

Becoming a Strongwoman

An auto/ethnographic study of the pursuit of strength and power, and the negotiation of health and performance in the UK Strongwoman community

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Growing interest in strength sports for women...

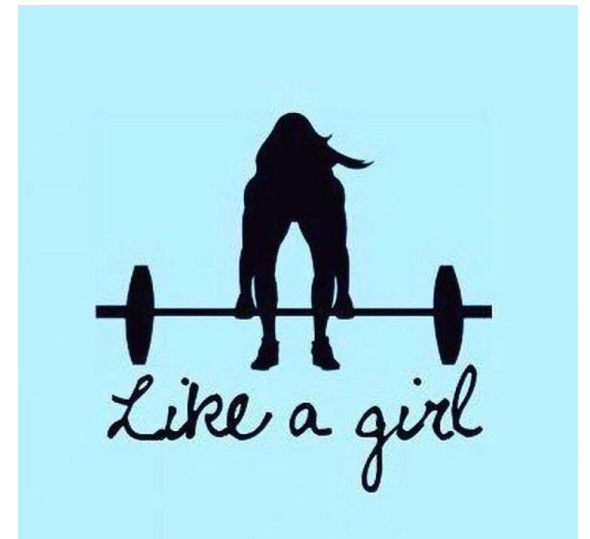
'Strong is beautiful': the unstoppable rise of Crossfit

At the Weightlifting World Championships, femininity and physique go hand in hand - and it's all down to the world's biggest fitness craze



#LiftLikeAGirl: Why women's weightlifting is the fitness trend that's here to stay

As the British Weightlifting Championships kick off, Victoria Northbrooke charts the rise of women's weightlifting (and the amazing story of how it won funding from the men's sport)



#liftlikeagirl

#girlsthatlift

#strongisthenewskinny

#strongisthenewsexy

What is strongwoman?

► What is strongwoman?

Strength athletics – female counterpart of the male strength athletics, strongman.

Tests competitors physical capacity in a variety of different ways –
static and dynamic tests of strength, power, speed and endurance.



Why study strongwoman?

- ▶ Although participation has increased, there is a continued cultural dissociation between women and lifting weights (*Salvatore & Maracek, 2010*)
- ▶ The majority of existing research is on female bodybuilding:
 - aesthetic focus, femininity rules, restrictive nutrition regime
- ▶ No in-depth research has been conducted on strongwoman. Some literature has conflated the two.

Why study strongwoman?

- ▶ Strongwoman has no aesthetic focus – competitors are judged solely on physical capacity.
- ▶ Shilling and Bunsell (2014) call for further research into this area:
 - The focus on practical achievement in strongwoman helped to provide an escape from the dominance of gendered aesthetics within bodybuilding.
 - Strongwoman may have the power to be more liberating or empowering than bodybuilding.
- ▶ Until an in-depth study into the subculture of strongwoman takes place it is difficult to assess its empowering potential.

Aims & Research Questions

- ▶ Explore and investigate the subculture of the sport of strongwoman in the UK, examining the practices, attitudes, values, and lived experiences of those involved.
- ▶ Further exploration of the notion of female strength and power, the attitudes and values that encompass it, and its implications for identity, gender, and sexuality.

Research questions included:

- ▶ Who competes in strongwoman and why?
- ▶ Does strongwoman allow women to build a body for themselves?
- ▶ Does strongwoman allow women to construct an identity that they can be content with in contemporary society?
- ▶ Is the daily lifestyle of a strongwoman liberating or constricting?
- ▶ Are normative representations and social perceptions of strongwoman empowering?
- ▶ Are the actual processes of the sport resistant/transgressive/empowering in relation to social norms of femininity?

Methodology

- ▶ Combined ethnographic & autoethnographic approach – others & self subject of inquiry.
- ▶ Two-way dyadic process.
- ▶ Ethnographic fieldnotes, autoethnographic journaling and reflection, interviews, online community.

Storying the Strongwoman journey

► **Pre-strongwoman fitness journey**

- Heavy focus on fitness, aesthetics, weight loss, body composition.

► **Novice strongwoman experience**

- New focus on strength, not shape or size.
- Number on the bar not the number on the scales

► **Intermediate strongwoman experience**

- How much sacrifice should I be making?
- How badly do I want this?

► **Elite strongwoman experience**

- Win at all costs.
- No excuses – nothing gets in the way.

'Stumbling into Strongwoman'

'I started off just going to the gym trying to lose a bit of weight...'

'Stop doing all that cardio and go and lift some heavy shit'

CrossFit – an introduction to resistance-based activity

Novice strongwoman experience

- ▶ A continuation of the search for health.
- ▶ Shift in focus from visual appearance to physical capacity.
- ▶ Enjoyment and achievement.

‘the change from focusing on the number on the scales to being able to focus on the number on the bar’

‘it makes you feel empowered by being strong and doing things that you never thought you could do’

Intermediate strongwoman experience

- ▶ Greater level of dedication and sacrifice required.
- ▶ CONFLICT
 - Between strength and weight loss goals.
 - Between performance goals & social life.
 - Between performance and health.
- ▶ *'How badly do I want this?'*

Intermediate strongwoman experience

The hot water scorched my skin and I could feel beads of sweat on my forehead within a minute of being in there. I could feel my body temperature rising and my heart beating faster. I endured 10 minutes and then got out, my head spinning as I stood up. I had no idea where my weight was at by then, but I was too scared to get on the scales. I laid down on the bathroom floor trying to regain some sense of composure. I felt weak, I felt sick, and I felt dizzy, but I had to carry on, I knew I still needed to sweat out some more. I got back in the bath for another 10 minutes. It felt like torture, but was almost addictive, watching the beads of sweat build up on my skin and willing them to build up faster. The more I sweated out, the more satisfied I was, driven by the fear of the embarrassment that I might not make weight the next day.

Elite strongwoman experience

- ▶ Performance focused.
- ▶ Bodywork – perfection discourse.
- ▶ 'no excuses'
- ▶ Pushing the body to its limit to be a 'true strongwoman'.
- ▶ Risks to health – restrictive practices, performance-enhancing drugs.

Additional thoughts & reflections

- ▶ 'Competition culture'.
- ▶ Hard to 'break away' from performance narrative.
- ▶ Wider implications re 'all or nothing', 'no excuses' narratives in the fitness industry.
- ▶ Challenges of studying your hobby! – all-consuming. Disappointing realisations.

Thank you!

Questions?

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