

# **The Body Politics of High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT)**

CCGL9064 Final Blog Portfolio

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As a young adult, it's hard not to think about your physical appearance. From Instagram stories to Tinder profiles, social media's pervasiveness in our lives have made our body images more important than ever. In an attempt to improve my own body in preparation for summer, I started attending outdoor, group HIIT (short for High Intensity Interval Training) classes in Victoria Park. As the name implies, HIIT is known for its intensity, combining fast-paced cardio with circuit exercises that encourage muscle growth. Nonetheless, I realized that there was more to unpack from this fitness activity. Specifically, HIIT is a political body practice impacted by social and cultural forces.

## **HIIT & Commodifying Bodies**

Following my first HIIT class, pain was the most distinct bodily sensation. My arms were cramping, and walking back to Causeway Bay station was a battle in itself. I realized that I could only have the body I wanted with sheer grit and hard work. The first workout had been the most effort my body exerted in a very long time. The week after, the instructor spared no one, forcing attendees into a more intense set: back-to-back circuit exercise with little rest, followed by cardio and abdominal training. I was experiencing more pain than in the week prior.

In exerting so much effort, I asked myself, are our neoliberal norms/values shaping fitness?

While global capitalism encourages us to work hard and produce the best goods/services, fitness encourages us to work hard to produce the best bodies. Additionally, in movies or underwear billboard advertisements, aren't these well-crafted bodies commodified for us to consume through our eyes? By extension, have capitalist/neoliberal cultural norms encouraged us to use fitness to produce bodies for others' consumption?

In her article, Sharp (2000) notes Karl Marx's view of commodities as "goods produced under the alienating conditions of capitalism". She furthermore argues "commodification insists upon objectification in some form," converting bodies into "objects of economic desire." Arguably,

pain as physical labour in HIIT may represent these alienating conditions: weekly, I'm required to consistently exert more and more effort into producing my body as a product of other's visual consumption. These bodies are then traded for economic and social capital (an attractive body can provide an individual with economic opportunities or higher social standing), transforming them into objects of economic — and social — desire.

## **HIIT & Gendering Bodies**

Even under spring temperatures, where I'd normally wear a jacket, the clothing of attendees was incredibly revealing. Men wore tank tops or were entirely shirtless, accentuating their biceps, chest or ab muscles. Likewise, women often wore sports bras and leggings, highlighting their hips, glutes and (in some cases) their bust.

I began to notice that HIIT was an embodiment of gender normativity. Understanding gender as socially constructed (Martin, 1991), people seemed to 'perform' in a way that adhered to traditional gender roles through HIIT. Perhaps, in pushing us to our physical extremes, we similarly pushed into conforming towards the extremes of the gender binaries. Like myself, many of the HIIT attendees strived for 'ideal' sexy bodies. In a world where institutions such as science actively promote gender normativity (Martin, 1991), it's no surprise that pursuing these bodies forces us into gender norms.

Even more symbolic of HIIT embodying gender normativity was who was lagging behind. One in particular was a woman on the larger side. Nonetheless, she still seemed physically fit. Compared to the other female attendees, she had larger arms and shoulders — a *marked* body built like a weightlifter's. As she had more masculine gender expressions and struggled in comparison to her more feminine, *unmarked* counterparts. It struck as a powerful illustration of HIIT (and mainstream exercise) embodying gender normativity. Hence, it's important to reconsider, is there a space for non-binary bodies in fitness?

## **Disciplinary Power & Tracking the Body**

Within the class itself, group dynamics were interesting. Attendees stood in a circle around a coach in the middle. Uniformity was highly encouraged: everyone did their best to carry out the

exercises the best they could. Otherwise, poor execution would be corrected by the coach. The fear of reproach over subpar performance led me to exert added effort into these exercises.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977), comes to mind when reconsidering these group dynamics. He discusses the Panopticon, a central observation tower placed within a circle of prison cells that induces us into "permanent visibility" assuring the "automatic function of power" and increasing our "docility" and "utility." Foucault understood the building as a metaphor and model for disciplinary power. HIIT class dynamics are quite similar. Not only does the instructor stand in the middle as a central observer, conscious "visibility" forces us into proper performance. Thus, the Panopticon's use in HIIT classes — although unintentional — forces attendees into exerting extra effort.

Foucault (1977) also argues that the Panopticon functions as a "laboratory of power", testing "punishment on prisoners" or teaching "different techniques to workers" to decide which is best. Likewise, HIIT activities may be interpreted as a laboratory, where exercises are tried and tested to see which ones cultivate ideal bodies.

Due to some instructors' busy schedules, I attended one alternative class at a gym in Sheung Wan the fourth week of doing HIIT. The exercises were done in front of a mirror, and through it, I found that I was unconsciously adopting more masculine behaviors. My form and performance was meticulously maintained to conform to gender normativity. More importantly, however, I noticed that the mirror became a means of self-tracking. Both within and outside the HIIT class, I'd pay more attention to my appearance and bodily structure in the mirror, always *tracking* whether I was losing body fat, or my muscles were getting more defined. From time to time, I used the weighing scale, always hoping that the numbers showing were lower than the last. It was a "tool of introspection" — "a digital mirror" that forced my self-understanding into numerical values (Schüll, 2016). Lastly, I was also significantly more conscious of what I was eating — estimating each meal and ensuring a caloric deficit and "steering by guesswork" when my "quantified self" was unavailable (Schüll, 2016).

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I've learned that HIIT is shaped by the global operations of culture and power. Still, these processes do not operate in isolation: cultivating our bodies as commodities for sexual desire is enhanced and encouraged by disciplinary power and our self-quantification. In turn, these force our conformity towards idealized gender norms viewed as attractive. Despite this, HIIT is not at fault. Like any day-to-day activity, fitness is impacted by values, norms and power. Understanding this, it's important to contemplate, is it possible to separate our daily lives from social forces?

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