

Transforming bodies, transforming society:  
the cultural impact of fitness

La trasformazione dei corpi e della società:  
l'impatto culturale del fitness

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ABSTRACT

In the current era, fitness gyms and private health clubs constitute a colossal global industry. Fitness has evolved into a popular movement, yet one that bears no resemblance to the 20<sup>th</sup> century movements that were often intertwined with nationalist sentiments; rather, it has become a profoundly personalized preoccupation. This article delves into the historical development of the contemporary gym and fitness culture, formulating an analytical approach to understand the emergence of this multi-billion-dollar phenomenon. The analysis posits that the physical exercises, tools, and techniques employed by gyms across the world today are the outcomes of a physical culture that developed and was refined throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Body ideals, exercises, techniques, and the pedagogy of fitness have evolved into an increasingly international enterprise. This article provides a preliminary analysis of this globalization of gym and fitness culture, identifying and examining three critical and conclusive phases.

Nell'era contemporanea, le palestre fitness e i club sportivi sono diventati un'industria globale. Il fitness si è evoluto in un movimento popolare, ma che non assomiglia ai movimenti del 20° secolo spesso intrecciati con sentimenti nazionalisti; piuttosto, è diventato un interesse profondamente personale. Questo saggio approfondisce il progresso storico della cultura contemporanea delle palestre e del fitness e formula un approccio analitico per comprendere l'emergere di questo fenomeno multimiliardario. I dati analizzati evidenziano che gli esercizi fisici, gli strumenti e le tecniche utilizzati oggi nelle palestre in tutto il mondo, sono il risultato di una cultura fisica che è stata sviluppata e perfezionata durante il 20° secolo. Gli ideali del corpo, gli esercizi, le tecniche e la pedagogia del fitness si sono evoluti in un'impresa sempre più internazionale. In sostanza, vengono effettuate un'analisi preliminare e identificate tre fasi critiche nella globalizzazione della cultura delle palestre e del fitness.

**Keywords:** body; fitness; education; cultural impact

**Parole chiave:** corpo; fitness; educazione; impatto culturale

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## Introduction

Over the centuries, physical activities have taken on new forms, specializations, purposes, and ideological and social functions. Alongside sports, gymnastics developed (Noto & Rossi, 1992). The latter is linked to the physical exercise undertaken by young Ancient Greeks, who called it «gymnazein» and «gymnasion», in reference to the place where gymnastics was practised. The terms retain the etymology of «gymnos», which means «naked», recalling the athletic nudity so prevalent in Greek statuary. Gymnastics is developed and practised to prepare the body for competitions, but also to preserve health. It is then called «physical education» when it begins to be seen in a formative capacity, being limited not only to the body, but also extending to the character and spirit of the practitioner, according to philosophical and pedagogical concepts that are gradually becoming more widespread. The multiple implications of the pedagogical approach to physical education can be seen in Morandi (2016).

The terms «gymnastics» and «physical education» have a substantial technical distinction. Physical education consists of a set of coordinated activities aimed at the physical and psycho-pedagogical development of the individual. Gymnastics denotes a series of regulated movements with various purposes, and falls within the scope of physical education but can also be related to the preparatory practice of a sports discipline or defined as an Olympic discipline in its own right with particular specialties (artistic gymnastics). In essence, Although both terms are often incorrectly used interchangeably both terms have movement in common.

Today, more than ever, all the industrialized nations of the world pursue a culture of a healthy lifestyle in which nutrition and physical activity play a leading role. The increasing economic costs, which are projected to become unsustainable, of treating pathologies induced by sedentary lifestyles and poor nutrition (excess weight and obesity), with the risk factors exacerbated by aging, are leading towards health evaluation being not a right but a duty for citizens (Bull et al., 2020). This statement finds context not in the inevitability of sudden illness, but in the effective prevention that can be taken to avoid it. The fitness sector, which has been promoting a healthier lifestyle for years, can be the vehicle for this important message, playing a major role in preventing the onset of pathologies related to sedentary lifestyles, and helping people find the most practical way to regain their physical independence, emphasizing that the most important aspect relates to health rather than aesthetics.

### 1. Economic and demographic phenomenon

In recent decades, the gym and fitness industry has emerged as a global enterprise and a significant socio-cultural phenomenon. According to estimates from the International Health, Racquet and Sports Club Association (IHRSA) in 2022, this global movement generated approximately 100 billion dollars in revenue from around 202,000 health clubs worldwide, serving approximately 187.5 million members (IHRSA, 2022). While geographic distribution of physical activity being undertaken in gyms varies, it is estimated that 10% to 15% of the population in many Western countries regularly attend a gym or fitness facility, with the numbers significantly higher among young adults (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014a; Crossley, 2006; IHRSA, 2016, 2022; Eurobarometer, 2022).

According to Rutgers et al. (2022) European memberships increased by about 1 million members or 2% from 55.2 million in 2020 to 56.3 million by the end of 2021. 38% of Europeans play sport or exercise at least once a week or more, while 17% exercise less than once a week. However, up to 45% of Europeans currently never exercise or undertake any physical activity. While this has stabilised compared to the 2017 Eurobarometer, the continued promotion of sport and physical activity clearly remains much needed. According to the report, the preferred locations for engaging in physical activity or sports are parks, outdoor areas, and home, with 47%, 37%, and 24% of respondents respectively choosing these settings. A little over a quarter of Europeans (28%) are members of a club where they participate in sports or recreational physical activity, such as a health or fitness centre, a sport club, a socio-cultural club that includes sport among its activities, or another type of club. Most Europeans (54%) who engage in physical activity do so for the purpose of improving their health, while 43% do it to improve their fitness level and 39% to relax (Eurobarometer, 2022).

## 2. Historical background

Physical exercise is of fundamental importance and should be promoted not only in places dedicated to the practice of different sports, but also during daily activities. Physical activity has always been an integral part of human life. This does not mean that our ancestors considered the need for «gymnastics» as we understand it today. Rather, physical activity, particularly walking and running, was closely connected to their need to survive and procure food.

In the most primitive stages of human life, one had to literally run after what would later become their meal or move quickly to avoid becoming prey themselves (Ulmann, 1968, pp. 281-302; Cereda, 2013). Today we are far removed from such a situation, but the body has maintained in its genetic memory the need to move and be active to survive in the external world and strengthen one's defences. We are probably the only «animals» on planet Earth who consider movement a secondary activity or, worse, merely a recreational activity, rather than an essential condition for life.

The growth of the gym and fitness industry has led to a surge in employment in service businesses that focus on the physical state of clients' bodies. This industry is now one of the fastest-growing sectors in the global labour market (Andreasson, Johansson, 2014a; IHRSA, 2016, 2022; Eurobarometer, 2022; Rutgers et al. 2022; George, 2008;). As a result, there is currently a fitness revolution or boom (Millington, 2016), whereby individuals all over the world are increasingly attending gym and fitness facilities to maintain their physical fitness and develop healthy lifestyles (Smith Maguire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010; IHRSA, 2022; Eurobarometer, 2022).

The origins of the fitness industry and the ideal of muscular bodies can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the teachings of the forefathers of bodybuilding such as Eugene Sandow and Charles Atlas (Budd, 1997).

### 2.1 *The roots of fitness culture*

The genesis of modern gym and fitness culture can be traced back to various historical roots. Early roots can be found in ancient Greece and Rome, thus suggesting a number of influences that have led to the contemporary gym and fitness culture. From 600 BC, physical activity was practised in both the East and in South America, with characteristics linked to religious rituals. In the Middle East, body worship reached its peak with the Egyptian civilization, which devoted itself to physical activity primarily for religious reasons, with the aim of achieving physical perfection as a means of exalting the divine being, a perfection to be maintained even after death. However, it was the Greek civilization, particularly in the classical period, that afforded the widest scope to gymnastics, undertaking it for military, educational, and religious reasons (Aiello, 2004; Cereda, 2013).

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century European Turnhalle, or gymnasium, and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn's Turnkunst, together with the exercise methods developed by individuals such as Per Henrik Ling in Sweden and Niels Bukh in Denmark, further represent some of the roots of the modern fitness culture (Cereda, 2013; Di Donato, 1984, pp. 41-99). A fascination with muscles was also associated with a fascination for the grotesque during this time period (Budd, 1997). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, for example, there was an increasing interest in so-called strongmen who performed in circuses and other venues in the United States (Kimmel, 1996). Additionally, the cultivation of muscular strength and the pursuit of physical fitness has been a male preoccupation historically, being closely tied to warfare, violence, and, later, to the establishment of nation-states (Bonetta, 1990; Torreadella 2021), thus being a practice that is readily associated with Mosse's (1996) concept of the masculine stereotype.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of physical culture and the use of novel techniques to cultivate a robust, muscular, and masculine physique gradually became prevalent in the United States. However, this was not a localized phenomenon, but rather an international trend, particularly in the Western world, where scientists from various countries focused on physical culture and education. By drawing on the German, Swedish, and Danish gymnastics movements, researchers developed approaches and methodologies to enhance health and physical strength. The growing attention to health and the human body during this time was linked to industrialization and the demand for physically able male bodies. Conse-

quently, by the beginning of the 1900s, sports and physical culture had become a concern not only of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie but also of the working class. This was especially evident, a few decades later, in totalitarian states such as Germany, Italy (Ponzio, 2015), and the Soviet Union (Grant, 2013).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eugene Sandow emerged as one of the most prominent and influential figures in physical culture. Born in 1867 in Königsberg, Germany, Sandow began his career as a strongman, travelling with various circuses and vaudeville shows. During this time, he collaborated with professor Attila, a physical education teacher, and together they revolutionized weight training and muscle development. While touring in the United States, Sandow drew widespread attention to his well-toned physique, and gradually became famous for his impressive muscular definition. Crowds flocked to see him flex his muscles, and many queued up just to touch and feel his body. Sandow's popularity coincided with the advent of modern photography, and his image was featured on a large number of postcards, with his half-naked body becoming a widely distributed visual trope across many countries.

The display of male nudity in photographs was not always widely accepted, and it was still possible to be prosecuted for indecency for showing a naked leg in Britain as late as 1866. However, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pictures of half-naked male bodies had become commonplace. Budd (1997) suggests that Sandow's emergence as an icon of physical culture played an important role in this shift and contributed to the emergence of homosexual cultures of desire and the formation of homosexual communities, a view which is supported by Dutton (2012).

The rapid growth of physical culture and the interest in shaping and sculpting the body - increasingly conceived in the realm of imagination as a machine (Herman, Priem & Thyssen, 2017) - were shaped by significant changes in capitalist societies and the turn of the millennium, which promised to subsume class differences and disrupt traditional positions. Physical culture combined elements of commercial culture and nationalist and imperial ideologies, as well as religion, with training and exercising the body seen as a way of taking care of God's gift. Muscular Christianity developed as a means of developing a healthy, religious, and morally righteous lifestyle. Both men and women were attracted to the possibility of changing their bodies and becoming different, 'better' people (Green, 1986; Putney, 2001).

Charles Atlas (1883-1972) was another important figure in the early days of bodybuilding who saw it as his mission to build a perfect race and contribute to the creation of perfect human masterpieces (Kimmel, 1996). This was driven by the need to defend gender and maintain strong and confident masculinity, amidst the changing roles of American men and fathers, the transformations in US society, and the World Wars (cf. Todd, 1998). Atlas' own transformation from an Italian immigrant (Angelo Siciliano) to an all-American hero was a part of a larger narrative on how American men sought to reground and secure their manhood. Physical culture was central to this process, not least through the YMCA and the 4,500 gymnasiums connected to this organization (Reich, 2010; Stern, 2011). Charles Atlas' association with mainstream American religious movements helped to distance him from his immigrant roots and de-racialize him, positioning him safely in the white, Protestant, American mainstream. These early developments in physical culture were forerunners to the bodybuilding culture that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, which was centred around places like Gold's Gym.

## 2.2 *Bodybuilding*

Today, bodybuilding is a global enterprise and sport with international magazines, books, and manuals available, as well as different organizations such as the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) associated to it. Joe Weider founded IFBB in 1946 and owned an empire of fitness magazines and gyms, with his *Muscle & Fitness* magazine selling over 400,000 copies annually in the mid-1970s. Gold's Gym developed from a small, marginal gym to a four-hundred-strong global franchise. The film *Pumping Iron* (1977) put Gold's Gym, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and his friends on the global bodybuilding map (Luciano, 2021).

Bodybuilding was seen as purposeless and meaningless during the 1960s. The strongmen period of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was replaced by the gradual development of the fitness industry. However, efforts were made to mobilize people into exercise, particularly weight training, to combat the physical weakness caused by modern lifestyle. Arne Tammer became famous in Sweden for promoting 15 minutes of strength train-



ing daily for the entire population. These efforts to engage people in exercise, in line with Muscular Christianity and similar movements, aimed to build a strong nation and combat the stress and illness caused by modern society. Bodybuilding rapidly developed again in 1977 as a result of «Pumping Iron,» but early efforts had laid the foundation for the 1970s bodybuilding culture at Gold's Gym and other locations.

Arnold Schwarzenegger was born in Thal, Austria in 1947 and became interested in bodybuilding as a teenager. He went to the US at the age of 21 to participate in the Mr. Universe competition and later achieved success in the bodybuilding and film industries. The 1980s saw an explosion of interest in bodybuilding, workout techniques, aerobics, and fitness in general. This cultural and body-centred transformation is situated in a historical time of Reagan and Thatcher, war, and nationalist movements. However, the increasing use of performance/image-enhancing drugs during the 1970s and 80s negatively affected the reputation and popularity of bodybuilding. Reports of drug use, anabolic steroids, and the obsessional traits of bodybuilders led to a separation between bodybuilding and fitness, and the sport developed a bad reputation. Self-confessions of bodybuilders like Sam Fussell further tarnished the public's view of bodybuilding (Hoberman, 2005).

In contemporary culture, bodybuilding is studied and described as a subculture (Bridges, 2009). Although film stars and action heroes with muscular bodies, like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, are still highly valued, the bodybuilder is often viewed as a freak (cf. McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). Bodybuilders themselves are aware of the problematic aspects of their sport, such as eating disorders and relationship problems (Probert, Leberman, Palmer, 2007). However, dedicated practitioners of the subculture are still prepared to take the risks, as shown in an online bodybuilder community (Smith & Stewart, 2012). Bodybuilding has transformed over time from being an almost exclusively male preoccupation to becoming more diverse, with a larger number of middle-class individuals involved. At certain times in the past, such as at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and again in the 1970s, bodybuilding attained a high status and was considered a masculine mass movement, particularly in the United States. In the past, it was also mainly a blue-collar and working-class preoccupation (Monaghan, 2001; Liokaftos, 2012).

In the second wave of globalization of gym and fitness culture, there was greater participation of both men and women, and the association with working-class bodies was no longer as strong. Instead, the culture became more inclusive of both working and middle-class individuals. However, this did not imply that there were no class or gender distinctions in gym and fitness culture, but rather that the sport had become more accessible and was being enjoyed by a wider population.

### *2.3 From exclusive sport to mass participation: the evolution of fitness culture*

Kenneth Cooper's 1968 book «Aerobics» created a surge in various forms of fitness activities, with aerobics becoming a popular form of exercise. In the 1980s, fitness and workouts were linked to femininity and the role of housewives (Connell, 1995). Jane Fonda became a significant figure in the international fitness industry, selling over 17 million copies of her first book and releasing twenty-three workout videos and five workout books during the 1980s and 90s (Mansfield, 2011). Fitness and workouts were initially the preoccupation of white middle-class individuals in the 1980s in the US, with black women largely absent from fitness classes (Lau, 2011). However, fitness and working out became more accessible to larger parts of the population in the 1990s, with the techniques and concepts of fitness and aerobics exported to different countries on the global market. Health clubs in the US became linked to the growing urban population of singles, with working out becoming a part of the urban, middle-class, and single lifestyle.

The 1990s saw a significant increase in fitness and gym culture, with the term «fitness» replacing «workout» and the establishment of multidimensional fitness gyms where different training styles were combined under one roof. In Sweden, for example, this development led to the emergence of highly gendered fitness gyms where young men focused on strength training while young women did workouts in separate rooms. However, the increasing need for a well-defined physique resulted in women venturing into the strength training parts of the gym. This development led to the transformation of the fitness gym into a more differentiated and individualized space, with gender playing a less dominant role. Today, the term «fitness» encompasses a blend of training styles and methods, and fitness franchises have gained immense popularity.

Although this change does not mean that all gender and class distinctions have been eliminated from fitness culture, it has encouraged a more inclusive participation in fitness, where working and middle-class participants are welcomed into the fitness community.

The cultural separation of bodybuilding and fitness does not indicate that they are entirely distinct lifestyles. There is a partial disconnection between the two, but they are becoming increasingly dependent on each other. The third phase of the globalization of gym and fitness culture is, to some extent, similar to the second phase. These developments are both independent and interwoven organically. However, the «fitness revolution» has separated itself from the more grotesque aspects of bodybuilding, such as drug use and the extreme cult of the huge muscular body, and has become a mass enterprise. This has led to the development of a more homogenous global gym and fitness culture while simultaneously resulting in “glocal” variations in the adaptation of this culture.

## *2.4 Physical activity and good health and well-being*

Regular physical activity confers benefits to both mental and physical health, making it a valuable practice for individuals across all ages and ability levels. Furthermore, it is never too late to commence engaging in greater physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviors to improve health outcomes. Despite these known advantages, a substantial proportion of the population, namely 81% of adolescents and 27.5% of adults, currently fail to satisfy the World Health Organization’s recommended levels of physical activity. The consequences of this shortfall are not limited to the affected individuals and their families, but also extend to health services and society as a whole (WHO, 2022, p. vii).

Physical inactivity imposes a significant economic burden. It is estimated that nearly 500 million (499,208 million) new cases of preventable non-communicable diseases (NCDs) will arise globally between 2020 and 2030, incurring treatment costs exceeding US\$300 billion (INT\$524 billion), or around US\$27 billion (INT\$48 billion) per year, if the current prevalence of physical inactivity remains unchanged. Of these new cases of NCDs, approximately 47% will result from hypertension, and 43% will arise from depression. Three quarters of all cases will occur in lower- and upper-middle-income countries. High-income countries will bear the largest economic cost, accounting for 70% of healthcare expenditure associated with treating illnesses resulting from physical inactivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the crucial importance of regular physical activity for both physical and mental health. Nonetheless, it has also exposed disparities in access and opportunities for certain communities to engage in physical activity. As such, physical activity must be regarded as a fundamental component of public policy, with all nations ensuring the provision of equitable opportunities for physical activity. To assist countries in raising levels of participation, the World Health Organization’s Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030 (GAPPA) presents a series of evidence-based policy recommendations designed to enhance participation levels across four key policy areas: active societies, active environments, active individuals, and active systems. The comprehensive implementation of GAPPA by all nations will hasten progress toward the global objective of achieving a 15% relative reduction in population levels of physical inactivity by 2030.

The remarkable expansion of the fitness culture can also be linked to the growing focus on the minimum daily physical activity necessary for sustaining good health. The World Health Organization (WHO) and numerous health institutions worldwide have consistently advocated for the adoption and upkeep of healthy lifestyles (WHO, 2022), which encompass physical activity and appropriate nutrition, across all age groups. Consequently, some individuals have gravitated toward the fitness culture, resulting in its proliferation, while others have pursued amateur pursuits, both individual and group-oriented, during their leisure time.

## **Conclusions**

The present article endeavours to explicate the historical evolution of the fitness industry and culture and its emergence as a global phenomenon. It posits that the global enterprise can be divided into three distinct

yet partially overlapping stages of development. The article traces the roots of the fitness industry back to the early twentieth century, with the rise of entrepreneurs such as Eugene Sandow and Charles Atlas, and subsequently with businessmen such as and Joe Weider. Despite the practitioners' efforts to impede commercialization and the development of entirely commercialized lifestyle concepts, fitness gyms and private health clubs have attained tremendous international business stature. The term «fitness» now serves as a comprehensive descriptor for health clubs, fitness franchises, and fitness gyms.

Fitness gyms have undergone a significant transformation, and a fitness revolution is clearly discernible. Notably, findings highlight the intriguing, albeit tenuous, relationship that has developed between bodybuilding and fitness. Whereas bodybuilding has historically had various negative connotations such as drug and steroid use, hyper-masculinity, vanity, hustling, the postmodern self, pastiche, and violence, fitness is now more commonly associated with health, beauty, and youth. The dichotomy between healthy and unhealthy lifestyles only partially accounts for the position of the fitness industry in society, and underscores the interconnectedness and interdependence of these two phenomena.

The rise and growth of the gym and fitness industry can be largely characterized as an international and global historical phenomenon. Present-day fitness equipment, techniques, and exercises used across the globe are products of a physical culture that was developed and refined during the 20<sup>th</sup> century but has its origins in ancient Greek and Roman practices. Although some locales and individual fitness establishments have assumed a central role in the history of gym culture, the principles of body ideals, exercises, techniques, and fitness pedagogy have progressively evolved into an internationally-oriented enterprise.

A trend towards uniformity and predictability is evident in the body ideals perpetuated by contemporary gym and fitness culture. Findings posit the existence of a globalized standard for the ideal body, characterized by well-toned, fat-free, clearly-defined, and lean physiques. The impressive proliferation of the fitness culture can also be attributed to the increasing attention paid to the minimum daily physical activity required to maintain good health.

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