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Glocalised fitness: the franchising of a physical movement, fitness professionalism and gender

Jesper Andreasson and Thomas Johansson

*Department of Sport Science, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden; †Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, and insert space Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is on the development of a globa-

lised and localised gym and fitness culture. The article takes

its point of departure from three distinct levels. These are (1)

organisational aspects of the culture, (2) fitness profes-

sionals’ individual trajectories, and (3) national variations

and gender regimes. The findings indicate that fitness profes-

sionalism is emerging as an uncertain profession. On the

one hand there are international accreditation systems that

aim to ensure the status of these professionals. On the other

hand, there are simultaneous tendencies towards devalua-

tion of the status of fitness professionals, on a global level.

Partly, this can be related to the standardisation of training

programmes, as well as the connectedness between the

service industry and feminised gender regimes. In conclu-

sion, the globalisation of fitness is a highly gendered pro-

cess, involving national body ideals and cultural variations

in how fitness professionals are valued and perceived

locally.

Over the past four decades, the gym and fitness enterprise has emerged as a global industry and an influential socio-cultural phenomenon. The International Health, Racquet and Sports Club Association (IHRSA) has estimated that this global ‘movement’ generated an estimated 81 billion dollars in revenue in 2015, from around 187,000 health clubs all around the world, serving 151.5 million members (IHRSA, 2016). Although the national geographies of physical activities in the gym varies, it is estimated that between 10% and 15% of the population in many Western countries more or less regularly attend a gym and fitness facility, and in young adult segments of the population the numbers are significantly higher (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a; Crossley, 2006; IHRSA, 2016). Recently the culture and industry have also expanded considerably in Asia and Latin

CONTACT Jesper Andreasson jesper.andreasson@lnu.se Department of Sport Science, Linnaeus University, Kalmar 391 82, Sweden

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America. Brazil is now second in size to the United States when it comes to the amount of clubs and number of memberships (IHRSA, 2016). Following the tremendous development of the gym and fitness industry, employment in service-producing businesses focusing on the state of clients’ bodies has increased to such an extent that it is one of the fastest growing industries in the labour market, internationally (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a; George, 2008). Consequently, at present it is possible to talk about a fitness revolution (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014b) or a fitness boom (Millington, 2016), where people all around the world are increasingly attending gym and fitness facilities in order to keep their bodies fit and to develop healthy lifestyles (Sassatelli, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2008).

The development, expansion and globalisation of gym and fitness culture\(^1\) has a long history. According to Andreasson and Johansson (2014b), it is possible to discern at least three phases of the globalisation of gym and fitness (see also Liokaftos, 2017; Sassatelli, 2010). The modern roots of this culture can be traced back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Liokaftos, 2017). As an example, Eugene Sandow was a central figure in this development (Budd, 1997; Chapman, 1994). He was perhaps one of the first modern fitness entrepreneurs, and his career path can in some ways be said to have set the direction for the work conducted by many contemporary fitness professionals, i.e. people representing different occupational roles found within contemporary gym and fitness culture. Among other things, he opened an institute for physical culture and published a magazine (Chapman, 1994). On a rudimentary level, he initiated a globalisation of physical culture and muscle building practices through the spreading of his training magazines, mass production of different sorts of training tools and promotional tours. Another important icon for early bodybuilding was Charles Atlas (1883–1972). Following the legacy of Sandow, Atlas became famous for developing a very specific programme for bodybuilding and physical exercise (Reich, 2010). Atlas regarded as his mission to build a perfect race and to contribute to building a strong American nation (Kimmel, 1996). According to Kimmel, the development of bodybuilding at this time can be connected to a chronic crisis in masculinity, and to drastic changes in American society (see also Fair, 1999).

The second phase of the globalisation of gym and fitness culture started when Joseph ‘Joe’ Weider and his brother Ben founded the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) in 1946, and went on to develop an empire within bodybuilding. Joe’s magazine, Muscle & Fitness, sold more than 400,000 copies worldwide in the mid-1970s and at the same time the famous Gold’s Gym gradually developed from a small, and somewhat shabby local gym into a global franchise (Liokaftos, 2012; Wieder & Weider 2006). During this phase of the globalization of gym
and fitness culture both men and women are involved, and the heavy connotations to masculine working-class bodies are gradually replaced by mass participation in fitness (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014b; Sassatelli, 2010).

The interest in bodybuilding increased tremendously in the 1980s and gradually the links and connections between bodybuilding and workouts/aerobics became stronger, leading to the development of a broader and less subcultural gym culture in the 1990s. Gym culture gradually changed its guise, and somewhat became a fitness enterprise, still extolling muscle building practices but increasingly also values such as health, slenderness and a sound lifestyle (Millington, 2016; Sassatelli, 2010). This third phase of the globalisation of gym culture is characterised by the development of more diverse training techniques, multidimensional fitness gyms, less gendered and more individualised spaces and the increasing appearance of fitness professionals, such as licensed and fully-trained personal trainers and group fitness instructors. This phase is also linked to a more critical attitude towards bodybuilding, performance-enhancing drugs and the whole spectacle around bodybuilding (Fussell, 1991; Liokaftos, 2017; Locks & Richardsson, 2012). The muscular bodybuilding body is now replaced by the fitness body, still muscular, but instead of excess, there is a desire of balance, moderately sculptured bodies and a more androgynous ideal body (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a,b).

Using different empirical studies compiled from a larger international umbrella project (see research design and methodology section for further information), the focus of attention in this article is directed towards the globalisation of contemporary gym and fitness culture, and to different interconnected levels/aspects of globalised fitness. The purpose of the study is to investigate how the emergence of a global gym and fitness culture is adapted to and affected by different national and local contexts, on both an individual and organisational level. In our sociologically informed analysis we will, in different ways, discuss whether the globalisation of fitness culture has led to uniform or flexible methods and training techniques, body ideals and body philosophies. In order to meet the purpose of the article the findings section has been structured and organised in relation to three central aspects/dimensions of the fitness revolution (global franchising, fitness professionals individual trajectories, and national variations within the culture), which also are formed by the following three research questions:

RQ1: How have global franchising and the globalisation of training methods affected the organisational development of gym and fitness culture?
RQ2: In what ways do individual trajectories of fitness professionals and their movements in time and space manifest within this globalised culture?
RQ3: In what ways can national variations and the globalisation of gender and body ideals be understood?
The three different aspects of globalisation and glocalised fitness-focused upon in this article do overlap somewhat, of course, although they mainly follow the structure of the research questions above.

Survey of research

Research on contemporary gym and fitness culture was mainly initiated in the early 1990s, predominantly focusing on gender and identity-forming practices within this cultural sphere of disciplining bodies (Johansson, 1998; Klein, 1993). This line of research is thematically still prominent in more recent studies, in which gender transformations, body ideals and techniques are explored (McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009; Monaghan, 2007). Due to the tremendous development of this cultural phenomenon researchers have also increasingly directed their attention towards the professionalisation and commercialisation of the culture, but this field of research is still underdeveloped (De Lyon, Neville, & Armour, 2016; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Smith Maguire, 2008). Interest has, however, been directed towards fitness professionalism and how personal trainers and group fitness instructors deal with their line of work, in particular in relation to gender, intimacy, ethical boundaries and legitimacy within the industry (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a; Felstead, Fuller, Jewson, Kakavelakis, & Unwin, 2007; Gavin, 1996; George, 2013; Sassatelli, 2010). Although processes of globalisation have a great impact on the development of national economies, bodies, (public) health, organisations and cultures, research on the international character of fitness professionalism, as well as the globalisation of gym and fitness culture is scarce (George, 2008; Johansson & Andreasson, 2016; Lloyd & Payne 2017).

Research has shown that, on a global level, considerable efforts are made to standardise, commercialise and brand fitness (Lloyd, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010). Successful companies, organisations, and brands have a powerful impact on what everyday fitness practices look like in different countries and contexts (Felstead et al., 2007; Lloyd & Payne 2017; Luciano, 2001; Markula, 2001; Spielvogel, 2003). Jong and Drummond (2016) have studied the messages transmitted within fitness culture on different social networking sites, such as general health communities, bodybuilding communities and different ‘healthy living blogs’. They suggest that online fitness is becoming an increasingly popular leisure activity through
which individuals, within the global sphere of online fitness culture, gather information that contributes to forming their ideas and understanding of health, fitness, bodies and more. They also conclude that users predominantly choose to follow normalised and dominant health discourses in order to be considered good global citizens. On an organisational and socio-cultural level, Parviainen (2011) has discussed this form of self-management in terms of the standardisation process of bodily movement within fitness culture.

Parviainen (2011) analyses how the global industry of fitness services increasingly tends to standardise bodies for profit, through different exercise programmes that are franchised on a global scale. The ability to adapt to specific body techniques used in different fitness facilities – where bicycling, aerobics, dance, meditation and martial arts are transformed into collective activities – is a central part of this homogenising development of gym and fitness culture. Further, studies show that the standardisation of group fitness heavily limits the possibility for instructors to personalise or alter their training methods and teaching (Felstead et al., 2007; Parviainen, 2011). The design, music and rehearsed choreography do not allow for free and innovative teaching (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a; George, 2013; Les Mills, 2016). At the same time as these processes of standardisation are evident it is, however, important to emphasise that gym and fitness culture is also formed, developed and shaped within a variety of local and national contexts (Lloyd & Payne, 2017). On the one hand, many fitness professionals and models can be said to be found on a global level, and images of perfect bodies are often manufactured and sold on a global commercial market through franchised fitness programmes (George, 2008; Smith Maguire, 2008). On the other hand, research has also shown that there is no streamlined way of enacting global fitness and that there are national discrepancies regarding how this culture is perceived and enacted in different countries and contexts, and in relation to gender, sexuality and ethnicity, among other things (Andreasson & Johansson, 2015a; Nash, 2012; Yang, Gray, & Pope, 2005).

**Analytical and conceptual framework**

Analysing the globalisation of fitness culture we will try to capture the dynamics between the transnational and the various local contexts of gym and fitness culture. In particular, we will look at how individual trajectories are affected and coloured by organisational and national contexts. Global culture is – in the sense, we are using this concept – characterised by hybridity, complexity and to a certain extent contingency. Social and symbolic elements are mixed and blended into new cultural forms (Bale & Christensen, 2004). This does not mean that we
avoid looking at power structures and hegemonic patterns in fitness culture, such as tendencies towards a *McDonaldization* of this culture. Ritzer’s (2011) theory of an ongoing McDonaldization of various phenomena has had a great impact on discussions about the food industry as well as the fitness industry (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a). Ritzer identifies four central mechanisms in organisational structures. Firstly, we have *effectivity*, emphasising the importance of following certain procedures of packaging, marketing and selling different products such as hamburgers or training sessions. Secondly, there is an aspect of *calculability*, which means that customers or clients can supposedly calculate the time (and cost) required for a given procedure, going to the gym and participating in a group fitness exercise programme. The third mechanism is *predictability*, which implies that people should be able to perform the same acts in different locations and on a global scale. Finally, *control* focuses on the spaces involved in gym and fitness culture, and suggests that it should be easy to use and to perform approximately the same activities within the gym spatiality.

This description of a highly effective and often successful organisational strategy and form, helps us to discern and study key aspects of gym and fitness culture. The standardisation of the culture helps people to feel at home and to know how to use the facilities and gym equipment, regardless of where on earth they are entering into a fitness space. However, even if it is possible to identify uniformity in how the gym and fitness culture is enacted at different national and local locations, there are also interesting variations. In this article, we are interested in how the standardised and hegemonic cultural patterns are transformed and re-evaluated at a local level. We will use the concept of *glocal* to capture how global structuration processes blend into and affect local patterns in gym and fitness culture (Ram, 2010; Steen-Johnsen, 2007; Urry, 2003). Therefore, we will differentiate between a *structural-institutional level*, where homogenisation and power occurs, and an *expressive-symbolic level*, where we find patterns of heterogenisation and diversity (Ram, 2010). Global commodities appropriate local traditions that strongly influence and are influenced by deep-seated social and cultural relations and ways of communication. In this way, we get *glococommodification*, that is, a combination of structural uniformity and symbolic diversity (Urry, 2007).

In relation to this, we will look closer at how new body and gender ideals emerge and develop in a global, transnational and local context. We will try to analyse how bodies and gender identities are transfigured by different national and transnational contexts. On a more abstract level, as in this case globalisation, it is possible to discern and describe certain patterns as a representation and enactment of transnational body and gender ideals. The relation between these hegemonic and transnational
representations and body and gender ideals defined at other levels, for example, the national, regional and local levels are complex, non-linear, and multi-layered (Elias & Beasley, 2009). It may also be that there are different hegemonic ideals at national and global levels.

**Research design and methodology**

This study is based on fieldwork conducted within a larger umbrella project in which we have spent several years analysing and writing about gym and fitness culture in different national and cultural contexts (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a). The overall methodological approach in this umbrella project was inspired by an ethnographic approach. By making observations, taking part in informal conversations, conducting interviews, analysing blogs and more, we aimed to take part in the everyday life of gym-goers, personal trainers, bodybuilders, instructors and gym owners. As a consequence of this umbrella project we also had the opportunity to leave our provincial location in Sweden in order to conduct fieldwork in other countries, such as the United States, Japan and Australia.

Analysing glocal variations of gym and fitness culture, and the impact global franchising has had in terms of training methods, organisations and individuals, we have in this study been inspired by a multi-sited ethnography approach (Marcus, 1995). From our perspective, it is not fruitful here to try to establish any clear dividing lines between the ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted within the umbrella project and the multi-sited ethnography approach that has constituted the methodological point of departure for this particular study. Rather we would suggest that in the process of analysing our empirical material in and through different locationscontexts/localities, the focus has gradually been directed towards how an individual/phenomenon can be understood as intertwined with different global processes. Methodologically and analytically new questions to previous empirical data within the umbrella project have thus been raised from within, such as in what ways does this culture or phenomenon manifest in other locations? This means that some of the empirical material presented here has also been touched upon in some of our previous writings, although here re-analysed and largely complemented with new data (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014b, 2015a; Johansson & Andreasson, 2016). With this in mind, obviously such a way of approaching and somewhat discovering a multi-sited perspective during fieldwork, in some ways is also to be understood as a question of blurring the boundaries between method and theory.

Following Falzon (2009) our multi-sited research approach has been to follow people, connections, associations and relationships across space.
The research design for the article has thus been preceded by a series of juxtapositions in which the global is seen as somewhat collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations, rather than something monolithic or external to them (ibid.). When compiling our empirical material and selecting quotes we have, as a consequence of this perspective, firstly made sure that it/they represent a network of social relations that both creates a system possible to study and at the same time stretches across space. Secondly, we have sought for narratives that reflect upon how these relations and juxtapositions materialise and are also played out in relation to power and gender. In the findings we will, thirdly, move between the individual, organisational and cultural level, as previously described, in order reflect diverse manifestations and features of glocalised fitness through the lens of a multi-sited perspective.

As this study derives from fieldwork conducted within a larger umbrella project, the sampling process is somewhat complex to describe. We have collected empirical material through interviews and observations in the period between 2011 and 2016. Included in the article are voices from elite bodybuilders, fitness franchisers, internationally accredited personal trainers, group fitness instructors and more. In total the different agents followed and interviewed amount to over 70, which of course is quite a large number of individuals contributing their experiences. Needless to say, not all persons contributing to the umbrella project have here been given the opportunity to make their voice heard. Aiming to address the purpose of the article in a nuanced way, the idea behind the sample composition and selection of quotes has therefore been guided by the principle that it represents data that reflect diverse positions and features of glocalised fitness.

The fieldwork mainly took place in different gyms in Sweden, Australia, Japan and the US. Analysing processes of globalisation, this naturally means that there is a Western bias in our material. At the same time, it can be argued that gym and fitness culture is predominantly to be regarded as a Western phenomenon. When referring to our empirical material we use the concept of narrative studies (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). For us, this is a way to mark the importance of every single meeting, as well as a way of stating how we use the stories told to us. As we see it, narratives constitute human realities and our mode of being, thus they help to guide action and are socioculturally shared resources that gives substance and texture to people’s lives (Sparkes & Smith, 2007, p. 296). Put differently; storytelling is an important component when people are making sense of their lives, and what we are trying to do is to build a mosaic of multiple voices that can say something relevant about how processes of globalisation can be understood in relation to different gender regimes found on varied national and individual levels (cf. Freeman, 2001).
The interviews were of varying duration, most of them being around 60 min or more in length. Throughout, a semi-structured approach has been used, meaning that participants have been given the opportunity to talk fairly freely about their own experiences, at the same time as we have tried to make sure that central themes were covered, such as training, gym and fitness culture, gender and body, national context and more. In general, pseudonyms are used when presenting our empirical material, with the exception of two cases that concern highly valued and internationally well-known respondents (Dave Palumbo and Jackie Mills). As these two respondents’ personal and biographical relation to the fitness industry is of relevance, we have with their permission used their real names.

In the next section we will focus on our three identified aspects relevant for understanding glocalised fitness. Firstly we will use a case study of the company Les Mills International in order to discuss the question of global franchising (RQ1). Secondly, we will focus on individual trajectories of fitness professionals, and their movements in time and space (RQ2). Thirdly, we will use examples from empirical studies from Australia and Japan in order to discuss how national cultures and different gender regimes are making their mark on gym and fitness culture (RQ3).

Findings

Franchising fitness

Today there are a number of national and global fitness enterprises that, through franchising, market and sell their products or ideas on fitness, exercise and global health. There are numerous companies selling pre-packaged training programmes and there are, of course, gym chains that have developed from small, single gyms into global business enterprises. Today the iconic Gold’s Gym, often referred to as the mecca of bodybuilding, has transformed from a cultural melting pot located in Venice Beach, California, to a global franchise that uses the narratives and images of the 1970s bodybuilding and gym scene in order to attract customers in countries such as Egypt, Japan, Peru and more. In the early 2000s, Anytime Fitness, in a similar way, began franchising and expanding worldwide, with the idea of using different security systems in order to also give their customers access to the clubs during unstaffed hours. Other companies focused on developing training regimes and franchised their exercise programmes.

In this section, we will look more closely at one of the most successful franchising companies within the gym and fitness industry, Les Mills International. In 2016 this company was present in over 100 countries,
and its different workout routines were performed on a daily basis in more than 17,500 clubs worldwide (Les Mills, 2016). In marketing, the company is often described as a *global tribe* consisting of more than 130,000 licensed instructors. These instructors have all been schooled to teach gym-goers how to collectively carry out different pre-choreographed exercise programmes to music, ranging from quite simple to more complex and designed patterns of movements. Commonly, the movements are first broken down into standardised units and then performed one after another, a method that shows strong similarities to Fredrick Taylor’s famous scientific management (Parviainen, 2011), making the exercise highly *predictable* and uniform. The movements performed are usually also constructed in such a way that most people easily can learn and *effectively* imitate them after a few sessions (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a).

Jackie Mills is the Chief Creative Officer at Les Mills, and is married to CEO Phillip Mills. In a Skype interview, she describes how the company gradually developed and was pushed beyond the national borders of New Zealand and Auckland where it was founded, becoming a global enterprise.

We were approached by a guy who wanted to take our programmes to his clubs in Australia. That’s how it all started really. It was never our intention to create a global product (…) …and its really important to us that every instructor feels like they are part of a global family. That there are something bigger than themselves, that the mission is bigger, a purpose. (Jackie Mills)

Within the company Jackie oversees all aspects of the routines and filming of master classes that are used to train the global tribe of Les Mill’s instructors (Les Mills, 2016). She has direct responsibility for the different programmes and in the interview she emphasises the importance of the quality assurance of everything, from the design of the programmes to questions on health and safety. She also travels around the world to ensure that the different exercise programmes are distributed and carried out according to the standards of the company. Thus *calculability* seems to rule. She explains the fundamentals of the Les Mills programmes as well as the success of the company:

What we do is, we take an exercise genre and set it to music, because music is very powerful. There are two things that are crucial to getting a population moving: one is music; the other is the power of a group. We know that both of these elements are great influencers. A third aspect is the instructor – someone who is positive and is also a great teacher. We are allowing people to feel the essence of an exercise in their bodies, so it’s not like weight training when you perform isolation training, for example, training your arms with bicep curls. Most of what we do is full body exercise. Essentially, what we are trying to do is almost to provide distractions! You have fabulous music, great lighting and a motivated instructor, so we can encourage people and help them to adhere to an exercise discipline through some type of entertainment while they exercise. We call it exertainment (Jackie). (Andreasson & Johansson, 2015b)
Since the 1970s Les Mills have developed from a localised New Zealand company, into a global fitness enterprise and experience culture. Through a combination of different methods and cultural elements, a hybrid training culture has developed and been franchised globally. The standardisation of different movements is central here, as well as the design of the programmes, the choreography and the music. Mixing the workout techniques from the 1980s with elements from bodybuilding makes this enterprise a central actor in the fitness revolution of our time.

Franchising has been one of the most important mechanisms for the global expansion of the gym and fitness culture. As the industry is increasingly developing in the direction of more unstaffed gyms and pre-packaged workout routines, well-paid fitness professionals may become less needed. As noted by Lloyd (2008) the workforce turnover in fitness professionals is also high, as a result of low pay, an oversupply of workers and lack of career progression (see also De Lyon et al., 2016; Lloyd & Payne, 2013). At the same time, there are movements towards an increased status for fitness professionals, and more private enterprises serving affluent clients, and providing tailored solutions for people’s health problems (EuropeActive, 2017; IDEA Health and Fitness Association 2013; Melton Katula & Mustian 2008). In the next section we will more explicitly address this question (see RQ2).

Global fitness professionals and their movements in time and space

The standardisation and globalisation of the fitness industry – through different professional licences, international accreditation systems and competitions – creates opportunities for fitness professionals to travel and work in different parts of the world. This possibility for individual fitness mobility creates trajectories that run across different national and sometimes local adaptations of gym and fitness culture. In this section, we will use three narratives in order to analyse how the possibility for international fitness mobility meets with diverse local expectations that are placed on the professionals.

Our first narrative study is Swedish Sophie, a 29-year-old woman who has worked within the industry, off and on, for some 10 years. She is a certified Les Mills instructor and she also gained accreditation from AerobicWeekends as a spinning instructor, working in Fuerteventura. This means that she is licensed to teach fitness internationally. With her relatively long experience however, she can see that the expectations held regarding her line of work have shifted somewhat. Below she talks about her position as a certified Les Mills instructor.
In a way, it's good schooling, at first. Because Les Mills you know, it is really straightforward. This is how you do it. You use these fingers. Keep the posture and bend your knees like this and that. But to me, it became purely technical, like,..., this is how you instruct. I used to dance a lot and make choreography. I have really danced a lot. But here, it didn't come from me. It came from a video. It's good schooling, but since I had instructed before it was only fun at first, then you wanted to be freer. (Sophie)

Sophie describes how the role of the group fitness instructor has gradually changed and become increasingly more uniform. As a consequence of an increasing professionalization, and standardisation of the professional skills required by the industry, her symbolic capital as well as knowledge has become somewhat devalued and centralised (Felstead et al., 2007; Stern, 2008). The process exemplifies how different group fitness sessions include coordinated bodily movements, as well as the beliefs, norms, values and even vocabulary of the company she is working for (Parviainen, 2011). Both Big Macs and a group fitness session are thus expected to somehow look and 'taste' the same all over the world. Eminent here is thus how processes of Macdonaldization have come to influences possible fitness trajectories for instructors, making this line of work highly predictive for both instructors and their clients.

Our next study, has some similarity with the above-described situation regarding devaluation processes within gym and fitness culture. This case focuses on Cassie, who is a 36-year-old Swedish yoga instructor. She has studied yoga in Copenhagen and London and is seen as highly skilled within her profession. She is also part-owner of a small gym chain in Sweden. On one occasion one of the authors met up with Cassie in order to conduct some participating observations during one of her yoga classes. Before the session, we got the chance to talk about her background within this sphere of exercising bodies. The following observation notes derive from this meeting.

Observational note: International yoga experience.

Cassie is sitting in her office and the door is open. She has geared up for the coming class and is about to go to the yoga room. We meet in the doorway and start talking about different yoga styles and her background. She explains that she is licensed to work and instruct internationally, and that she worked on a luxury cruise ship in the Caribbean for a short while. She explains that she had this dream of working with yoga, in something of a paradise, but tells me that this project was less than successful 'to say the least'. In our conversation, she lowers her voice and tells me that the management had placed quite different expectations on her in her role as fitness professional than she was used to. 'We had these weekly inspections of our own bodies, due to all the buffets you know, and as a special section of the service staff they expected me to flirt with customers in order to fill my classes'.

Although the actual routine when having a yoga class was essentially the same as Cassie was used to, the cultural framing of her new
employment on the cruise ship made her feel really uneasy. To her, the management put too much emphasis on beauty and the sexiness of her workout routines, which made her feel ‘more like a prostitute than an instructor’. On a very personal level, Cassie’s experience thus seems to correspond with the well-established pattern of ‘feminisation’ of service work found within the fitness industry (Smith Maguire, 2008). Cassie found herself in a precarious position in which expertise was granted low status and added to this, symbolic sexual violence was directed towards her body.

Although fitness professionals in some ways can be said to have gained in status and professionalism, there are obviously at the same time huge national and global variations in how this enterprise is looked upon and valued. In many countries this is mainly a female and low paid occupation, focusing more on serving than valued in terms of excellent knowledge of physiology and different training techniques. The two examples above point towards different de-qualification and devaluation processes found within the fitness industry. The McDonaldization process as well as the impact different glocal contexts have on individual’s fitness trajectories and hierarchical gender positions are apparent here. At the same time, there are also examples showing that this industry fosters creativity and the possibility of developing highly personal enterprises.

Moving on to our third and last example for this section we will meet Dave Palumbo, who is a well-known American bodybuilder, entrepreneur and nutrition expert. In the 1990s and until 2004 he competed successfully as a bodybuilder and since then he has started his own company involved in nutrition, bodybuilding and questions on healthy lifestyles. When talking about his career, Palumbo says the following:

I decided that I wanted to start my own company in 2005, I believe, I started Species Nutrition which is where we are right now. So I started Species Nutrition and at the time I was working for Muscular Development magazine, and they decided that they wanted to start a website and they made me the editor in chief, I started the website for them. After three years I left there and started the RxMuscle, which is a similar site. So I own RxMuscle, the media website which would cover bodybuilding shows, and do TV and radio programming. Species Nutrition became the warehouse. It became the nutrition part of my company. (Dave Palumbo)

To Dave the essence of his business enterprise is knowledge about nutritional supplements and muscle growth. As a successful former bodybuilder, he also possesses a bodily authority that can serve to legitimise the advice he gives and the products he sells, via the company’s website. Trying to gain market share in a competitive market Dave also aims to present the global news on bodybuilding and fitness on his website, including interviews and information. Through his previous experience as a competitor he has access to central and highly valued actors within
gym and fitness culture, and through these connections, he is forging an international career. One important part of his business is to use the internet as a launch pad for an international audience/clientele, in order to globally promote his company.

As discussed in this section, on the one hand, we find different attempts to raise the status of fitness professionalism, through educational systems and diplomas. On the other hand, we also have an increasing process of devaluation of the competence of fitness professionals. Looking more closely at the three examples above, there are reasons to suspect that these processes are gendered. Of course, group fitness exercise, yoga and bodybuilding as exemplified above also have a different historical genesis, representing different approaches to fitness, the body, health and gender. As a consequence, they have also been valued differently. The concept of group fitness is predominantly configured as a femininity-connoted preoccupation (Sassatelli, 2010), which together with standardisation processes and the low status of fitness professionals found in many countries creates a fertile ground for devaluing this line of work. Looking at Dave’s narrative, however, it is possible to see certain variations in the valuation of the different segments of the fitness professionals. Between the fabric of organisational developments and individual trajectories we thus find something of a gender stratification system in which some professionals have (been given) the ability to interact with different societal sectors and to translate commercial and global concepts into local contexts in an effective way, while others have not (Steen-Johnsen, 2007).

National contexts, bodies and gender ideals

In this section, we will use two national studies in order to discuss transnational variations in gender and body ideals. Using the contrasting examples of the Japanese and Australian gym and fitness culture, we will explore how globalised concepts and variations in the fitness culture are received and interpreted in local/national contexts.

In Japan, gym and fitness culture are to be regarded as a fairly recent phenomenon. The culture was basically ‘imported’ from the US in the late 1980s and 1990s, due to great concerns regarding the general health of a sedentary and ageing Japanese population (Spielvogel, 2003). Although influenced by American fitness culture, it was adopted in quite a different way in Japan. Gym and fitness centres initially took the form of recreational places, where, in particular, an ageing and affluent part of the middle-class population spent their leisure time. Rather than spaces of discipline, exercise and muscle building, fitness centres thus became spaces of luxury where the middle-class could cultivate a relaxed and healthy lifestyle (Spielvogel, 2003). Recently, however, entering the twenty-first
century, Japan has been reached by the third wave of the globalisation of gym and fitness culture. As a consequence, franchises such as the American Anytime Fitness, Gold’s Gym and other companies have established their businesses, also creating training opportunities for a younger and less affluent population. This does not mean that gender ideals in Japanese gym and fitness culture became Americanised.

In the 1980s the cult of cuteness gained a strong hold in Japan, and since then this ideal has crept into almost every aspect of Japanese society (Ginsberg, 2000). Japan has been characterised as a nation totally fixated on cuteness (Kawaii). Young women are portrayed as young, innocent, sweet and beautiful. Ginsberg (2000, p. 276) suggests that this is no coincidence, as the ‘frail, pre-pubescent ideal poses little emotional, intellectual, or sexual threat to the patriarchal status quo’, and is only achieved through strict self-control of appetite, emotions and thoughts. When asking a young Japanese gym-goer, Yurika, 26 years old, about beauty ideals, gender and muscles she says the following:

Yurika Women mostly want to become beautiful, and men they want muscles. Women also want to be skinny.
Interviewer How about muscles on women?
Yurika I like it a little bit, but I want to be cute.
Interviewer What is cute?
Yurika To shape the muscles in fine lines, and not to be chubby.
(Andreasson & Johansson, 2015a)

In Japan, there are some people (read men) doing bodybuilding, but the general view on large muscles and bodybuilders is quite negative (Andreasson & Johansson, 2015a; Spielvogel, 2003). For Yurika, who trains at an Anytime Fitness facility in Tokyo close to her apartment, the ambition with her daily workout is to be(come) cute and thin. The global fitness ideal for women – muscular, well-toned and fit, hard bodies – is here transformed into a cuteness ideal. Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that national body and gender ideals have a significant impact upon how fitness is adapted to the specificities of socio-cultural ideals and notions of beautiful bodies; of course, these body ideals must also be understood within a framework of national gender regimes.

While cuteness (Kawaii) has long influenced the national formation of ideals in the Japanese gym and fitness context, Australia has seemingly followed a somewhat different route. In Australia, the concept of the ‘fit mum’ has been put forward frequently as an ideal in the press, and in advertisements for gym and fitness clubs. Research on Australian female fitness reveals an obsession with keeping fit and slim (Brabazon, 2006; Nash, 2012). Some female fitness experts also try to sell the importance of
remaining fit and well-trained as a mother—like fitness author Sharny Kieser. Below we find an extract from an interview with Sharny, on one of Australia’s most visited news websites.

SUPER fit Aussie mum Sharny Kieser has again dipped her toe in controversy, challenging expectant mothers to tough it out and banish their pregnancy cravings. Kieser made headlines last year when she and husband Julius said most overweight people were “fat and lazy”. Now the personal trainer, who’s announced she’s pregnant with baby number five, is out to “bust some pregnancy myths”. “For the first four pregnancies, I got so fat because I let my cravings control me. For this one, I wanted to see if I could control them. And I have.” Sharny, who believes that “anyone can achieve their perfect body – it starts with believing you can, and then taking ownership of what you put in your mouth (www.news.com.au, 2014, para 1-5).

In Australia, there has been an ongoing debate on whether the kind of body ideals put forward within the concept of the fit mum is to be understood as health-promoting or rather judgemental expressions of ‘fat-bullying’. The way in which the body of the fit mum is approached can, further, be seen as an example of what Theberge (2000) calls the feminine apologetic. It is not the muscular and capable female body that is being represented here but rather the bikini model body that is meant to meet the desires of heterosexual men. Emerging is an imagery of a gender divided Australian fitness body. This imagery is also prominent in several interviews with Australian fitness professionals (Johansson & Andreasson, 2016). At one occasion one of the authors met up with Mike who works as a personal trainer in one of the largest gyms in Newcastle, on the Australian East coast. He describes the activities performed at the gym as rather normative and also in terms of polarised gender stereotypes. He calls the gym the ‘high school dance, where all the girls go one way, and all the boys go the other way. The boys try to build their muscles and the girls want to lose a couple of kilos’.

In the gym in which Mike works, you can find advertisements for ‘fit mum’ classes. Not far from there, next to the beach, the Australian fitness model Erin Maddison has also opened up a store called ‘Pink Muscles’, where nutrition and supplements ‘created by women, for women’ are marketed and sold. The fitness discourse is, in Australia as well as many places elsewhere, obviously heavily permeated by polarised descriptions and portrayals of fit men and women (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Stevenson, 2002).

**Discussion and conclusions**

This study has focused on the third and most recent phase of the globalisation of gym and fitness culture, which is characterised by the development of a multitude of training techniques, multidimensional fitness gyms, more
individualised spaces and the establishment of fitness professionals as key sources of inspiration and guidance. It has been shown in this article that the global standardisation and tendencies towards McDonaldization of the fitness industry makes it possible for individuals to travel and work in the area of professional fitness in different parts of the world. These fitness trajectories are coloured by local and contextual factors, but they also need to be understood in relation to organisational and gendered structures. On the one hand, it is possible to discern different attempts to raise the status of fitness professionals on a global scale. Within the industry, through different diplomas and international accreditation systems, fitness professionals are put forward and constructed as a mobile resource that can address public health challenges on a global scale. On the other hand, as this is a commercial industry focusing on sales growth and personalised services, it is also possible to discern an increasing process of devaluation of the competence of the professionals involved (De Lyon et al., 2016; Smith Maguire, 2008). Individual skills and knowledge are not always transferable into emerging franchised systems, and on an organisational level employers within the industry may in a centralised system be more concerned about the fitness professional’s sociability, likeability or even sexiness than their professional expertise and competence (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a; George, 2013; Lloyd, 2008). Emerging in the intersection between gender, education, fitness experience and glocal contexts, is a status and reward system of fitness professionalism. Certain forms of fitness training are ascribed or given a higher value/status than others, and this hierarchy is often connected to gender. Group fitness training activities are to a high degree standardised and in many countries female fitness professionals still have a somewhat low status (Coen, Rosenberg, & Davidson, 2017). The example with Palumbo presented in the findings also indicates that professionals in different subfields of fitness actually may find it easier to navigate successfully in a global gym and fitness arena. Nevertheless, although the workforces of fitness professionals are increasingly becoming accessible for different segments of the population their professional credibility is seemingly understood as somewhat changeable and insecure (De Lyon et al., 2016).

The status of fitness professionalism and the development of the occupation are strongly tied to the organisational and employment structures that exist within this particular line of work, and gym and fitness culture (De Lyon et al., 2016). This means that the work fitness professionals do/undertake on client’s bodies, and how it is valued, cannot be separated from organisational conditions. As shown, some of the key organisational developments of the fitness industry can lead to a devaluation and dequalification of fitness professionalism. An increasing number of unstaffed gyms, franchising and tendencies towards the McDonaldization of gym and fitness culture and the different exercise formats found within this
culture are all in line with such developments. However, there are also movements towards more private enterprises serving affluent clients, and providing tailored solutions for people’s health problems.

As shown in the article, different body and gender ideals needs to be understood within a framework of national and sometimes also local gender regimes, impacting upon how fitness is adapted and performed. In Japan, for example, the global fitness ideal for women – muscular, well-toned and fit, hard bodies – is reshaped and adjusted in accordance with a hegemonic cuteness ideal. In Australia however the situation has been slightly different, and here the concept of the ‘fit mum’ has been strongly promoted. These two national contexts obviously frame gender and the notion of the female ‘fit’ body differently, they unite in the sense that they largely confirm the image of emphasised femininity. At the same time, the increasing presence of women in gym culture must be seen as a part of an ongoing empowering process, and the emergence of new empowered and muscular feminine identities (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a).

As been shown in this article, it is obvious that the fitness revolution and its consequences are progressing in different ways depending on national and/or local contexts. What we suggest is that glocal fitness needs to be understood as a process through which global flows, ideals, organisations and more contribute to form local and national cultures and gender ideals, and vice versa. Consequently, analysing how this market is transformed and how the individuals involved develop their professional identities and gender positions – in different national and local contexts – we can generate knowledge about the organisation, philosophy, embodiment and key goals of the fitness industry.

**Note**

1. In the article we will use the concept of gym and fitness culture throughout. Addressing this as a culture, however, does not imply that it is to be understood as a homogeneous and unambiguous enterprise; rather it suggests that the focus of attention is on complex and hybrid symbolic, cultural, national and local ideas that constitute a specific way of approaching the body and physical culture (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**ORCID**

Jesper Andreasson [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1631-6475](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1631-6475)
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