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Rethinking conceptions of body image in group fitness education, culture, and contexts: Recommendations for perspective transformation and innovations in instructional methods

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This article examines the situation of group fitness instructors with particular attention to the implications of the influence of fitness culture on body-related norms which shape instructors' self-perceived conceptions of body image. Of particular interest is the consideration of how self-perception influences an instructor's performance, and their ability to educate and motivate their class participants. Evidence will show that the most popular ways that body image is incorporated into and represented within the group fitness setting are limiting and misguided, and there are better methods for instruction that fitness professionals and the industry can follow. Recommendations for practice and suggestions for interventions to encourage adequate body satisfaction in the group fitness instructor's context will be provided for both individual and collective levels of action. This will include what instructors can do at an individual level to improve their self-perceptions and professional practice and support themselves and their peers; what can be done in gyms and fitness facilities to improve community support for instructors; and what can be done at the fitness industry level to encourage a cultural shift in body-related norms and expectations.

Introduction

Since ancient times, the "ideal" human body has been a central fixation of art, culture, history, and philosophy. The Ancient Greeks were some of the first to model this fascination, as is seen in their sculptures and physical activity, which frequently depicted athletic pursuits symbolizing the glory and the beauty of the human body (Jenkins and Turner, 2009). Eugene Sandow who is considered the "father of modern body-building" is known for his quest to develop and sculpt his body through physical training into predetermined proportions in what he referred to as "The Grecian Ideal," his conception of the perfect physique (Johansson and Andreasson, 2016). Through the centuries, despite progress and changes made in philosophical thoughts, beliefs, and social practices, humanity has yet to relinquish the pursuit of the perfect body, although the effects of this obsession may be problematic. One controversial issue has been the debate over the soundness of the preoccupation with body image and what repercussions may befall the health and wellbeing of society (Mathisen et al., 2020).

Currently, in the health and fitness field, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the aesthetic body, in other words, having the right size, shape, and proportions (Frew and McGillivray, 2005; Mathisen et al., 2020). "Body work" is the term that theorizes the relationship of how bodies and societies share one another (Coffey, 2016; Borgogni et al., 2020). There are different meanings and interpretations of body work but one of these concerns the practices of modifying or maintaining the body according to a particular aesthetic ideal. Often such ideals are influenced by capitalist and consumer demands (Coffey, 2016). This emphasis can be seen in health and fitness facilities around the world, and it is an influence that encroaches strongly upon the group fitness studio (Stern, 2008).

Group fitness is a large and powerful industry with the potential to influence, inspire and fulfill the current desperate need to elevate levels of exercise and physical activity for the improvement of the nation's health (Mathisen et al., 2020). The need for qualified, confident, and prepared fitness and exercise leaders and educators has never been greater following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has produced serious concerns for fitness, health, and wellbeing (e.g., Woods et al., 2020). Group fitness classes have the potential to fill a current need for exercise and social connection to improve overall health and quality of life. However, the group fitness programs of many facilities are underutilized and well below capacity. One reason for this may be that many individuals are too intimidated to take part in group fitness classes. This attitude can have any number of causes. One cause relates to self-presentational concerns rooted in social physique anxiety, an issue which is directly related to poor body image cognitions. There are perceived barriers to entering fitness spaces that can inhibit those who do not align with the "ideal body" from entering fitness spaces. The

conceptions of the ideal body spread directly and indirectly through the fitness communities in facilities between friends and colleagues and through social media. Gym members and fitness consumers are not the only ones affected by these imposing aesthetic cultural norms and ideas. Those who are currently working or involved in the industry are not immune to the cultural and societal influences of the fitness industry and may face distress and anxiety due to body image concerns, given that their physical capital is linked to their credibility - a fact that has been less explored and theorized in the literature (Szumilewicz et al., 2008; Hutson, 2013).

This article aims to analyze the implications of the influence of fitness culture on body-related norms which shape instructors' self-perceived conceptions of body image and how this impacts their work and the potential of their contribution to the health and wellbeing of society. Of particular interest is the consideration of how self-perception of body image concerns and disturbances may influence an instructor's performance, and their ability to educate and motivate their class participants. Evidence will show that the way body image has been incorporated into and represented within the group fitness setting is misguided, and potentially damaging and that there are better methods for instruction that fitness professionals and the industry can follow. Two questions guided this investigation: What influence does fitness industry culture have on the emergence of body satisfaction or dissatisfaction in group fitness instructors? What educational strategies and interventions can remake group fitness instructors' negative self-perceptions and body dissatisfaction to promote the development of more inclusive and motivational exercise environments?

A review of the literature was conducted to identify the challenges fitness instructors face and factors that can influence instructors' poor body image conceptions. This drew upon literature from exercise psychology and education and focused on both identifying challenges in the field and recommendations for practice and suggestions for interventions to encourage adequate body satisfaction for the group fitness instructor's context will be provided for both individual and collective levels of action. The Social Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994) was used to analyze the intersecting spheres of influence identified from evidence in the present literature. Following the analysis and using the same spheres of influence identified in the Social Ecological Model, recommendations are provided for education and professional practice. This will include what instructors can do at an individual level to improve their self-perceptions and professional practice and support themselves and their peers; what can be done in gyms and fitness facilities to improve community support for instructors; and what can be done at the fitness industry level to encourage a cultural transition in body-related norms and expectations, which may be adversely affecting body image cognitions and by extension creating social physique anxiety and self-presentational concerns for group fitness instructors.

Methods

The purpose of the literature review was to identify the factors that influence instructors' poor body image conceptions and potential educational and instructional recommendations within the literature that support the transformation of body image concerns from negative body image perceptions to more positive body image perceptions. Multiple literature searches were done using indexes and databases popular in the disciplines of education, kinesiology and physical education, and exercise psychology (ERIC, Education Source, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest) as well as the university library search. Search terms and combinations of terms included body image, body image satisfaction, body image dissatisfaction, group fitness, group fitness instructors, and the fitness industry. Materials used included books, textbooks, journal articles, and dissertations. Selected sources focused on studies where subjects were fitness instructors or participants in fitness classes. Age and gender were not included in selection criteria.

Results and reflections on group fitness, body image, and fitness culture

To put this discussion into context, evidence from the literature will provide how this article conceptualizes the intersection of the group fitness context with the broader understanding of body image and social physique anxiety in the literature.

Group fitness and group fitness instructors

Group fitness is defined as instructor-led exercise performed as a group (Vogel, 1998; Bryan et al., 2011). It has been said to be at the core of most health clubs and fitness facilities and where most of the action happens (Bryan et al., 2011). Group fitness combines elements of social connection, safe and effective movement performance, and physical effort. Group fitness instructors are essential to the success of group fitness programming. They occupy an influential position in fitness clubs. In their role as exercise leaders, they are responsible for educating, motivating, and encouraging positive change through how they teach and the relationships they create with class attendees and fitness facility members (Andreasson and Johansson, 2014). To be a successful and effective group fitness instructor requires a wealth of skills and experience, including but not limited to professionalism, punctuality, dedication, excellent assessment and communication skills, performance abilities, empathy, and personal fitness (Bryan et al., 2011). The group fitness instructor has a tremendously influential role, capable of empowering health-behavior change and positive feelings toward body image. It is surprising, then that group fitness instructors are an under-represented and under-researched group in the literature (Reinboth et al., 2022).

The traditional aerobics environment, which provided the foundation of the modern group fitness class, is deemed to have been patterned to emphasize stereotypical ideologies of femininity and the "ideal body" and the instructor's discourse and appearance can also reinforce cultural standards of the ideal female body and body image (Markula, 1995; Vogel, 1998; Doğan, 2015). Markula's (1995) seminal work in the area of group fitness instructors' experiences with body image showed how the toned and trim, fit and feminine body became the dominant approach in fitness education. Media sources spurred this approach as did magazines to create a demand for moves that are supposed to address the body's "trouble zones." The premise that guided and inspired this approach is that bodies are imperfect and thus required "body work" (Markula, 1995).

Consideration of the context within which exercise is performed is vitally important, as it directly relates to the experience extracted by the exerciser. Although individuals involved in group exercise have been found to experience more positive wellbeing and less psychological distress compared to others who performed their exercise alone. These benefits of exercising in a group setting will depend on individual differences and the exerciser's level of body image dissatisfaction (Song et al., 2014).

Body image and social physique anxiety

Body image is a multidimensional construct of the thoughts and feelings a person experiences based on their perceptions of their body (Lox et al., 2010). A body image disturbance is an unhealthy body image that is often driven by aspirations to reach a certain level of thinness or muscularity. Negative body image concerns and weight dissatisfaction is recognized as a global phenomenon (Haakstad et al., 2021). In conjunction with body image concerns, a host of other related conditions and other more serious ramifications exist particularly pertaining to weight-stigma (Sturgess and Stinson, 2022).

Social physique anxiety is an individual's anxiety relating to the manner they believe others perceive their body physique (Thøgersen-Ntoumani and Ntoumanis, 2007; Lox et al., 2010). When individuals assume their perceived inadequacies are being judged and evaluated by other individuals, this can cause shame or social physique anxiety (Thøgersen-Ntoumani and Ntoumanis, 2007; Hall et al., 2014; O'Hara et al., 2014). Self-presentation describes the efforts of an individual to regulate and maintain how others may perceive them. Self-presentational concerns influence behavior toward exercise, such as which exercises are selected and how often exercise is performed and can influence reasons for exercising and motivation to

exercise. This includes the motivation to exercise to maintain an "ideal" physical appearance or to achieve a desired social identity. Self-presentational concerns have a major influence on the physical activity choices people make, in determining if people will begin an exercise program and may even deter some from commencing a certain exercise program (Hall et al., 2014). Those who take part in physique salient sports (i.e., gymnastics, synchronized swimming, figure skating) are believed to experience greater self-presentational concerns because of the stronger emphasis and importance placed upon physical appearance in these activities (Hall et al., 2014).

Body image disturbances and social physique anxiety can lead to self-presentational concerns. This has the potential to decrease motivation for exercise and negatively affect the experiences of exercisers and the likelihood of adherence to and success with exercise programs (Hall et al., 2014). For instance, those who feel less positively about their physical appearance are less likely to want to go into environments where the body is the focus and under constant scrutiny. Environmental factors have been cited as mitigating the levels of social physique anxiety. These include both the physical environment and the social environment of the group fitness studio and gym (Leary, 1992; Lox et al., 2010). The quality of the physical environment and social environment may encourage body image dissatisfaction and disturbances but may also be altered to decrease self-presentation concerns and should be considered in creating interventions (Hall et al., 2014). As such, those interested in making fitness spaces more inclusive need to pay attention to how the gyms environment—both the facility's arrangement and the community interactions can help or hinder member's self-perceptions. Being aware of the fitness culture in one's facility is critical and being able to consider the space from the perspective of those who might feel social physique anxiety will bring greater awareness for what changes may be needed to make these spaces more inviting and less intimidating.

Body dissatisfaction as it relates to social physique anxiety and self-presentational concerns has an enormous impact on all of those involved in or who are considering becoming involved in exercise (LePage and Crowther, 2010; Sturgess and Stinson, 2022). For instance, the conceptions of body image held by group fitness instructors have significant implications for their ability to teach their classes. The conventional way that body image has been incorporated into group fitness settings, through motivational cuing focusing heavily upon appearance-based motivation, is causing more harm than benefit to both participants and group fitness instructors. For this reason, it is imperative to critically appraise issues of body image and establish ways to assist group fitness instructors to develop more healthy body image conceptions and body satisfaction not only for themselves but also for the good of the participants they lead and the good of their profession and industry. It is only in this way that they will perform at the level sufficient to create change and have a positive impact on the health of society.

Fitness industry culture and the group fitness context

Physical appearance motives are currently cited as the most compelling reason to be physically active (Hall et al., 2014) and the media is a primary contributor to instigating the belief that the ideal and only acceptable body image is that of the thin and toned physique. This suggests on many levels that appearance-based motivation is the stronger strategy to gain participation in group fitness classes (Martin Ginis et al., 2008). For participants, the draw of improving body composition and appearance is effective as an initial motivation to get participants started, however, that is where the effectiveness ends. In terms of actual exercise adherence strategies, appearance-based motivational forms negatively affect body image cognitions, whereas a health-based approach will do more to improve satisfaction and adherence to group fitness (Raedeke et al., 2007). Strategies that focus on retention and engagement are far more warranted, both for the success of the group fitness programs as well as the health of the participants and their satisfaction with the services provided through group fitness programming and the fitness establishment.

Group fitness instructors create the fitness class experience and can influence an individual's levels of social physique anxiety by the way they verbally cue and coach the exercises in class. This effect comes primarily from the choice of motivational cueing. Set-up and execution cues are those cues that are directed specifically in performing the activity, and thus limited by the necessity of subscribing to general safety and biomechanical principles. Motivational cues on the other hand are more variable, instructor dependent, and even stronger because they affect more deeply the emotions and the subconscious of the participants. Motivation can be internal or external. An instructor who selects appearance-based motivational cuing will negatively affect their participants' perceptions of their body image cognitions, social physique anxiety, and self-presentational concerns. Appearance-based cues are an extrinsic form of motivation. This is supported by evidence from the study by O'Hara et al. (2014), where two experimental conditions existed—one in which the instructor emphasized physical appearance and the other in which the instructor emphasized health-related benefits of the activity. The participants in the health-related motivational condition were less likely to experience state-self-objectification and state social physique anxiety whereas those who were in the appearance-related motivational condition participants were more likely to have state-self objectification (O'Hara et al., 2014). Another study by Raedeke et al. (2007) supports this conclusion. Participants who went to classes where instructors used a health-based leadership style felt better overall and had feelings of being more engaged, revitalized, and less exhausted after the class. This meant that these participants had stronger intentions of joining a similar class in the future. The study concluded that the

exercise leader's behavior influences the quality of the exerciser's experience (Raedeke et al., 2007).

As identified earlier in the literature, social physique anxiety may impact performance quality, as well as their motivation to take part in physical activity (Leary, 1992). This relates to concerns for creating the right impression, which is a concern to which many instructors can relate. The success of group fitness programming and of an instructor depends on class participation and popularity. Instructors will naturally be concerned with making the proper impression to have full classes and maintain their job security (Szumilewicz et al., 2008). Looking a certain way and behaving in a certain way to adhere to expectations are guided by greater fitness culture ideologies of the body. Sappey and Maconachie (2012) support this with the concept of "ocularcentric labour" which is a term that explains how fitness workers seek the adoration of their clients as the primary reward for the work they perform. A related term, developed by Mears (2014), is "aesthetic labour" which refers to how workers are screened and managed by their physical appearance. In these examples, there is either a psycho-social type of reward or a material type of reward that is based on self-image and the physical capital of the worker. These phenomena can be traced back to the influence of cultural ideologies of what fitness should be and reinforce the desire and pursuit of the ideal body. The result is that employment conditions for instructors become less than ideal and there is a potentially greater concern for the development of body image disturbances.

Mass media and marketing promote a culture of thinness, and this has implications for decisions regarding class naming, workout selection, and marking in clubs which in turn influences group fitness instructors' exercise selection, class design, and even the coaching they provide (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Sturgess and Stinson, 2022). "Fitspiration" is a modern term for the images posted on popular social media sites and magazines meant to inspire exercise has paradoxically produced increased body dissatisfaction (Krug et al., 2020). The messaging perpetuated by these sources, particularly health and fitness magazines, is to focus on improving appearance—becoming smaller and thinner—rather than improving or maintaining one's health. Thinness is the only valorized method for self-improvement and the ultimate goal, and therefore motivation for exercise is to look good, rather than feel good and be healthy (Washington and Economides, 2016; Upiter, 2018). These messages from these sources become internalized by readers and viewers. Recent research that adds to this phenomenon, is the multi-billion dollar athleisure wear industry which is encouraging the pursuit of fitspiration lifestyles and the clothing wearers' ideals and concerns and obsessions over their physical appearance (Lipson et al., 2020). The narrowly defined thin ideal promoted through these channels is unattainable for the majority of the population which creates a gap that increases body dissatisfaction,

feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression (Upiter, 2018; Markula, 2021; Sturgess and Stinson, 2022).

The predominant cultural views and ideologies in favor of the "ideal body" and more recent "fitspiration" which has inspired a drive for thinness, underlies the fitness industry. This dominant discourse is not new, nor is it unique to the fitness industry (Upiter, 2018). Group fitness instructors as part of the industry are feeling the effects and performing their role in the industry–which involves interaction with different networks of relationships with class participants, fellow instructors, managers, club owners and operators–means they occupy positions that are more precarious and affected by the influences of culture and the media. Nevertheless, the nexus in which they operate may conversely afford some influence to encourage change based on their approaches and instructional methods, for instance, avoiding the use of appearance-based references and motivational cueing in their classes.

Analysis

As identified in the previous section, there are numerous factors and mechanisms of interaction between group fitness instructors and their social environment which present implications for social physique anxiety and body image disturbances. Having a framework to conceptualize the various interactions clarifies the issues. The need to understand the forces and interactions is critical before challenges can be addressed and opportunities can be recognized. In this article, the influence of fitness industry culture on group fitness instructors' context and body image conceptions will be analyzed using Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). Bronfenbrenner originally created the Social Ecological Model to conceptualize a theory for human development (Lox et al., 2010; Eriksson et al., 2018). However, the theory is also useful as a conceptual model to understand and guide the development and implementation of interventions for physical activity or mental health. The advantage of using the Social Ecological Model is that it emphasizes both individual and contextual factors that are responsible for impacting behaviors and considers both the environment and relationships (Eriksson et al., 2018; Rooney and Young, 2022).

The Social Ecological Model shows how individuals are affected by several overlapping ecosystems. These ecosystems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Lox et al., 2010; Rooney and Young, 2022). This model offers an integrative approach to recognizing multiple levels of influence on an individual and is well suited to understand and illustrate the influences of culture and society on the body perceptions of group fitness instructors. From conceptualizing relationships and interactions, insights into where and how to take action to encourage change can be made.

Supplementary Figure 1 presents the application of the Social Ecological Model to group fitness contexts to conceptualize the multiple spheres of social and environmental influence that impact group fitness instructors' body image cognitions. The individual group fitness instructor is at the center of the model. The microsystem surrounds the individual and contains the people with whom the individual has close interactions. This level corresponds to the gym space where group fitness participants, club owners, and operators exist. The mesosystem, which is the next level of the model, is where microsystems can interact. The mesosystem includes events and activities outside of the gym space, for instance, fitness conferences and training courses which bring together different clubs and groups to interact. Within the exosystem for group fitness instructors are the educational systems and certifying bodies of the fitness industry. Social media and fitness magazines can also be included in this layer. The fitness industry as a whole is part of the exosystem. The final outer layer of the model, the macrosystem, contains the dominant cultural values and ideologies related to body image that impact the fitness industry and all of those within it.

Interventions can be developed and implemented at any level of the Social Ecological Model. A change in one level will cause a change in another level—either directly or indirectly (Lox et al., 2010). Bronfenbrenner discussed "proximal processes" which are reciprocal interactions that occur between the individual and other persons, symbols, and objects in the microsystem. Proximal processes are considered particularly important because according to Bronfenbrenner, they were the most significant determinants for human development (Eriksson et al., 2018).

Discussion

Innovations in instructional methods to encourage perspective transformation were developed and provided based on advice from the existing literature. These recommendations are aligned and presented following the framework of the Social Ecological Model. The first set of recommendations will be given at the individual level. The second set of recommendations will be given at the community level (microsystem and mesosystem). The final set of recommendations will be delivered at the fitness industry and cultural levels (exosystem and macrosystem).

Recommendations for instructors in teaching methods and practice

Reinboth et al. (2022) argue for the need to build instructors' autonomy and foster supportive environments to build resilience. Developing self-determination and encouraging self-compassion are two approaches to guide educational interventions cited in the literature as promising for advancing

autonomy and supportive environments. Instructors may learn and develop a sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation for their work by engaging in interventions that are based upon both practices. This has implications for how they teach their classes and engage with their class participants.

Developing self-determination

Self-determination Theory (SDT) comes from the work of Deci and Ryan (1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) which is well known in the exercise psychology literature. Self-determination is related to an individual's ability to autonomously choose to perform a behavior and is related to improved self-concept, self-esteem, and self-perception (Thøgersen-Ntoumani and Ntoumanis, 2007; Lox et al., 2010). Given this, the support that this concept could offer to individuals and instructors who struggle with self-presentational concerns and body image disturbances is clear. Self-determination depends on satisfying three needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Hartmann et al., 2015). SDT aligns with and satisfies the recommendation from Reinboth et al. (2022) to develop approaches by advancing autonomy and encouraging relatedness and competence to foster more supportive environments. Achieving self-determination is related to intrinsic motivation and is not due to coercion or external pressure (Lox et al., 2010). Ryan and Deci (2000) conceptualize motivation according to SDT along a continuum, from amotivation to intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is the most preferred type of motivation because it is the kind of motivation that comes from within and does not involve coercion from external sources. However, external motivation—which corresponds to the kind of motivation that encourages body work and underlies "ocularcentric labour" and "aesthetic labour" - is more commonly seen and encouraged in fitness contexts (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

The dominant form of motivation that underlies an instructor's reason for engaging in exercise may impact their performance through the actions and behaviors that they espouse in their classes. Instructors who rely on external motivation may have amotivation for teaching when experiencing body image dissatisfaction. In contrast, instructors who can go from amotivation to intrinsic motivation will be able to find greater fulfillment and renewed engagement in their teaching. Encouraging instructors' intrinsic motivation has the potential to alter their class design and educational and presentational practices and thereby transform the fitness experiences they create for exercise participants. For this reason, interventions to support group fitness instructors with body image dissatisfaction should focus on encouraging self-determination.

Encouraging self-compassion

Strong evidence supports self-compassion interventions as promising and protective against negative body image experiences and emotions, including shame, guilt, and

embarrassment related to body image (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2013; Braun et al., 2016; Pila et al., 2022). Increased levels of shame and body image dissatisfaction have been associated with decreased self-compassion while higher levels of self-compassion have been associated with lower levels of body shame and body surveillance and a decreased tendency to judge oneself based on appearance (Ferreira et al., 2013; Toole and Craighead, 2016). Self-compassion involves recognizing that all individuals are worthy of compassion and that failure and inadequacy are natural and acceptable elements of being human (Braun et al., 2016). Self-kindness, mindfulness, and appreciation for common humanity are three inter-related dimensions of self-compassion (Braun et al., 2016; Toole and Craighead, 2016). Interventions based on self-compassion have been shown to promote a healthier relationship with self (Toole and Craighead, 2016). Having greater self-compassion may act as a buffer against the socio-cultural pressure and drive for thinness, appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction and support increased awareness of the societal appearance-based ideologies. The outcome of interventions involving practicing self-compassion, particularly in exercise and sports contexts, is a more positive and enriching experience (Pila et al., 2022).

Self-compassion interventions follow diverse methods and can include meditation training, writing exercises, and group-based education sessions (Toole and Craighead, 2016; Pila et al., 2022). There are both individual and collective ways to practice self-compassion. By developing self-compassion for themselves, instructors can model and encourage more positive learning environments for the participants that come to their fitness classes. This has the potential to modify how they show up to class, their coaching style, and motivational cueing.

Recommendations for club operations

Gyms are sites of learning and places where social change is possible (Andreasson and Johansson, 2014). Support at the community level of clubs and from their managers, club owners, and operators will contribute to changing conceptions of body image in health and fitness industry contexts. This support corresponds to the "proximal processes" discussed by Bronfenbrenner (Eriksson et al., 2018). There is a need to improve fitness club owners' and operators' competence in identifying challenges and concerns for body image and supporting group fitness instructors as relates to their body image concerns. This is significant for the relevance of the occupational health of group fitness instructors (Reinboth et al., 2022). Club leaders can make changes within fitness facilities to encourage more intrinsic motivation and health-related focus in clubs to support group fitness instructors. Some examples of interventions at the club level include choosing to revise marketing and promotional materials and class names and descriptions to make content more inclusive and less focused on external motivation.

Marketing materials used around gyms to promote group fitness classes within clubs or externally harm body image and result in social physique anxiety if the design is too strongly focused on body objectification and the "ideal body." Fitness centers have been associated with greater body image concerns in female exercisers as in this environment the female body is often on display owing to the omnipresent mirrors typically found in gyms (especially in the group fitness studio) and the plethora of posters emphasizing the ideal body (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2008). When only the ultra-fit and thin are represented, this creates inaccurate messaging, which for those who do not measure up will tend toward avoidance and the belief of not "looking good-enough" to exercise in public. This may also be a determent to the recruitment of new group fitness participants and thus the growth of the industry. When promotional materials are off-putting, even if only on a subconscious level, by showing only a specified and restrictive body type, this cancels the chances of insecure individuals setting foot in the studio and trying group fitness. Research suggests that exercise promotional materials should show models with a varied range of body shapes, sizes, and fitness abilities (e.g., Martin Ginis et al., 2008; Lox et al., 2010). Even though this research is not new and the evidence continues to grow, change is slow to occur.

The names and descriptions of group fitness classes contribute to how they are perceived (Brown et al., 2017). Both class names and class descriptions that relate to intrinsic motivation encourage participants' interests, enjoyment, and perceived confidence. While names that are based on extrinsic motivation and connected to appearance or weight-related terminology elucidate more tension in participants and pressure to exercise (Brown et al., 2017). Based on these findings, club owners and operators would do well to re-evaluate class titles and descriptions.

A first step for club owners and operators could be to take an audit of their current marketing and promotional materials and their fitness class descriptions and consider ways in which materials can be adjusted to support a more inclusive and diverse. Following this, standards and guidelines can be fashioned to guide the creation of future materials to ensure that changes once implemented are encouraged. Club owners, operators, and managers can provide education to employees about the significance and reason for change to demonstrate support and understanding.

Recommendations for perspective transformation in fitness industry culture

Western worldviews and culture have guided the development of the industrial fitness culture (Scheerder et al., 2020). As has already been identified in this article, these cultural influences spurred on by neoliberal discourse and

values of individualism and consumer culture have intensified the struggles with body image and obsession with body work (Coffey, 2016). The larger fitness industry culture influences both the individual instructor level and the community level (microsystem and mesosystem). This is the site where change when it occurs, will be much more apparent. An outright change to the entire industry that has decades of enmeshed influences of culture and society on the body is hardly practical. It will take time. One way to begin to encourage a transformation in the industry is by taking a more holistic conceptualization of health and wellbeing (Beauchemin et al., 2015).

Fitness education is lacking in the sustainable promotion of holistic health and wellbeing. Seeing health and fitness as holistic and relational is a good starting point for change and education and a good perspective for both instructors and participants (Beauchemin et al., 2015). Education that supports understanding the relational aspects of misconceptions about body image and culture is a crucial step toward awareness of the mechanisms and the potential psychological wellbeing damages that poor body image concerns have on individuals and communities. The pursuit of the ideal body is not a new phenomenon. As illustrated in the work of Dion et al. (1972) those who are socially perceived to be more physically attractive had better lives. This has led to the belief that "what is beautiful is good." A relational understanding of the misconception however will bring awareness to the fact that this is too simplistic an assumption. Multiple factors that contribute to living a healthy, successful, and fulfilling life and physical appearance is not the most important. To judge beauty as the single variable is limiting.

Moving toward a more holistic model of health and wellness for fitness industry culture could be supported by being open to and learning from Indigenous perspectives on health and wellbeing. Indigenous worldviews are holistic, relational, and encourage balance (Absolon, 2011; Dei, 2013). Health and wellbeing perspectives based on Indigenous worldviews are focused on strengths-based approaches and self-determination rather than on a deficit model (Thiessen et al., 2020). The traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples offers an alternative perspective to the dominant pressure for progress and development. Moreover, Indigenous philosophies value the connection between humans and their environment which is concerned with living in sustainable and respectful ways (Smith, 1999). For instance, Turner and Spalding (2018) explain how *ethnoecology* is the study that brings together the knowledge of the environment and ecosystems, with the added level of consideration for individual's attitudes, values, and worldviews and the impact of cultural institutions on the application of knowledge. This brings awareness to the importance of sharing traditional ecological knowledge and being attentive to the role that culture and institutions play in promoting knowledge and application of that knowledge.

Multiple perspectives, approaches, and a greater variety of voices are needed to reinvent the culture and landscape of the fitness industry. With a focus on and value for diversity as normal, more affordance to Indigenous worldviews have the potential to alter the appreciation for differences in body and shape size (Little Bear, 2000). This in turn can support the creation of a culture and an industry that is more welcoming and supportive and based on true health and wellbeing for all.

A key point to make with this recommendation is that Indigenous methodologies and worldviews are not widely recognized or available due to colonial erasure (Kovach, 2009). Furthermore, the importance of connecting Indigenous and mainstream knowledge on health and fitness requires respectful engagement to avoid cultural appropriation and remain true to Indigenous knowledge and cannot be understated (Smith, 1999; Bartlett et al., 2012). Bartlett et al. (2012) provide several recommendations including the need to acknowledge that both Western and Indigenous ways of knowing are needed and should engage in a co-learning journey. Another example and approach to support this journey is the principle of "Two-Eyed Seeing" first presented by Elder Albert Marshal in 2004 (Bartlett et al., 2012). "Two-Eyed Seeing" is a principle that was originally conceptualized for health research. Following this principle, Indigenous ways of knowing are honored and respected (Sylliboy et al., 2021).

Along with discussion and education about respectful cultural engagement and avoidance of cultural appropriation, there needs to be a consideration for making gyms culturally safe spaces for individuals from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, fitness professionals can come to recognize that culture and community are both important to viewing and understanding Indigenous conceptions of physical activity (Tang and Jardine, 2016). Understanding there is a need to examine spaces and focus on strategies to build more awareness to create culturally safe spaces for delivering physical activity will improve inclusivity (Giles and Darroch, 2014).

Fitness professionals can support transformation and shifts in the broader context of culture and society by a commitment to learn and engage in more discussion, education, policy development, and practices that honor, celebrate and create space for the expression of different perspectives and worldviews. This has relevance for revising cultural ideals and the negative influences on body image cognitions in fitness industry culture.

Summary

Three levels of recommendations from the individual instructor level to the macrolevel of culture. **Supplementary Table 1** presents a summary of the levels of action and recommendations for practice and perspective transformation that have been provided.

Health and the embodiment of fitness are assemblages, that are produced by a variety of networks and through relationships and cannot exist as separate and distinct (Coffey, 2016). There is a need for action at all levels—from the individual to the collective and cultural level—to encourage perspective transformation from dominant discourses centered on appearance-based motivations for exercise toward more health-based motivations for exercise and wellbeing. This was explored through the Social Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994) which helped conceptualize the interaction between different spheres and systems and reveals the potential for transformation.

Conclusion

The consequences of negative body image conceptions in the group fitness setting are many. There are ways industry professionals can do more to maximize the full potential of group fitness and the effectiveness of group fitness instructors. Body image as it relates to social physique anxiety and self-presentation concerns has an enormous impact on all of those involved or who are considering being involved in group fitness. It has been shown that the popular and traditional way that body image has been incorporated into group fitness settings, by focusing heavily upon appearance-based motivation, produces more harm than good to both participants and group fitness instructors. Change is timely and relevant. Instructors have the means and opportunity to learn and develop resiliency in the face of body image issues. However, while instructors have a particular and potentially wide sphere of influence, they cannot be held individually responsible for transforming the industry. This article highlights that some strategies and approaches can be applied at multiple levels to transform perspectives on body image in group fitness culture.

Many changes have taken place since the dawn of the aerobics movement in the 1950s and society and technology continue to evolve at faster and faster rates (Stern, 2008; Andreasson and Johansson, 2015). It is therefore critical that group fitness leaders become more innovative in order to evolve and advance the industry to do more to serve greater numbers throughout the world. The way forward is to challenge current practices and approaches and learn to be more flexible and accepting of how group fitness programming is created and delivered. Transforming dominant cultural norms regarding conceptions of body image from poor body image to body satisfaction has implications for supporting a more diverse and inclusive fitness industry, exercise culture, and communities. More support is needed to dispel the sources present in the group fitness setting which invoke negative body cognitions, body image

disturbances and by extension social physique anxiety and self-presentational concerns because these factors are a determent to participation and stifling the growth of the industry. This is a challenging phenomenon to address because dominant cultural narratives and reasons for exercise are rooted in motivations for weight loss and body toning; however, this is an important discussion that has the potential to create meaningful change to improve fitness culture and exercise motivation and adherence.

At present, there is a limited amount of research into the context of group fitness instructors (Reinboth et al., 2022). Future research should more closely examine the impact of body image conceptions and ideologies on group fitness instructors. There is a need for the development of more education, resources, and interventions to support instructors in their workplaces and communities so as to produce protective measures to reduce body image dissatisfaction and encourage body image satisfaction and acceptance. More research into understanding contexts and relationships and learning from diverse perspectives and worldviews will support interventions that can revise the emphasis from body-related norms in the fitness industry to a more holistic conceptual understanding of sustainable health and wellbeing consequently making a valuable Contribution to the field and the future.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2022.1008461/full#supplementary-material

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