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“It’s like lifting the power”: Powerlifting, digital gendered subjectivities, and the politics of multiplicity

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Abstract:	<p>Powerlifting, a competitive strength-based sport, offers a rich and compelling site for investigating the digital mediation of gendered subjectivities. The substantive implications of feminist knowledge as interventions in physical cultures are well documented. This article seeks to extend the onto-epistemological precepts of a Feminist New Materialist framework to further a generative analysis of women’s physically active moving bodies. The digital lifting journeys of ten women and their physical-digital everyday experiences of becoming-strong comprise the sample with the intent of understanding something different about the micropolitics of self-world transformations entangled within moving-desiring practices. Hence, we argue in this article that the ephemerality of digital traces embedded within networked-based platforms such as Instagram have the potential to change the ‘Face’ of strength-based sport with significant implications for expanding the cultural imaginary of/for sportswomen more broadly.</p>

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“It’s like lifting the power”: Powerlifting, digital gendered subjectivities, and the politics of multiplicity.

Abstract

Powerlifting, a competitive strength-based sport, offers a rich and compelling site for investigating the digital mediation of gendered subjectivities. The substantive implications of feminist knowledge as interventions in physical cultures are well documented. This article seeks to extend the onto-epistemological precepts of a Feminist New Materialist framework to further a generative analysis of women’s physically active *moving* bodies. The digital lifting journeys of ten women and their physical-digital everyday experiences of becoming-strong comprise the sample with the intent of understanding something different about the micropolitics of self-world transformations entangled within moving-desiring practices. Hence, we argue in this article that the ephemerality of digital traces embedded within networked-based platforms such as Instagram have the potential to change the ‘Face’ of strength-based sport with significant implications for expanding the cultural imaginary of/for sportswomen more broadly.

Key words: Powerlifting, gendered subjectivities, Feminist New Materialism, Instagram, feminist knowledge, strength-based sport, digital media, Instagram

Introduction: 'Building Otherwise'

Despite being relegated to the periphery, Women's strength-based pursuits are not a new phenomenon. A kaleidoscope of strong female figures has flexed their muscles throughout history (Vertinsky, 2010). From Edwardian vaudeville acts, to the 'Dolly's of muscle beach', body builders and more recently, Olympic Lifting, Powerlifting and CrossFit athletes illuminate the shifting attitudes towards women with muscles. The past 20 years have witnessed a shift in the normative feminine ideal, from 'skinny' to 'strong' (Markula, 2014). Dictums, such as 'strong is the new skinny' feature prominently in social media and advertising (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). However, women's fitness and the 'fit-looking body' has received heavy critique (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Markula & Kennedy, 2011). The narrow parameters characteristic of the Westernized 'fit feminine ideal' (white, slim and toned, but not too muscular) have been condemned as oppressive to women (Markula 2014). At the same time, there has been growing awareness of the benefits of strength training, particularly for women as they age to protect against a whole range of physical and mental health issues (Leiros-Rodriguez et al., 2019). The often-contradictory way in which sports women are both simultaneously empowered and disempowered, and the paradoxical nature of their everyday experiences is thematically consistent throughout previous leisure literature (see Krane 2001; Meân & Kassing, 2008; Fernandez-Lasa et al., 2021). There have been a few notable and influential scholars who have made important contributions to our thinking about strength-training and feminism. Leslie Heywood's post-structural account of bodybuilding is exemplary of these important studies.

Focused on bodybuilding (which she herself practiced), Heywood provides a compelling and detailed argument for the role of bodybuilding as a form of feminist resistance (1998). She writes, 'taking the risk, going up the next ten pounds and getting the lift convinces us we are someone who can do things, someone who is competent, proud' (1998, p. 3). Female bodybuilders, she argues, calls to 'attention assumptions about women and weakness and incompetence by building

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3 *a body that says otherwise*' (1998, p. 12, our emphasis). However, there remain risks regarding
4 representation for the female bodybuilder. In *Bodymakers: A cultural anatomy of Body Building*,
5 Heywood (1998) reflects on the mode of photography as the primary way women are represented
6 in bodybuilding, and argues that this mode of representation complicates its potential as a resistant
7 form of feminist practice. Represented as sexy or titillating complicates the generative capacity of
8 bodybuilding for women to challenge and resist notions of feminine weakness.
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17 More recent scholarship examines 'new' physical cultural practices such as CrossFit (CF
18 hereafter), which incorporates constantly varied movements at high intensity, such as lifting
19 weights and cardio fitness exercise (Nash, 2018; Johnson, 2019). The rise of CrossFit has been
20 closely aligned with social media platforms that enable participants to post still and moving images
21 (often of themselves), alongside captions and hashtags. Postfeminist analyses such as that by
22 Washington and Economides (2016, p. 156), although attempting to move beyond a reading
23 focused on binary oppositions around femininity and masculinity, ultimately conclude: 'where CF
24 capitalizes on and contributes to this moment where female physical strength and strong bodies
25 are valorized and widely touted, it also reinscribes those bodies as sexual objects for both the
26 heterosexual male gaze and the narcissistic gaze'. This argument is common within postfeminist
27 frameworks of analysis, and it works to close down, rather than open up, potential for feminist
28 transformation and creative, embodied articulations of sporting women.
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46 Turning to the work of Heywood (2015) provides a more generative account of CF. Through
47 attuning to the visual aspects of the sport, she draws on a different range of literatures to argue for
48 what she calls the 'CrossFit Sensorium'. For Heywood (2015, p. 21), CF represents 'a particular
49 manifestation of embodiment encountered within and beyond the moving image, emphasizing CF
50 as one of the world's first sports to be constituted through digital experience, with specific
51 consequences for the forms of embodied experience it offers to practitioners'. For Heywood
52 (2015), the visual is something of a way through to broader somatic experiences, particularly ones
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of safety and inclusion. In her analysis of CrossFit, she conceptualizes the sport as ‘immersive’, combining elements of the competitive and participatory modalities of sport. The immersive model, she writes, ‘... is based on the idea of sport on a gender continuum, with some men embracing participatory values and some women competitive ones’ (Heywood 2015, p. 26). Combining insights from biology and neurobiology with feminist cultural studies and the affective turn (particularly from film studies), Heywood (2015, p. 31) notes that ‘... the importance of a communal experience [in CF] as more important than individual achievement invokes a more immanent, immersive model of sport that appropriates the instrumentality of conventional sport and uses it towards the ends of embodied experience and community building’. It does this through visuality, representing intense exhaustion and physicality, and the everyday lives of participants. Various visual images (moving and still) reveal a ‘split between modernity’s normalizing, empirical regime of measurement and the immersion-based affectivity that erupts within it’ (Heywood 2015, p. 21). In extending upon Heywood’s (2015) conceptualization of the affective relationship between visuality and immersive sport, this article gives attention to a gap existing within the literature surrounding the complexities of visuality-affect-gender entangled within the emerging ‘strength sport’ landscape.

1. Powerlifting: steady, stable, heavy, and inclusive

Research pertaining to women’s weightlifting as a competitive sport, as differentiated from general resistance training, remains under explored. Generally, Weightlifting is divided into Olympic Lifting, Powerlifting and more recently the emergence of CrossFit (CF). Whilst the more varied programming of CF develops muscular strength, Olympic Lifting, and Powerlifting are characterized as ‘strength-dominant sports’, wherein, ‘muscular strength has a direct relationship with competition performance’ (Latella et al., 2020, p. 2412). The focus of Olympic lifting involves shifting weight overhead through two explosive movements known as the snatch, and

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clean and jerk, whereas Powerlifting is less dynamic, focusing on three controlled, heavy lifts (Rodriguez, 2016). Moreover, the physical culture of Powerlifting, as a relatively ‘new’ strength sport, has been welcoming to women (Rodriguez, 2016, p. 6), and through its scoring method, attempts to neutralize variables between lifters (Marc-Ferland & Comtois, 2019).

Powerlifting is characterized as a sport of relative and absolute maximal strength (Ferland & Comtois, 2019): lifters are placed into weight classes divided by age and experience levels. Competitions involve three attempts of one repetition across the squat, bench press and deadlift. As a relatively inexpensive sport following simple rules, it is popular internationally (Kozub et al., 2017). Its straightforward nature and health-related benefits provide a unique opportunity to investigate the transformative potential to generate alternative experiences of the physically active *moving* body. Much like Heywood (2015) found CF to be constituted through digital experience, Powerlifting’s growing popularity centers around how it is ‘seen’ via social media platforms such as Instagram. Hence, Powerlifting offers a rich and compelling site for investigating the digital mediation of gendered subjectivities. Coupled with a need for more nuanced investigations into the embodiment of women’s physically active and muscular bodies, this article engages mixed-mode qualitative inquiry to explore the everyday, physical-digital experiences of becoming-strong.

2. Feminist Physical Cultural Studies Powerlifting and digital culture

The potential to think through women’s *moving* bodies differently from previous studies has led to a call for more multidimensional understandings of the body in sport and society, in order to create critical knowledge about these relationships (Thorpe, 2014). In an age saturated by imagery wherein the presentation of the body has become synonymous with the presentation of the self (Coffey, 2019, p. 1), it is imperative to advance understandings surrounding the transformative potential of the sporting body. Moreover, as gendered subjectivities are enacted amid a highly

complex socio-political climate, their re-presentation demands flexible and creative theory-method designs (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013). Feminist Physical Cultural studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field that explores the 'disruptive possibilities of feminist interventions into physical cultures' and 'advocates creative articulations rather than essentializing re-presentations of gender difference' (Author B et al., 2019, p. 2). The performativity of gender within physical cultures is a central concern of this framework and draws upon diverse methodologies to answer the call for more nuanced and 'fleshy' explorations of women's movement lives. Therefore, a central aim of this research is to show how sport cannot be thought of as an institution separate and above cultural conditions but instead, as entangled with every day (gender) normalizing practices.

In an illuminative study, Brace-Govan (2004) investigates the social forces implicated in controlling the access and, importantly, interest in competitive weightlifting. In her research, she argues that a lack of visibility of weightlifting women is significant and alters the social dynamics of the lived experience of physical strength. As argued by Brace-Govan (2004), it is not only the social organization of physical activity that is important, but also the highly visible, ritual display of strength and ability. Visual (especially digital) representations are a vital part of the processes embedded within embodied identity projects. Within sport cultures, there has been a significant shift from women athletes being represented, often in sexualized and objectified ways, to women representing themselves, uploading images and moving film for diverse purposes and audiences (Bruce, 2016; Toffoletti, 2016). Building upon Toffoletti et al.'s (2021) call to critically consider how exercising women experience and navigate digital spaces, we focus on Instagram as the main platform that the athletes use to share and store visual representations of their sport practice.

Reade (2020) notes that Instagram is a social media platform through which exercising women can visually self-present 'authenticity' and the 'everyday' experiences of their movement lives. Moreover, the sustained use of Instagram has been conceptualized as both private and public

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archives. Pybus (2015, p. 239) considers the nature of these archives as an ‘important space of interpretation and contestation that has the power to make meaning through its ability to privilege certain discourse over others’. As a repository exceeding 80 million daily photos, further investigation is warranted into the meaning-making practices underpinning the curation of user-generated content (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). The use of Instagram creates opportunities for expanding the cultural imaginary surrounding sportswomen. In relation to Powerlifting, we argue that ephemeral mobilities of digital traces have the potential to change the ‘Face’ of strength-based sport among other emerging sporting femininities by attracting and sustaining a supportive virtual collective. Hence the research questions that attenuate our thinking are as follows: how are systems of power (re)produced and negotiated between embodied identity projects and the physical cultural space(s) and practice(s) of Power Lifting? And, how do we understand the changed affordances of self-representing the sporting body within digital media landscapes?

In the next section, we present and explain the conceptual framework underpinning the project, followed by our methodology. We then analyze the experiences of becoming-strong and the complexities entangled within the gender-sport-media nexus. Finally, the closing discussion engages the research questions in response to the main findings and argues that theory-method approaches grounded in feminist new materialism offers a generative framework to explore how gendered inequalities are ‘felt’.

3.0 Conceptual Framework: Feminist New materialism(s), the ‘living present’, and ‘affective assemblage(s).

Drawing upon scholarship examining embodiment and physical cultures, this article contributes to new understandings about the mechanisms through which Powerlifting engages the full force of the moving body. Specifically, the ways in which the moving-desiring practices of becoming-

strong offer a different way of relating to the world and oneself. Hence, with the intent of providing a critical understanding of situated knowledges of becoming-strong, this project investigates processes of subjectification that materialize through a feminist new materialist framework (hereafter FNM). As Wearing (1998) notes, 'ideas have complex trajectories', and a diverse number of post-structuralist and post-humanist perspectives transverse a feminist 'new materialist' framework. Mindful of this genealogy the 'new' of new materialism should not be read as a departure point from the legacy and significant contribution of previous feminist thought (Davis, 2014, p. 62). However, what is new about these conceptualisations is an ontological-epistemological shift which moves analysis beyond neat categorisations and coherent narratives (St. Pierre, 2017). In shifting the ontological-epistemological prism through which knowledge claims are made 'about' gendered subjectivities, this framework offers radical potential to extend analysis of physical cultures (Markula, 2019). Specifically, we argue that the collaborative lines of flight between Barad's (2003) agential realism and a feminist inspired Deleuze-Guattarian (1987) philosophy contribute towards research practices that facilitate generative capacities of representation. A key problematic that FNM has contributed towards is troubling notions of linearity and progress. Loewen Walker (2014) establishes that across a diverse array of scholarship there has been an exploration into the 'value of non-chronological time in opening up a transformative and unknown future' (2014, p. 46). She extends on this work to conceptualise a materialist feminist temporality as a 'living present', wherein the 'echoes, resonances and traces of the past' (2014, p. 46) materialise within the present-future. Building upon the work of Grosz, Colebrook, and Barad, she frames the living present as a realm of possibility co-constituted through intra-active materialities. Barad (2006, p. 139) conceptualises 'intra-action' as a situation of 'inseparability between self and world, subject and object', advocating a performative relationality, 'between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted'. Barad (2006, p. 185) similarly argues towards

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research practices that are grounded in an ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’ and which recognize that we are ‘becoming with the world’, and that the ‘becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter’. This is an important shift in not only decentring the human as the focus of inquiry but also in decentring the privileged position of researcher/researched. The dynamism of intra-active becoming places an emphasis on difference rather than sameness and has been a generative concept in feminist analyses to destabilize normative categories of identity (Lowen Walker, 2014). This temporal register of identity is, we argue, also implicated in the ‘affective assemblage’ which we elaborate below.

4. The ‘Affective Assemblage’

Feminist theory and post-structuralism have made significant contributions to the ways in which the body operates as a materialization of self-expression (Griffen, 2007). Whilst the constitutive nature of discourse remains a pivotal analytic tool, methodological enquiry also needs to attend to the body as more than merely a passive surface inscribed by ‘texts’ (Griffen, 2007). Gaining significance across a range of disciplines is the increasing recognition that processes of subjectivity are linked to the ways the body is experienced through time and space (Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). This moves social inquiry to attune to the ways in which, not only discursive practices shape worlds, but also practices of inclusion and exclusion can occur from the relations in-between material and affective elements (Daya, 2019, p. 361). Or rather, as Lemmings & Brooks (2016, p. 3) succinctly surmise, ‘if the linguistic turn represents our acknowledgement that language helps to constitute reality, then an affective turn implies that emotions have a similarly fundamental role in human experience’.

The ‘affective turn’ was catalysed by an inclination to better understand the micropolitics of the ‘live surface’, that is the intensities of ‘... the textures and sensations through which everyday life is experienced’ (Stewart, 2007, p. 4). Affect, ‘the capacities to act and be acted upon’ (Fullagar et

al. 2018, p. 1), orients the focus of enquiry towards the bodily sensations and the meaningful knowledge gained from such a 'pre-discursive, feeling, physically active body' (Gregg & Seigworth, 2009, p. 1). Whilst affect is inherently difficult to define as there is 'no pure or somehow originary state for affect' (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1), emphasis is not so much on what affect 'is' but what it 'does'. Whilst there are competing conceptualisations of affect, they have at their heart 'a desire to account for the *more than* symbolic aspects of the body' (Fullagar et al., 2018b, p. 5, original emphasis), or rather things that are not easily captured in language. It is these 'more-than' aspects generated by the moving body that are of interest to our approach. In opening up questions of embodiment to consider the role of affective dimensions, a more generative analysis might be enabled beyond a closed program of empowered/oppressed interpretive claims. The imperative here is not a 'resolution' of contradictory experiences. In moving away from neat narratives that romanticise individual empowerment or, alternatively, pronounce sportswomen's gender performativity as effects of idealised heterosexual recuperation, we ask, what can a Powerlifting body do?

Whilst there is considerable debate concerning inside/outside and biological/cultural origins of emotion (Kumm & Johnson, 2018), in finding new ways of thinking and writing about emotion, affect and the social in sport, we draw upon the idea of 'affective assemblages' which Ringrose (2011, p. 602) defines as "'multiplicitious" "social entities" constituted through interactions among the various parts, with various affective capacities'. The mechanics of assemblage are viewed by Deleuze and Guattari (1984, pp. 286-8) as either molecular 'relations which combine in ways that mean nothing other than the desire they produce' or as molar assemblages, which are, 'stable forms, unifying, structuring and proceeding by means of large aggregates'. Within an assemblage, affects flow 'rhizomically', 'branching and reversing flows, coalescing and rupturing' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.7). Hence, in moving beyond subject/object dualisms akin to Barad's (2003)

notions of intra-active inseparability, 'every society, and every individual, are thus plied by both segmentarities simultaneously: one molar, the other *molecular*', or rather, 'in short, everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 249). When viewing agency as the capacity to affect/be affected as a processual and relational flow, different desires can be critically and creatively explored. To this end, extending the Deleuzian-Guattarian concepts of 'deterritorialization' and 'reterritorialization' offers a compelling framework for rethinking how gender has been made 'knowable', and importantly, how this might be imagined otherwise.

The capacity of the body to affect relations within molecular assemblages 'deterritorialize', by opening up 'possibilities for what bodies can do and desire', and opens up the possibility to produce a line of flight from a stable or molar identity (Fox & Alldred, 2013, p.773). However, within assemblages, constraining power also resides in affective flows which can work to 'reterritorialize' *what* bodies 'can' and 'cannot' do (Fox & Alldred, 2013, p.773). Braidotti (2002, p. 28) also invites us to rethink the potential contradictory material-discursive effects by rethinking an ontology of the social and self-hood in terms of power-relations as overlapping variables '... cut across any monolithic understanding of the subject'. Hence, rejecting notions of a singular, unified, and humanist subject, enables a more generative analysis of complex phenomena (Fullagar et al., 2019b, p. 2). Moreover, this facilitates a stance, which 'can accommodate multiple, not simply dichotomously sexed bodies' (Gatens, 1996, p. 56). By avoiding metanarratives and facilitating a mode of representation beyond a classificatory approach, substantive insights may be gained. This is crucial for exploring the potential of feminist knowledge as intervention into narrow, closed and often unobtainable and for many, untenable, gender ideals. As an open-ended program for social change, this way of thinking *through* concepts creates new imagined possibilities and importantly lends itself towards constructive methods of engaging social-material change (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013).

5. Methods: “Lifting” Research

The sample of 10 participants selected for this research was diverse in terms of sporting ability; experience ranged from a minimum of twelve months to five years of training in powerlifting as a competitive sport. Level and frequency of competition also varied, from novice to international competitors. The ages of participants ranged from 22 to 42 years of age and all participants worked across a variety of industries (*see table 1 below*). Recruitment strategies included social media invitations and through local gyms. Snowballing was also used, as participants often had other people in their network who fulfilled the criteria. Lifters were located mainly in Brisbane (Queensland, Australia), but also in Melbourne (Victoria, Australia) and Wagga (NSW, Australia). One Skype interview was conducted internationally with a participant from Bangkok (Thailand). A departure point from other research engaging social networking texts is the move towards a more nuanced line of inquiry through recruiting participants as ‘co-analysts’ (Robards & Lincoln, 2017, p. 715). Initial interviews went for approximately 15 minutes before the ‘scroll-back’ methodology was introduced after having established a rapport with the participant to ensure they were comfortable being recruited as a co-analyst. The ‘scroll-back methodology’ as conceptualized by Robards & Lincoln (2017) combines an interview approach with the materiality of images, through having participants ‘scroll back’ through the archival Facebook Timeline. They argue that such a method ‘brings to life’ the ‘digital trace’ (Robards & Lincoln, 2017, p. 715) inscribed through the use of social media sites. Although the authors do not explicitly align themselves within a new materialist framework, it would be reasonable to suggest that such a method might mechanize a FNM onto-epistemology in its capacity to generate representations of the ‘everyday, mundane, and critical moments brought forth as “matterings”’ (Robards & Lincoln 2017, p. 716). In operating through a FNM lens, we write this article with a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which the digital-physical spaces of Powerlifting facilitate the transversality of affective resonances, building up otherwise unthought of ‘intimacies’ (Mondin, 2017, p. 283).

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Hence, we combine this method with semi-structured interviews as a way of introducing the materiality of the smart phone, as well as the moving body (archived through Instagram) into the research encounter. Moreover, positioning the interviewees as co-analysts recruits the participants into the process of analyzing their own digital traces and disclosure practices. Such a step may work to decenter the privileged position of researcher/researched.

This mixed-mode approach aligns with Ahmed et al’s. (2014) call towards an *ethics of address* and takes response-ability for the boundaries created by the research encounter. We argue that engaging semi-structured interviews with a scroll-back methodology is a pathway ‘to “better” encounter others, of speaking and of hearing, and of responding to difference and disagreement’ (Ahmed et al., 2014, p. 3). To extend feminist post-structural insights about the value of reflexive and embodied research beyond the interview encounter open communication was maintained with participants through the first author’s own personal Instagram account to foster reflexive engagement with the participants over the course of the project, should they chose to do so. In the spirit of the ‘diffractive researcher’ (Barad, 2003) and in order to better attenuate to the ways in which the specificity of the strenuous bodywork involved in becoming-strong materializes through pre-discursive and embodied knowledge, the first author also engaged in a powerlifting training program for at least once a week for one hour at varying times over the course of the year 2019.

[LIST TABLE 1 HERE]

6. Analysis

To critique the complexities entangled within the gender-sport nexus our analysis follows Jackson & Mazzei’s (2013) demonstration of thinking with-through theory to facilitate a reading of data that is ‘both within and against interpretivism’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 261). In working

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3 against conventional coding, the authors deploy ‘plugging in’, a conceptual tool drawn from
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5 Deleuze and Guattari (1987), which operationalizes analysis as a process that positions data and
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7 theory as machines with ‘potential to interrupt and transform other machines’ (2013, p. 261).
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9 Drawing on the conceptual tool of ‘plugging one text into another’ also aligns with MacLure’s
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11 (2013) call towards alternative modes of engaging with data that are not bound by the strictures of
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13 coding. However, caution must be exercised in suggesting that coding as an analytical practice be
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15 abandoned altogether. Rather, MacLure (2013, p. 181) orients coding towards...
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19 [an] experiment with order and disorder, in which provisional and partial taxonomies are
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21 formed, but are always subject to change and metamorphosis, as new connections spark
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23 among words, bodies, objects and ideas.
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27 A Deleuzo-Guattarian figuration of the assemblage also works as an apt framework to incorporate
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29 the compilation of images provided by the participants. These images have been assembled into a
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31 “research feed” (*see image 2 below*). Separate images will also be embedded throughout the
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33 following sections alongside theoretical concepts. Rather than rely solely on interpretive
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35 modalities this mock ‘feed’ is incorporated to bolster the presence of the affective realm of
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37 experience within the analysis to think *through* and *with* the images in an attempt to come to know
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39 something different about how identities are lived, felt, and practiced (Ahmed et al., 2014, p. 15).
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41 The research feed mimics the flow of images, ‘likes’, and affective intensities chosen by
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43 participants as significant in their personal feed, and hence provides a way to read their images
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45 through and with the other participants. Rather than analyzing images in isolation, the research
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47 feed provides a literal assemblage that is both familiar and unfamiliar at once. The next section
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49 introduces the uses of Instagram as a community resource and training diary for Powerlifters.
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58 [LIST FIGURE 1 HERE]
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7. Digital-Physical-Sporting Culture(s)

7.1 Networked Affect, community, and the training diary

“You’ve got that common interest, oh you do power lifting, I do power lifting, let’s be friends.”

(Katie, 32)

A visible Instagram presence was an integral part of Powerlifting for the participants in this study. All but two participants regularly engage with the social networking site, posting training videos, competition photos, community announcements, promotion of upcoming competitions etc., as well as content related to their wider social lives, often in a public profile capacity. Lucy (35) is the only participant who has a ‘private’ profile specifically using the site to network with other Lifters and Powerlifting related content. Although Vanessa (37) does not use Instagram at all, she notes its significance in the increasing popularity of the sport. The inextricable nature of the relationship between the digital and physical spaces of Powerlifting is pervasive throughout the interviews. When the interview turns towards exploring the main reasons for the growing popularity of Powerlifting, an alternative sport with little to no financial incentives, the discussion centered around how it is ‘seen’ via social media. Through engaging participants as co-analysts in extrapolating *how* and *why* they use Instagram, it became clear that its purpose as a *training diary* is paramount. Isabel characterizes the use of Instagram as a public training diary across the sample by stating,

When I post stuff on Instagram it’s about other powerlifters looking at it. It’s a training diary for me. When I post something on Facebook, that’s my friends and family, so I get very different comments on Facebook than I do on Instagram. So that’s been really interesting to see. (Isabel, 42)

The heterogenous character of dynamic, affective visual imagery archived as a public training diary has particular implications for increasing the visual economy of strength-based femininities.

The digital trace archived within these training diaries provide an object to think-through the relationship between sporting and gendered performance. As the Instagram accounts often include content surrounding their moving-desiring life worlds across multiple social sites experiences of alternative sporting femininities differ. In narrating their negotiation of these, multiple contexts, the participants sought to rearticulate notions of desired femininity and reappropriate strength-based physical acts as positive and productive performances of gendered knowledge. The following section of this analysis explores how the participants enacting moving-desiring practices which are intelligible as ‘feminine’ but also directly challenge the preserve of strength-based sport as inherently ‘masculine’.

7.2 “The Lifting Face”: The affection-image

“It’s not real cute. I’ll give you the hot tip... That’s the face. That’s a ‘I’m going to kill you’ [face]” (Isabel, 42).

[LIST FIGURE 2 HERE]

One of our main findings emphasizes how Powerlifters use Instagram to produce or extend offline communities around networked affects as well as a memory text to archive key moments in their lifting journeys and wider social lives. A recurring and significant instance of imagery which mobilized affective logics to cue strong emotional responses was that of the ‘lifting face’. Such imagery can be explored through Deleuze’s concept of ‘faciality’. The face for Deleuze is intensive and reflexive, and as an ‘organ-carrying plate of nerves’ shows its expressive becoming (Deleuze, 2005, p. 67). Utilizing the face as an interpretive vehicle, a Deleuzian inspired approach to visual

sociology centers on the affection-image as occupying the gap between perception and action; it is the moment in which subject and object ‘coincide’. It finds expression in the ‘close-up’ and captures the way in which the subject ‘feels’ itself ‘from the inside’ (Deleuze, 2005, p. 67). Within Powerlifting communities, the lifting face is enacted at the end range of the process of materialization between the intra-actions of the barbell, plates and lifter. The ‘lifting face’ as a pre-personal and pre-conscious intensity reconciles with Hemmings’ (2012, p. 150) call that, ‘... in order to know differently, we have to feel differently... feminist politics can be characterized as that which moves us, rather than that which confirms us in what we already know’. Sharing these kinds of images, which in other contexts may be considered ‘ugly’, an excess or abjection of the heteronormative ‘feminine’ self, is seen by participants in a range of generative ways. Isabel (42) describes her lifting face as a ‘*devil face*’ and a ‘*psycho lifting face*’. When further prompted about this phenomenon of the lifting face she replies that: ‘I do get self-conscious about the faces. I think they’re funny and I think, you know, you’ve got to own it a little bit’. Similarly, Katie (32) celebrates imagery associated with the ‘Poop Face. Lifting Face’, as a ‘fun thing to take the piss out of yourself’, as ‘... it’s not always a glamorous sport’. She adds: ‘sometimes you pull crazy faces and look like shit. But... it normalizes what you look like... after all you’re there to compete’. Hannah (26) also discusses the intensity of feelings enacted at the end phase of a heavy lift. Interestingly, she describes a shift from consciously trying to maintain a semblance of ‘appropriate femininity’ towards a complete disruption of normalizing practices in attempting to engage the full force of the moving body. She attests,

‘when I first started it was full poker face, no noise, no nothing, and then the other lifting face crept in somewhere last year, now it’s ugly lifting face and noise’ (Hannah, 26).

This example also illuminates how the face as an organ-carrying plate of nerves, is an effective interpretive vehicle occupying the gap between perception and action. Building on Butler’s (1997, p. 147) conceptualization of ‘insurrectionary womanliness’ defined as ‘expressing conventional

formulae in non-conventional ways', the digital trace on Instagram accounts of the participants provides an object through which to think with the liminal space between self-hood and social life (McNaughton, 2012, p. 2). Often the profile of the participants is characterized by a mixture of Powerlifting content, as well as moments captured from their wider social lives. Their experiences of strength-based gendered subjectivity differ between the context of the multiple worlds they inhabit, and the archival feed provides an object that demonstrates visually the practices of negotiating these various contexts.

8. Engendering of a Novel Future – Complicating Linearity

"While it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than just a personal act"

(Misztal, 2003, p. 6)

8.1 The 'thickened human': How to research the Future?

Central to disrupting normative ways of knowing and being is the potential to imagine other possibilities for living (Author B et al., 2018, p. 3). Ontological notions surrounding futurity are increasingly consonant in how the life worlds, particularly in a contemporary Western context are organized, experienced and governed (Coleman, 2017, p. 525). Braidotti (2002, p. 1) argues that '... living at such times of fast changes may be exhilarating, yet the task of representing these changes to ourselves and engaging productively with the contradictions, paradoxes and injustices they engender is a perennial challenge'. For the participants in this study, a key challenge centralizes around the negotiation of pressures to conform to traditional notions of femininity. This is not a deterrent for participants; rather, they enact modes of resistance in order to make positive and productive space for themselves. In a world where change is a pervasive feature, we argue that the practices of powerlifting, particularly in its specificity and training principles grounded in

progressive-overload and *time-under-tension*, are life affirming technologies of self-expression and produce affective economies which re-imagine feminist futures. Our research shows the instability of the boundaries between gender performance and affective memory. Or, as Deleuze (1994, p. 137) states: ‘affects aren’t feelings, they’re becomings that spill over beyond whoever lives through them (thereby becoming someone else)’.

Attenuating to the living present as a *live* present is amenable to generating concepts which can move social knowledge surrounding physically active women beyond empowered/disempowered binaries. A conception of non-chronological time attends to the co-creative relationship between meaning and materiality and the *becoming* of time, ‘a realm of possibility to which one is accountable, but not bound’ (Loewen Walker 2014, p. 58). Reworking temporality as an active component in the materialization of embodied identity, Juelskjaer (2013) explores how the constitution of subjectivity is a complex and dynamic process. The research investigated how students who changed schools to experience ‘new beginnings’ enact past and present lives as active forces in becoming as...

... one always already haunted; one not just placed in time and space, but a ‘thickened human’ who is not a bounded entity, but a human where boundaries of what that human might, and might not be, are set in motion so many different and specific ways, places and temporalities. (Juelskjaer, 2013, p. 766)

Offering theoretical and empirical insights into how we might engage with forces of space, time, materialities and bodies in shaping subjectivities Juelskjaer (2013, p. 765) argues that a diffractive reading of space-times ‘makes possible a universe that gets to some of the “thickness” of subjectivities’. Although it is inherently difficult to research the intangible, exploring the ways in which the participants reconfigure temporality as dis/continuous (Barad, 2003) offers a rich site for investigating temporality beyond linear narratives of progress. Juelskjaer argues that the ‘thickened human’ mechanizes an effective move out of the realm of masculinist, teleological

mastery; operationalizing a way of getting to know something else about the struggles of subjectivity (2013, p. 766). Hence, it is necessary to engage with the pasts embedded within processes of becoming-strong, as they are entangled with presents and with unknown and unthought of futures (Sroda et al., 2014, p. 121). The ways in which Instagram makes past activity available for communication in the present works to emphasize the tensions or contradictions that exist in moving the physically active body within-through advanced capitalist conditions. Cho (2015) describes mapping the cyclicity and repetition of the flow of affects through social media platforms as a useful dynamic in understanding the temporal cycles of felt experience that structure the flow of affect in digital-physical worlds (Cho, 2015, p. 24). As co-analysts, the participants narrated past and present capacities in a dynamic and unedited way, 'zigzagging' (Braidotti, 2002) between the archived imagery and interview questions. The performance of memory when engaging with the imagery 'reverberated' outwards from the body-media-memory assemblage to illuminate the ways the participant disrupted normative ways of being. Hence, we argue that the role of Instagram is twofold, not only does it expand the visual economy of power lifting identities and alternative sporting femininities more widely but its affordances of archiving visual imagery mediate memory, which 'reverberates' through the intra-actions of temporal cycles of felt experience (Cho, 2015, p. 24). Scrambling linear notions of time as duration and affect are re-enacted through the ephemeral story telling of collective-connective performance of shared memories (van Doorn, 2011, p. 540). Cho (2015) asserts that attention to cyclicity and repetition is crucial to understanding the flow of affect in situated performances of knowledge.

The programming specifics pertaining to the development of strength aligns with a dis/continuous, cyclical view of temporality (Barad, 2003). The very nature of the sport reorients notions of success away from teleological progress narratives. Whilst a variety of methods are used for programming, 'nonlinear periodization' is a generally understood practice which optimizes physiological strain, or 'time under tension' as paramount to strength gains (Monteiro et al., 2009,

p. 1321). A constant loading of the muscles in a progressive, linear fashion is viewed as a considerably less effective way to gain strength (Monterio et al., 2009, p. 1321). For participants who have been competed over a number of years, such cycles are brought forth as ‘matterings’ in a zigzag fashion; demonstrative of a life-world centered on the rhythmic ebbs and flows characteristic of optimizing peaks in physical exertion to perform competitively. This coincides with an opening up about notions of winning/losing and success/failure beyond the sites of Powerlifting. Hence, training principles such as ‘time under tension’ generated a life affirming technique for participants in that they facilitate ‘women’s own understanding of their experiences as both physical sensations and metaphors for personal, confident sense of self’ (Clarke, 2017, p. 6).

8.2 Life-affirming Programs

Tracing the movements of becoming-strong to different sites such as work or wider social settings demonstrates the ways in which space and time are active forces co-implicated in constructing subjectivities. Tsing (2015, p. viii) describes a ‘third nature’ beyond ecological relations (first nature) and capitalist conditions (second nature) to emphasize that life is affirmed in the enabling of entanglements, despite these often precarious and constraining conditions. For example, Hannah mobilizes the incorporeal imaginary of physical control and strength alongside bodily awareness in her everyday experiences. She describes how she thinks it...

just makes you a lot more confident and assertive and like you’ve got more confidence in your abilities...I guess even in work [...] in the last year I’ve kind of moved up a bit through my roles [...] in my previous role last year I remember going into my boss and actually asking him for a pay rise, which is something I would never have had the confidence to do before, I was just, like, oh, they’re not going to do that, but I just did it. (Hannah, 26)

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3 Harriet also expresses the way that processual flows of affect generated in becoming-strong
4 transversed into wider social sites. When asked whether the stillness and composure central to
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6 Powerlifting transferred across into any other aspects of her life she responds with a revelation she
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8 had one day where...
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13 *As juvenile as it sounds, I had this revelation one day that power lifting is like – ‘Hang on,*
14 *it’s like lifting the power’ And it’s like the idea of encouraging others and showing others*
15 *and being able to uplift you know the power. And I know it sounds a bit juvenile ... but it*
16 *came to me one time and I was just like ‘Oh, yeah, so I actually have a responsibility and*
17 *I have an opportunity to be able to uplift others through what I do even my failures.*
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22 (Harriet, 40)
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27 We argue that in a world characterized by constant change and transformation, the opportunity to
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29 work on three movement patterns re-orientates embodied identity projects quite literally towards
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31 a position of stability. Harriet elaborates on the affective resonances unique to Powerlifting as she
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33 compares her experience of CF, she states:
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37 *Well, it’s different because in Powerlifting you’re focusing-in on three movements, so*
38 *you’re really working towards that [...] it’s really got a different mindset; it’s really about*
39 *the grind, getting under the weight and working it time and time again because*
40 *that’s how you get better just continuing to ramp-up the Kgs and getting that time under*
41 *tension, and it’s not about changing [...] There’s something special about refining yourself*
42 *for a particular movement [...] So, having that focus is very unique [...]you’re staying still;*
43 *you’re standing, so you don’t have interference of someone going to tackle you ...you can*
44 *stand in that moment. (Harriet, 40)*
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56 Temporality is an active force embedded within the agentic potential of matter and facilitates
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58 access to knowledge, particularly in constituting the *more than* symbolic aspects of the body.
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Investigating the participants experiences of spatio-temporalities or rather, the ‘living present’ can work to ‘surface’ ways of understanding and attuning to the future. Instagram offers a unique arena to investigate the politics of becoming through engaging with moving imagery as an archival object, which have ‘specific affective and political potential and can live in different spaces differently’ (Mondin, 2017, p. 283). The zigzagging movements of narrative, which reverberated outwards from the images archived within the participants Instagram feed, enables a performance of memory work, which demonstrates the concept of the ‘thickened human’ (Juelskjaer 2013). Such insights contribute to FNM theorizing of the subject as not a bounded and rational individual, but rather a permeable entity entangled within a nexus of human and non-human forces. This further clarifies how identity politics are processual rather than fixed, opening up the possibility to become-otherwise, which has significant implications for a feminist project of leisure and physical cultural studies.

Conclusion:

“Smaller people have lifted bigger stuff. You watch people smaller than you lift bigger weights. So, you know that all of this stuff is possible.”

(Isabel, 42).

In this article powerlifting emerges as a moving-desiring set of practices that demonstrates possibilities for intervention into narrow articulations of desired femininity. In desiring to become otherwise the participants utilize the affordances of Instagram to extend a sense of community and support within digital-physical spaces. The participants, through documenting their lifting journeys as a public training diary, expand the visual economy surrounding strength-based gendered performance. The ephemeral trace existing within the affordances of social media

platforms, such as Instagram, increase visibility, communicating in different spaces and times to past, present and future lifters. Researching temporality as an agentic force demonstrates how relationality is a dis/continuous process of past, present and future through which the in-betweenness of selfhood and social life is entangled.

It is important to recognize that enacting the potential of post a FNM framework is not without limitations and challenges. Tensions can materialize when facing institutional expectations that research outputs resemble the “gold standards” of postpositivist inquiry (Berbary, 2019, p. 2). However, there is radical potential in FNM in its ability to flexibly accommodate differences within and between sportswomen by advocating a politics of multiplicity. Difference, when understood as creative, relational and multiple increases the critical theoretical toolkit to more closely attenuate to how subjectivities are enacted within highly nuanced flows of power. Arguing towards a ‘micropolitical’ conception of life-worlds, we contribute to new understandings about the ways in which the live surface is entangled within inextricable systems of power. Conceptualizing active embodiment as continuously immersed within wider socio-political forces further clarifies that notions of a unified, singular and humanist subject is an inadequate theoretical platform from which to support any kind of social or cultural transformation. This article also problematizes the idea that sportswomen are either disempowered subjects who unwittingly reproduce docile bodies or are conversely, empowered agents who are able to make a complete and totalizing escape from heteronormative gender ideals. Reorientating social inquiry towards an alternate, positive account of difference uncouples analysis from having to reduce complex phenomena to reductionist binaries or either/or identities towards accounting for both/and subjectivities. Moreover, in doing so agency is reconfigured beyond constrained/liberated to better attenuate to material-discursive-affective underpinnings of power relations. This is an important step towards mapping how molar structures are reterritorialized in a socio-political context that depoliticizes health, wellbeing and active embodiment practices.

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As physical cultures, health and wellbeing more broadly are increasingly caught up in postfeminist and neoliberal discourse, feminist theories of affect offer generative frameworks to explore how gendered inequalities are ‘felt’. We argue that it is imperative to re-imagine feminist futures which nurture spaces and practices to engender alternative ways of being outside of narrow, closed and often unobtainable and for many untenable gender ideals. The salience of FNM social inquiry resides in its potential for illuminating ways of being that nurture alternative possibilities or rather, as St. Pierre states, ‘the new is immanent, but it must be created’ (2017, p. 1087). Put another way, in the spirit of rhizomatic thought, we will let Isabel (42) have the last words, “*So, what you can’t see on my belt, is around the inside, and I’ve had the word ‘possible’ engraved on there.*”

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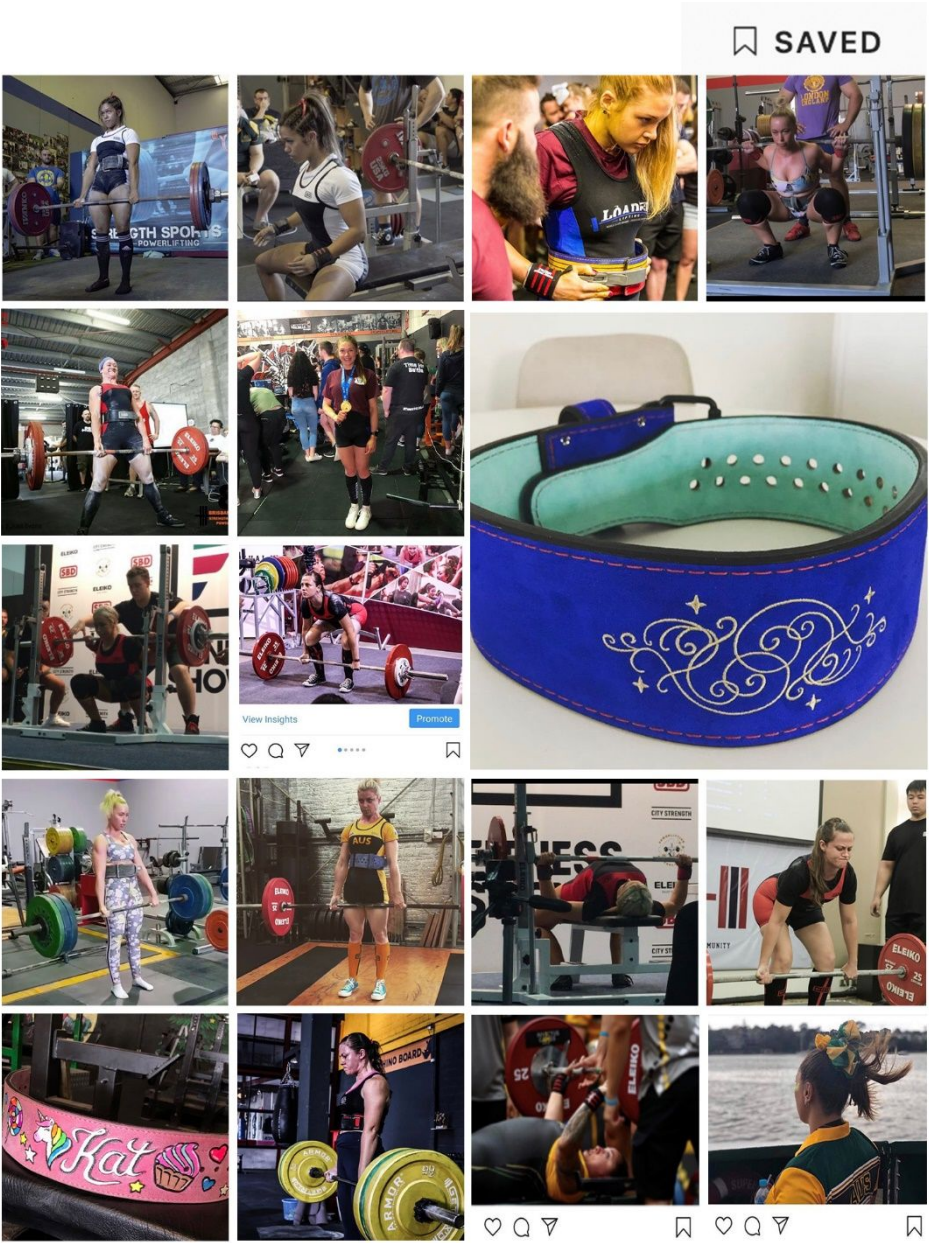


Figure 1 Research Assemblage: Becoming-Strong

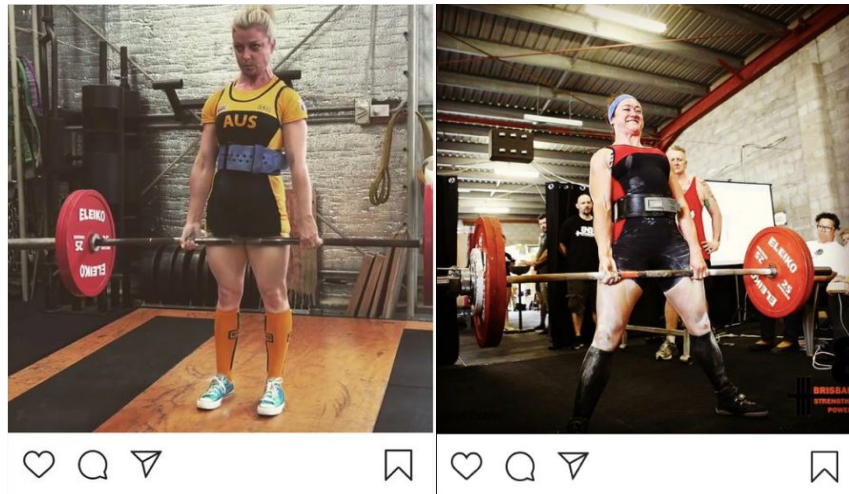


Figure 2: Lifting-Faces

	Age	Occupation	Squat	Deadlift	Bench	Competition Total	Number of years participating in PL	Number of PL Competitions
Amy	26	Strength & Conditioning Coach	137.5	170	80	387.5kg	4yrs	8
Elise	22	Skin Specialist/Therapist	140	135	82.5	357.5kg	3.5yrs	2
Harriet	40	Chaplain	152.5	187.5	90	417.5kg	5yrs	20
Katie	32	Firefighter	132.5	142.5	95	370kg	3yrs	3
Isabel	42	COO	122	156	74	352kg	2yrs	5
Hannah	26	Senior Employee Relations Advisor/Law Student	135	160	65	355kg	3yrs	7
Naomi	31	Product Designer	70	98	47	215kg	1.5yrs	2
Lucy	35	Psychologist	158	170	83	411kg	3yrs	3
Beth	n/a	Office Worker	125.5	140	60	325.5kg	3yrs	3
Vanessa	37	FT Academic/PT Fitness Instructor	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1yr	1

Participant Summary Table