

**Exploring the Impact of Boutique Fitness Studio Participation on Women's Mental
Health**

By

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the
ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

We are all Treaty people.

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Dedication

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

As of 2017, the wellness industry was valued at over 4.6 trillion dollars globally (Global Wellness Institute, 2017). Embedded within a culture that values productivity and in a society where economic conditions make it increasingly difficult to survive (Ali, 2022), wellness industry players offer a buffet of high-cost fitness and wellbeing related activities as an antidote to the stress and anxiety endemic under contemporary capitalism. To manage competing responsibilities requiring high levels of performance, individuals are encouraged to incorporate consumerist routines into their lives which are framed by a rhetoric of individual wellbeing and empowerment. In this way, contemporary wellness culture reinforces neoliberal, capitalist norms around productivity, consumerism, personal responsibility, and healthism (Baker, 2022) often in the service of profit-driven corporate entities. An example of this concept at work, and the focus of this study, is the existence of and conditions created in boutique fitness studios (BFS). Small gyms, generally between 800-3500 square feet, these studios “focus on more community-like group exercise in one or two specific fitness areas” (Zacks, 2018, para. 2).

BFSs are the specific topic of this research, as they differ from other community exercise spaces in several ways. Notably, there is a stark difference in the financial investment required of BFS clients or customers. Indeed, mirroring the literature more broadly, the participants of this study spoke at length about the financial sacrifices they made to participate in BFS classes. Signaling another key difference, while more traditional gyms and exercise spaces tend to offer a variety of types of exercise, BFSs are known for their niche modalities (be it spinning, boxing, barre, hot yoga, Pilates etc.). They typically offer one type of exercise, with some variation in themes or difficulty

levels. They are also highly identifiable by their often single-word names, sleek and sometimes sexual branding, and loud music. In this way, shifting away from more accessible and inclusive forms of exercise, reflected in, for example, the offerings of a centre like the YMCA, BFS are deliberately branded as exclusive. And yet, ironically, they increasingly draw on notions of community, belonging, and inclusivity as part of their branding. In many ways, it is this tension and its implications that are at the centre of this study's inquiry.

Moreover, and central to the analysis offered in this thesis, BFSs are explicitly understood and framed as sites of profit accumulation by investment analysts. Reflecting the potential profitability of such spaces, not just for operators, but for investors, an online keyword search of "boutique fitness studio" immediately yields an article written by an investment research firm titled "What is boutique fitness and how can investors profit?". The article offers specific insight into the mechanisms of profit making through BFS models, detailing how cancellation- and no show-fees in spaces, otherwise experienced as sites of belonging, comradery, and exclusivity, operate to simultaneously motivate attendance while generated revenue when they do not. These more insidious aspects of this model of financial gain with the context of boutique fitness are not always recognized by clients of these spaces, and yet, as this study demonstrates, they are felt. For the women interviewed for this research, BFSs represented, initially, an opportunity for belonging and wellness, but as their participation intensified, the realities of these spaces were revealed.

This research took as its starting point my own ambivalent relationship to the highly competitive, yet seemingly benevolent spaces of commodified, branded wellness

offered by BFSs. In turn, it sought to understand how the culture and political economy of contemporary wellness, embodied by and capitalized on by BFSs, might impact the mental health and overall well-being of the women who access these spaces. To this end, it elaborates the tension constitutive of these spaces, which can be experienced as simultaneously helpful and harmful. And it explored, from the vantage point of BFS clients, how these spaces produce/reproduce, or might possibly contest, common discourse around mental health and wellness, and importantly, to what effect. More precisely, the project sought to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the motivations, expectations, and experiences of women who have pursued health and wellness at boutique fitness studios?
2. From the vantage point of participants, what are the implications to their wellbeing resulting from participating in boutique fitness studio classes and communities?

In addition to contributing to a critical literature on wellness, in answering these questions, this project also aimed to elaborate a way of approaching exercise and mental health useful for the practice of anti-oppressive social work.

Anti-oppressive social work weaves together critical social theory with an in-depth consideration of the social work profession's complicated history, to realize and implement interventions that are not only responsive to people's needs but are transformative of broader social and structural realities. To do this, it becomes vital that we understand the deeper implications of our interventions, such that somewhat facile connections between, for example, exercise and wellbeing need to be disentangled. What emerges from participant narratives and experiences is that BFSs produce and reproduce

dominant discourse that moralizes the body and assigns virtue and value to body size/shape, exercise frequency, and exercise performance. Regardless of participants' physical alignment or conformity with socially constituted and cultural ideals of beauty and thinness participants reported that attending BFSs had a net-negative impact. These insights, while not necessarily generalizable given a relatively small sample size, are important. They point to the need for social workers and other mental health practitioners to investigate activities and interventions that might, on the surface, appear healthy, understanding that for some people—and particularly, women—they might in fact do more harm than good.

Section 1: Research Methods and Process

This project conducted seven in-depth interviews with women who had all previously attended BFS classes in Canada. All of the participants of this study were cis, white women between the ages of 25-40. 2 participants had lived experience with disordered eating and/or exercise. All participants were working professionals at the time of the interview. Some had participated in BFSs as post-secondary students, and all except for one had participated in BFSs as working professionals. Participants all had an extensive participation history with BFSs, and had attended a number of different spaces over an extended period of time (1 year or more).

Snowball and convenience sampling was used to recruit participants who met the following criteria: (1) have attended a minimum of 6 classes in a boutique fitness studio in Canada (2) have not attended a boutique fitness studio class in more than 1 month, (3) identify as a woman or non-binary. In line with snowball and convenience sampling

approaches, the researcher shared a brief overview of the research project with friends, acquaintances and colleagues on personal social media channels (Instagram and Facebook), as well as via email. This included a simple graphic as well as an overview of the project's goals and criteria for participation. Interested individuals were asked to contact the researcher by email to inquire about participating.

When an individual inquired, the researcher connected with them by email to ask the individual screening questions and ensure they fit the criteria of the study, as well as to share information about what participation entails, how their privacy would be protected, and how they could withdraw from the study if they chose to. During this time, participants were encouraged to ask any questions they had about the project. If the person met the study criteria, and consented to participate, then the researcher would schedule a time to complete the interview portion of the study.

Data Collection

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, and where there is complexity, nuance and perhaps taken-for-granted assumptions in the experiences and content being discussed, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were determined to be the most appropriate method of data collection (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). Interviews were conducted one-on-one with myself, and the use of open-ended questions allowed participants to share their experiences in a fulsome way. Participants in Halifax or the surrounding area were given the choice of attending an in-person interview in a public space, or to attend via videoconference. All 7 participants chose to meet via videoconference and interviews were audio recorded. Prior to beginning of each interview, the researcher reminded

participants that they were able to withdraw their participation at any time, and that if they decided to do so none of the information they shared would be included in the study. They were encouraged to take breaks as needed, to share only what they felt comfortable including, that they could skip any questions they would prefer not to answer, and that all information would be de-identified.

Participants were asked open-ended questions prompting them to reflect on their experiences with boutique fitness studios. Specifically, they were asked to consider how the overall culture within the studio, their interactions with staff and their experiences in classes impacted their levels of stress and anxiety, and their perceived sense of overall wellbeing both during the period where they attended classes, and in the month or more following this period. Participants were also asked to reflect on and share what financial considerations were involved in their participation in boutique fitness studio classes. Following the interview, participants were offered the opportunity to debrief with the interviewer.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded using my iPhone, which was disconnected from the Cloud. These recordings were uploaded to Dalhousie's secure OneDrive platform as quickly as possible following the interview and the audio recording was deleted from the phone. The audio recordings were then uploaded to Scribe Software for transcription. Following this, I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and removed any identifying information. This process was completed within two weeks of each interview. As soon as transcripts were complete, audio recordings were deleted.

Responding to the project's focus on the mental health impacts of women's experiences attending boutique fitness spaces in Canada, the analysis involved a close reading and annotation of the interview transcripts and an analysis of themes informed by fat studies scholarship, feminist political economy, and health phenomenology. In addition to paying close attention to the narratives offered by participants, the thematic analysis drew out specific themes related to the project's research questions. Following Braun and Clarke's best practice recommendations for thematic analysis (2023), it was determined that a reflexive thematic analysis is the most appropriate method for the analysis of data in this study. In line with this method, I began by familiarizing myself with the data by reviewing it multiple times. Next, I coded the data to identify the pieces that related to or provided insight on the research questions.

Once the data was coded, I identified themes that occurred amongst the coded data based on relevance to the research question, not necessarily prevalence, or the frequency with which certain themes appeared. After initial themes were developed, I reviewed the data once again to ensure that the themes were robust, and appropriately represented the findings (Braun & Clark, 2021). Notably, and reflective of feminist methodology, as well as those central to critical social work scholarship, my personal experiences and perspective have been utilized as a lens with which the data has been analyzed, recognizing that my positioning cannot be separated from the research and data collected. From these analytical approaches, three major themes appeared from the interviews: 1) BFSs did not satisfy participants' desire to create meaningful social connections with others; 2) attending BFSs had a lasting negative impact on participants' body-image and ideas about health and wellness; and 3) the allure of being a BFS

member resulted in financial stress and strain that lasted well beyond participant's engagement in BFSs. To better understand these themes, the project drew on several theoretical frameworks. Working at their intersection allowed me to articulate a comprehensive account of participants' experiences that captured the complexity of their experiences in these socially and politically fraught spaces, while allowing for the potential of meaningful social connection, sense of belonging, and wellbeing.

Section 2: Theoretical Frameworks

“The more the individual is the locus of health, the less structural and historical issues that create health disparities are considered”

(Welsh, 2021)

This study draws on scholarship from feminist political economy, the field of fat studies and health phenomenology to ground its approach and analysis of women's experiences of boutique fitness studios. Taken together, these analytic frames offer insight into the dynamics at play in boutique fitness studios—dynamics that are, at once, from the vantage point of participants, compelling and alluring, and also, challenging and harmful. Feminist political economy provides clarity into the political and economic structures that shape commodified gendered-wellness, and the ways in which women are integrated into those structures through the socializing effects of boutique fitness. In turn, fat studies scholarship is attentive to and critical of social and cultural constructions of fatness and the fat body. It explores the implications of such constructs while simultaneously envisioning radical alternatives.

This study's lens for understanding mental health and wellbeing draws on health phenomenology. In her book, Talia Welsh draws on work from Hans-Georg Gadamer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and other philosophers to describe "health as a background state that permits extension in the world and with others" (2021, p.43). This offers a basic framework from which understanding mental health or wellness is explored in this study. In short, and in line with phenomenology broadly, health phenomenology considers the physiological manifestations of emotional experiences (mental and emotional stress, duress and conversely contentment, joy and happiness etc.) as a part of ones' overall health and does not limit health to a definition of body mechanics. Welsh uses the example of a man who lives a life he is content with, symptom free, but with slow growing prostate cancer that has little to no impact on overall quality of life or life expectancy. While he lives with what the medical system would define as a disease, he is not experiencing suffering, or restricted from living his life as he wishes to. Welsh writes "someone who feels dreadful and is hardly able to make it through a day but passes every test as "healthy" may have met the clinical standard of health as judged by "passing" tests, but not health as an experience of something like wellness, or a lack of suffering" (2021, p. 41-42). This understanding of the concept of health, mainly focused on levels of overall suffering, informs how this study understands participants' self-reported experiences of mental health and wellness.

Importantly, then, health phenomenology prompts us to consider one's mental health in relation not only to the personal, but also in relation to broader cultural environment. Fat studies and feminist political economy, in turn, help us to understand that environment and the suffering it generates. More precisely, the field of fat studies

explores the experiences of people who live in large, or fat bodies. This scholarship dissects and challenges the marginalization and violence people encounter in relation to their body size and shape. While this thesis does not exclusively explore the experiences of people in fat bodies, it is situated in and responsive to a social, economic, and cultural context where body size is highly politicized, moralized (Knoll, 2019), and that overwhelmingly views fat bodies as burdensome to society. This tendency is well captured by the descriptor “diet-culture”. As described by fat studies and feminist scholars, diet culture “is characterized by the conflation of weight and health including myths about food and eating, and a moral hierarchy of bodies derived from patriarchal, racist and capitalist forms of domination” (Jovanovski and Jaeger, 2020).

In this study, fat studies scholarship on diet-culture is deployed as a framework with which the embodied experiences of exercise can be considered. It holds the position that “bodies that are deemed non-normative, such as fat bodies, are often made either invisible or intolerable in the discourse of physical activity and exercise” (Harjunen, 2019). The erasure and oppression of fat bodies adds to the pressure, desire, and urgency to avoid certain body shapes and sizes, particularly, though again, not exclusively, larger bodies. Public health agencies and authorities have actioned this negative reinforcement approach to address the so-called obesity epidemic (Brewis & Wutich, 2019), as have many for profit entities. Importantly, this perspective contextualizes the exercise experiences of people in fat bodies and considers the intensity with which people fear fatness and are motivated to engaged in exercise to avoid fatness.

Feminist political economy bridges perspectives from fat studies with broader economic and gendered structures to position that “embodied identities, practices and

experiences are in fact produced by wider economic and political processes” (Agenjo-Calderon, 2021, p.2). The theoretical understanding that body politics and gendered embodiment paradigms are produced and reproduced as part of the capitalist mode of production frames the analysis of this thesis; where the financial implications and economic conditions created in boutique fitness studio spaces intersect with experiences of mental health and embodiment. Jia Tolentino writes that:

“...the ideal woman has always been conceptually overworked, an inorganic thing engineered to look natural...More recently, the ideal woman has been whatever she wants to be as long as she manages to act upon the belief that perfecting herself and streamlining her relationship to the world can be a matter of both work and pleasure- of ‘lifestyle.’” (2020, p. 64-65)

In Tolentino’s work, as in this thesis, the lens of feminist political economy is used to explore how the concept of the “ideal woman” is constantly being re-architected by and for the capitalist mode of production. While the traits that define “the ideal woman” are continuously shifting, what remains constant is the expectation that she is constantly working on herself; that her lifestyle revolves around personal growth and optimization (Tolentino, 2020). A key consideration in this study is the lifestyle pressures and motivations that draw women to boutique fitness studios, as it importantly influences the factors that contribute to overall mental health implications of attending boutique fitness classes. Additionally, BFSs themselves are strongly positioned as sites for personal growth, so regardless of the actual impact, attending the space in and of itself satisfies the cultural burden women experience to work on oneself.

In this regard, Tolentino insightfully writes that “it’s very easy, under conditions of artificial but continually escalating obligation, to find yourself organizing your life around practices you find ridiculous and possibly indefensible. Women have known this intimately for a long time” (2020, p.68). Every participant of this study began attending BFSs with multiple, at times competing, goals in mind. They hoped that attending BFS classes would not only allow them to meet these goals, but to fulfil needs each had in their lives—a need for social connection; for increased body satisfaction; and/or for overall stress relief. From the outside, BFSs seemed to be ideal sites for working towards the goal of fulfilling these very human needs. However, over time every participant—except for one—came to realize that their BFS attendance was modifying their values and perspectives in ways they weren’t comfortable with. Participants described moments where they had stark realizations that they were headed down a path they weren’t proud of, confirming that the ‘escalating obligations’ Tolentino writes about are reproduced in BFSs, which, for participants of this study, led to psychological distress, shame, and increased anxiety.

Conclusion: Overview of Thesis and Key Contributions

Reflecting the adaptability of wellness culture, instead of promising toned thighs and thin waists, customers are increasingly being sold the possibility of wellness—a concept that encompasses physical and mental health, social acceptance and belonging. Despite the promises made by increasingly lucrative BFSs, it remains unclear if the social experiences and physical environments on offer are conducive to actual overall wellbeing and mental health improvement. This thesis, then, seeks to understand the psycho-social

impact of participation in boutique fitness studios. In a context characterized by decreased public investment in meaningful, state-funded forms of care, unprecedentedly high costs of living, and growing job insecurity, a significant number of people (often young, often women) turn to these spaces to achieve or maintain “wellness”. Bringing together the contributions of feminist political economy, fat studies scholarship and health phenomenology, described above, in what follows, this thesis parses out the nuances and complexities inherent in the commodification of wellness in these spaces, and the experiences of those who access them. Framing this inquiry is the extent to which participation in boutique fitness negatively or positively impacts the mental health and wellbeing of boutique fitness consumers.

More specifically, chapter two offers a literature review which considers the overarching context in which BFSs exist: contemporary wellness culture. It maps the shaping and shifting of narratives that pervade the western world related to health and wellness, with a critical and nuanced understanding of these concepts. Situating women’s individual experiences with BFSs as part of a broader system with its own motivations, chapter two unpacks the economization and politicization of women’s bodies and their intersectional identities.

Chapter three focuses on the theme of social belonging within BFSs, one of three key themes identified within the data as being important considerations in women’s experiences in BFSs and the impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Participants expressed three key factors that concerned their social experiences in BFS: (1) their level of involvement and participation, (2) brand loyalty and (3) exercise performance and outcomes. Across the sample, participants expressed feeling intense pressure to conform

to BFS culture particularly in these three ways as a means of establishing and maintaining social relationships and acceptance within BFS spaces. Additionally, chapter three includes a more detailed account of participants' social experiences of their bodies, in particular how social standing and value was assigned and accrued via physical appearances and presentations, like body size, shape, clothing.

The second key theme identified in this research project is that women's experiences in BFSs led to various types of embodied stress which impacted their overall wellbeing during their time attending these spaces, which is explored in chapter four. Participants of the study explained feeling dissatisfied and self-conscious about their bodies. They also shared that the culture, class structures and coaching styles used in classes often led to physical distress (e.g. heart palpitations, frequent vomiting etc.), and generally a disconnection from their physical selves and embodied experiences. Finally, the themes and narrative carried out via class instruction style was found to be self-help inspired and spiritual in a way that furthered their embodied stress by pushing them past their limits in pursuit of the self-actualization that was promised as part of the overall experience.

Chapter five connects participants experiences back to the bottom-line: capital accumulation for BFSs. Through my analysis of the data, it was apparent that carefully curated culture and experience of BFS classes broadly are designed to leave women wanting, and needing more, so that they keep coming back. The data from this research indicates that BFSs have identified and are reproducing and exploiting women's vulnerabilities in the contemporary moment for their own financial success. Social connection and belonging; physical wellness, and self-actualization were identified both

as areas where participants were seeking support and validation and are all represented in BFSs in ways that promote customer loyalty, and therefore profits, but not necessarily wellness. Participants of this sample reported that these conditions, created to induce reliance on the service, not mental and physical wellbeing as advertised, overwhelmingly created physical and mental stress in their lives.

Chapter six considers the implications of this research for anti-oppressive social work practice. The connection between mental health and exercise is widely accepted and yet nuanced and complicated, as identified throughout this research. A deeper, more thoughtful understanding of how women in particular experience and are impacted by exercise in contemporary culture is needed to support women's wellbeing and overall mental health.

Chapter 2: THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF WELLNESS

The success of BFSs as businesses and their continued ability to recruit new members relies heavily on the pervasive ideas and belief systems surrounding health and wellness that permeate the western world, which is often referred to broadly as wellness culture. The discussion of wellness culture that follows traces the history of health and wellness predominantly under capitalism, and more recently in relation to more contemporary, neoliberal forms capitalism wherein wealth accumulation has assumed an ever-greater affective quality. This history and culture help us to critically engage with the complexities and contradictions of boutique fitness, as well as the ways in which BFS clients rationalize and understand their participation in those spaces. In turn, they provide the backdrop and social, economic, and cultural context of this research.

Section 1: Wellness Culture

In this thesis, the term “wellness culture” is used to represent a structure that defines wellness in ways that are supportive of capital accumulation. Central to this definition is how wellness has been, over the course of capitalist history, commodified and the extent to which this commodification has disproportionately impacted on women—the primary targets or at times, objects of this commodification. Despite being omnipresent, wellness culture is not fixed. It shifts to accommodate new ideas around wellness and health, new technologies, new trends and popular interests, and even critique. In the current moment, picture health food stores, expensive athletic clothing, spin studios, yoga classes, tech-wearables that count steps and calories, and tell you when to move, meal replacements, juice bars, raw vegan restaurants, novel forms of therapy, forest bathing, etc. On their own, each of these things seems harmless. Woven together and read through the specifics of neoliberal ideology pertaining to productivity and

individualism, these aspects contemporary wellness culture permeate almost every area of life in the Western world, creating the unavoidable narrative that self-worth is tied to managing one's body with the ultimate aim of achieving thinness. In this context, spending on wellbeing is rationalized, and understood as a perfectly reasonable use of personal and social resources.

More broadly, however, the concept of wellness has historical roots in Indigenous cultural practices all over the world. The Native Women's Association of Canada uses the traditional Indigenous medicine wheel teachings in everything from violence prevention toolkits to diabetes management resources, acknowledging that wellbeing is interconnected to every aspect of a person's life (Native Women's Association of Canada, n.d.). Modern public health research echoes this wisdom with findings that social and economic factors play a substantial role in determining health status, which have been defined and widely accepted as the social determinants of health (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). These social and economic factors are largely derived from the logics and conditions of colonialism and capitalism, such that the social determinants (i.e., poverty, unemployment, racial inequality) of health have their origins in these systems.

Despite long-standing traditional and increasingly common-place understandings of human health and wellbeing as rooted in social and economic conditions, contemporary "wellness culture", and those who benefit financially from it, remains steadfast in its promotion of highly individualistic forms of wellness. Here, industry players capitalize on colonial notions of wellness, and more precisely, thinness as wellness, to determine and dominate much of what we encounter and experience as "wellness". Adjacently, modern medicine has remained fixated on weight, conflating

health with thinness (Manias, 2020). With the attachment of weight to health and health to status, there is a morality to health and body size (Knoll, 2019). This morality and the assignment of value and status to thinness creates the opportunity for capital gain. Indeed, since the 1960's, fitness spaces have promised changes in body size and shape as a marketing tool. From Jazzercise to Jane Fonda's at home aerobics classes, the focus of women's exercise has generally been to tone, trim, and sculpt women's bodies (Dart, 2018)—to contain them.

The morality of exercise, physical ability, and body size, however, is not new (Bourdieu, 1984), nor is the profitability of such discourse. Indeed, such messaging tracts the moralizing, pathologizing, and vilifying to which fat people are frequently subjected—lazy, lacking productivity, willpower, and discipline, and unable or unwilling to care for oneself (Brewis & Wutich, 2019; Saguy & Riley, 2005; van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019)- and have much deeper roots, as do the solutions on offer to resolve these characteristics. In the contemporary moment of hyper-individuated and fatphobic capitalism, these traits are to be avoided at all cost. Striving, then, for the opposite is the foundation on which most boutique fitness studio brands, classes, and communities are built. Consumers, this study's participants amongst them, are encouraged to push through pain, fatigue, stress, financial strain, and emotional upset to achieve strength, to be productive with their time, and to earn self-respect according to the BFS construct.

Central to “wellness culture” and its reliance on moralizing discourse are the processes by which *body capital* has been established as a form of social currency and power. Bourdieu (1984) describes body capital as encompassing the virtue and morality attached to bodies based on their size, shape, ability, and capacities. That is, power and

authority is ascribed to individuals who have bodies that conform to contemporary standards of beauty, while those that do not are excluded, devalued, and not granted power or authority. This has been well demonstrated and documented by research across a range of health and wellness scholarships, and in adjacent disciplines, specifically in relation to thinness. For example, “thin” women make considerably more in salaries than “average weight” women (Judge & Cable, 2011), and women considered “overweight” are more likely to be judged as guilty by juries (Schvey et al., 2013). Offering evidence of this authority and perceived expertise from a different vantage point, a study by Puhl and colleagues (2013) explores the experiences of doctors who, according to these norms, lack body capital. They found that patients with physicians who were perceived to be ‘overweight’ were less likely to trust their doctors and follow their medical advice and were more likely to change health care providers. In these studies, bodies conforming to contemporary wellness and beauty ideals (thin bodies) were assigned power and authority, while those who did not, had their competency challenged and denigrated.

Section 2: Race, Gender, and the (un)Well Body

While there is a clear link between the culture of wellness and capitalism, the exclusivity of contemporary wellness culture has roots deeply grounded white supremacy, as does the conflation of wellness and thinness, and the notion of thinness as the ideal embodiment of health and beauty (Farrell, 2011). Beauty and health ideals that center thinness as the ultimate goal didn’t appear until the turn of the twentieth century, which shortly follows the legal abolishment of slavery in North America. As African Americans were beginning to live outside the ownership of white colonizers, rampant racism left white Americans motivated to separate themselves from people of color as

much as possible. While fat bodies at one time signaled affluence and lavish luxury, they suddenly began to resemble the bodies of previously enslaved African Americans. As a result, beauty standards shifted quickly, and the ideal body shrunk, leaving white-Americans deeply afraid of becoming fat. (Bordo, 1993; Farrell, 2011; Purkiss, 2017).

As revealed in the narratives of this study's participants, the concept of wellness culture has considerable economic limitations that barre peoples' access to participation. It cannot be overlooked that in Canada, and North America more broadly, systemic racism has disenfranchised Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) since its colonization, and as a result BIPOC families are four times more likely to live in poverty than white families (Poverty in Canada, 2021). This number is even higher for households led by single mothers, and higher again for single mothers who are BIPOC (Poverty in Canada, 2021). Housing and food insecurity, transportation barriers, financial constraints, social stigma and resultantly limited access to health care and resources are just a few of the barriers that keep people living in poverty from accessing wellness and therefore uphold the concept of wellness as a tool of white supremacy. Indeed, the idealization of thinness was used as a means of contributing to the othering and dehumanization of black people. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beauty ideals moved away from viewing fat/thick bodies as a sign of affluence and beauty, since fat bodies bore resemblance to the proportions of black bodies. Instead, white colonial citizens began to demonize large or fat bodies (Bordo, 1993, Purkiss, 2017) in favor of thinness, which became a symbol of control, self-restraint and desirability (Oliver, 2006). Thus, the colonial, white, and elitist notion of thinness as wellness and wellness as status was established.

In addition to its entanglement with white supremacy, personal wellness as a tool of capital accumulation has significant gender implications. Women and gender non-conforming people are uniquely impacted by contemporary beauty ideals and the wellness diet, which can be demonstrated fundamentally by the disproportionately high prevalence of eating disorders among women, girls, and gender-non-conforming folks, compared to men (Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2014). To further highlight the gendered impacts of this issue, it is important to address the reproductive health consequences and barriers women encounter as a result of the attribution of weight to morality.

Although regulations were put in place in the late 1990s requiring representation of men and women to ensure that health research more directly reflected the population, medicine is still a field biased by gender. Much less research is completed on topics of women's health compared to men's, and many medical decisions and assumptions are made regarding women based on research completed on white males (Hamberg, 2008), with even less attention paid to women of diverse identities, including body size. Currently, Health Canada mandates that all "morning after" pill (emergency contraception medication that can be taken up to 72hrs after sex) options are only effective in women/people with a uterus who weigh up to 165lbs. It is "less effective" in people weighing between 165-176lbs and considered ineffective for people over 176lbs (Health Canada, 2014). The only after-sex contraception option for people above 176lbs is emergency IUD insertion, which has a much higher price tag and involves multiple appointments with a doctor (Vogel, 2015). This can take weeks to book and requires time

away from work and the competing priorities that are encapsulated within women's reproductive labour.

This kind of complacency in researching and offering sexual and reproductive health resources and services to people who do not exist in thin bodies is just one example of how a culture that associates thinness with health and health with morality further marginalizes people already encountering oppression. Additionally, this demonstrates one of the many ways that wellness has been effectively co-opted by neoliberal and colonial structures, as people are often left with no option but to participate in the commodification of wellness in order to access basic resources like health care (for example, participating in paid exercise classes and consuming expensive weight-loss supplements in order to conform to a size where medication is effective).

A. Intersectional Implications

Wellness culture has substantial negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of women, girls and people broadly, as well as their financial security. It disproportionately impacts people from marginalized communities including black, Indigenous and people of color, people with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ community, people living in poverty, and more, as will be exemplified in this section. Hispanic women are more likely than white women to cope with weight stigma by engaging in disordered eating (Himmelstein, 2017). People who are food insecure are left with the dilemma to eat foods that have been deemed morally bad, or not eat at all (Chen, 2016), which is one potential reason underlying the statistic that people who are food insecure, or low income, are more likely to experience eating disorders (Mitchinson et al., 2014; Becker et al., 2017). Lesbian, bi-sexual and queer, cis-women, transmasculine, and non-binary folks experience disproportionate

weight stigma in health-care settings because of their intersecting gender and sexual minority identities, and therefore are less likely to seek medical care when necessary, and more likely to be discredited or misdiagnosed (Paine, 2021). These are just a few of the ways that people with intersecting identities are further marginalized by the perpetuation of contemporary wellness culture, which is imposed by colonial and neoliberal structures for capital accumulation.

Wellness culture's pervasive messaging around good vs. bad food has contributed to the high prevalence of eating disorders among women and girls in Canada through reinforcing the diet mentality (Culbert et al., 2015; Linardon & Mitchell, 2017; Harrison 2018). Studies have shown that children would rather lose an arm than be fat (Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2014). As of 1998, Anorexia Nervosa had the highest mortality rate of any mental illness (Harris and Barroclough, 1998). While this data is dated, it continues to represent an accurate depiction of death related to mental health amongst eating disorder experts and mental health clinicians (Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2014). Transgender people face all the same risk factors as cisgender people for the development of eating disorders, with the additional layer of gender affirmation concerns (Nowaskie et al., 2021). People who are trans face a disadvantage in social capital that entices people to change their bodies to compensate via the accumulation of body capital, they experience barriers to accessing health care, which further promotes the pursuit of health and wellness individually, and additionally are motivated to engage in exercise to improve their experiences gender-affirmation via physical characteristics. Linking morality to body size and food through wellness culture

has only created additional public health concerns with respect to people's overall wellbeing.

Section 3: Making Space, Adaptions within Wellness Culture

In response to this, and the ensuing pressure on women to achieve and maintain particular kinds of bodies, fat activists, feminist scholars, and health care providers who follow a “health at every size approach” work to problematize dominant approaches to health and wellbeing, encouraging instead an approach that is body positive (Mysko, 2015). In turn, many fitness spaces, boutique fitness studios amongst them, have changed the way they advertise their services. Businesses now want to erase their focus on weight-loss in favour of promoting wellness, while still perpetuating harmful and unattainable beauty ideals that keep customers coming back for more (Harrison, 2018). For example, Weight Watchers recently changed their name and branding to WW to disguise their focus on weight loss, while still enforcing thinness as health (WW, 2021). In fact, their new tracking app is called WellnessWins, which aligns their branding with the concept of wellness, when the actual focus of the program is to help people lose weight, regardless of how the process impacts their overall well-being or health.

The shift from diet culture—that is, the explicit promotion of diets, and the pursuit of thinness as morally good—to wellness culture has been fruitful for many. As previously mentioned, the wellness industry was worth 4.6 trillion dollars globally as of 2017 (Global Wellness Institute, 2017). This industry includes the co-optation and appropriation of sacred spiritual and cultural practices from all over the world that have been dissected and adapted to maximize commodification (Thompson-Ochoa, 2019) by

brands like Lululemon and SpinCo. Trips to health food stores, fitness studio memberships, and athletic wear have become forms of social currency that enhance a person's perceived worth and well-being.

Conclusion

Wellness culture has been strategically deployed under contemporary neoliberal capitalism to commodify wellness as a tool for capital accumulation. Women in particular are targeted with the individualization of health and wellness, while their bodies are highly politicized and surveilled. The roots of wellness culture and its associated beauty ideals lie in historical, systemic racism and white supremacy. Though specific beauty ideals and health trends associated with women's bodies have shifted over time, they still remain firmly grounded in neoliberal ideologies, specifically related to women's work, the individualization of responsibility and productivity.

The intersectional race, gender and socioeconomic implications of this culture are pervasive. The realities of existing in the wellness culture landscape most intensely impact people who are marginalized and the economic barriers to accessing wellness and the gendered implications of wellness culture further marginalize those who do not conform to its ideals, illustrating how these systems are replicated in BFSs..

Overall, this chapter has laid the groundwork for understanding the complex interplay between wellness culture and BFSs. By critically engaging with the historical, social, and economic contexts of wellness, it provides a nuanced backdrop for the subsequent analysis of how BFS clients understand their participation in these spaces. This exploration sets the stage for unpacking the broader implications of wellness culture on individual and collective well-being within the neoliberal capitalist framework.

Chapter 3: CONNECTION + DISCONNECTION, SOCIAL BELONGING IN THE STUDIO

“It’s a social club almost before it’s a [fitness studio]” (Participant)

As discussed in the introduction, recently, and largely in response to concerns about discrimination and exclusion, BFSs have shifted away from overtly promoting changes to physical appearance as a central component of their marketing tactics. Instead, these spaces tend to make promises about the mental health impacts and social benefits of attending studio classes. The evolution of CrossFit marketing is a keen example of this. Posted ten years ago, videos on their YouTube page targeted towards women are titled things like “Let Beauty Speak” and “Beauty in Strength”. These videos, which offer testimonials of CrossFit consumers, focus on the physical changes women can expect to see if they commit to CrossFit. Under the guise of female empowerment, CrossFit is sold in these videos as a rejection of traditional beauty standards, while maintaining a heavy focus on an alternative aesthetic that is very much still centered on physical appearance. “Defined strength”, “finely tuned”, and “sexiness” are just a few of the many physical outcomes promised to CrossFit consumers in these videos which were posted a decade ago. In contrast, a more recent video published in 2022, describes the experience as “working out with a good bunch of people, having a sweat and letting off steam”. There is a notable shift in focus away from the exclusively sculpted bodies depicted in the videos 10 years prior. Instead, the 2022 video features a moderate diversity of body shapes, sizes, and races. The spaces are sold much more gently as sites of community and family building that will “change your life”.

It is commonly understood that social connectedness and a sense of belonging are protective factors against mental health concerns. This has been demonstrated in research

across a diverse array of populations and life circumstances including people with severe pre-existing mental health diagnoses (Sippel et al., 2022). Conversely, across ages, a weaker sense of belonging and connection to community is associated with poorer mental and physical health (Michalski et al., 2020). In fact, the relationship between social connection and health is so strong that the World Health Organization has a commission dedicated to researching loneliness as a global health threat (Ng, 2024).

Important to fostering community connection and belonging are third places: sites other than work and home where people can gather and engage socially. They are places where social connectedness and belonging can develop (Oldenburg, 1999). To some, a gym, or BFS, is one such space: it is a gathering place that people frequent as part of their everyday lives and routines where social connections can be established via shared interests and habitual contact. For the participants of this study, while social connection was important to them and, as they understood it, their mental health, the conditions created overall in these spaces were not conducive to positive mental health. Instead, for most participants, attending BFS added stress and strain that increased their mental health challenges.

Section 1: Seeking Connection

Of the 7 participants in this study, five identified social connection as their primary or secondary motivator for seeking out BFSs. Three of these five participants had friends who were already accessing the studio and decided to attend classes to spend time with their existing friend. The other 2 had recently moved to new cities and were seeking BFSs to meet new people with hopes of building relationships and finding community in

their new homes. The three participants who tried out BFSs to spend time with existing friends both maintained their relationships after ending their attendance at the studio and all shared that attending the classes had a net neutral impact on their relationships (they didn't become closer, nor did they lose the friendships). However, two of the three participants reported the experiences they had with the social environment to be problematic.

The two participants who accessed BFSs to build relationships and connection shared that they were successful in making friends and feeling a sense of community. However, in both cases, they also shared that their relationships either did not continue or have become strained since they stopped accessing the space. Once they no longer had the shared interest of accessing BFSs, both participants shared that the relationships became challenging to navigate. The overarching theme spanning all seven interviews related to experiences of social connections is that belonging in BFSs was conditional and BFS social dynamics were associated with increased social anxiety. Overwhelmingly, participants shared that the environments were rife with competition and social hierarchy, which in some cases they found motivating, but ultimately were harmful to their overall wellbeing.

Four of the seven participants interviewed identified that there were "cliques" or "an in-group" that dominated the BFSs. This interview narrative speaks directly to a sense that belonging in BFSs came from making it into the "in-group". Three key themes were identified as moderating people's social status within the spaces: 1) level of involvement in the spaces (i.e. attendance, type of membership, relationships to staff

etc.), 2) participation in the overall brand (wearing unofficial uniforms, owning equipment/accessories) and 3) exercise-performance.

A. Level of Involvement

Multiple participants reported that the type of membership held, and/or the number of classes attended impacts social status within the space, as well as access to both formally and informally organized events.: “there’s definitely a bit of an “in” group...where there’s people who have like the full membership...If you are in that group that is like frequently attending, there seems to be, like there’s definitely a bit of a clique there”. In a similar vein, another participant said: “certain members get certain perks and other people don’t...it’s an elitest group of people”. A third participant described the same dynamic further: “There’s this social hierarchy dynamic within the BFSs...like there are the no name customers who just sort of exist. Then there’s the folks who are there all the time, and then there are the folks who are there more than once a day and are also paying for the extra services.” She also said “I definitely got access to things that other customers didn’t because I had a relationship with the right people”. The sense of confidence and belonging she felt with this special access only amplified her desire to be in the space more frequently, to solidify these relationships and out of fear around losing them.

One participant talked about the opposite experience where instructors would use inside jokes when facilitating a class saying; “I felt left out”. Though she attended the space frequently, her involvement somehow wasn’t quite “good enough” to get her invited to private classes and events where “elite” relationships were further developed, and then displayed in front of the broader membership. She commented that she didn’t

believe these inside jokes were used intentionally to exclude people, however for her it produced feelings of insignificance and amplified her desire to show up more consistently in hopes that she might be invited to the next private event.

The same participant also talked about the use of social media. She shared it was common for people to discuss whether or not they followed the BFS owner on social media platforms because the owner would not typically follow people back but every so often she would: “Who is the special one to get a follow back from the owner” is something everyone talked about. “I think these instructors get idolized in really unhealthy ways,” said another participant. To add to the dynamics between instructors and customers, one participant described feeling additional pressure to attend consistently because of the relationships she had developed with instructors over time. If she missed a class, she would receive messages like “You didn’t show up today, where are you?” or “Don’t be lazy”.

B. Brand Loyalty

Though participants of this study had accessed different businesses, there are shared branding elements among most of the BFSs discussed. From clothing choices to choreography, there is a distinct set of aesthetics and practices that seem to be associated with high social value in BFS spaces. The data indicates that alongside level of involvement, a key mediator of belonging and social connection in BFS spaces was participating in the overall BFS brand, which included exercise performance in classes.

Displays in some of the spaces ranked class participants by their performance in real time and compared different data points depending on the type of class/studio. In some cases, only a top percentage of class participants were displayed, and it always

included names and measures of performance: rotations per minute, calories burned, and heart rate were all mentioned. Instructors were described as using these stats to address class participants with praise and encouragement. Participants shared that having your name at the top of the board would catch the attention of both instructors as well as other class participants, which contributed to the development of social hierarchies within the space. Additionally, choreography was something that came up no less than four times. Participants mentioned there being “front rows” in the classes which were always filled with people who knew what to do, when to do it, and “never missed a beat”. One participant shared that she became aware of the way she fixated on wanting to be the top performer in the class. She noticed that this caused her to become obsessive in ways that she felt were unhealthy as she attempted to push herself to the top of the class.

Additionally, fitting in seemed to include wearing the “unofficial uniform”.

Three participants brought up that when they first attended the space, they wore whatever they were comfortable in, but over time they began to feel insecure about their outfits. “I felt weird about the fact that I was the only person in the room wearing a shirt. So, then I did eventually just like start wearing a sports bra, but to be honest it’s not my preferred way to exercise. I would much rather wear a shirt” (participant). Another participant said “I was like oh man I need to buy new fitness gear.... I can’t be showing up in the same outfit multiple times a week.”

For two of the participants, noticing a shift in the way they dressed, or even just acknowledging the discomfort they felt around clothing was when they started to question their participation in BFSs. The realization that they were stressed about something which they typically would not be led them to begin questioning if attending

the BFS was adding value to their lives, or perhaps adding unnecessary stress. While a more fulsome discussion around embodied experiences is included in the following chapter, this also speaks to social conditions and pressure created in BFS. “If you look at their web pages you can see there’s a dress code. There isn’t actually, but there is” (participant). The dress code seems to be one of many cultural norms curated by BFSs to establish perceived community, while actually creating conditions of exclusion that simultaneously served to project the studio’s brand more broadly.

C. Exercise-Performance and Outcomes

Two participants reported that they sought out BFSs for weight loss reasons. Along this pursuit, one such participant shared that the attention and praise she received as her body started to change really fueled her participation in these spaces. This participant explained that being in pursuit of weight loss impacted the way people interacted with her in these spaces “Especially as I started losing weight, people noticed me even more...both staff and other customers. I felt like I gathered so much social capital like having the trainers know who I am”. She also shared that at a time in her life when she was in distress because of disordered eating and exercise, the praise compensated for how much stress she was under:

At a certain point, I had gone more than a year without missing a day...and like if I don’t go then I’m not going to get that hit of perceived pride that I feel when folks around me are like hey it’s nice to see you again...socially and emotionally I felt like I was seeking that fix of affirmation.

She shared that she later came to understand that these relationships, which had been built on a shared interest in making her body smaller, were not as genuine as she had hoped “Walking in as a fat person...and a fat person who has spoken out loud ‘I’m pursuing weight loss’...that brought people a lot of joy... and in hindsight I’m like ‘oh, they saw dollar signs”. This participant felt so much anxiety around her decision to leave the BFS that she drove to a different franchise of the same BFS in a different city to end her membership to avoid facing staff and other members at the studio she attended.

Another participant, who was not actively seeking weight loss, but who is, and was at the time of her participation in BFSs, in recovery from an eating disorder and disordered exercise shared “There’s something about being in a studio, in a class around other people that, while it is really motivating, would also sometimes encourage me to lean too much into the activity in a way that actually wasn’t great for me”. Similarly, a participant shared that the social connection was a motivator for her to attend classes saying: “if you have friends that you don’t see anywhere else, it’s really motivating when you’re alone in a city or don’t have a lot of people that you know in a city, to go multiple times a week”

Section 2: Body Capital, In-Groups, and Conditional Belonging

The desire to connect with others over an activity that appeared to be at minimum fun, and/or, even better, possibly wellness enhancing was present in each of the interviews. While friendship outside of BFSs seemed to be relatively untouched by shared experiences in BFSs, the interactions participants had with BFS communities broadly fostered insecurity and competitiveness that ultimately was the reason that four

of the participants stopped attending BFS spaces. Participants' experiences of social connection and belonging seemed to hinge on their level of involvement in the space, their participation in the overall BFS brand (outfits, exercise performance, social media participation etc.) and, for participants who identified living in large/fat bodies, their pursuit of weight loss. Ultimately, participants reported experiences suggest that conditions of belonging are created in BFSs were more about branding and business strategy than about meaningful connection, community, and wellbeing.

For many of the participants, it was the apparent hierarchies present in the space that made BFS participation initially compelling, but eventually disappointing (at best) and damaging (at worst). Other participants highlighted that the connections they made were "relationships of opportunity" (participant) and therefore felt disingenuous. One shared that despite years of attending the same classes, she felt completely ignored in a context where other attendees appeared to be connecting and making new friends. All participants shared feelings of self-consciousness related to the intense power imbalances within the studios. From their narratives and descriptions, body capital was deployed by instructors and trainers to exert authority, naturalizing the social hierarchies that favoured customers who aspired to the same level of fitness as the instructors.

Reflecting the perseverance of diet-culture and the body capital associated with thinness, and despite studio references to wellness and community, the power imbalance that existed between those classified as thin or fit and those who were not was evident in the experiences of participants. Mirroring a study by Hutson (2015) that explored how body capital is used in fitness spaces to adjust power norms and social hierarchies within the class-space, participants with relative status in other areas of their lives, found

themselves struggling to make sense of their “social location” or position within the studio, and in turn, though even momentarily, wanting connection within the studios that would elevate their standing. Similarly, in his work, Hutson found that age and gender differentials in interpersonal encounters create power imbalance, and that fitness trainers used their body capital—that is their thin, toned, muscular bodies—to renegotiate power, to exert power, and to influence people’s judgement (Hutson, 2015). This is further confirmed by research from Hutson (2013) which found that people working in the fitness industry were regarded by their clients as having both expertise and moral authority in a range of health-related and medical matters. This, he argues, is largely predicated on the trainer’s body capital (or perceived fitness) instead of education in advanced nutrition, kinesiology, medicine, or diagnostic care (Hutson, 2013).

In their work, Penderson & Tjorhoj-Thomsen (2016) argue that because the human body is a reflection of one’s identity, the concept of working on one’s body similarly becomes a part of peoples’ identity. Specifically, they found that youth’s body work, or engagement in the pursuit of fitness, contributed to their accumulation of both body capital, as well as social forms of capital, in particular knowledge and expertise, social connectedness and self-worth. The moral value, virtue and power that is acquired through the process of attending to, or working on, one’s body positions gyms and fitness studios for immense opportunity with respect to capital gain. That is, they deeply benefit from the conditions of the contemporary social context.

Importantly, for participants, this power structure made the possibility of meaningful social connection within the space challenging. Customers vied for friendship with trainers, who in turn, rewarded those most “committed” to the studio. One

participant shared that attending BFSs gave her the feeling for the first time in her life that she was a part of the “in group” or “cool group”. However, there seems to be something about BFS spaces that catapults women in particular onto a social ladder that can be climbed only with a lot of disposable income, time and self-sacrifice. The elitism that is established via expensive fees, steep time commitments and the fact that employees of these spaces are commonly social media influencers, seems to have reproduced a toxic culture of hierarchy and competition, which is packaged as community. As one participant described “it’s girl power gone wrong”.

When asked to describe the environment of BFSs, with a sarcastic tone, one participant said, “they are offering you community, Nora”. She was one of many participants who perceived BFS staff to be performative in their interactions. Along with other participants, she believed that at the end of the day, BFSs are businesses looking to make a profit. As well, her quip spoke to the fact that she knows “community”, or a sense of belonging, is being marketed even more than the workout classes themselves are marketed. An awareness of the dynamic between customer and business was present in other interviews as well: “There’s this weird pseudo friendship that happens with the front door staff... it kind of feels like an upsell but at the same time it’s kind of pleasant because they act excited to see you and stuff even if they don’t really know who you are”. In this case, the participant was seeking social connection when accessing the BFS and so enjoyed being greeted but recognized the interactions to be profit-driven and not genuine. In turn, and overarchingly, the spaces were described as “competitive”, “intimidating” “clique-y” and “exclusive”, which did not make for environments conducive to the development of healthy, fulfilling relationships.

Conclusion

Where physicians perceived as overweight are deemed untrustworthy (Puhl et al., 2013), and uneducated, thin fitness trainers are awarded authority on topics of health (Hutson et al., 2013), under contemporary diet-culture, authority is assigned, and trust is built based on physical body size and shape more than education, credentials and experience. In turn, body capital and the social capital obtained through body work become tools that can be used by corporate wellness spaces to garner authority. This authority is mobilized, not in the service of client wellbeing, but rather to ensure the profitability of the business, and in turn, to create a structure wherein belonging is predicated on buy-in. Put differently, corporate, boutique wellness spaces capitalize on the perception of their instructors' expertise, realized through body capital, which in turn, creates and naturalizes social hierarchy within the space, leading to an intensifying of commitment as customers seek out social rewards. The actual nature or content of instructor expertise is secondary in this equation.

And yet, from the interview data, it became clear that the authority of the instructor, coupled with the social cache they acquire through their association with the studio, created social conditions and hierarchy that participants struggled to navigate in their efforts to develop or deepen connection within the space. Overarchingly, the spaces were described as “competitive”, “intimidating” “clique-y” and “exclusive”, which did not make for environments conducive to the development of healthy, fulfilling relationships. At the same time, what becomes clear from their experiences—and more precisely, their financial investment in attending BFS—is the desire for connection, a

longing effectively tapped into by BFSs. The conditions to belonging that participants described in this study connect back to financial investment in BFSs, where increasing financial investment in the BFS and its brand is directly correlated with an increased sense of belonging and connection to the “in- group”. What this meant for participants of the study is a steep financial investment without the payoff of meaningful social connection, and as discussed in the next chapter, any significant improvement in mental health or wellbeing. In fact, and very much an outcome of conditional belonging within these spaces, in addition to the dysmorphic implications of intense forms of group exercise, participants experienced a diminishment in their sense of wellbeing and wellness.

Chapter 4: UNDER PRESSURE, WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF (DIS)EMBODIMENT IN BFSs

“Sometimes you feel like you’re dying” (participant)

While there is ample research demonstrating a positive connection between exercise and mental health, a much deeper, and more analytical understanding of this connection is needed (Pickett, Kendrick & Yardley, 2017). The interpersonal and environmental context in which exercise takes place, as well as the type of exercise, add complexity to people’s experiences and consequential mental health outcomes (Klussman, Langer & Nichols, 2021). Particularly for women, the moralization and stigmatization of fat bodies has led to complex associations with exercise that complicate the relationship between exercise and mental health. Work by Harman and Burrows points to some of the potential harms, particularly to women, that are enacted through exercise experiences and related choices. Their work reveals a sort of paradox where, regardless of body size, women experience feelings of guilt particularly related to fatness and the fear of fatness, both when exercising, and when choosing not to exercise (2019). Similarly, amongst my interviewees, irrespective of their choices (to spend time exercising or to not exercise), they spoke of feelings of guilt and shame that frame their identities, and overall mental health—feelings that were intensified in the spaces of boutique fitness, such that “merely” being there to exercise was insufficient. This is because, as described in chapter three, participation in these spaces became socially fraught and as such, personally complicated.

Here, we can turn to recent research demonstrating the mental health impacts of exercise as mediated by type of exercise and importantly, self-connection (Klussman,

Langer & Nichols, 2021), indicating that maybe exercise on its own is not enough to impact mental health outcomes—or that absent self-connection, made possible in part through healthy connections with others—one might experience negative outcomes. For example, in a study by Klusman, Langer and Nichols demonstrated that higher self-connection, defined as “(1) an awareness of oneself, (2) an acceptance of oneself based on this awareness and (3) an alignment of one’s behavior with this awareness” (p.66) was related to higher self-reported health and wellness (2021). In a culture where most women wished their bodies were different in one way or another, and where wellness is offered in deeply competitive (both socially and physically) environments, self-connection can be elusive. This, in combination with the essentially unavoidable the presence of exercise-related guilt and shame, calls into question whether the search for mental wellness can found in boutique fitness studios.

Section 1: Body (dis)satisfaction and (dis)comfort

Given the complicated context of contemporary wellness culture, where participants must simultaneously deny body dissatisfaction while working toward idealized forms of fitness, and where community is celebrated, yet hierarchies based on fitness-levels remain normative, interviewees hesitated to articulate body-oriented exercise goals. And yet for most, dissatisfaction with their bodies, or fear of impending body changes (brought on by age, etc.) was one of the primary reasons for pursuing BFS membership. Such motivation for exercise remains incredibly common, and despite recent moves toward body inclusivity and positivity, intensive, frequent exercise is offered as the solution. In this context, BFSs emerge as site of managing one’s body dissatisfaction

through exercise that is group-driven and competitive. In turn, these spaces normalize frequent, excessive, and indeed, disordered forms of exercise by apply different forms of social pressure on customers.

Reflecting the effectiveness of these social pressures, while some participants attended BFS in pursuit of fitness and/or weight loss, others did not. Still, regardless of their initial goals and motivations, even those previously comfortable with their bodies, development goals related to fitness and body modification. Moreover, and more broadly, all experienced acute anxiety around how they would be perceived, particularly as it relates to their performance and physical appearance *while* exercising. Discussions around experiences of embodiment were rich with insights about what exacerbated their insecurities and body image concerns. Overarchingly, there was a great deal of embodied discomfort, which was generally experienced as a keen awareness of the ways in which their own physical selves (body shape/size, clothing and performance) perceivably differed from the class as whole and from the instructors. These feelings accelerated, rather than diminished, in BFS classes where any difference felt magnified. In turn, body dissatisfaction morphed into a whole new set of discomforts around exercise apparel, ways of being in the study, and physical ability vis-à-vis the sometimes very complicated exercise routines.

It is unsurprising that the very specific aesthetic and overall brand that seems to define most BFSs (as discussed previously) left participants feeling pressured to assimilate. One participant described BFS as “pretty homogenous in terms of like gender, race, body type and size”. Accompanied by the “unofficial dress code”, participants reported a startling lack of diversity of any kind when it came to members of BFSs. It

makes sense, then, that participants in these spaces would develop feelings of insecurity, because with that degree of cohesion any minor difference from the common aesthetic was glaring.

The lack of diversity among these spaces was, in a very small way, verified by the lack of diversity of participants who engaged with this study. While the research project was open to all women and non-binary adults, only cis-white women participated. There was no culture or gender diversity in the participant cohort. While there are many potential reasons for this, the participant demographics for this study line up with the class demographics described. There was, however, some diversity among participants with respect to body size. The two participants who identified as having large or fat bodies, both found BFSs specifically as spaces for pursuing weight loss. “The instigator [was] that I don’t like how I look. I’m uncomfortable in my body and I want to go to the space that’s going to help me change that as quickly as I possibly can”, said one participant. Participants noted have some success in that regard, and that during the time they spent at BFSs, their bodies aligned more with social and cultural ideals. Still, they struggled to feel like they genuinely belonged in these spaces: “if you are a fat body attending these sorts of classes, you’re definitely the odd one out. Like there’s no doubt you just don’t see fat bodies in these classes.” (participant)

In addition to a lack of diversity among identities and experiences of BFS users, as discussed briefly in the previous chapter, a few participants shared about the very specific clothing patterns they encountered. Two participants in particular shared feeling discomfort specifically about wearing a shirt to class, noting that everyone else in the space wore only sports bras. Both shared that despite the fact that it was not their

preference, they each adjusted to wearing outfits that matched their peers, as the discomfort in the modified outfit itself was less stressful than being the “only person in the room wearing a shirt” (participant).

A few factors such as the setup of the space itself, as well as the instructor’s approach, either enhanced or lessened participants’ self-consciousness. “The way that instructors manage peoples’ relationships with the mirrors, whether that’s like what spot you can request to be put it, whether you can see yourself or not, whether the lighting is dark enough that you can’t really make out other people or yourself” really mattered to one participant. She noted “people’s relationships to their bodies are so impacted by when they’re watching themselves exercise versus just feeling how it feels in their body”. Another participant articulated that she felt much more aware of both her body and her performance in a BFS that involved partnered activities as opposed to ones that did not include involvement of other group members in the actual workout.

Having an audience, or a perceived audience of any kind increased participants’ discomfort about exercising. One participant shared that she once attended a BFS that was on the ground floor of a building and the classroom had a wall of windows which overlooked a restaurant patio: “I remember feeling so uncomfortable the entire time”, she shared. This makes a lot of sense given that exercising can be a vulnerable experience. Also, it connects back to the narratives carried out in many of these spaces around personal responsibility to the self, and to the remainder of the class, to challenge limits and perform at the same pace as the rest of the class. “I was thinking constantly how uncomfortable I was or how awkward or nervous I felt” (participant). While the restaurant clientele on the other side of the window creates an obvious audience, the

discourse around collective hard work and community, as well as the homogeneity of the experience overall, creates a slightly disguised, yet ever present audience within the class. This adds to the pressure to perform and conform, and consequently led to a great deal of anxiety and self-consciousness for the participants of this study.

Section 2: Body (dis)connection

Three participants shared that attending BFS classes allowed them to “get out of their heads”, stating that the intensity of the classes and the nature of it being an immersive experience with many sensory components (low lighting, loud music, physical challenge) cleared their minds of daily stressors and anxieties. “I just want to get out of my head and into my body” said one participant. Unfortunately, the experience overall tended to create conditions that caused participants to also disconnect from their bodies’ cues, which resulted in being pushed past their reasonable limits. Four participants identified that their exercise habits were taken to extremes in these spaces. Two participants described experiencing heart palpitations and/or reaching dangerously high heart rates in the classes, another reported that she frequently vomited because of over exertion- which was celebrated by others in the classes as a sign of hard work- and another participant (a young, otherwise healthy person) described a time when she genuinely wondered if she might be having a heart attack in a class. The theme to be highlighted here is not that BFS classes put people at increased risk of cardiac events, but instead that for the participants of this study, whether it was overtly encouraged or not, BFS classes were spaces where people ignored important cues their bodies were signaling about being maximally exerted and pushed themselves to the point of distress. In each

case, participants articulated that it was not their preference to get to the point of distress, but they either failed to realize it was happening, or felt obligated to continue past their limit because of the social pressures present in the class. As a result, despite wanting to feel more connected to their bodies, the majority of participants in fact experienced the opposite: a disconnection from their physical selves which led to health concerns.

Instructor narratives around pushing boundaries and limits, and the social pressures associated with these spaces seem to create dangerous conditions that, for participants of this study, created short term distress, and in some cases long lasting stress and anxiety related to exercise spaces.

One participant shared that after a few years of attending these spaces, she developed concerns about her participation in BFSs. “I started to worry that I was leaning back into excessive ways of being around exercise”. After asking herself “Is this actually serving me in the way that I think it is? Or am I letting this become something that I’m doing that’s actually counter to what my body would prefer?”, she decided to end her participation in these spaces for good. Similarly, the participant who talked about frequently vomiting in classes shared that 10 years later, she still has a great deal of anxiety attending any type of group fitness class which has resulted in her avoiding group fitness entirely. Instead, she has since opted to almost exclusively exercise in the privacy of her own home. “Now even going into any class no matter how gentle it is or if I know the instructor...I still feel nauseous in the pit of my stomach because I’m like, oh my God, it’s going to happen again”.

Two of the participants who experienced physical symptoms of distress also shared that at the time of their attendance, they were experiencing disordered exercise

behaviors related to their weight loss goals. Importantly, a growing scholarship has explored patterns of and behaviors around excessive exercise (intense and frequent), and their implications, drawing on labels like “compulsive” and “disordered”. Though not formal diagnoses, compulsive exercise, refers to exercise that is excessive in frequency, intensity and/or duration. Disordered exercise, in turn, encompasses compulsive exercise, but also refers to a fixation of body modification or maintenance that negatively impacts on the quality of a person’s life and wellbeing. Discourse connecting fatness and morality impacts people’s relationship to their bodies and exercise, and at times can lead to the development of disordered exercise.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to draw a correlation between disordered exercise and BFSs, given the social pressures present in these spaces, it is easy to conclude that members might fall prey to such practices. A few participants noted that it was common for instructors to urge people to push themselves: “some instructors will be like yelling at you like ‘don’t turn [it] down. You need to believe in yourself. You need to push. There’s no growth without pushing yourself’. But then you’re like man, my heart rate is [too high]. Like this is unsafe. I should turn it down”. In addition to the two participants who described their participation as disordered, a third participant with a history of disordered exercise, shared that her BFS participation triggered past thought patterns and invoked behaviors that worried her considerable. This participant explained that over-exertion and pushing herself beyond her physical limits was a discomforting, yet familiar, feeling—one that she, on some level, enjoyed, but she stressed left her feeling dysregulated and guilty when she wasn’t at the studio. While one participant was able to joke about her experiences, laughing as she described the amped up instructor,

encouraging them cycle harder on stationary equipment—“I mean, how do they know if I’m pushing myself...I could be cranking up the dial on nothing for all they know”—most participants (five of the seven) spoke of these experiences as both physically and emotionally harmful.

Section 3: (dis)Empowered and (de)Spirited

“You’ll never reach your hopes and dreams without some hard work or crap like that”
(Participant)

The possibility of self-actualization and spiritual connection is one of a few key factors that contributed to the pressure to perform in BFSs. Participants reported that BFSs in general promote spiritual and emotional connection both to the self and others as a part of the overall experience. Many participants shared the observation that BFSs focused on spirituality and/or self-help approaches to class instruction and structure. One participant talked about going to a BFS whose name was a play on words between the type of class it offered and the word “psychology” which not so subtly implies that the experience offers far more than cardiovascular exercise and/or strength training. Another participant shared that one particular BFS she went to had a special class on Sundays that was likened to a church service by the studio’s members. It was a particularly coveted class (making it even harder to reserve a spot for) with many rituals connected to religious practices and was facilitated by a very popular instructor who ran the class as if they were preaching a sermon. A participant had this to say about the self-help narrative that commonly accompanies class instruction: “The motivational language is just unhinged.”

Instructors, who have training in facilitating exercise and are there to lead people through a workout, were reported to speak on topics including relationships, finding purpose, meditation, self-confidence, mental and physical health, and finances. Always connecting these topics back to attending BFS classes and performing in certain ways, BFSs build the narrative that participation in these spaces leads to personal development far beyond an increase in physical fitness. Instructors then also hold a great deal of power because of their perceived wisdom and capacity to motivate and inspire.

The experiences that BFSs curated for the participants of this study fall dangerously close to modern cult organizing. The way that spiritual connection and enlightenment (discourse in classes) is paired with a charismatic leader (the instructor) and ideas around group cohesion (emphasis on community and working together) fall directly in line with Marc Galanter's definition of a charismatic group, which is an umbrella term encompassing modern cults and zealous self-help groups (1990). While this is not a study about religion and cults, it is relevant and important to consider that these businesses are engaging in psychologically manipulative practices to churn profits. It can't be lost that, as reported by the participants of this study, BFSs are engaging in the same strategies used by modern cults to garner business. Research demonstrates that people are drawn to cults because of life dissatisfaction, the pursuit of a spiritual journey, or because they feel they need personal development (Rousselet et al., 2018).

This corresponds to why interviewees were drawn to BFSs. Further, people report that a relationship with cult members/leaders, perceived dependency on group or its leader, and feelings of reassurance from being a part of the group are key reasons that kept them from leaving cults (Rousselet et al., 2018). These factors align with dominant

themes from this research about the environments created in BFSs. For example, and as described in chapter three, the intentional efforts made by BFSs to foster hierarchical relationships between staff and customers, narratives that attending BFSs is what is best for the customer's wellbeing, and overtly tracking participants progress within each class as well as their ongoing attendance at these spaces all build the reliance and connection that create the necessity of remaining in cult- environments, as described by research with past cult members.

Unfortunately, many participants of this study shared that how they felt about the experience the first few times they visited these spaces was vastly different than they do now. While at first, they were enamored with the experience, over time they began to question whether or not the experience was supportive of their wellbeing. Six out of seven participants experienced pivotal moments in which they came to realize their involvement with BFSs was detrimental to their overall wellbeing (whether that be sense of self, financial health, or relationship to their body/exercise).

Conclusion

This chapter has delved into the complex and often paradoxical experiences of women navigating the landscape of boutique fitness studios (BFSs). Despite the widespread belief that exercise promotes mental health, the narratives shared by participants reveal a more nuanced and troubling picture. BFSs claim to be sites for enhancing physical and spiritual wellness and the mind-body connection. According to interviewees, they simultaneously create conditions that have the opposite effect. Overarchingly, interviewees reported feeling physically sick, emotionally distressed, and

disconnected from their bodies. The environment of BFSs, characterized by social and physical competition, amplifies these feelings, making the quest for mental wellness through exercise fraught with challenges.

The data suggests that while some women initially seek out BFSs to manage body dissatisfaction, the competitive and aesthetically homogenous nature of these spaces often leads to increased body dissatisfaction and discomfort. The social pressures within BFSs normalize disordered exercise behaviors and push participants beyond healthy limits, resulting in both physical and emotional distress. The lack of diversity in these spaces further exacerbates feelings of alienation and insecurity among participants who do not conform to the prevailing aesthetic.

Self-help messaging and the promise of spiritual enlightenment, in addition to an environment curated to be incredibly competitive, are some of the key factors that perpetuated this for participants. At first, some participants enjoyed the integration of self-help and spiritual enlightenment narratives, while others deemed it a farce from the beginning. Regardless, this messaging seemed to be of benefit to only the BFSs themselves, as it left participants with feelings of guilt and shame associated with missing classes or not returning to the BFS, increasing the financial return for BFSs. The emphasis on spiritual and self-help narratives in BFSs can create a false sense of empowerment, masking the underlying manipulative practices. Instructors, who wield significant influence, often blur the lines between fitness guidance and psychological manipulation, fostering dependency and reinforcing harmful exercise behaviors.

Ultimately, a critical disconnection between the marketed benefits of BFSs and the lived experiences of women who frequent these spaces is highlighted. While BFSs

promise improved mental and physical health, the reality for many women is one of increased anxiety, body disconnection, and long-lasting negative impacts on their well-being. This calls into question the true efficacy of boutique fitness studios as environments conducive to holistic health, suggesting the need for a reevaluation of their practices and the pressures they place on women.

Chapter 5: WHO BENEFITS FROM BOUTIQUE FITNESS?

In the contemporary moment, wellness practices aimed at connecting the body and mind by and large are facilitated as capital enterprise. This functions in two principal ways. On the one hand, wellness and the commodities required for achieving wellness generate considerable profit. With a net worth of \$4.6 trillion globally (Global Wellness Institute, 2017), the wellness industry has been deeply effective in accumulating wealth, particularly by exploiting women and their vulnerabilities. In fact, McKee and Stuckler offer that the commodification of wellness was established to fill gaps in other capital markets. The growing population of aging people with multiple complex needs has changed the market such that health care work is no longer a lucrative business. So instead, corporations moved to create need among those who are deemed healthy and otherwise have no need to be participants in the market of health (2012). On the other hand, wellness as a specific set of outcomes is intended to increase the productivity or efficiency of people, as workers, under capitalism (Davies, 2015; Foucault, 1988; Mickey, 2019). Though wellness industry players claim to be motivated by improving health and wellbeing and therefore overall quality of life of the people they serve, as evidenced above, the quiet yet omnipresent motivator behind wellness products and services, as with any business, is the pursuit of capital accumulation.

Women have been integrated into these structures as both consumers (or customers / clients) and as service providers / entrepreneurs. When considering this alongside the competing priorities women encounter in balancing the professional and the personal, the latter makes considerable sense, as wellness entrepreneurship allows women to satisfy cultural pressures requiring their thinness, and well as a source of flexible

employment. A salient illustration of the neoliberal conflation of empowerment, wellness, and success, an exploratory study of a women's networking conference in the US has permeated the working lives of women in the contemporary moment. The conference was outwardly framed as creating opportunities for women's professional growth, deploying wellness as a means of "empowering women" to fulfill the many conflicting expectations set out under neoliberal capitalism. In this context, combating gender inequality was very much individualized and centered on women's individual wellness practices as opposed considering to the systemic and structural inequities that continue to marginalize women.

Such individualization of gender inequality allows neoliberal ideologies to thrive, rather than being recognized as a contributor to this systemic issue, rooting the issue within the individual and not the system (Mickey, 2019). In their study, Mickey notes that focusing on wellness connects the morality of women's bodies, food choices, and mental health to their professional abilities and creates "a responsibility to improve personal market value" (p.3), where people who do not meet wellness demands (effectively thinness) are seen as a burden or threat to productivity (Cederström & Spicer 2015; Mickey, 2019). Mickey also identified the neoliberal "wellness entrepreneurialism" present at the conference and noted that it seemed to originate from peoples' increased levels of stress, loneliness and anxiety over societal pressures and competing responsibilities associated with being a woman, such as balancing income generation and career expectations with parenting and familial expectations (2019). Here, neoliberal individualism reifies the problem as located within the individual, which increases stress

levels, and then commodifies wellness as the solution to the problem of increased stress to further capital accumulation.

Section 1: Boutique Fitness as a Site of Capital Accumulation

BFSs package social, emotional and physical health into 60-minute classes sold at premium price points, with classes typically ranging from \$18-\$40CAD/session. BFS owners and operators participate in narratives around the individualization of health whereby participants are responsible for pursuing and maintaining their own wellbeing by attending these spaces. Accompanying the social and embodied vulnerabilities that are preyed upon in BFSs, the financial structure of these businesses is yet another manipulative tactic used by BFSs to ensure profitability.

The feminist political economy of BFSs concerns the individual responsabilization of women to pursue connectedness, belonging, weight loss and/or maintenance of the ideal body as well as the economization of this pursuit. Agenjo-Calderón explains contemporary neoliberalism as the “omnipresence of the market model and the nightmarish configuration of human beings as market actors always and everywhere” (2021). We see this reproduced in these spaces with the economization of affect and experience (Agenjo-Calderón, 2021), where customers are sold far more than a basic service. They are being sold a sense of belonging and connectedness, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and accomplishment, which have become the individual’s sole responsibility to pursue.

The notion of personal responsibility is ubiquitous within BFSs. From lining up in online cues to register for a spot, to participating to the fullest capacity in classes, these

spaces are ripe with contemporary neoliberal ideologies of hard work, autonomy and self-responsibility, all framed as self-empowerment (McKee & Stuckler, 2012). Trying harder, showing up for yourself, and prioritizing your wellbeing are means by which people achieve success in BFS and in life, according to most BFS narratives and practices. The barriers to accessing these spaces are mountains to be climbed in service of the self.

A. The profitability of vulnerability

Central to this work is an understanding of how and to whom BFSs market themselves. When asked to identify their primary motives for attending BFSs using open ended questions, there was remarkable consistency among responses. Participants were seeking to address social isolation, body-consciousness (weight loss or body maintenance) or all the above. Effectively, either unmet basic social needs or body related anxiety drew people to BFSs, where participants hoped to have these needs met, or their problems remedied. Participants self-reported experiences indicate that, by and large, BFSs target people with these specific social and embodied vulnerabilities as a key strategy within their business model.

Some participants shared that relocating to new cities for work or school is what led them to BFSs. They didn't know anyone in their new cities and were looking for ways to forge new friendships and reduce their isolation. Other participants shared that BFSs were a way to connect with people they already had some kind of relationship with. Two participants shared that in the throes of their experience with disordered eating and exercise, the only way they could make time to see their friends was if it coincided with their workouts. BFS are arguably aware that their customers are looking for sites of belonging, as many embed the promise of connection within their promotional content.

As Crossley discusses, in fitness clubs: “accidental intimacy is inevitable and friendly interaction is required to manage it.” (2008). Attending classes includes unavoidable passive interactions when showing up at the same time as others, in change rooms and in classroom spaces before instruction, spending an hour together (in a more or less interactive way depending on the nature of the class), and then back in the lobby and changerooms as people prepare to head home.

Furthermore, for people who are habitual in their attendance, these interactions are consistent and, in some cases, as frequent as daily. Six participants reported that overtime they connected with other customers and/or staff of the spaces they attended. The nature of these relationships are discussed more in detail in chapter three, but it’s worthwhile noting here that the social relationships developed were largely superficial, fleeting and in some cases disingenuous. While it’s embedded within the culture of BFSs generally to foster connection as a part of the service they sell, for most, the effort is in vain. Despite many frequent points of connection, the relationships people establish in these spaces don’t last.

While seemingly innocent, BFS are arguably quite calculated in the ways that social dynamics and a sense of belonging are established:

“Some people feel the pressure to go a lot because they want to be recognized by instructors and like, they want to feel a part of that in-group. And another way to be a part of that in-group, from my observations, is by volunteering and doing unpaid labour. They call it all sorts of different things like energy exchanges, but at the end of the day, they’re working for a business for free.” (Participant).

As this participant described, while BFSs offer themselves as sites of genuine connection, they have a lot to gain from people who are experiencing feelings of isolation and/or loneliness. Feeling connected isn't as simple as making small talk in the changerooms. Here, she described that the pressure to show up often and be as engaged as possible, is omnipresent, and goes as far as to suggest that people perhaps even donate their time to the business. The same participant went on to say: "people who did unpaid labour and stuff for [the owner] would send her presents and it seemed like, from the outside looking in, there's this pressure to give her presents". In this BFS, it seems even unpaid labor wasn't enough to earn belonging, gifts were expected as well.

It is hard to ignore that BFS, who boast community and connection as benefits of accessing their spaces, are internally fostering social hierarchy and competition. The resulting insecurity leaves people feeling compelled to literally pay visits to the studio as frequently as possible, provide unpaid labour and arrive with gifts, which is incredibly lucrative for businesses.

Section 2: Creating Valuable Bodies and Generating Profit

Under contemporary neoliberalism and its individualization of responsibility, value is assigned to those who are perceived as mentally and physically healthy (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). This is referred to by Zupančič as 'biomorality' (2008). Under this system, the pursuit of health via exercise classes is considered morally virtuous. As sites for exercise and the pursuit of health (or moral virtue), BFS are well-positioned for profit. One participant, who was pursuing weight loss when accessing BFSs said: "walking in as a fat person...and a fat person who has spoken out loud, I'm pursuing

weight loss...that brought people a lot of joy...and in hindsight, I'm like, oh, they saw dollar signs".

Contemporary neoliberal society fears fatness with such extreme that research participants have reported that they would rather lose a limb, lose 10 years of life or be blind than be fat (Schwartz et al., 2006). Another study showed that women reported being fat is worse than having breast cancer (Pila et al., 2018). With such fear, panic and stigmatization, there is of course a distinct opportunity for profit; one that has been taken up by many BFSs. This participant shared that she participated in a 30-day weight loss challenge that had a cash prize of \$10,000.00. Others discussed that over time, they began to develop 'streaks' with their BFS friends where they wanted to maximize the number of days in a row accessing the space. Here, we see campaigns organized, both formally and informally, by BFSs and their staff which specifically target body-concern vulnerabilities for profits.

While some BFS are blatant in their alignment with neoliberal ideologies about body capital, more covert strategies are also being employed. In line with contemporary wellness culture, Cairns and Johnson explain this as the 'do-diet': a repositioning of classic dieting and food restriction as the inclusion of positive food choices in support of wellness, while continuing the pursuit of body modification and self-control (Cairns & Johnson, 2015). BFSs have applied this same disguise to their spaces, refurbishing older discourses of exercise for body re-shaping as the pursuit of wellness, self-empowerment and self-actualization (as noted above, as well as in chapter 2 of this study. So, even where there are BFSs who chose to not explicitly market body shaping and weight loss as

outcomes, many of them are concealing this older form of neoliberal capitalism and have economized morality, women's empowerment and mental health.

A. Carrying the Cost

Cost-of-entry was a common barrier that many participants faced to accessing BFS in the long term. Participants shared the various strategies they used to stretch their investment within these spaces, including jumping from one studio to another to access first-timer promotions, to picking up second jobs in these spaces for the perks (free classes). Despite taking creative approaches to reduce access costs, ultimately 5 participants shared that the high membership fees prevented them from accessing BFSs at certain times.

Interestingly, many of the participants shared that at the time they accessed these spaces, they had substantially less income than they did at the time of their interview (many were students during their participation in BFSs and/or were much earlier in their careers and therefore had lower paying jobs). However, among 3 of them, there was recognition that the investment now would cause them more stress than it did at the time of their participation, when their income was significantly lower: "I always felt a bit guilty about how much it cost...I feel like I'd probably feel guiltier now" (participant). It seems that at the time of their participation, research participants mediated financial stress by: 1) making the most of their investment by accessing the space as much as possible to reduce cost per use (in the case where they had membership) and/or going to extremes to attend classes they had signed up for to avoid incurring no-show fees or losing money they had spent on a class 2) becoming employees of the space to gain free or discounted access to classes 3) only accessing BFSs when there was a promotion or sale or 4) considering the expense an investment in their priority goals (most participants

with this approach were pursuing weight loss and/or body maintenance). However they justified the expense, all 7 participants found the cost of attending BFSs to be a barrier, and 3 participants in particular mentioned that they experienced financial stress directly as a result of the cost of attending these spaces.

The payment structure itself proved to be a means of enticing participation. The spaces are in high enough demand that if participants wanted to attend a class, they reported having to register up to 2 weeks in advance for a class. Harsh cancellation policies didn't allow much flexibility, so when the day came and she didn't sleep well, or had to work late, a participant shared that she was stuck with the cost. She shared that the cancellation window for accessing a refund was something like 8-12hrs ahead of the class depending on the specific BFS. In addition, a no-show penalty was charged, on top of losing the class fee that had already been paid. So, effectively, participants were double charged for not attending the class. One participant in particular shared the keen observation that these spaces are "double dipping" since they can then turn around and fill the spot with someone from the waitlist. These cancellation fees ended up being her primary motivator for attending the classes:

You have to book really far in advance because they would sell out, like there's limited space....and the cancellation window is eight hours. And so I found it to be really hard when I like was working and was really busy or had a long day but I had signed up for a 7am class two weeks ago I would be like, I actually can't cancel because I'm going to lose my money.

While social connection and/or body dissatisfaction were motivators for participants to sign up for BFS classes, guilt, shame and anxiety about potential wasted financial

resources seemed to keep them as customers, or at least accountable to classes they didn't always want to attend, and that were no longer necessarily in their best interests. Lack of sleep, priority tasks related to work and loved ones, and being physically worn down are reasons why participants felt they sometimes needed to change their plans and not go to a class they had signed up for, but that's not an option at most BFS. So instead, participants pushed themselves, often beyond their limits, because they were already locked in financially, adding to the mental and in some cases physical stress they were already experiencing.

Conclusion

The wellness industry, particularly through the lens of boutique fitness studios, operates as a mechanism of capital accumulation under contemporary neoliberalism. This industry commodifies wellness, turning it into a highly profitable venture while simultaneously embedding the pursuit of wellness into the fabric of everyday life. By targeting social and embodied vulnerabilities, such as isolation and body consciousness, BFSs have adeptly aligned themselves with neoliberal ideologies that emphasize personal responsibility, self-optimization, and productivity.

Women, in particular, find themselves at the intersection of these dynamics, both as consumers and as service providers. The industry's appeal to women is multifaceted, promising not just physical health but also social belonging and self-empowerment. However, this empowerment is deeply entangled with the pressures of neoliberal capitalism, which often shifts the burden of addressing systemic gender inequalities onto individual women, framing personal wellness as a solution to structural and systemic issues.

The financial model of BFSs further reinforces these neoliberal principles. The high cost of participation, rigid cancellation policies, and the strategic use of promotions create an environment where financial stress and the fear of wasted resources drive continued engagement, sometimes to the detriment of participants' well-being. This structure not only ensures profitability but also perpetuates a cycle where individuals feel compelled to invest in their health as a moral and economic imperative.

Ultimately, the wellness industry's integration of personal health, social connection, and economic gain illustrates the pervasive influence of neoliberal capitalist ideologies. By framing wellness as both a commodity and a moral virtue, BFSs contribute to the ongoing commodification of everyday life, reinforcing the notion that individual success and well-being are inextricably linked to market participation. This underscores the need for a critical examination of how wellness practices are marketed and consumed, how they reflect broader societal values and economic structures, and ultimately how they impact women, particularly those that exist at the margins.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION: Implications for Anti-oppressive Social Work Practice

Neoliberal capitalist ideology has shaped the way body capital is assigned. That is, a focus on individualism, consumerism, optimization, productivity and racism has informed societal perceptions of what the ideal body look like, which is to say, thin, muscular and toned. Existing outside of this ideal is constituted as immoral, and conversely, participating in exercise as part of the pursuit of health is conflated with morality in modern society (Zanker and Gard, 2008). Consequently, there exists an opportunity to pursue capital gain where there is demand for the pursuit of body capital in search of morality and worth. Where food and bodies are moralized and assigned value as virtuous or not, exercise also assigns morality and worth. People who exercise are seen as good and productive, and people who don't are considered lazy and bad. Body size and exercise are not personal, but nor should they be the business of doctors, policy makers, governments, institutions and employers interested in resource allocation and preservation. So, attending exercise classes becomes laden with layers of values and ideals associated with the frequency and intensity of exercise, and what that means for an individual and their sense of self both personally and professionally.

In light of neoliberal capitalist focus on attaching morality and value certain body shapes and sizes, BFSs become even more well-positioned to profit off of peoples' search for value and meaning in their lives. It makes sense then, that BFSs would lean into narratives of spirituality, self-actualization, and physical embodiment, to further connect experiences in their spaces to having value and worth as individuals. However, this approach to generating business and profits tows the line of exploitation, where participants reported that they in fact experienced largely the opposite effect. As study

participants cited a decrease in their own sense of self, a startling change in their personal values, and a lack of connection to the community.

Through this research, it can appear that BFSs are not at all interested in the health and wellbeing of their members and are in fact only focused on their profits. Under the guise of socially and emotionally beneficial exercise classes, BFSs are lining their pockets as they create dependency among people who are coming to them to fill unmet human needs for belonging, social connectedness, self-worth and stress-reduction. Leaning into the vulnerabilities created by a culture which has conflated body size/shape and exercise with morality and worth, BFSs position themselves for immense opportunity by offering services that satisfy these conditions for moral value while simultaneously reifying the narrative.

As described by the participants of this study, BFSs have constructed environments so homogenous that any diversion from the norm within these spaces is glaring. At the same time, they have managed to position themselves with an allure and exclusivity that people are willing to make great sacrifices to be a part of. This has created social and embodied vulnerabilities for participants whereby people are deeply compelled to conform by participating in the consumerist routines that have come to be expected by purchasing clothing, equipment, expanded memberships, special events, gifts for staff and even donating their time.

To be clear, accountability lies with BFSs who, according to participants of this study, borrow strategies from modern-day cults to garner unwavering commitment from their customers. Today's western world is steeped in a culture that sides with BFSs. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the message most prominent within this wellness culture is

that being fat is synonymous with being lazy, unhealthy and immoral, and that it is a persons' individual responsibility to do anything and everything in their power to avoid becoming fat and/or to reduce their body size as much as possible. Exercise is one of a few means by which people can demonstrate that they are not lazy, unhealthy and immoral. In many ways, BFSs have curated the perfect environment to satisfy this need while reinforcing the neoliberal individualization of health, wellness and the morality of exercise. This positions them with immense opportunity for capital gain, at the literal and figurative expense of particularly women living under the pull of wellness culture. Not only has this research demonstrated that attending BFSs can lead to social and embodied discomfort and distress, but it also impacts attendees' financial health. Participants recounted feeling overwhelmed by the cost of attending these spaces, and some shared that even years later, thinking about the amount of money they spent at BFSs is distressing.

Social work as a discipline and profession is concerned primarily with the overall wellbeing of individuals and society via the pursuit of more equitable structures and systems. The Canadian Association of Social Workers states that:

Social work focuses on improving health and social well-being using the social determinants of health framework when delivering services, navigating systems and advocating for equitable access to and improvement of the multiple dimensions that impact health and well-being (2020).

Much of the work being done to unpack the toxicity of wellness culture lies adjacent to the practice of social work (i.e. understanding how race intersects with wellness, disentangling fatphobia as a health concern etc.). However, in supporting the wellbeing

of citizens, social workers can fall into the trap of perpetuating wellness culture when offering resources or support to clients (Lawrence et al., 2012).

Currently, the Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments (CANMAT) recommends aerobic exercise as the first line of treatment against mild to moderate depression (MacQueen et al., 2016) and this research is backed by the Public Health Agency of Canada (Fortier et al., 2020). However, as indicated by this thesis and its accompanying literature review, the relationship between exercise and mental health isn't quite linear. Where the field of health care broadly offers exercise as a highly valuable treatment plan for mental health, social workers must be mindful of the many compounding factors that contribute to peoples' relationship to exercise and moderate the extent to which they recommend exercise in support of a persons' wellbeing.

Considering the "person-in-environment" philosophy that the Canadian Association of Social Workers upholds, a much broader definition of wellness is required in the social work profession than what contemporary wellness culture permits. For example, people who are fat/live in large bodies experience many forms of oppression and Stoll argues that fatness is therefore a social justice issue (2019)- making it also a social work issue. Responding to stigma that people encounter as a result of their body size necessitates a much deeper understanding of well-being that considers the biopsychosocial environment; that is mental health, social networks, physical health, comorbidities (like disordered eating and exercise), home environment and situation etc. (Lawrence et al., 2012). This more holistic approach serves as an example of taking an intersectional approach to supporting people, as social workers should prioritize.

When encountering clients and co-workers alike, it is impossible to understand all the experiences, challenges and trauma people have lived through. A person might have previously or be currently experiencing food insecurity, disordered eating or exercise, mental or physical health concerns, violence in their home, income or housing insecurity, precarious employment or a variety of other challenges, all of which impact their ability to participate in contemporary wellness culture- regardless of body size, shape or how they present physically otherwise. Additionally, different spiritual and cultural groups have unique encounters with wellness, as well as difficult histories with the co-optation and appropriation of their practices by the western world. As such, discussing and offering opportunities for wellness that align with wellness culture can be triggering and oppressive. Since wellness and well-being are common topics in the practice of social work, a thorough understand of the white supremacist and colonial roots of contemporary wellness culture and its ties to neoliberal capitalism is necessary to engaging in anti-oppressive and inclusive social work practice.

Additionally, the discourse around self-care for social workers has become increasingly emphasized. Martin et al. emphasize the importance of self-care practice by social workers as crucial to their longevity and success in the field (2020). Understanding this, it is of vital importance that the field of social works and its practitioners separate holistic well-being from wellness as defined by contemporary, neoliberal wellness culture. Supporting the well-being of workers, clients, and the general population is a necessary and important part of social work, however social workers must be cautious to avoid the confines of contemporary wellness.

Solutions to some of this can be found in the reflections of this study's participants, some of whom spoke about strategies that fitness spaces could deploy to reduce potential harms and the likelihood of body-related discomfort specifically the offered that when "instructors and staff speak about movement in a positive way, [or] where they encouraged you to do what was feeling right for your body and not force yourself to do anything that felt wrong or painful" the stress of conformity decreased. A participant also noted that when "instructors are educated on the way to modify movements for different bodies and different abilities", they were better positioned to support a wider range of bodies in their classes. Participants also spoke of wanting spaces that didn't encourage them, through harsh lighting or mirrored walls, to fixate on how they looked, encouraging them instead to focus on the sensations associated with particular movements. Finally, participants noted that the tendency of some instructors to call-out or offer specific encouragement to individual class members had the impact of emphasizing cliques in a way that felt exclusionary and harmful. And that in a similar vein, that staff should welcome people into the space in a gentle way and provide lots of information and guidance particularly for new members so that they know what to expect and how to set themselves up. Unfortunately, participants were able to identify these strategies largely because of experiencing harm in BFSs, in other words, by learning and experiencing what is not helpful as opposed to what is.

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