INTRODUCTION

As we enter 2017, social media has become the driving force behind social interaction and social perceptions. It plays a huge role in almost every millenials’s life (CITE). Because it recently became such an influential platform, there is limited research regarding the way varying facets of social media have influenced young people. One area that is particularly lacking research is the new age fitness industry. In the past five years, the “fitness industry” has grown exponentially though social media. “Fitness Influencers” who have Fitspo (fitness + inspiration) accounts use their platforms in various ways. Much of what these groups do is encourage social change through fitness. Some have aimed to influence women by encouraging them to lift weights regardless of stereotypes and stigmas that may discourage women from lifting weights, while others have advocated for seeing working out as a mechanism for empowering oneself instead of shrinking oneself. As weight lifting is often viewed as a male dominated activity, I set out to explore the way male dominance played a role in women’s desire and ability to weight lift. Much of what I found indicated that socially constructed ideals of the feminine body paired with male spatial dominance in the gym deterred women from weight lifting (Mcgrath,2003).

In order to better understand how these fitness influencers are creating social change I by destigmatizing weight lifting and encouraging women to transgress gendered boundaries, I set out to answer the Question: How do “Social Media Influencers” make a difference in viewpoints and actions of women who workout in male dominated space?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In order to answer my research question, I created a survey that asked an array of questions pertaining to social media, its general influence, and its fitness related influence as well as a few question relating (loosely) to gendered norms in the gym and the way they are challenged or internalized. In order to get an adequate sampling of information, I posted a Google form in a fitness community based facebook group

Once I received the 57 survey responses, I looked for a few main themes: demographics, overall feelings regarding social media, common influence from social media, and effects of gender on comfort/confidence in the gym. I looked for any common themes or overlapping instances of feelings of support, discouragement and perceptions of men in the gym. I also looked to see if any of the respondents had noted past feelings of spatial domination, anxiety or fear in male dominated spaces that had subsided after joining social media communities.

RESULTS

Social Media and Self Confidence:
When asked how social media affected their self confidence, the participants generally reacted with mixed reviews. Most were caught between feeling encouraged because they wanted to look like the people on social media and discouraged because they compared their bodies to media models.

Specific Influencer:
When asked how Grace Beverly, the leader of the community based facebook page influenced them, remarks were nothing but positive. Participants commented that she encouraged them to find a health balance, helps improve their mental health and empowered them to want to lift weights instead of just doing cardio.

Spatial Dominance:
When asked if they had ever felt intimidated or held back in the gym almost all participants that answered yes attributed their inability to feel comfortable in the gym to male dominance. They claimed that the weight lifting section is overrun by men who make comments are glares which makes them uncomfortable and discourages them to lift.

Figure 1. Grace Beverly.
Figure 2. Label in 24pt Arial.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that while social media influencers are beginning to help women transgress gendered barriers, the aforementioned literature that discusses the significance is socially constructed body ideal and male spatial dominance is still overwhelmingly true. Fitness influencers have defiantly opened up a dialogue that encourages women to transgress these barriers and provided a platform and communities to help women band together, but they have yet to break down the social barriers that stand in the way of many women lifting weights. In theory, many women feel empowered and encouraged to lift weights, because of the way social media influencers have been to normalize and encourage women to lift weights but in practice, spatial dominance still plays a significant role in keeping women out of the weight room. Men still have a profound effect on controlling women’s actions in the gym, which is a problem that still needs addressing. This could be the result of internalized construction of what is and what is not acceptable to do with a female body. Like many other internalized constraints, unlearning gender dynamics in the gym and not feeling pressure to meet ideal body standards will take a lot of time. However, at the rate social media is progressing, and with the increasing popularity of fitness influencers, I believe this change can be made but it will take a time and hard work to break down the years of oppression that has created such boundaries.

CONCLUSIONS

My study concludes that while certain fitness influencers and groups have made an impact of women’s desire to lift weights and their desire to be strong over skinny, spatial dominance in the gym still discourages women from reaching their full optional in the gym. While this study proved significant, it may be more effective to do it with a larger sample size using multiple form of data collection in order to get a better analysis of why and how gendered spaces are navigated. Furthermore, I believe that in the coming years, social media has the power to encourage women to band together and transgress gender norms. With the proper encouragement and the booming new age fitness industry, women have the power to keep socially progressing.

REFERENCES


