

FOUCAULT, FITNESS, AND THE FABRICATION OF THE SELF (EXPOSING POLITICAL ANATOMY OF THE NEOLIBERAL BODY)

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Abstract: The research uses Michel Foucault (1926–1984)’s genealogy to study modern fitness culture by analyzing how power functions through body discipline and self-regulation and surveillance in contemporary health and exercise practices. The research uses Foucault’s concepts of docile bodies and panopticism and political anatomy and biopower to analyze how gyms and fitness technologies and wellness ideologies create micro-institutions that generate subjects who are compliant to globalist culture. The research examines from how physical fitness spaces (gyms, studios) and digital platforms (apps, trackers, social media) operate as disciplinary institutions which transform people through repetitive practices while being monitored and quantified. The research examines fitness discourse together with wearable technology and the quantified self-movement to demonstrate if modern health culture really shifted from external control to self-imposed discipline which makes individuals both subjects and objects of power. The research demonstrates how the modern fit subject exists under continuous optimization and surveillance and moral judgment while being responsible for their own well-being. The research investigates the political aspects of fitness as a form of embodied citizenship through self-transformation practices and monitoring systems in a neoliberal capitalist society.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, fitness, globalism, power, neoliberalism

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern fitness culture has moved away from traditional practices which used to connect physical training to moral or spiritual development through the Greek kalokagathia ideal and medieval Christian body discipline (Vuković, 2013:83–100). Modern society values physical appearance and athletic performance above all else while separating them from personal development. The system which claims to empower people actually forces them to conform through self-discipline by turning individuals into monitoring subjects who use fitness apps and wearable tech and social media to track and judge themselves. The modern fitness movement differs from Sokol gymnastics because it emphasizes personal success and market-based self-esteem while promoting continuous body enhancement without considering emotional or ethical development (Pavlović, Filipović, & Popović, 2024, p. 261–267). This research uses Foucault’s power and surveillance theories to demonstrate how modern fitness practices function as neoliberal tools which create market-compliant bodies while discarding the complete unity between body and soul and community that characterized previous times. The research by Bauman (2000), Steger (2020), Sassatelli (2010), Hayes (2018), Cameron and Green (2015), and Salmenniemi and Gritsenko (2022) provide conceptual frameworks about cultural globalization, disciplinary regimes, institutional transformation, and self-surveillance which can be used to integrate our empirical findings about the global fitness industry as a Foucauldian “political technology of the body”.

In order to comprehend complex relations between globalism and growing fitness culture, this paper highlights Michel Foucault’s major work *Discipline and Punish* demonstrating how modern societies use disciplinary power to regulate individual bodies and behaviors and desires instead of traditional legal punishments. The pre-modern era used visible violent body punishment through public executions and torture but the modern period employs more subtle control mechanisms. Modern power systems focus on creating docile bodies through training and monitoring and normalization of individuals by using everyday routines.

Foucault bases his analysis on multiple essential concepts. The operation of disciplinary power depends on three main mechanisms which include surveillance and structured routines and social norms that establish acceptable behavior and appearance standards. The Panopticon serves as Foucault’s metaphor for modern society because it demonstrates how people internalize surveillance when they feel they could be watched at any time. The docile body emerges through social training which makes individuals internalize control mechanisms to maintain the existing social order while following productivity and health standards and attractiveness norms.

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2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research demonstrates how fitness culture expansion follows global integration patterns by analyzing quantitative globalization metrics together with fitness industry data. The research uses Foucauldian analysis to show how physical discipline operates within the operational structures of global capitalist systems. The research design combines three analytical methods which use secondary data sources. The KOF Globalization Index and World Trade Organization trade statistics serve to measure globalization while fitness culture expansion is tracked through four key indicators that include global fitness club expansion and industry market revenue growth and international fitness chain proliferation and digital fitness technology adoption. The research uses data from international reports (IHRSA, Global Wellness Institute, Strategic Market Research) and company records from major gym brands. The analysis of time-series and trends examines four essential years (1980, 2000, 2010, 2020) to identify synchronized developments and potential time-based relationships between globalization and fitness industry growth. The research conducts cross-national assessments between high-globalization nations (US, Germany, Japan, South Korea) and low-globalization nations (North Korea, Eritrea, Central African Republic) which serve as control cases based on Mill's "method of difference." The research employs descriptive and correlational statistical methods to show and analyze the relationship between globalization and fitness industry expansion. The research combines sociological economic and cultural perspectives through the integration of established globalization and consumer society theories and Foucauldian biopolitics. The research draws all its conclusions from verified secondary sources which enables replication and reliability without conducting original surveys or interviews. The extensive research design enables a strong evaluation of how fitness culture development relates to worldwide economic and cultural transformations.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Globalization and Fitness

The KOF Globalization Index increased from its low 40s during the 1980s to exceed 60 by 2020 while the US achieved a score of ~82 which supported a dense fitness market with 41,000 gyms and more than 64 million members. Germany and the UK maintain strong commercial fitness sectors which include numerous international gym franchises. North Korea along with Eritrea and the Central African Republic maintain no commercial fitness industry because they depend on state-run collective activities instead of market-driven fitness culture (KOF, 2023; Planet Fitness, 2024). The number of fitness clubs worldwide increased from 183,000 in 2014 to exceed 205,000 in 2020 at a growth rate of 12.1% while membership numbers expanded from 144 million in 2010 to reach 184 million in 2020. The global fitness industry reached \$96.7 billion in 2019 and analysts predict it will exceed \$200 billion by 2030 while Anytime Fitness and Planet Fitness continue their worldwide expansion. The research uses time-series analysis together with cross-national comparisons of low-globalization states to demonstrate that commercial fitness culture development mirrors the growth of global integration. Open economies with global connections support fitness culture development but isolated countries without international trade or cultural exchange show no signs of this culture. This study uses time-series analysis and cross-national comparison and methodological "control cases" of low-globalization states to show that commercial fitness culture growth directly correlates with rising global integration and market openness. The research supports the idea that fitness culture develops mainly in societies which have strong global connections between trade flows and capital movements and cultural and information exchanges but it fails to exist in countries that remain economically and culturally disconnected.

Table 1: KOF Globalisation Index (Edition 2020, data year 2018) vs. Fitness Market Size by Country indexed in dollars (2019)

Country	KOF <u>Globalisation Index</u> – Overall (2020 edition)	Fitness Market Size (Year, Currency)
United States	82.28	US\$ 35 billion (2019)
Germany	88.83	€ 5.51 billion (2019)
Japan	78.40	US\$ 3.94 billion (2019)
South Korea	78.48	US\$ 2.58 billion (2019)
North Korea	N/A	N/A
Eritrea	30.99	N/A
Central African Republic	37.90	N/A

Sources: KOF Swiss Economic Institute (2020); International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association [IHRSA] (2020); EuropeActive & Deloitte (2020); RunRepeat (2021).

The research findings show that fitness culture globalization serves as a fundamental example of Foucault's "political technology of the body" (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 26). According to Foucault (1977/1995, p. 25) modern power relations exercise control over the body in the same way the global fitness industry operates as a mechanism which trains and monitors bodies by establishing routines alongside standards and technological systems to normalize self-regulation. According to Foucault, the global fitness industry demonstrates his definition of "a 'knowledge' of the body which is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces which is more than the ability to conquer them" (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 26) as the political technology of the body. Fitness brands and digital health tools distribute discipline through their instruments and relays of power and knowledge to transform people into active participants of their disciplinary process. High-globalization countries promote disciplined physical activities as market-based programs which individuals use to track their bodies for social status indicators. Gym memberships along with fitness tracking and body optimization have become market norms to develop "docile bodies" that power utilizes for transformation and utilization in contemporary society, following Foucault (1977/1995, p. 136). North Korea and Eritrea operate as the control group because their minimal fitness culture exists because these countries maintain restricted global capital exchange and cultural exposure which eliminates individualized bodily control and commercial self-enhancement. According to Foucault the control mechanism operates independently from physical force and ideological manipulation because it directly utilizes material elements through non-violent force-based interactions (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 25). The data validate Foucault's disciplinary power concept by showing that the expanding global fitness culture operates as both an effect of and an instrument for the mechanisms he explained. Market integration reaches its peak when the body experiences maximum commercialization and transformation and control because of health and productivity standards and measurements. The modern global fitness industry demonstrates the logic that Foucault described when he wrote "the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 30). In his detailed study of classical penal spectacles Foucault demonstrates how public body regulation operated as "a ritual of armed law" through which "the prince showed himself, indissociably, both as head of justice and head of war" and "the public execution... belonged to a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored" and "the ceremony of punishment... is an exercise of 'terror'" (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 30). The body served the state to demonstrate its power while the state established its legal power and sovereign authority through "the poetry of Dante put into laws" (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 33).

Modern society has evolved disciplinary power into a more flexible yet extensive system which Foucault describes. The discipline ritual continues unchanged because it shifted from public executioners to various modern technologies and fitness centers and digital health systems which influence contemporary lifestyle patterns. Fitness functions as a contemporary body practice which functions as a modern ritual: People in modern globalized communities use the gym as a space to perform the "penal truth production ritual" by showing their bodies through constant surveillance and optimization and demonstration activities. The execution process described by Foucault consists of words and cries and agony length and resistant body and desperate life clinging to it which together form signs (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 46) exactly like modern fitness cultures turn private body routines into public commercial signs to show self-control and wellness and productivity. The instruments of power through fitness apps and gym chains and digital tracking systems enforce physical discipline on people by requiring them to display their fitness progress

to the public. According to Foucault, the confessional disciplinary system stands above every other form of evidence because it serves both as the calculation procedure and the act of admission through which the accused accepts the charge and verifies its truth (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 38). Individuals who confess under the disciplinary mechanism participate actively in the penal truth production process just as they did in the judicial system while making their actions accessible to public observation. Globalization acts as the central element which defines fitness discipline. The market for bodily discipline appears only in societies which have experienced globalization to the extent indicated by high KOF Globalization Index scores yet remains non-existent in low-globalization states with North Korea functioning as the “control case.” Societies with advanced capitalist consumer culture develop “self-regulating docile bodies” that exist for their service and undergo growth and improvement.

Torture served as both punishment and truth extraction tool through its examination of the body according to Foucault (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 42). Judicial torture united punishment with investigation through its structured pain procedures that included essential presumption as a fundamental element (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 42). Fitness work transforms people into dual agents who perform moral and social value assessments through its routine strictness and workout pain while using continuous measurement and comparison methods. Fitness culture has expanded across the globe in ways that mirror the indicators of modern disciplinary body governance which Foucault described. The display of public executions at the scaffold has given way to private optimization at the gym. Fitness culture under globalization presents disciplined self-production rituals that display the “truth” of integrated individuals who function productively in a global market. In the eighteenth century Foucault noticed that executions served as both judicial procedures and political events which showed state power through physical control. The political operation of global fitness culture displays power relationships through observable performances. Fitness transformations alongside athletic competitions and social media platforms function as global performance venues that display people’s dedication to the fundamental values of the global market society including productivity and health and self-control. Modern-day fitness performance visibility is established through social media and wearable technology which converts personal body control into collective public entertainment. The fitness transformation functions as a public acknowledgment of self-worth through ritual practices in the same way that public executions granted temporary freedom from prohibition and punishment (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 59). The spectacle creates fresh social patterns which replicate the intricate crowd responses Foucault described. Foucault explains that the sovereign holds absolute power to either forgive or punish endlessly while power reveals itself through dramatic intensification or suspension (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 53). Fitness culture shares transformation narratives through “before and after” visuals that use return-to-glory stories to offer salvation through proper discipline. The workout equipment and tracking devices used for body transformation serve both disciplinary functions and offer social acceptance through redemption.

Foucault warns about the potential for disorder at public executions because audiences occasionally turned against both the ritual and those in power. Fitness culture reaches millions of people which creates both standardized social order through global norms and social disorder through oppositional movements such as body positivity activism and fitness capitalism critiques. The fitness spectacle exists in a permanent state of danger for producing its own carnivalesque reversals alongside social debates.

The relationship between truth and public body exposure which Foucault emphasizes as “the body has produced and reproduced the truth of the crime” corresponds to fitness culture’s requirement of visible documented health and virtue and value “truths” in the global era. Through physical appearance the fit body serves as proof as well as admission of guilt and it also functions as a declaration.

Through Foucault’s analysis of spectacle and public rituals the modern global fitness industry reveals itself as a contemporary site where people perform and contest power dynamics with a worldwide audience. The swift expansion of the fitness industry stems from both market unification and its adoption of public execution functions which were once performed by the scaffold. The body functions as “the partner of a procedure ordered around the formidable rights of the sovereign” under global capitalism which now serves as the sovereign through its rituals of productivity and health and self-optimization.

3.2. Subversion, Solidarity, and Spectacle: From Scaffold to Fitness Stage

Foucault’s thorough analysis of the public execution as a place where both sovereign power and collective ambivalence and resistance occur provides essential perspectives for studying fitness in worldwide societies. According to Foucault the scaffold functioned as both a demonstration of royal authority and a carnival event which reversed social rules while making authorities objects of ridicule and criminal defendants into celebrated figures. The condemned persons’ bravery and their weeping and screaming caused displeasure only to the legal system at its most violent point. Fielding documented that

executions failed to connect death with shame for viewers yet some condemned individuals gained honor during their executions (Foucault, 1977/1995, pp. 61–62).

The crowd's attendance at executions produced lasting turmoil which sometimes escalated to public disturbances or attempted rescues of prisoners. The legal procedures to create docile citizens ended up creating solidarity between the general public and petty offenders thus showing how public power rituals can create spaces for collective action or social protest or carnival-like transformations.

Understanding the modern fitness spectacle in a digital networked global world depends heavily on this dual nature. Fitness culture serves as a ritual which conforms bodies to market standards yet simultaneously becomes a space for visibility where performances happen alongside possible resistance against the norms. The modern fitness platforms today mirror the scaffold through their combination of standardized global norms with alternative voices that include body positivity and anti-diet movements as well as public fitness capitalism critiques.

The present-day fitness participants undergo three expectations similar to the scaffold's condemned individuals who demonstrate change while revealing their mistakes and verify social expectations through transformation stories and monitoring their actions. People can turn their feelings into proud accomplishments as fitness globalization exclusion experiences result in new solidarity groups which resist the standard fitness scripts.

Foucault's observation about people experiencing the closest connection to penalized individuals in execution rituals (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 62) reappears in soft contemporary form when fitness culture implements exclusion rituals that create new community alliances against fitness globalization norms. Through its modern-day scaffold the global fitness stage functions as both a disciplinary space for normative presentations and a social battleground where emerging collective identities form and counter-narratives manifest.

The condemned person's death did not conclude the execution ritual because it continued through the creation of criminal stories which included final statements and printed materials and musical compositions. The criminal needed to validate his tortures through public declarations which confirmed the complete darkness of his criminal acts. These narratives intended to authenticate the punishments endured by the condemned person instead created folk heroes or saints and indomitable figures from them. Foucault explains the dual nature of this situation: The broadsheet criminal presented himself as either a black hero or a reconciled defendant who fought for authentic justice or an unyielding power figure. Through his apparent moral lesson, he carried a complete record of his life-long battles and confrontations. After death a convicted criminal could achieve sainthood status as people respected both his memory and his resting place (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 67). Penal discourse evolved into a battlefield between those who exercised power and those who exercised resistance according to Foucault.

The modern fitness industry as globalist weapon functions through a transformed model which showcases spectacle along with confession while creating ideal physical examples. Fitness influencers and before-and-after stories and viral body transformations have replaced the traditional "last words" genre. People validate their changes by showing their dedication along with their past mistakes and present achievements to an audience that watches them.

Fitness participants today serve a function similar to the condemned man described by Foucault by being publically required to share their physical journey narratives which include moral content. For example: Despite being told to give up, she persevered... now weighs 183.8 lbs. Reed celebrated her achievement on Instagram, expressing pride in her progress and the better quality of life she has gained (Shultz, 2024). The same way that the criminal of the broadsheets became a hero to the public fitness influencers achieve iconic status when they reject mainstream standards. Through the spectacle people create a new counter-narrative by making the "alternative" hero their focus. The circulation of their confessions and physical bodies establishes new social bonds which mirror the public fascination with the "minor everyday epic of illegalities" of past times. Foucault states that every citizen accepts all laws of society at the moment of society's law which can lead to their punishment. The criminal stands as a being who defies legal logic because he has violated the social agreement.

In global fitness culture every person is considered to have agreed to the health standards and self-improvement and productivity requirements. For example, major companies worldwide establish wellness programs that either require or reward employees to reach step targets and participate in health screenings and track their physical activity. Apple and Google along with numerous Fortune 500 companies provide gym stipends and fitness challenges and wearable technology to support their goal of healthier more productive employees (Business Group on Health, 2023). Foucault distinguishes between the former system (punishment as retribution and spectacle) and the present one: Exercises, not signs; timetable, not festival; repetitive or perpetual, not unique or exceptional ceremonies. It was a question

not of arresting the criminal body, but of making it the target of subtle coercion, of acts repeated, of movements imposed, of obligatory cycles of activity... (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 128). The global fitness order transforms individuals into subjects who must follow established habits and routines while conforming to international standards of behavior.

The internalization of norms and the semiotique required old systems to display punishment as a spectacle. The modern world functions through a continuous stream of images and signs which includes Instagram fitness influencers and #fitspiration and before/after photos and fitness challenges. The signs move swiftly between international borders because of worldwide media networks. The new disciplinary system enables worldwide citizens to develop self-comparison abilities and internalize global standards while working to match the celebrated ideals. People create invisible chains through internalized expectations and comparisons and aspirations which they mistakenly believe are their own natural choices although these ideals result from global health and beauty and productivity discourses.

4. DISCUSSION

The research extends beyond market analysis and personal health reasons to position fitness as a foundational structure that drives global power dynamics and surveillance systems and personal identity development. The research applies empirical evidence to support Michel Foucault's political technology of the body theory by demonstrating that fitness culture operates as a disciplinary mechanism that produces compliant bodies through standardized global fitness routines. Fitness culture operates through routines and self-surveillance to create "docile bodies" which conform to standardized global standards. This research challenges the conventional view of personal freedom in fitness by showing how people have restricted autonomy within this system. The research connects biopolitical theory to real-world phenomena through its demonstration that fitness culture thrives best in highly globalized societies but disappears in areas with limited global capital and information flows. The research connects global market integration to body discipline mechanisms to deliver essential theoretical progress that deepens sociological and philosophical knowledge of late-modern health and identity and power structures. The study establishes critical practical and societal concerns regarding autonomy together with diversity and inclusion. Can the fitness industry evolve into an arena which promotes collective empowerment instead of individual competition and conformity under global commercial norms? The search for new holistic health and movement approaches requires strategies which both resist market dominance and develop authentic diversity and creative practices. These research questions correspond to present-day discussions within public health and social theory and wellness studies regarding exclusion risks and global era homogenization and healthism dangers. The research further indicates that we need immediate development of new models including community-based and expressive movement practices and holistic approaches which fit Western cultural requirements. Such alternative approaches could establish fitness as a social bonding practice which enables personal recovery and creative self-revelation instead of being limited to self-improvement or worldwide standardization. The research develops both theoretical and empirical knowledge about fitness as a global disciplinary mechanism while it demands the field to examine potential fitness transformations away from global standards toward pluralistic empowering holistic futures. The field faces an opportunity to rethink the meaning of movement and health and embodiment in a global society which should evolve into remain human-centered. The research makes significant contributions to the fields of globalization and sociology along with organizational studies by showing how Bauman's (2000) and Steger's (2020) theoretical processes actually manifest through the physical political dynamics of fitness centers. These abstract processes are shown to operate through the fitness culture's mechanisms which construct and surveil and evaluate identities according to globalized value systems. Sassatelli's (2010) theory about gyms being discipline-pleasure sites finds contemporary support in this study since digital platforms together with global fitness brands expand disciplinary control methods outside physical spaces into everyday life through self-regulation and normative compliance mechanisms. Research shows that individuals constantly adjust their freedom of choice against market-based performance standards and monitoring systems. Research on organizational and change management by Hayes (2018) and Cameron & Green (2015) typically studies how institutions affect and modify human behaviors. This research builds upon existing perspectives to demonstrate how the fitness industry functions as both an organizational adaptation agent and a leading force in global social normalization and subject creation. The management techniques used in fitness such as routines along with metrics and incentives serve as direct tools that support broader sociopolitical governance mechanisms for power construction and compliant identity development. These findings support the work of Salmenniemi and Gritsenko (2022) who investigate digital self-tracking through biopolitics. Modern fitness practices combine technology and

data monitoring and self-observation which enable disciplinary power to penetrate deeply into personal daily routines. These theoretical frameworks create a comprehensive base that accepts the current empirical data to show fitness represents a core location for the implementation and resistance of global Foucauldian body political technology.

5. CONCLUSION

The research shows that fitness culture globalization represents an instance of Foucault's "political technology of the body" that goes beyond consumer preferences and public health patterns. The fitness industry operates as a worldwide body training system that normalizes and monitors bodies through gym networks and digital health solutions and wellness industry markets. According to Foucault modern power systems transform people into "docile bodies" through regular procedures alongside body measurements and self-control mechanisms rather than through visible force or spectacular means. The study demonstrates that fitness culture reaches its peak growth in areas with strong global connections which manifest through market development and technological penetration and standardization of routines and measurement systems. These contexts transform bodies into permanent objects which undergo continuous optimization while being disciplined and displayed according to global health and productivity standards and self-mastery expectations. These practices remain specific to particular social contexts because societies with weak global connections show no signs of commercialized bodily discipline. The research expands existing scholarship by directly connecting observed growth patterns of global fitness culture to Foucault's theory about disciplinary power. The research shows how public punishment and spectacle have given way to modern disciplinary methods that people practice through fitness activities and digital monitoring tools while displaying their achievements to others. Modern fitness industry serves as a fundamental domain where contemporary power mechanisms function while enabling people to demonstrate their personal values and social worth. These research findings demonstrate the fundamental role fitness plays in global governance through its ability to create self-monitoring subjects who follow established regulations. Research demands investigation into whether fitness paradigms today prioritize individual well-being and autonomy or serve as tools to strengthen existing control mechanisms and competition structures and commodity systems. New approaches must be developed which resist global market control to create holistic and inclusive health and movement practices that respect cultural diversity. Future research needs to explore essential questions about fitness because its main purpose seems to create subjects for global society rather than helping individuals achieve personal growth. Researchers should create new fitness approaches that combine collective well-being with creativity and spiritual development while remaining suitable for Western cultural environments. Can the fitness industry develop into a transformative force which promotes physical wellness and autonomy and resistance to global standardization as well as spiritual growth and creative freedom? The understanding of fitness globalization through Foucault's "political technology of the body" framework enhances both theoretical and practical discussions about fitness while challenging the current understanding of fitness in a free and diverse global society.

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