinning
18	Female	South	Strength training
19	Female	Central	Strength training
19	Male	Central	Power lifting
20	Female	Central	Strength training
21	Female	North	Strength training; Running
21	Female	Zealand	Strength training; Running
21	Male	Central	Strength training
21	Female	North	Strength training; Crossfit
22	Male	Capital	Strength training
22	Male	South	Strength training
22	Female	Central	Running
22	Female	Central	Running
23	Male	Capital	Strength training
23	Female	Central	Strength training
23	Female	Zealand	Strength training; Crossfit
24	Male	Capital	Power lifting; Bodybuilding

The interview participants were recruited through a survey disseminated in 33 large fitness related groups and profiles on Facebook and Instagram. The survey, which does not inform the analysis of this article, but focuses on the same main sections as mentioned above, included the opportunity to indicate whether the respondent wanted to be contacted for an interview. In total, 20 young Danish self-trackers were sele≤cted based on an attempt to ensure as much diversity as possible in terms of especially gender and age. The selection also aimed to include participants from different parts of the country to avoid only addressing participants from the largest cities in Denmark. Ethically, the co6olection of interview material was

based on informed consent, but, if the participant was under 18 (three participants were), parental consent was also collected. In order to acknowledge that some participants found the interview both intimate and personal (e.g., in terms of sharing thoughts on body shame), all participants were offered anonymity (franzke et al., 2020). Furthermore, we emphasized the participants' right to withdraw their participation or specific parts of the interview. None decided to do so.

Before the interviews were conducted, an interview guide was constructed around the previously mentioned five key research foci, and adjusted based on comments from two pilot interviews. The interviews were – based on the preferences of the participant – carried out as semi-structured online or telephone interviews (Kvale, 2007; Salmons, 2010) and lasted approximately one hour each. The mediated character of the interviews was partly due to Covid-19 restrictions, but it also allowed for a certain distance and sense of privacy as, for one thing, the bodies of the informants were not exposed to the interviewer. This potentially made it easier for some to share their thoughts on their body and on body shame. The first two interviews were conducted collaboratively by the two researchers to ensure a shared understanding of the interview process, while the rest were made with only one researcher present. Reflexivity concerning the positionality of the researchers is crucial for this kind of qualitative knowledge production (Dodgson, 2019; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The two researchers are a male professor in his forties, with little personal experience of fitness centres and self-tracking, and a younger female researcher in her twenties with a background as a fitness instructor. The latter 'insider' of the two researchers did the majority of the interviews, which ensured an interview situation where the informants felt included and safe. This choice of interviewer increased the potential for creating interaction based on familiarity and minimised power differences as the female researcher was closer to the field and lifeworld of the informants. A potential risk with this division of labour is that some of the male participants could feel less inclined to share their bodily insecurities with a female peer. However, this was not the case – on the contrary. The young male participants seemed to feel safe in the company of an interviewer with a certain level of lived knowledge about the fitness environment. In general, the merging of outsider and insider perspectives throughout the process allowed for combining a fundamental and open curiosity about the experiences of the informants with the creation of interview situation characterised by familiarity and safeness.

The interview guide contains direct questions about body shame and the role of fitness activities in terms of reducing or increasing body shame. To create a collective understanding of what is meant by shame, the interviewer shared a definition of shame as a feeling of being wrong that is linked to e.g., one's identity, personality or body, and explained that body shame can be experienced as an inclination to want to cover parts of the body to avoid exposure. After this introduction, questions were asked on if/how often body shame had been experienced, the role of fitness activities in relation to body shame experiences, and whether the respondents had felt excluded or bullied due to their body. The interview guide also included questions on potential memories about specific shameful situations.

The coding and analytical process followed the flexible and recursive phases described in Braun and Clarke's outline of thematic analysis as method (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021). First the data set was transcribed, which resulted in 415 pages of transcripts, and read in an open and exploratory way. Then six random interviews were inductively coded and recoded in NVivo – with a broad focus on different articulations of body ideals, self-measurement strategies, use of social media, and body shame – and discussed by the two researchers in order to create a codebook (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). In this article, the analysis will focus on the coded extracts describing how fitness activities are intertwined with and used to counter shame in different ways. The analysis will thus give a detailed account of three themes – named 'reversal', 'normalisation' and 'self-care' – which were established by rereading and reorganising the coded extracts and analysing them by using existing theories of body shame, body ideals and fitness culture. Following Braun and Clarke we understand a theme as a semantic unit that "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 82). After the thematic analysis we will discuss what it can teach us about shame as a potentially transformative – and not only destructive – emotion in the life of young fitness self-trackers.

4. Analysis: Three logics of countering body shame

A vast majority of the participants have experienced shame in relation to their bodies, but half of them also describe that they felt more body shame in the past than in the present. In the material, fitness activities predominantly play the role of responding to and acting on body shame. Only a few of the 20 participants believe that fitness plays no role at all in terms of affecting or decreasing body shame. The rest articulate some degree of positivity in terms of the ability of fitness activities to remove or alleviate body shame. This does not imply that all the participants are living lives saturated by body shame, but rather that they understand their fitness activities as playing some sort of role in terms of navigating and modulating body shame as a dynamic emotion. We can distinguish in the material three different logics through which fitness activities are used by the participants to handle, react to, or overcome body shame.

4.1 Countering body shame I: Fitness as reversal

Some participants articulate their body shame as intertwined with a failed interest in obtaining – and being able to control the process of achieving – a particular type of ideal body. For the female participants, the ideal body is most often linked to being slender and toned, but occasionally also to being curvy in particular ways. Several of the female participants, for instance, describe the body shame produced while growing up as teenagers in a culture focused on female thinness and how fitness becomes a way of handling that pressure (either by losing weight or by focusing on becoming strong instead). The male participants often have the opposite problem: many of them experienced feeling small and not muscular enough as adolescents. A male participant (M23), for instance, describes a situation where he felt shamefully exposed as a young boy when he had to jump from a diving board and sensed that he was much smaller than his peers: "(...) I just stood like this [covers his body with his arms]. I thought all the others had big chest muscles and were showing them off, and that I just didn't have any of that. I actually remember that well" (M23). Another explains that, "during my late primary school time, I wore large hoodies to hide that I wasn't as well-trained as the others" (M22). These gendered findings in many ways support existing findings in body image research (cf. Grogan): men often want to grow larger and attract acknowledgment

(e.g., from male peers), while many women desire slenderness and being smaller to align themselves with dominant norms.

According to the participants, fitness can be deployed both to directly target the object of body shame (e.g., feeling small or too big) or to compensate for or counterbalance a feeling of deviance that is not altered directly through fitness activities (e.g., having acne). Relating to the first option, the already mentioned male participant (23) who felt shame in relation to standing on a diving board with his larger peers, describes how his body shame disappeared due to the fitness-based reshaping of his body: "As I've started to look better or achieved a more ideal body, it [the feeling of shame] just disappeared. Because now I don't really care, and I think that I'm more at ease with myself" (M23). This quote stresses the highly complex relationship between social validation and self-confidence as the ability to 'not care' about outside judgements and feel confident seems to be aligned with adjusting the body so that it adheres to socially constructed norms about how an ideal body should look like in a particular context.

In a way, this participant handles body shame by simply delivering on what body shame reveals an unfulfilled desire for. If this desire is a bigger body, then the body must become bigger, and shame is repaired to the extent that this ideal is achieved. We call this a logic of 'reversal' (where small is reversed into big, big reversed into thin etc.). An important aspect of such reversals is that it should attract positive attention and validation: Significant others are to be impressed by the grand transformation – and new visibility – of the subject because the subject in shame wants to be included and praised within the collectives that it feels (more or less) excluded from. A male participant explains his positive experience of transforming himself from small to big as a way of handling being bullied due to his body as a child:

> Sometimes, I've watched myself in the mirror and thought, 'Damn, you've done well coming so far'. So yes, it [fitness] has helped me. I've sometimes seen some of the others from my old primary school that used to bully me. And then I've become even more motivated in terms of doing exercise and giving it all I've got. One time I met the twin brother of a classmate, who was in a class above us, and he said "Wow [name of participant], you've become a big guy". That was super motivating, and that situation is something I remember. It is really nice being praised (M22).

What is striking is that the value of body ideals is not questioned in any way. Rather the transgression of body shame seems to rely on the participant's ability to deliver on these ideals and thus prove his former peers

wrong by producing a grand reversal. For some participants – for instance the young man being quoted here – such a reversal does not remove body shame once and for all, while others describe how their embodiment of the desired ideal has made it possible to transgress this feeling more permanently.

Body shame is not only articulated as a question of wanting (but not having) certain bodily forms or surfaces, but also as a feeling linked to the distribution of wanted and unwanted degrees of social visibility. Going back to the male participant with a shameful diving board experience, his fitness activities have focused on developing his shoulder muscles and getting rid of "the skinny teenager" that he was before he began doing fitness. In that way, he used fitness to counter body shame by enacting himself as a more visible subject that did not just blend in into the context that he was a part of: "(…) I wanted to stand out. I wanted an identity that stressed who I am. That is, who this guy [name of participant] is". Following this, the participant wanted to become visible in a more explicit way with the aim of "being able to say 'I actually take up some space… I am able to fill out this jacket'" (M23).

In that way, the acknowledgement linked to overcoming shame is both social and material – to be acknowledged socially the body must grow and align itself with a dominant 'daedalic' ideal. The convergence of social validation and physical change is expressed through the goal of 'filling out one's jacket'. In Danish this phrase is used as a metaphor for being a competent and accomplished self, but in this case the metaphor is also highly literal and concrete: Validation (and self-confidence) is linked to growing muscle in order to fill out the clothes that the participants wear. This conflation of social worth and a certain physical shape lies at the heart of the logic of reversal. To be acknowledged by others, the body must reverse its physical appearance and become strikingly ideal.

4.2 Countering body shame II: Fitness as normalization

Other participants do not seek out increased visibility to counter body shame, but rather try to neutralize their appearance by becoming, for instance, big enough to pass as not small without necessarily attracting appraisal or explicit visibility. We call this a logic of 'normalization'. Here the goal is not to attract appraisal for 'taking up space' in new and impressive ways – as in reversals – but rather to be left unnoticed or just invisible enough to blend in. A participant describes, for example, that her goal

is "not being too eye-catching and not standing out too much. Yes, that people just won't think badly about me when I walk past" (F17). Normalization as a concept is thereby used to describe how body shame – and its unfulfilled desire for social validation – is handled through fitness activities that try to eradicate deviance or 'standing out'.

Another female participant articulated a similar bodily goal that, in the terminology of Gilbert, aimed more at 'damage limitation' than at 'reputation enhancement':

> Actually, I just want a body that people don't notice when it's there – where you don't want to look anorectic, but you also don't want to look very buff or very overweight. Because those are the types of bodies I think you notice the most or become negatively aware of (F21).

As the quote shows the goal of the participant's fitness activities is quite different from that of the young men aiming for extraordinary reversals. She instead wants to avoid becoming extraordinary and to elude bodily extremes in terms of thinness (cf. 'anorectic'), weight (cf. 'overweight') or muscle (cf. 'buff'). What is at stake is how the body is noticed by others and instead of defining a positive target that could ensure appraisal she uses fitness to stay free of negative attention and to become able to pass unnoticed.

These examples support that shame is often based on an experience of not having access to the proper level of visibility in particular situations – either you feel ashamed because you are too invisible and do not take up enough space, or you feel shame due to a blocked desire to be normal and less visible (e.g., because of a perceived deviance). Not surprisingly – taking existing research into account – the distribution of visibility is highly gendered in the material: the male participants want more visibility and feel ashamed of being too small, unnoticed by their male peers or sexually invisible to potential partners, while the female participants generally feel ashamed of being too big and voluminous.

In the material there are also examples of young women who want to be more muscular, but not to obtain a particular visible body shape. Rather their goal is to become strong and able to perform certain actions and exercisers with their bodies or to remain 'functionally normal' in the sense of being able to use the body for ordinary purposes after an accident (e.g., a back injury). Normalization through fitness can likewise focus on restoring a lost condition of bodily satisfaction. In such cases, normalization acquires a more nostalgic tone as the past is not something to run from (as in

reversals), but a state to long for. A female participant (18) describes how she compares her current body with images from the past and that the goal of doing fitness is to "be comfortable by seeing a picture of myself":

> A couple of years ago we were on a holiday and then you look back and think 'Wow, I have really gained a lot of weight since then' and then you kind of try to obtain that again. Despite the fact that you had a completely different type of body because you were a lot younger, and the body was less developed at that point. I think that's it. The thing where you get a little scared how fast you can gain weight through something else than muscles (F18).

A normalization approach to overcoming body shame through fitness activities is thus different from reversals in various ways. Normalization focuses less on seeking appraisal by transforming the body to align with extraordinary body ideals, and it does not frame the past as a shameful point of departure for grand transformations. Instead, normalization has the eradication of bodily extremes and dysfunctions – and the joy of being able to pass unnoticed – as its core objectives.

4.3 Countering body shame III: Fitness as self-care

Last, but not least, body shame can also be reframed and deconstructed through fitness without necessarily understanding bodily transformation – grand or small – as a road to social validation or inclusion. Here, the subject instead handles body shame by wanting to be accepted as it is or by finding peace with his/her own body. We call this a logic of 'self-care'. Fitness activities are thereby articulated as something that the subject does for his/her own sake and not for reasons of appearance or praise. A female participant exemplifies the logic in this way and reflects on how she has suddenly disconnected herself from the judgments of her classmates:

> The first year I did fitness, I only did so to prove that I wasn't deviant. (...) it wasn't until after my first competition... For some reason, I'd realized that this process was for my own sake. It wasn't a process for their sake (F23).

Through the logic of self-care, fitness becomes a way of activating the body that pleases the subject and reaches internally motivated goals. But, most importantly, fitness activities are decoupled from the idea of aligning bodily transformation with social acceptance. The practice of doing fit-

ness, however, is not terminated but rather reframed as a more conscious practice of self-orientated pleasure and enjoyment.

When formulating this approach to fitness during the interviews, the participants often entered a mode of critical reflection regarding shame, fitness and cultural body ideals. An example is given in the following statement about what motivates body shame by a male participant (21): "I guess it's because you want to fit in. (...) Are you able to make friends and are they able to accept you as you are? And it's nonsense because the body doesn't play any role in that relation" (M21). The participant seems to become aware both that body shame is based on a desire for fitting in, but also that the perceived connection between the body and social acceptance is problematic because friendship should not depend on the body in any way. The self-reflexivity built into shame according to Sartre – do people perceive me as a failure? – in that way becomes an object of reflection in itself: why do I think that my body is important to how people see and evaluate me? Articulating the experience of body shame during the interviews thus triggers a process of double reflexivity that simultaneously registers and problematizes its own investments in particular body ideals as a road to social acceptance.

Turning fitness into a form of self-care, rather than a way of adapting to cultural ideals and judgments of others, is however also highlighted as an ongoing personal struggle by many of the participants. A vast majority of them acknowledge that they care about how others perceive their bodies, and that it is therefore a constant challenge to embed their fitness activities in an internal form of motivation and self-care. One participant states: "Well, I hope that I'll reach a point where I learn to love myself, my body, and feel at ease with myself. (...) I'd like to be able to say that I'm doing this [fitness] for my own sake and not for others, but I'm not there yet" (F19). A male participant unfolds the complex relationship between internal and external validation as process, where he has slowly succeeded in feeling better by focusing less on external factors. As he began doing fitness,

> [i]t's been a rather big motivation for me that I wanted to impress people of the opposite sex or be respected by my network or something like that. It's obvious that when your motivation is so external then it's that kind of approval you look for to confirm that you've reached your goal. I've become better at moving it into something internal. It has actually changed quite a lot (M23).

The potential of using fitness as a form of self-care is complicated by the fact that approximately half of the respondents also understand the fitness environment as a potential source of shame. Fitness is in that way articulated both as a tool to transgress body shame and as an ambivalent arena for shameful processes of various sorts. Body shame is probably present in the fitness centre "because I compare myself with others" and because "others have that ideal body that I'm dreaming to get", according to a male participant (M18). A female participant (F21) explains how body shame was a motivation for her to begin doing fitness in the first place, but also how her first encounters with the centre intensified the feeling of shame – e.g., when entering a zone of the centre used by more experienced and 'pumped up' exercisers: "At that point, I thought that I simply don't belong there. I don't look fit enough to be there (…)" (F23). Body shame can also be produced if the participants fail to engage in the desired level of fitness activities due to a lack motivation that either reveals a perceived individual inability of not being able to control/motivate the body or restores a not so ideal physical body due to decreasing activity. In that way the use of fitness as a practice of self-care is constantly counterbalanced by the risk of producing shame through processes of bodily comparison or motivational failure within the fitness environment.

5. Discussion: The transformative potentials of shame

Shame has a bad reputation as a painful self-conscious response and thus it is often framed as an emotion that should be erased as much as possible to help ensure human flourishing. While acknowledging that body shame is individually painful, this article has indirectly taken a different path by analysing shame as a starting point for – and maybe even an energizer of –various sorts of transformative actions. The three logics described above – reversal, normalisation and self-care – reveal that body shame is not only a feeling of being flawed, but also an emotion that registers a blocked desire for change and a different future for the (ashamed) self. Producing the ideal body, the unnoticed body or the self-caring body are answers to body shame's impeded interest in being related to oneself or others in new and improved ways. The three logics are not only to be understood as means to eradicate shame, but also as attempts to produce the change that body shame reveals an interest in.

This approach to shame is a contribution to existing studies of body shame in fitness culture where the question of what shame reveals or tries to communicate is underexplored. However, looking at a broader field of shame research, Silvan Tomkins grasps the affirmative and transformative aspects of shame. According to Tomkins, shame should not be defined in terms of the damaging pain that it produces, but rather as an inherently affluent affect that is always linked to some sort of positive interest in others. He writes:

> I believe the toxicity of shame has been much exaggerated by shame theorists; shame is an affluent emotion. It arises only in the context of a strong bond with the other. You cannot be ashamed, per se, unless you find the other exciting or lovable or enjoyable in some way, and you wish to maintain that bond. (...) if you see a face where shame is dominant, one thing you may be sure of is that that is a positively oriented human being, either one given to much love or much excitement (Tomkins, 1995, 392).

It might seem controversial to claim that shame is affluent and linked to a positive orientation characterised by love and excitement. Tomkins' reason for claiming this is that you can only feel shame in relation to, for instance, your parents, partner, children, friends, neighbourhood, fitness network, or a more abstract collective of 'other people' if you believe that they are important to you and if you want to have a positive relationship with them but feel that this affirmative interest is refused. You need to care about the judgments made about you by (more or less specific) others to feel shame in front of them. Shame simply relies on a positive interest in having social bonds with others and a feeling that something linked to one's personality or body threatens these bonds and entails a risk of negative social judgment.

It is important to highlight that 'positive' does not equal 'pleasing', but 'affirmative' in this line of thinking. The approach does not claim that shame creates a positive feeling on an individual level, but rather that shame requires affirmative investments in something or someone (I want to be liked or accepted by it/you/them) in order to come into existence as a negatively felt or troubling emotion in the first place (Frank and Wilson, 2020: 1016). But why is this approach interesting as a framework for understanding the three different logics of countering body shame through fitness as outlined in the analysis? First of all it helps us understand how and why body shame can lead to action (here doing fitness) because shame is not simply conceptualised as a feeling of being flawed, but also an emotion

that energizes a process of reshaping the subject and its social position. As such, body shame registers a positive, but blocked interest in being a new embodied subject that both feels differently about itself and is acknowledged differently by its surroundings. An approach to body shame that focuses on shame as triggered by impeded positive interest in the social acceptance from others, is also interesting because it challenges a narcissistic reading of the body work done by young fitness exercisers, as it helps us see how fitness-related transformations address a body that is never simply enclosed or self-absorbed, but instead highly attuned towards its social connections – or its need for reconnection and validation. A young female informant, who has experienced body shame frequently, describes this intertwinement of bodily appearance and a desire for social acceptance in the following way:

> I want people who are close to me and matter to me to acknowledge my body and my appearance. Maybe they don't have the same body ideal, but that they think I have a nice body. 'Nice' is not the best word, but... I think it is because it matters to me. It is about a kind of acceptance from one's group (F23).

An important discussion is, however, whether fitness activities are a constructive solution to feelings of being refused or rejectable and to producing feelings of individual worth, because fitness culture has a 'cruel optimism' built into it. According to Lauren Berlant, 'cruel optimism' describes the situation where something you strive for in order to be(come) happy actually produces a hindrance to your flourishing (Berlant, 2011; Hakim, 2018). Following Berlant, it could be claimed that the young participants are part of a fitness culture that describes bodily transformation aligned with particular ideals as a road to happiness and social acceptance, but that this striving for transformation ends up supporting constant self-critique and self-evaluation – as well as the problematic idea that human worth is linked to body mass and shape. In this line of thinking, the fitness environment is simply a cultural context that offers the promise of happiness through bodily transformation and individual willpower, while also pushing a constant burden of subjective incompletion, failure and responsibility on the subject.

This kind of conclusion, however, does not do justice to the complex work and negotiations of the young people interviewed in this study. Based on these interviews the participants are not so much hindered in their flourishing as they are experimenting with fitness activities as a potential

but ambivalent road to handling body shame – as well as their blocked desires to be positively linked and sustained by the social world around them. This approach is a contribution to existing research on shame, health and fitness as it highlights, in a new way, how fitness activities are intertwined with different subjective strategies of decreasing shame, but also often with an awareness of how fitness is not only a cure against body shame, but also a potential vehicle of it. By highlighting the impeded interests expressed through moments of body shame, research can become more attentive to the subject in shame as not just a pacified or frozen subject, but also a subject that desires personal and social transformations – and often has (more or less conscious) strategies to achieve them.

6. Conclusion

The article has shown that body shame is a well-known feeling for the vast majority of the participants and that fitness plays three key roles for the participants in terms of addressing or trying to overcome body shame through reversal, normalization or self-care. A segment of the participants also understands fitness activities as co-producing shame by enabling an environment of shameful comparison and by demanding levels of activity that can be difficult to achieve and thus felt as shameful failures. Last, but not least, the article has argued in favour of theorising body shame as a form of blocked positive interest in social validation, instead of perceiving it as an inherently bad emotion. This makes it possible to approach the fitness practices of young people as reflexive and ambivalent attempts to navigate body shame and as unfulfilled desires for social connection and validation. A challenge for future research is to balance the acknowledgement of body shame as an individually painful emotion, while also being able to grasp and understand the social and relational investments – and desire for positive change – that body shame indirectly expresses.

Grant, data and disclosure

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