





Fit, feminine, and visible: A feminist semiotic study of Facebook images by female fitness instructors in Taiwan

Hsiu-Tao Hsu ^{a,b} and Chen-Te Hsu ^c

^aGraduate Institute of Gender Education, National Kaohsiung Normal University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan; ^bCenter for Physical and Health Education, National Sun Yat-Sen University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan; ^cDepartment of Sport Management, National Taiwan University of Sport, Taichung, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Taiwanese female fitness instructors negotiate gendered visibility, professional legitimacy, and bodily value through visual self-representation on Facebook. Drawing on a feminist semiotic analysis of 120 publicly accessible images, the study conceptualises four patterned modes of bodily performance: exposure-oriented, professional-neutral, movement-focused, and contrast-challenging. These function as strategic visual repertoires through which instructors calibrate strength, femininity, and credibility within platform-based economies of attention. Within post-feminist sensibility and platform capitalism, muscularity, bodily exposure, and softened facial cues function as semiotic resources that render female strength culturally legible and commercially viable. While some performances foreground embodied expertise, many remain tethered to algorithmic logics and normative aesthetics, reproducing a gendered double bind in which empowerment is entangled with commodification. By foregrounding the Taiwanese Sinophone context, this study extends feminist media scholarship beyond Euro-American paradigms and advances conditional agency as a framework for understanding women's strategic autonomy within the regulatory structures of digital visibility. The findings illuminate how fitness labour, gender performativity, and platform governance converge in contemporary digital body cultures.

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Introduction

In recent years, the rise of health consciousness has transformed fitness from a simple health behaviour into a broader cultural phenomenon intertwined with self-improvement, bodily discipline, and digital self-performance (Julia Coffey 2016; Francesca Kurghan and Holly Thorpe 2025). Fitness practices are increasingly framed as moralised projects of self-care and productivity, through which responsibility for health is individualised and rendered visible. Within digital cultures, these logics are amplified through social media platforms, where bodies are rendered visible, comparable, and governable through images, metrics, and affective engagement. This transformation has been

CONTACT Chen-Te Hsu  cthsu@ntus.edu.tw  Department of Sport Management, National Taiwan University of Sport, No 16, Sec 1, Shuangshi Rd, North Dist, Taichung 404401, Taiwan

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particularly visible in Taiwan since the early 2010s, coinciding with the enactment of the Sports Industry Development Act in 2012—a key moment in the formalisation and expansion of the country's fitness and sports sector. Since then, fitness has increasingly been positioned as both an economic industry and a lifestyle ideal, supported by a growing infrastructure of gyms, personal training studios, and health-oriented digital platforms. Health consciousness in the Taiwanese context extends beyond disease prevention to encompass everyday practices of self-monitoring, physical capability, and lifestyle management. According to the 2024 Taiwan Sports Participation Survey, 82.9% of the population engage in some form of exercise, while the proportion meeting the standard for regular exercise remains gendered at 38.2% for men and 32.0% for women. Prior research in Taiwan has also documented persistent gender differences in exercise participation and motivation (Hung-Yi Mao, Hsin-Chih Hsu and Shih-Da Lee 2020), underscoring the gendered structure of fitness practices. This expansion has not dissolved gender hierarchies; instead, it has reorganised women's participation and visibility within fitness spaces long structured by masculine strength and authority.

Historically, women have been marginalised or excluded from athletic spaces due to perceived physical inferiority. Gendered discrimination in sport dates to the first modern Summer Olympic Games in 1896, where women were prohibited from participation. Women's entry into elite sport was only gradually recognised, such as the formal acknowledgement of women's right to compete in the 1924 Olympic Charter, Kathrine Switzer's defiance of the 1967 Boston Marathon ban, and the inclusion of the women's marathon in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. These milestones epitomise the ongoing contestation over women's bodily autonomy and sociocultural legitimacy. In contemporary Taiwan, female Olympic medallists have increasingly become cultural icons, not only through international sporting success but also through heightened media visibility and institutional recognition. Recent policy revisions have enabled elite athletes—including those who have served as national representatives while holding public-sector status—to participate in commercial endorsements, a privilege generally unavailable to ordinary civil servants or teachers. As a result, figures such as badminton player Tzu-ying Tai, boxer Yu-ting Lin and golfer Yani Tseng exemplify a newly legitimised model of female athletic visibility that circulates across sport, media, and consumer culture. As women increasingly assert bodily autonomy, participation in fitness is no longer merely a health practice; it also operates as a culturally legible marker of discipline, aspiration, and gendered achievement.

Within this context, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have emerged as pivotal arenas for the visual performance of fitness. These platforms amplify visibility and aesthetics (Ana Marta M Flores and Rita Sepúlveda 2025), enabling fitness instructors to curate images that communicate strength, professionalism, and empowerment. For female fitness instructors, the body operates simultaneously as a site of labour, a marker of professional credibility, and a commercial asset. Through clothing, poses, and hashtags, they negotiate a balance between professional legitimacy, gendered agency, and market visibility in their visual self-presentations. Platform logics further shape this process: images that attract attention and engagement are more likely to circulate through opaque recommendation systems, as likes, shares, and interactions generate additional exposure. At the same time, the demand to remain visible produces tensions around safety, harassment, and vulnerability in hybrid online—offline fitness spaces,

requiring instructors to continuously calibrate their self-presentation for both reach and risk management (Kim Toffoletti, Holly Thorpe, Adele Pavlidis, Rebecca Olive and Claire Moran 2023).

Grounded in feminist theory—particularly Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity—and feminist semiotics, this study approaches gender not as an innate essence but as a construct performed and reiterated through social practice. Feminist semiotics allows us to decode how symbolic and aesthetic choices in images communicate worldviews and ideologies (Laura Corradi, Natalie Benelli and Silvia Lempen 2012). This perspective is especially productive for analysing fitness imagery, where visual signs such as muscularity, skin exposure, and feminised posing are strategically mobilised to signal both professionalism and market appeal. This lens guides our exploration of how Taiwanese female fitness instructors perform their bodies on Facebook, and how these visual cues function as carriers of meaning that may simultaneously reinforce and subtly rework normative gender expectations (Sofia P Caldeira, Sander De Ridder and Sofie Van Bauwel 2020; Flores and Sepúlveda 2025), often within a commercialised economy of visibility.

These performances are best understood as forms of cultural negotiation, in which professional legitimacy is pursued alongside market visibility, and empowerment is continually entangled with commodification. Rather than reflecting unconstrained individual choice, such negotiations are patterned by structural conditions in which visibility, credibility, and marketability must be carefully balanced. Algorithmic dynamics further intensify these pressures. As Elise Rose Carrotte, Ivanka Prichard and Megan S C Lim (2017) note, social media fitspiration content frequently portrays young, thin yet toned female bodies, often with sexualised or objectified emphasis, and platforms like Instagram tend to amplify these highly gendered body ideals. Within this environment, female fitness instructors encounter a recurrent double bind: they are expected to demonstrate strength, discipline, and expertise, while remaining culturally intelligible as feminine and commercially viable. By embedding feminist semiotic analysis within the Sinophone context, this study situates Taiwanese fitness culture in dialogue with emerging regional scholarship. Renxue Wan (2022) shows how fitness professionals in China construct “competing personas” to negotiate commercial expectations and gendered visibility, while Mao, Hsu, and Lee (2020) demonstrate that exercise practices in Taiwan are shaped by locally specific gender norms. These perspectives underscore that fitness cultures in Taiwan and China are embedded in distinct moral, aesthetic, and labour conditions. Once marginalised in male-dominated fitness narratives, these instructors now occupy an ambivalent position in which visual self-performance functions as labour under constraint, producing forms of agency that remain conditional and uneven.

Constructing femininity through the athletic body

The fields of fitness and sport have historically reinforced a gender binary through institutional policies, media representations, and social norms. Women face dual pressures: to demonstrate physical competence while also maintaining culturally ascribed femininity. Scholars such as Raewyn Connell (2005) and Michael A Messner (2002) highlight that sport remains a space where hegemonic masculinity is continuously reproduced. Cynthia Frisby (2017) also demonstrates that in *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the*

Magazine covers between 2012 and 2016, female athletes appeared in only about 12% of the covers, and most were portrayed in posed, sexualised, or suggestive manners. This imbalance underscores how women's athletic bodies are more frequently framed as visual objects than as sites of performance or expertise. Earlier analyses of sports advertising similarly show that female athletes have long been positioned within constrained visual scripts that prioritise attractiveness over athletic competence (Jennifer Ellison 2002). For female fitness instructors, this contradiction is particularly acute: they must simultaneously perform strength and discipline while remaining approachable, attractive, and aligned with conventional feminine ideals.

In line with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, these gendered displays are not expressions of innate identity but are constructed through the repeated enactment of culturally encoded behaviours. Fitness imagery thus operates as a performative site where femininity is continually rehearsed, stabilised, and adjusted. Images showcasing muscular definition alongside soft facial expressions, relaxed postures, or stylised poses do not merely represent bodies; they enact gender norms through visual repetition. Such performances illustrate how strength is rendered culturally intelligible only when tempered by recognisable signs of femininity. Their images—whether emphasising toned muscles, controlled movement, or aesthetic softness—circulate in public digital arenas where gender norms are continuously negotiated, situated at the edges of both reinforcing and subtly destabilising the gender order. Everyday visual self-representations can thereby slide “between the mundane and the political,” making ordinary social media posts consequential for the cultural construction of femininity (Caldeira, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel 2020).

Within this visual economy, clothing plays a central role in gendered performance. The evolution of women's athletic attire—from ankle-length skirts to form-fitting activewear—represents a historical narrative of bodily autonomy and visual politics. Roland Barthes' concept of the costume system (1983) positions fashion as a language: individual outfits function as speech, while bodily identity and gender recognition are articulated through sartorial choices. In contemporary fitness imagery, apparel such as cropped sports bras, leggings, and coordinated sets simultaneously signal functionality, bodily discipline, and aesthetic desirability. In commercialised fitness spaces, the addition of ornamental or sexualised elements to sportswear reflects the broader commodification of women's bodies, transmitting gendered social messages under capitalist logics of profit. As Dawn Heinecken (2015) notes in her analysis of female athletes online, clothing becomes a key mediator through which athletic legitimacy is negotiated alongside expectations of feminine attractiveness, particularly for muscular women whose bodies are simultaneously celebrated for strength and constrained by normative femininity in digital visual cultures. Contemporary athletic apparel thus not only optimises performance but also conveys layered symbolic meanings of professionalism, sensuality, and market orientation.

In visual imagery, the display of abs or glutes is rarely neutral; it operates within the dynamics of the male gaze and the aesthetics of consumption (Susan Bordo 2003). Importantly, this does not imply that the primary audience is male; rather, the male gaze is understood here as a structural visual logic embedded in dominant representational conventions, rather than the gender of actual viewers. Even when framed as evidence of training discipline or physical capability, such body parts are selectively highlighted through camera angles, lighting, and static posing. These visual codes align with the fitness industry's commodification of female bodies, transforming the labour of

training into consumable spectacles that satisfy cultural expectations of both health and desirability. The prevalence of static, posed images—rather than images of exertion or movement—further reinforces this aesthetic logic, privileging visual legibility over embodied process.

In these images, femininity does not simply clash with the athletic body. Here, we use “athletic” analytically to describe the visual emphasis on strength and bodily capability within fitness imagery, rather than to denote competitive or elite sport participation. Instead, femininity is worked out through ongoing negotiations over how much strength, exposure, and softness can be shown.

Female fitness instructors are expected to embody strength without excess, visibility without impropriety, and professionalism without the loss of femininity. This balancing act anticipates what later sections conceptualise as a double bind, in which athletic competence and feminine appearance must be continuously recalibrated in response to platform visibility, audience expectations, and commercial incentives. The athletic female body thus emerges as a key site where gender norms are not only reproduced but strategically managed within contemporary digital fitness culture.

Commodification of the body and the fit-feminine ideal

Social media influencer economies convert visibility into economic capital (Crystal Abidin 2016; Alice E Marwick 2015). Female fitness instructors’ bodies serve as both instruments of labour and objects of consumption. Performing the “fit-feminine” ideal requires intensive aesthetic labour (Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2017), shaped by algorithmic logics and audience expectations. This form of aesthetic labour resonates with Wan’s (2022) analysis of the Chinese fitness industry, which demonstrates how fitness trainers strategically manage competing personas—professional expertise, aspirational femininity, and commercial appeal—within highly marketised visual cultures. In the Taiwanese context, similar dynamics are evident as female fitness instructors calibrate bodily exposure, neutrality, and strength display to enhance market visibility while maintaining professional credibility. These negotiations are further intensified by algorithmic circulation, where particular visual styles are rewarded with increased reach and engagement.

These regional dynamics further resonate with research in Taiwan demonstrating gendered patterns in exercise participation and motivation (Mao, Hsu, and Lee 2020), underscoring how fitness practices are already structured by differentiated gender expectations. Situating Taiwanese female fitness instructors within this broader Sinophone scholarship allows the present analysis to move beyond Euro-American paradigms and to foreground locally specific negotiations of aesthetic labour, bodily discipline, and market visibility.

Kurghan and Thorpe (2025) describe this dynamic as the “glow-up imperative,” where continual bodily enhancement becomes a moral measure of personal growth. Within social media fitness cultures, bodily improvement is not only encouraged but rendered publicly accountable through images, metrics, and engagement counts. On Facebook, before-and-after transformation photos operate as potent symbols of discipline and success, yet they often reproduce harmful “thinness-as-value” ideals (Angela S Alberga, Samantha J Withnell and Kristin M von Ranson 2018).

Feminist scholars have shown how neoliberal bodily governance reframes discipline as aspiration, whether through everyday “body work” (Coffey 2016), “fitspiration cultures” (Kim Toffoletti and Holly Thorpe 2021), or the moralised demand to continually “glow-up” (Kurghan and Thorpe 2025). These discourses emphasise self-monitoring, bodily transformation, and individual responsibility, often packaged in aesthetically appealing narratives of health. What is less visible in such framings is the extent to which these practices are embedded in labour relations and commercial imperatives. Recent work on appearance-based exercise highlights how women are required to negotiate a double bind: to present disciplined, capable bodies while avoiding excessive muscularity or visibility that might transgress feminine norms (Anna Grahn 2024). This negotiation is economically consequential, determining which bodies are rendered marketable and which are excluded from professional credibility.

Platform logics further intensify these pressures on female fitness instructors’ self-presentation. Content analyses of #fitspo images reveal that women are disproportionately portrayed as thin, toned, and sexualised, often emphasising full-body visibility and buttocks, reflecting social media’s implicit privileging of white, slender, heteronormative aesthetics (Carrotte, Prichard, and Lim 2017). At the same time, global fitness cultures are not monolithic. Emerging scholarship has highlighted alternative embodiments—including plus-size, racially diverse, and religiously marked fitness influencers—that complicate this dominant aesthetic narrative. However, within the Taiwanese Sinophone context examined here, the range of visibly circulating fitness bodies remains comparatively narrow, with toned and conventionally attractive femininity continuing to dominate mainstream digital visibility. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021) further note that the affective dynamics of fitspiration culture encourage women to navigate visibility through self-objectifying and market-oriented performances, simultaneously invoking empowerment discourses while reinforcing normative gendered aesthetics. In this sense, the promise of empowerment is tethered to platform-legible femininity, where visibility must align with commercial desirability.

From the perspective of fitness labour, this commodification is experienced not only as image production but as working conditions. Yu-Hsien Tseng (2025) demonstrates that fitness trainers’ working experiences are structured by gendered expectations linking bodily appearance to employability, client attraction, and income stability. Trainers are encouraged to embody an “ideal” body that signals expertise and motivation, yet must carefully regulate muscularity, exposure, and sexualisation to remain commercially viable. Here, the body functions simultaneously as credential, advertisement, and revenue-generating asset, collapsing the boundaries between professional competence and market performance.

Within social media platforms, this double bind is further intensified by algorithmic circulation. Images that successfully balance strength and femininity are more likely to be rewarded through likes, shares, and extended reach, reinforcing a narrow repertoire of acceptable fit-feminine embodiments. As Grahn (2024) argues, such dynamics compel women to continually recalibrate appearance-based exercise practices in relation to social approval and economic return. Consequently, the fit-feminine ideal operates as a commercialised gender norm, where bodily autonomy is conditional upon visibility metrics and platform recognition.

While some scholars argue that platforms like Facebook and Instagram also provide opportunities for “norm-critical pedagogy” (Joaquín Piedra and Valeria Varea 2023), the scope of resistance remains uneven under commercial constraints. Wellness mapping and repeatable visual templates—such as transformation tropes, coordinated outfits, and motivational hashtags—organise bodies into recognisable and market-friendly forms (Flores and Sepúlveda 2025). These templates stabilise expectations of what a successful, aspirational fitness body should look like, making deviation risky for professionals who rely on platform visibility for income.

In our material, female fitness instructors’ self-presentations appear less as free expressions and more as responses to the pressures of commodified fit-feminine ideals. They are structured responses to a commercialised economy of visibility in which gender norms, labour demands, and algorithmic incentives converge. The double bind thus operates as a mechanism of market governance: strength must be displayed, femininity preserved, and difference carefully packaged for consumption. This framing clarifies how empowerment and commodification are not opposites but interdependent processes within contemporary digital fitness culture.

Resistance, re-signification, and feminist semiotic strategies

Despite these constraints, social media also affords meaningful—though uneven—possibilities for resistance and re-signification. Piedra and Varea’s (2023) analysis of the “Operación Feria” campaign in Spain illustrates how Instagram users collectively responded to a health-promotion initiative that reproduced fat-phobic and medicalised body discourses. Users engaged in a repertoire of critical comments, ironic captions, and image remixes, transforming Instagram into a site of public pedagogy. Crucially, the authors conceptualise these practices as forms of norm-critical pedagogy, which seek to interrogate how “normality” is socially constructed and how everyday visual practices may either reproduce or destabilise dominant norms. Importantly, such interventions do not dismantle platform logics but work tactically within them, exploiting moments of visibility to re-frame meaning.

Building on this perspective, Amy Shields Dobson (2015) highlights that girls’ and young women’s digital self-representations often function as cultural strategies of survival and negotiation within postfeminist contexts. While not always overtly resistant, these practices reveal how marginalised users navigate, appropriate, and occasionally subtly contest dominant gendered discourses. Rather than opposing neoliberal visual cultures outright, such strategies are often characterised by ambivalence, partial compliance, and selective refusal. Together, this body of work demonstrates that digital spaces may operate as arenas of *soft resistance*, enabling gradual processes of re-signification without escaping the constraints of commercialised visibility.

In Taiwan, female fitness instructors have likewise developed subtle and hybrid strategies of resistance within highly gendered and commercialised fitness cultures. This study identifies visual tactics such as juxtaposing pronounced muscular definition with soft facial expressions, or combining high-intensity athletic movements with vulnerable affect. These strategies do not reject dominant aesthetic codes; instead, they recalibrate them, for example by pairing visibly developed muscles with soft smiles or pastel-toned styling that renders strength culturally legible. Such practices resonate with feminist

semiotic perspectives (Barthes 1983), which attend to how meaning is produced through visual codes rather than fixed symbols. Through compositional framing, hashtag curation, and carefully orchestrated aesthetics, these instructors articulate contingent positions within the gendered economy of platform visibility.

Moreover, the act of self-documentation in fitness spaces can itself generate empowering effects, even under conditions of constraint. Emma Pullen, Laura Mora and Michael Silk (2023) demonstrate that the self-representation of Paralympic athletes disrupts normative assumptions about ability, thereby broadening the spectrum of athletic visibility. Their analysis underscores how visibility can function as a political resource, particularly for bodies historically excluded from dominant athletic imaginaries. Similarly, Taiwanese female fitness instructors, by asserting their presence in traditionally male-dominated fitness spaces, challenge prevailing assumptions about who can be fit, visible, and professionally authoritative, even as they remain embedded within market-driven platforms.

Collectively, the interplay of clothing, posture, platform interaction, and audience response constitutes a dense semiotic network. The body emerges not only as a site of physical training but also as a communicative medium laden with cultural syntax. Within this space, female fitness instructors perform far more than exercise routines; they engage in complex negotiations and ongoing re-interpretations of contemporary gender norms. Grounded in the Taiwanese context and analysed through a feminist semiotic lens, this study deepens our understanding of the intersections between gender, media, and fitness in an era shaped by digital selfhood and platform capitalism. It shows that resistance within social media is rarely absolute; instead, gendered agency is produced through constrained, strategic, and often commercially entangled forms of visual self-presentation.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, adopting a feminist semiotic lens to explore the modes of bodily performance by Taiwanese female fitness instructors on the Facebook social media platform. Data collection and analysis combined visual content analysis, gender theory, and visual culture studies, with a particular focus on how visual elements—such as clothing, posture, composition, and hashtags—reproduce, challenge, or negotiate contemporary gender norms. This approach treats images not as neutral representations but as culturally situated texts embedded within gendered, economic, and platform-specific conditions of visibility.

Data collection and sampling were conducted collaboratively by two researchers with professional backgrounds in sport. Both researchers hold internationally accredited fitness-related certifications that are formally recognised in Taiwan. One researcher holds Certified Personal Trainer (CPT) credentials from the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), while the other holds CPT credentials from the American Council on Exercise (ACE), as well as additional coaching and officiating qualifications within the sport and fitness sector. Using keywords such as “personal trainer,” “fitness coach/instructor,” “strength and conditioning,” “gym trainer,” “fitness guru,” and “fitness,” we conducted systematic searches and screening of public accounts on Facebook. Eligible

accounts were those explicitly identified as female fitness instructors and actively engaged in this profession.

The collection period spanned from June 2024 to January 2025. We initially identified approximately 50 female fitness instructors' pages in Taiwan. From these, we selected images that were visually clear, thematically focused, and demonstrated distinctive characteristics of bodily performance. Given the study's emphasis on visual semiotics, the dataset prioritised images in which bodily presentation, attire, and posture could be clearly interpreted. A maximum of three images per instructor was included, resulting in a curated dataset of 120 Facebook images. The majority of images analysed were static, posed photographs rather than action-based movement sequences, a factor that informs the interpretive scope of the findings. This predominance of static representational images provides the visual conditions through which feminised posing—such as softened facial expression, indirect gaze, and de-emphasised exertion—becomes culturally legible.

Exclusion criteria were applied to reduce sampling bias, eliminating:

- (1) Pages belonging to male instructors or mixed-gender teams.
- (2) Commercial stock images in which the instructor herself did not appear.
- (3) Heavily edited images where posture or clothing could not be discerned.
- (4) Group photos without a clear individual focus.

Data analysis integrated feminist semiotics with thematic visual content analysis, focusing on the gendered meanings conveyed by signs and symbols within the images. The analytic process included several stages:

- (1) Initial categorisation and theme construction: Both researchers jointly reviewed all images, performing initial coding and noting features such as clothing style, focal body parts, movement types, camera angles, and accompanying text (captions or hashtags).
- (2) Iterative comparison and theme refinement: Through repeated comparison and discussion, four dominant modes of female bodily performance were identified: exposure-oriented, professional-neutral, movement-focused, and contrast-challenging. Interpretation drew on Barthes' semiotic framework (denotation/connotation), Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, and feminist analyses of neoliberal bodily commodification in digital fitness cultures (Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018, 2021).

While captions and hashtags were considered as contextual anchors for visual meaning, the analysis prioritised imagery over textual self-description. This decision reflects the study's focus on visual circulation and platform-based visibility, but it also constitutes a limitation insofar as textual nuance and self-articulated intent may not be fully captured.

This interpretive approach treats images as cultural texts, recognising that visuals are not merely objects of viewing but intersections of cultural ideology, gender politics, and economic value. Research ethics followed three key principles:

- (1) Respect for privacy: Only publicly available images were used, and no personal identifiers (names or page titles) were disclosed.
- (2) Avoidance of stigmatisation and objectification: Analyses focused on cultural context and power relations, avoiding evaluative labelling or reinforcement of stereotypes.
- (3) Reflexive research stance: Researchers maintained critical reflexivity, particularly when examining body, gender, and power structures, avoiding derogatory interpretations or reproducing representational oppression.

Researcher positionality was explicitly considered throughout the analytic process. Although both researchers are embedded within the sport and fitness field, their gendered positions differ, with one researcher occupying a male positionality and having received formal training in gender studies and gender professionalisation. Reflexive dialogue between the two researchers was used to interrogate assumptions regarding professionalism, bodily competence, and gender performance. Nevertheless, this study is limited by the absence of a third independent coder, and interpretations should therefore be understood as situated rather than universally generalisable.

Additional limitations should be noted. First, instructors' years of professional experience, training histories, and socioeconomic backgrounds could not be reliably inferred from visual material alone. Similarly, age cannot be reliably inferred from photographic material alone. Although fitness visibility often appears aligned with youthful aesthetics, we do not assume that the instructors represented in our sample are exclusively or predominantly young. Rather, the stylisation of vitality and bodily optimisation may reflect broader postfeminist visual economies in which youthfulness is culturally aestheticised rather than demographically verified. Second, the sample predominantly comprised aerobic instructors, general fitness trainers, and exercise instructors rather than elite bodybuilding or strength-specialist coaches, reflecting the visual and cultural norms of Taiwanese fitness culture on Facebook. Third, as Taiwan is situated within a broader Sinophone and East Asian cultural context, social norms surrounding female bodily exposure differ from Western contexts, which may constrain the degree and forms of visible bodily commodification observed in this study.

As researchers situated at the intersection of the sport industry and academia, we not only examined how images are produced and circulated but also reflected on how our own professional standards of "fitness," "expertise," and "appropriate femininity" shape interpretation. Rather than positioning ourselves as neutral observers, we acknowledge that our analyses are informed by situated knowledge, disciplinary training, and ongoing reflexive engagement. This reflexive stance foregrounds the agency and ambivalent positionality of women navigating contemporary digital fitness cultures while recognising the methodological boundaries within which such interpretations are made.

Results and discussion

Through the qualitative analysis of 120 publicly accessible Facebook images posted by Taiwanese female fitness instructors, four primary modes of bodily performance were identified: exposure-oriented, professional-neutral, movement-focused, and contrast-challenging. These modes represent patterned visual strategies rather than fixed identity

categories. They illuminate how female fitness instructors navigate the intersecting demands of gender performance, professional legitimacy, and market visibility within platform-based fitness culture. These four modes and their associated visual characteristics and gendered implications are summarised in [Table 1](#). Drawing on feminist semiotics, gender performativity theory, and feminist critiques of digital body politics, this section demonstrates how these visual performances operate simultaneously as practices of subject formation and as sites of disciplinary power.

Exposure-oriented: body commodification and the “economy of visibility”

Exposure-oriented images are visually distinctive, typically featuring bikinis, cropped sports bras, low-rise shorts, or tightly fitted activewear that accentuate the chest, abdomen, waistline, and glutes. Most images in this category are static, posed photographs rather than depictions of physical exertion, frequently employing close-ups, mirror selfies, or over-the-shoulder angles to foreground sexualised body parts. This aesthetic aligns closely with platform algorithmic logics on Facebook and Instagram, where attention-grabbing imagery is more likely to generate engagement and circulation (Abidin 2016).

Table 1. Four modes of bodily performance by female fitness instructors on social media.

| Performance Mode | Visual Characteristics | Gender/Power Implications | Representative Theories |
|--|--|--|---|
| Exposure-Oriented | Bikinis, cropped sports bras, low-rise shorts; close-ups or over-the-shoulder poses highlighting chest, abs, waist, glutes | Conveys bodily autonomy but aligns with the male gaze; reinforces the commodification of women's bodies; gains high platform visibility due to algorithmic preference for sexualised aesthetics | Barthes' semiotics; Bordo (2003) on disciplinary femininity; Carrotte, Prichard, and Lim (2017) on fitpiration visibility and algorithmic bias |
| Professional-Neutral | Gender-neutral T-shirts, polo shirts, training trousers; gym/equipment background; focus on instructional or demonstrative posture | Low sexualisation and androgynous negotiation; foregrounds professional legitimacy and competence; may receive moderate engagement compared to exposure-oriented posts | Butler's gender performativity; Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) on the professional-femininity double bind |
| Movement-Focused | Demonstrations of exercises (yoga, TRX, kettlebell, aerobic choreography); fitted functional wear; emphasis on full-body motion and muscle definition | Embodied agency and professional identity; partially escapes traditional gendered regulation; encourages aspirational mimicry (“you can be like me”) | Toffoletti on embodied digital practices; Flores & Sepúlveda on fitness culture; aligns with mid-level algorithmic visibility focused on skill rather than sensuality |
| Contrast-Challenging /Hybrid “Barbie with muscles” | Pronounced muscularity combined with sweet or traditionally feminine facial expression or styling; deliberate visual dissonance of strength and softness | Challenges hegemonic femininity and the thinness-as-value paradigm; enacts subtle resistance to bodily discipline (Bartky 1990) while entering the attention economy; remains marginalised by algorithms favouring slender, heteronormative bodies | Bartky on disciplinary body politics; Dobson (2015) on postfeminist negotiation; Carrotte, Prichard, and Lim (2017) on underrepresentation of non-slender bodies |

From a feminist semiotic perspective, these images exceed the documentation of training routines and instead function as symbolic exchanges. The body becomes a semiotic resource through which visibility is converted into social and economic capital. Even when framed as “everyday training” or “healthy lifestyle” content, exposure-oriented images remain embedded within regimes of bodily commodification and the male gaze. As Bordo (2003) argues, contemporary media often reframe self-discipline and self-care as forms of empowerment, while simultaneously sustaining normative femininity through sexualised visibility.

Within the competitive digital fitness economy, this mode reflects a strategic negotiation rather than unambiguous agency. Exposure-oriented displays operate as what might be termed “non-pornographic exposure:” carefully calibrated performances that remain socially acceptable while maximising platform visibility. Flores and Sepúlveda (2025) similarly observe that dominant fitness imagery overwhelmingly reproduces slender, toned, and binary gender ideals. From a Taiwanese cultural perspective, where overt female bodily exposure remains socially constrained, such images often balance between provocation and restraint, revealing how globalised fitness aesthetics are selectively localised rather than fully adopted.

Professional-neutral: the body as a gender-neutral symbol of expertise

Professional-neutral imagery presents female fitness instructors in relatively gender-neutral attire, such as T-shirts, polo shirts, or training trousers, often branded with gym logos and situated in equipment-centred environments. Visual emphasis is placed on instructional posture, equipment use, or trainer—client interaction rather than bodily allure. Here, femininity is not erased but deliberately muted, allowing professional competence to take visual precedence.

This mode resonates with Butler’s (1990) conceptualisation of gender as performative rather than essential. By reducing overt gender markers, instructors strategically minimise the risk of sexualisation that could undermine professional authority. However, this neutrality is not equivalent to gender absence; instead, it reflects an androgynous negotiation shaped by the gendered expectations of the fitness industry.

As Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) highlight, female athletes navigating digital fitness branding face a persistent double bind: displays perceived as “too sexy” risk undermining credibility, while those read as “too masculine” threaten normative femininity. The professional-neutral mode represents a calculated compromise, foregrounding expertise while maintaining market trust, particularly among female clients who may prefer female instructors for comfort, safety, or identification.

Movement-focused: embodiment and the interplay of agency and expertise

Movement-focused images foreground physical action, depicting instructors engaged in yoga, aerobics, kettlebell training, TRX routines, or functional fitness drills. These visuals emphasise balance, coordination, strength, and technical proficiency, often captured mid-movement or in instructional sequences. Compared to exposure-oriented images, movement-focused posts more frequently portray bodies in action rather than as static visual objects.

This mode reflects a form of embodied agency, partially disrupting the positioning of women's bodies as passive spectacles. As Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) suggest, movement-based representations can reconfigure the gaze by shifting attention toward bodily competence, discipline, and skill. Yoga imagery often integrates soft lighting, serene spatial composition, and complex poses, blending Eastern spiritual aesthetics with contemporary wellness culture. By contrast, kettlebell and TRX images communicate muscular engagement and technical mastery, symbolising control over both body and equipment.

Nevertheless, this mode does not fully escape gendered visual regulation. Fitted activewear, pose aesthetics, and hashtags such as #fitgirl or #strongwomen continue to anchor these performances within recognisable gender codes. Platform preferences for visually pleasing bodies shape circulation, limiting the extent to which movement-focused displays can operate independently of normative beauty standards (Flores and Sepúlveda 2025).

Contrast-challenging: "Barbie with muscles" and contesting gender norms

The contrast-challenging mode features visibly muscular female bodies that deliberately disrupt conventional associations between femininity, slenderness, and softness. Often described colloquially as "Barbie with muscles," these images juxtapose pronounced musculature with sweet facial expressions—here referring to conventionally feminised facial cues such as smiling, softened gaze, or light makeup—alongside pastel colour palettes or traditionally feminine styling. This deliberate visual dissonance unsettles the normative equation of beauty with thinness and softness and expands what can be recognised as a feminine body within contemporary fitness culture. Some images explicitly invoke strength-based embodied politics, asserting that women can be as, or more, powerful than men. At the level of visual signification, these performances challenge hegemonic femininity only partially, as they remain tethered to familiar aesthetic cues.

Drawing on Sandra Lee Bartky's (1990) analysis of disciplinary femininity, muscular development can be read as resistance to the social regulation of women's bodies. Rather than minimising the body or rendering it passive, muscularity foregrounds effort, strength, and visible bodily labour. However, such resistance is constrained. As Carrotte, Prichard, and Lim (2017) demonstrate, algorithmic cultures continue to marginalise bodies that deviate from slender, heteronormative ideals. Consequently, muscular femininity is more likely to gain visibility when it remains visually palatable and commercially legible within dominant platform aesthetics. Even counter-normative muscular femininity risks being incorporated into alternative consumer aesthetics, transforming strength into another form of spectacle within the attention economy. As Ellison's (2002) historical analysis of sport advertising illustrates, women's athletic competence has long been visually subordinated to aesthetic appeal—a logic that continues to shape contemporary fitness imagery, even when bodies appear more powerful.

Read through the lens of postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2006, 2016), muscular femininity operates within a contradictory regime of empowerment and regulation. As Gill (2006, 2016) argues, postfeminist culture encourages women to understand the body as the primary site of self-worth, agency, and achievement, while reframing bodily surveillance,

discipline, and self-monitoring as voluntary and empowering forms of “body work.” Within this logic, muscularity does not simply signal resistance to traditional femininity; it reconfigures feminine norms by rendering strength acceptable only when accompanied by signs of attractiveness, self-control, and continual self-optimisation. The muscular body thus signifies empowerment, but only insofar as it remains aligned with neoliberal ideals of health, productivity, and visual desirability.

From a feminist semiotic perspective, contrast-challenging performances re-code the “fit female body” by hybridising strength and femininity. Their political significance lies less in outright opposition to gender norms than in the ongoing visual negotiation they enact—asserting bodily agency while remaining partially legible within platform-specific regimes of visibility and market value. In this sense, postfeminist muscular femininity expands the symbolic repertoire of femininity, yet remains tethered to the commercial and algorithmic conditions that govern contemporary digital fitness culture.

Synthesis of results

Taken together, these four modes illustrate that the self-representation of Taiwanese female fitness instructors on social media is neither uniform nor linear. Rather, it unfolds within a field of tension structured by platform algorithms, commercial imperatives, and gendered cultural expectations. The body emerges simultaneously as a site of labour, a medium of self-expression, and a contested political terrain.

Through a feminist semiotic lens, these findings demonstrate how digital fitness spaces function as contact zones where bodily governance, professional identity, and gender norms intersect. The imagery both reproduces and reworks femininity, revealing agency as conditional and negotiated rather than freely chosen. Social media is not simply a tool of empowerment or oppression. It sets the conditions under which instructors can be seen as legitimate, and under which resistance can be noticed at all.

Conclusion

Drawing on a feminist semiotic analysis of 120 publicly accessible Facebook images posted by Taiwanese female fitness instructors, the material indicates that bodily self-presentation on social media is not simply a matter of personal style or preference. Rather, these visual practices are shaped by the intersecting pressures of platform algorithms, market competition, and locally situated gender norms. Building on the introduction’s discussion of Taiwan’s fitness expansion since the enactment of the Sports Industry Development Act in 2012, the findings show how neoliberal imperatives of self-optimisation are increasingly negotiated through precarious and algorithm-dependent forms of visibility.

The analysis identified four patterned modes of bodily performance—exposure-oriented, professional-neutral, movement-focused, and contrast-challenging. These modes should not be understood as fixed or mutually exclusive categories, but as flexible visual repertoires that instructors combine and recalibrate in response to gendered expectations and commercial demands. Across these variations, a shared condition emerges: bodies must be rendered legible, credible, and appealing within platform cultures that reward visibility, engagement, and affective circulation.

Consistent with Kurghan and Thorpe's (2025) discussion of the "glow-up imperative," the images analysed here reveal how female fitness instructors are positioned between moralised discourses of bodily improvement and narratives of empowerment or body positivity. This tension is not resolved through individual choice, but managed through careful visual negotiation. While some images foreground professional expertise or embodied capability, many remain aligned with dominant aesthetic norms reinforced by algorithmic circulation. As a result, toned-yet-feminine bodies are repeatedly reproduced as commercially viable and socially intelligible forms of fitness professionalism.

Importantly, these images function not only as objects of the gaze but as active semiotic devices. They communicate expertise, transmit ideological assumptions about health and femininity, and shape how instructors come to understand their own bodily value. Across the four modes, female fitness instructors assert strength, discipline, and competence, while simultaneously maintaining soft expressions, approachable aesthetics, or feminised visual cues. This produces a form of conditional agency—one that enables visibility and professional legitimacy, yet remains tethered to normative frameworks of femininity.

Echoing previous research (Y Liu and X Li 2024; Toffoletti and Thorpe 2021), the findings suggest that Taiwanese female fitness instructors draw on Western fitness cultures and neoliberal health discourses, but adapt them within local cultural constraints. Together, these practices illustrate what we describe as localised adaptations—selective recalibrations of Western fitness aesthetics within Sinophone gender norms. Such localisation is evident in strategies that moderate bodily exposure, emphasise professional neutrality, or mobilise "Barbie with muscles" imagery to contest the association between femininity and weakness. These visual strategies shape not only how audiences evaluate female instructors, but also how instructors themselves negotiate professional identity and market positioning within the fitness economy.

Within platform-based fitness markets, the body emerges as a central site of labour and commodification. Visual self-presentation frequently outweighs formal credentials, as degrees of exposure, neutrality, or muscular display operate as semiotic resources for signalling credibility, approachability, or desirability to different audiences, including potential female clients. From a feminist semiotic perspective, these bodily signs do not carry fixed meanings. Their interpretation is contingent on viewing positions and culturally specific norms. In line with Butler's (1990) conception of gender as performative rather than innate, the bodily performances analysed here can be understood as ongoing negotiations between femininity and strength, professional legitimacy and market visibility, constraint and agency.

The reflexive dialogue between the two authors further underscores this interpretive openness. Differences in gendered positioning shaped how particular images were read, with some visual displays interpreted as expressions of health-oriented professionalism rather than sexualised self-presentation. This divergence highlights a central insight of feminist semiotics: meaning is not inherent in the image itself, but emerges through contested processes of interpretation situated within specific social and cultural contexts.

By examining Taiwanese female fitness instructors as situated actors within platform capitalism, this study contributes to feminist media scholarship on embodied labour, visual culture, and gendered agency. Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating audience reception, algorithmic mediation, or cross-platform comparisons to further explore how gendered bodies are made visible, legible, and valuable within contemporary digital fitness cultures.

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Notes on contributors

Hsiu-Tao Hsu is a Distinguished Chair Professor at National Sun Yat-sen University and a Gender Impact Assessment Committee member under Taiwan's Executive Yuan. She holds multiple certifications in strength and conditioning training, with academic expertise in exercise physiology, the sports industry, and gender studies. Professor Hsu integrates feminist theory with everyday cultural practice, focusing on gender justice through teaching, research, and public engagement. As a leading scholar on gender issues in athletics, she plays an active role in both academic and policy arenas in Taiwan.

Chen-Te Hsu is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sport Management at National Taiwan University of Sport. His research focuses on big data analysis, educational administration, sports industry, and event management. He has led national physical education surveys and gender analyses for the Ministry of Education, and has contributed to several government projects on health promotion and physical fitness. He is also qualified as a member of the Gender Impact Assessment Committee under the Executive Yuan. Dedicated to bridging theory and practice, Hsu promotes public fitness, health awareness, and gender equality. In addition, he is also a certified coach in basketball, sailing, and woodball.

ORCID

Hsiu-Tao Hsu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7203-1904>

Chen-Te Hsu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0620-8163>

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