

“Body Sculpting”: The Social Discipline and Embodied Practices behind Fitness Consumption

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Abstract

This study examines fitness consumption through the lens of social discipline and embodied practices, analyzing how individuals construct their identity in relation to an ideal body. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes questionnaire surveys and interviews, the study finds that fitness consumption is shaped by geographical location, information access, and social circle dynamics. Women and highly educated individuals show a stronger preference for personal training services. Women’s engagement is largely driven by societal expectations of physical appearance, whereas highly educated individuals view personal training as a status symbol. Additionally, social circle influences significantly impact men’s fitness consumption, highlighting gendered expectations. The study reveals that fitness consumption extends beyond health pursuits, serving as an expression of social status and values.

Keywords: Fitness Consumption, Social Discipline, Embodied Practice, Social Influence, Value Orientation.

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INTRODUCTION

The release of the 2024 Chinese New Year film *YOLO* (You Only Live Once) sparked widespread public discussion on fitness and body transformation. In the film, director and lead actress Jia Ling portrays an inspiring female protagonist whose personal weight loss journey closely mirrors her real-life experience, gaining significant social attention. Influenced by the film, the demand for fitness equipment surged during the Spring Festival period. Statistics show that on the Tmall platform, kettlebell sales increased by 930% year-on-year, punching bag transactions grew by over 60%, and boxing equipment sales rose by more than 40% (Xue & Song, 2023). This phenomenon reflects the public’s pursuit of an ideal physique. This study explores how social norms and individual desires shape modern perceptions of the ideal body. It examines the influence of fitness activities on individuals and analyzes the construction and definition of beauty, uncovering the social and personal motivations behind body sculpting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies indicate that fitness facility location, information access, and social networks significantly impact personal training consumption. First, proximity to fitness centers enhances participation. Researchers

suggest that facilities within a fifteen-minute travel radius (approximately three kilometers) promote both physical well-being and social interaction, fostering mass sports development (Wen, 2008). Second, in the digital era, fitness apps and social media serve as key information sources. Diverse promotional strategies stimulate interest, expanding the personal training market. Moreover, social circles play a crucial role. According to social cognitive theory, individuals confident in their abilities and expecting positive outcomes from role models are more likely to adopt similar behaviors (Wu, 2024). Research also links individual health status to that of friends, indicating that a positive fitness culture within social circles further drives personal training consumption. In summary, convenience, digital engagement, and social environments collectively shape personal training consumption patterns.

METHOD

The research subjects comprise consumers of personal training services across China, including users of major online fitness platforms such as Keep and participants in offline fitness activities. This broad sample ensures the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the study. This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining questionnaire

surveys and individual interviews to examine nationwide personal training consumption patterns.

Data collection occurred from September 28 to October 7, 2024, through online surveys and on-site investigations at fitness venues. Of 1,100 collected questionnaires, 1,016 were valid after excluding 84 with excessively short completion times, yielding a 92.4% effective response rate. The survey covered respondents' personal information, perceptions of personal training value, and industry marketization.

DISCUSSION

1. Market Environment and Social Influence in Personal Training Consumption

Personal training, as a key sector in the fitness industry, has become highly marketized due to multiple factors. On one hand, the widespread distribution of fitness facilities supports its expansion. Survey data shows that 92.85% of respondents have access to a fitness facility within three kilometers of their residence (see Table3-1), indicating that personal training services have extended beyond major cities, increasing accessibility and demand. On the other hand, the national fitness boom has driven growth. Well-equipped training facilities and the rise of "Internet + Smart Fitness" models, such as LeFit, have intensified industry competition. Advertising plays a crucial role in increasing consumer awareness, with 72.4% of respondents having encountered fitness-related promotions (see Table3-1).

Table 3-1: Private Training Consumer Groups: Number of Fitness Consumption Venues within a 3-Kilometer Walking Distance, Exposure to Relevant Advertising Campaigns, and Hourly Rate of Personal Training Sessions

Item	Options	Number of Respondents (People)	Percentage (%)
Number of Fitness Consumption Venues Within a 3-Kilometer Walking Distance	0	57	7.15
	1	474	59.47
	2	200	25.09
	3 or more	66	28
Exposure to Relevant Advertising Campaigns	Yes	577	72.4
	No	220	27.6

Social networks also influence consumer choices. The study finds a significant negative correlation between gender and the number of fitness-oriented friends ($p < 0.05$), with male respondents having more active peers (see Table 3-2). This supports the traditional view that men engage more in fitness due to a favorable social atmosphere and stronger peer support.

While women face less direct peer pressure, societal expectations regarding appearance remain influential. The peer effect further reinforces fitness participation: individuals are more likely to work out when surrounded by active peers. This trend aligns with broader societal expectations regarding male body image and exercise culture.

Table 3-2: Correlation between Gender and Number of Fitness Friends in Social Circle among Private Training Consumer Groups

		Gender
Number of Fitness Friends Nearby	Pearson Correlation	-0.074
	Significance (Two-tailed)	P<0.05
	N	797

2. Group Expectations and Value Concepts in Social Structures

(1) Gender Analysis of Personal Training Consumers

Societal expectations regarding physical appearance significantly influence personal training participation. Women, more affected by beauty standards, show a higher inclination toward personal training. The 2023 Contemporary Women's Fitness Insight Report indicates that women account for 64% of personal training users, nearly double that of men (LeKe Sports, 2024). This study's survey confirms this trend,

with 97% of female respondents opting for personal training, compared to 78.9% of males.

This highlights the impact of strict beauty standards, where appearance remains a key indicator of success. Women are more likely to invest in professional guidance to achieve specific fitness goals, such as waist, hip, and leg sculpting. In contrast, men often treat fitness as a social activity, engaging in shared workouts and group training. Their fitness goals are generally less specific, leading to lower demand for personal training services.

(2) Educational Background Analysis of Personal Training Consumers

In an era of conspicuous consumption, highly educated individuals prefer to express status through cultural symbols rather than material goods, with personal training serving as one such form of symbolic consumption.

Survey data shows that 79.5% of individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher have purchased personal training services, suggesting that fitness has become a status marker. Instead of traditional material consumption, they favor experiences that emphasize identity and knowledge representation. Personal training not only helps maintain health and physique but also reinforces social distinctions.

Moreover, highly educated consumers have distinct preferences for personal trainers. Survey data reveals that 76.29% prioritize a trainer's physique, highlighting a positive correlation between education level and concern for a trainer's appearance (see Table 3-3). First, they associate a well-maintained physique with good health, perceiving fit trainers as more credible. Second, they tend to imitate those they admire, assuming appearance-conscious trainers are more professional. Third, attractive trainers provide psychological motivation, enhancing training engagement. Lastly, selecting a well-groomed trainer aligns with their social expectations, reinforcing self-image and social recognition.

Table 3-3: Correlation between Educational Level and Emphasis on Physical Appearance When Choosing Personal Training among Private Training Consumer Groups

	Educational Level	
Emphasis on Physical Appearance	Pearson Correlation	0.069
	Significance (Two-tailed)	P<0.05
	N	797

CONCLUSION

When selecting personal training services, individuals' decisions are influenced by multiple factors such as gender, social networks, income, and education. Men may be more inclined to choose personal training due to competition and a sense of identity, whereas highly educated individuals tend to value a trainer's professional image, seeing it as a representation of health and expertise, and are more willing to pay a higher price for such services. These factors interact to make personal training not only a pursuit of health but also a significant way to reflect personal social status and values.

Individuals opt for personal training services not only in pursuit of an ideal physique but also under the combined influence of social constructs and personal aspirations. Society promotes ideal body images through advertisements and media, shaping individual expectations and behavioral patterns.

From the perspective of embodied practice theory, individuals' choices to engage in personal training stem from internal drives, seeking bodily transformation and capability enhancement to achieve personal satisfaction and happiness. The construction of an ideal physique is dynamic, influenced by social standards while also being adjusted through personal choices.

Personal training thus embodies both social conditioning and individual agency, illustrating the interplay between external influences and internal

experiences. However, with the increasing popularization of fitness knowledge and the accumulation of personal experiences, individuals begin to reevaluate their real needs, forming personalized and health-focused fitness concepts, thereby driving a deeper societal understanding and acceptance of diversity in fitness and health perspectives.

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