

Women in Gym Subculture

Background

I joined the Elite Gym along with my friend, Naeem, as new gym members from August 2017 to January 2018 (Saleem 1, 2). During my membership, my perception of exercising in the gym changed. By the end of my membership, I developed an interest in regularly exercising for the sake of reducing body fat and reshaping my body into a more muscular physique. Aside from the physical and health benefits, I enjoyed spending time in the Elite Gym because it was a place where I was able to connect with friends ^{who} I rarely met elsewhere (Saleem 2). ^{transition} For this paper, I ^{needed} wanted to study the perspective of women in gym subculture.

Observations

The Elite Gym is located at 782 Coney Island Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11218 in Kensington, (i.e. Brooklyn's 14th neighborhood district). On the 25th of February 2018, I visited the gym to perform my first fieldwork observation on this fieldsite as described below:

In the front of the gym, from the left, there was a 10-feet by 10-feet glass screen. By standing in front of it, I can see a number of people exercising in the gym and three ellipticals facing the glass screen. Behind the ellipticals, to the left, there was a mirror lining the wall from the floor to the ceiling and stretching across the other end of the building. In front of this mirror, there were four treadmills lined up side by side. From above, the positions of the treadmills and ellipticals would form an "L." On the right side of the glass screen, there was a black door with a glass screen in the center and a flat bar in the middle of the door to push the door open or pull the door shut.

Upon entering the gym, ^{gym patrons?} we notice a wide rectangular room that makes up the entirety of the first floor. This floor was characterized by a dark yellow wooden floor, the

treadmills were located on the left side, and there were 10 black lockers and 12 grey lockers lined up against the wall to the right. On the left side of the lockers, [there was a *grammar?* two bike machines facing the wall. Passed the bikes,] there is a large black refrigerator with a glass screen to examine an assortment of drinks. The lockers and refrigerator were across from the treadmills. [Across the room from the refrigerator, a thigh machine was located on the right side of the treadmills.] On the left side of the refrigerator, there was the receptionist desk with a 4 ½ feet steel plated border in front of it. A scanner and flyers were placed on top of the border, where members scan their cards. One of the flyers lists membership prices for \$ 45.00 per month, \$ 40.00 per month for 3 months, and \$ 40.00 for 6 months. The receptionist desk had a black computer's monitor placed on it with an assortment of papers. Behind the desk was the black-haired receptionist. Inside the gym, there was no odor, but there was the repeating cycle of loud rap music playing from the speakers that hang from the walls. The lack of odor indicates that the gym was kept well ventilated. The exercise equipment occupied so much space, ^{that} there was a narrow walkway sufficient for only two people to walk abreast. As I walked passed the receptionist's desk, I saw a wide-open space that was occupied by people performing squats and lifting a long black bar or a long steel bar with black metal plates on each end. Each person had a black rack to catch or hold the bar. The gym-attendees were either working out or taking a break. At the end of the first floor, passed the open spaces to use the long bar, there are benches available to push up or pull up a long steel bar while lying down or sitting up on the bench. In order to prevent attendees from dropping the bar on themselves, there was a rack to catch and hold the bar.

In the back of the gym, there was a door leading to the backyard. Upon entering it, I enjoyed the fresh air as the wind blew against me. There was a blue tarp positioned about 10 feet above the backyard. The tarp blocked out rain on rainy days and much of the wind, but there were wide gaps at the sides for wind to pass through. There were various pieces of equipment for attendees to use. On the left of the doorway, there was another black rack to catch or hold a long steel bar as attendees perform squats or deadlifts. Behind the rack, there was a bench to perform sit-ups. Shortly ahead of the doorway, there was a piece of equipment in which attendees lift their bodies pressing their forearms against the arms of the equipment. Noticeably, no one was exercising in the backyard.

Upon going back through the door, I returned to the gym's 1st floor. I walked passed the wide-open spaces to reach a stairwell located to the wall on the left. After reaching the bottom of the stairs, I have entered the basement. I am standing in a wide hallway. In front of me, there were [several] different types of exercise equipment lined up against the left wall. On the right wall, from right to left, there was a door to the maintenance room, a door to the restroom, and a door to the employee's reserved restroom. At the end of the hallway, there was a room with two [black] benches, [an arm curl machine with tattered black cushions,] and other equipment. Unlike, the first floor, the basement feels warmer and there was no music being played. Like the 1st floor and backyard, there was no odor. The most notable thing in this room, there were the four racks filled with barbells of different weights that placed against the left wall and another four racks placed in front of the rear wall. On the left and right walls of the room, there were mirrors that stretch from knee-height to the ceiling (Saleem 2.4).

Was it
a
nice
day?

first

was that

On the 8th of April 2018, I visited the Elite Gym to perform a second observation. Since my last observations, most features of the gym remained the same. Compared to my last observation, there were nine differences in the gym that surprised me. On the first floor, first, the bike machines were reversed to face the treadmills against the right wall. Second, a new bike machine was facing towards the left wall on the right side of the treadmills. Third, there was a new exercise machine that works on the quadriceps and gluteus maximus located passed the new bike machine. The new exercise machine took the thigh machine's previous location. Fourth, the thigh machine was relocated to the right side of the new exercise machine. Fifth, a new black bench was placed behind the third open workout area (for gym attendees to perform deadlifts or squats). Sixth, the rear door had a new sign attached to it. It stated, "please do not open door! Thank you!" Thus, the gym members were not able to access gym's backyard. Seventh, near the bottom of the staircase leading to the basement, there was a sign posted on the wall above the staircase. It stated, "watch your step wet stairs." Eighth and ninth, there was a new black bench and new pink cushions for the arm curl machine in the basement.

Wow - lots of change

Research

I used the City College of New York's (CCNY) online library resources and statistics on gyms to collect data on women in gym subculture. From CCNY's online library resources, I gathered data from academic peer-reviewed articles to provide reliable information. I used demographic statistics on gender in Brooklyn to develop a better understanding of the gender gap at the Elite Gym and its connection to women in gym subculture.

good!!

From CCNY's online library resources, I used two articles. In the article, "Gendered spaces: The gym culture and the construction of gender," Thomas Johansson wrote men and

women experience dissatisfaction with their bodies, which “creates a constant urge to develop and change” (Johansson 32). In other words, the insiders’ purpose in gym subculture is determined by our personal dissatisfaction regarding our bodies. In the same article, Thomas Johansson wrote music plays an important role to set the proper rhythm to perform different movements in aerobics (36). Johansson implied that the right music can help a person focus to perform the correct movements of aerobics. In the second article, “Gender in the Gym: Evaluation Concerns as Barriers to Women’s Weight Lifting,” Jeanne Maracek and Jessica Salvatore wrote the “evaluation concerns ... [of] what others think of them” can influence a woman’s self-esteem (557). Within the context of the article, Maracek and Salvatore described women avoid weight-bearing training because they fear the result of being ostracized for challenging society’s perception of women. — which is that small & delicate women are attractive?

For the third source of information, I relied on statistics provided by the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is the most extensive demographic survey in the United States. The American Community Survey’s (ACS) work, *DP05: ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates – 2016 American Community Survey 1 – Year Estimates*, described Brooklyn had a population of 2,629,150 people, which consisted of 1,247,152 males (47.44%), and 1,381,998 females (52.56%).

Interview

In the basement of the Elite Gym, I interviewed Aileena, a female gym member, to describe her personal experience in gym subculture. After she just completed her workout, I asked for her consent for an interview. Aileena agreed to a quick interview. Before the interview, I also asked for her consent to use my audio recorder to record the interview. Aileena provided her consent to record the interview. She remained sitting on the wooden floor. I asked, “have you

ever attended gyms aside from the Elite Gym? If so, how does it compare to other gyms?" She replied, "yes, it (i.e. the Elite Gym) is too small". She laughed briefly and continued to speak, "no, I'm just kidding. It's a good neighborhood gym". Then, I asked, "how do you prepare yourself before heading to the gym?" She briefly hesitated before responding, "Uh, I just rest". Her response surprised me, I assumed her response would include wearing her gym clothes and stretching before reaching the gym. So, I asked, "Oh, okay, do you stretch before coming to the gym?" She replied, "no, I don't think you should. I do stretch after my workout". Personally, I found her answer disagreeable. In my opinion, stretches should not be limited to the end of a workout routine to relax one's muscles. It should also be used before a workout to prepare one's muscles for intense activity, like exercising in the gym, to prevent scarring and cramps. Next, I asked, "why do you exercise in the Elite Gym?" She replied, "to stay fit". After pausing, I asked her, "are there any aspects to this gym that you dislike or aspects where the gym can improve to provide a better experience for yourself?" She reiterated, "it's a good, small gym". I stared at her with a cocked eyebrow, knowing that the gym had a few well-known problems that made members uncomfortable. After a brief pause, she said, "there is not a lot of room in the gym. Well, women need more space to exercise". I felt that her response was too vague. Aileena did not mention the name any specific exercise that she claimed more space would be required to perform them. So, I asked for clarification, "are you stating that more space is needed for aerobic exercise?" She replied, "well, yes, but other types as well". In consideration of our prior agreement to keep the interview short, and Aileena's short, vague reply led me to assume that Aileena would like to quickly end the interview. Therefore, I moved on to ask the next question without asking for further clarification. I asked, "what actions or behaviors (i.e. rituals) do you repeat for every workout session in the Elite Gym?" She replied, "I workout". This is the second

↑
uh... she wasn't really into being interviewed.

time, Aileena surprised me with her answer. Prior to the interview, I observed that she repeated certain actions (i.e. rituals) such as taking breaks between different types of exercise, listening to music on her phone during each exercise, and stretching after finishing each exercise. Next, I asked, "could you describe your workout schedule?" She replied, "I workout two to three times a week". I wanted her to explain her schedule. So, I asked, "is that all?" She repeated her answer. Perhaps I was not clear, but due to time limitations, I moved on to the next question. Then, I asked, "do you generally perform aerobics, weight-bearing exercises, or both in your weekly workout schedule?" She replied, "I do a combination [of aerobics and weight bearing exercises]". For my next question, I asked, "in your weekly workout schedule, do you use equipment from every part of the gym (i.e. the elliptical-treadmill-bike area, weight bearing bar area, open space in the backyard, and free weight area in the basement)?" She replied, "yes".

Afterwards, I asked questions relevant to the data I collected on women in gym subculture. First, I asked, "what is your idea of a perfect ideal body for men and women?" She paused briefly and replied, "I think it's very personal for each person". I judged her answer to be too vague. I wanted Aileena to provide further clarification on her response. So, I asked, "how so?" She replied, "just that it's very personal. It depends on the figure you are working towards". I decided not to press with this line of questioning. Moving on, I asked, "how does music influence your exercise routine?" She replied, "music is very important to me. Without it, I would not be able to exercise". Personally, I don't rely on music to help me exercise. In the past, I treated the gym's music as background noise. Upon hearing her reply, I felt confused. I wanted to ask for clarification on music's influence on her ability to exercise, but due to time constraints I decided to move on to the next question. Next, I wanted to understand a female gym member's perception of women in the gym. So, I asked, "in the Elite Gym, do you feel that there is a large

gap in the male to female ratio?" She gave a wry smile and replied, "yeah, of course".

Afterwards, I asked, "based on the available equipment, do you think the Elite Gym favors male or female gym attendees?" She smiled and replied, "males". So, I asked, "how do you feel about women lifting weights as part of their exercise routine and bodybuilding women?" She replied, "it depends if they are just lifting light weights or heavy weights. I, myself, exercise using light

weights, but I could never understand women exercising with heavy weights (i.e. referring to bodybuilding)". Aileen expressed that she understood that a person's exercise goals ^{are} very personal. Each ^{singular} individual designs ^{plural} their exercise routine to achieve particular results. I found Aileen's answer interesting. She incorporated light weight training, yet implied rejection to heavy weight training for women. After this question, I felt that I collected sufficient data from the interview in order to discuss women in gym subculture. I thanked Aileen for her assistance and left the Elite Gym.

why?
Gotta be
strong to
smash the
patriarchy!!

Reflection

I have concluded based on my fieldwork observations on the 5th of February 2018 and the 8th of April 2018 that eight of the nine new changes in the Elite gym will have little impact on gym members. The only significant change was the addition of the new exercise machine that trains the quadriceps and gluteus maximus. This new addition will allow gym members to incorporate the use of the new exercise machine in their workout routine. Yet some outsiders may challenge my view with the argument that closing access to the gym's backyard is significant. Since, it made up a significant portion of the gym and it contained equipment not available inside the gym (i.e. 1st floor and basement). In reality, gym members most often exclude the use of the backyard's equipment in their workout routine. In fact, most members do

good
clear
acknowledgment
to counter-
claim

not even enter the backyard. Hence, closing access to the gym's backyard does not have much impact on the gym members.

The research materials I used to construct this ethnography consists of two articles and one group's demographic statistics. The two articles, "Gendered spaces: The Gym Culture and the Construction of Gender" and "Gender in the Gym: Evaluation Concerns as Barriers to Women's Weight Lifting," were chosen as research materials for three reasons. One, the CCNY's library resources listed them as trustworthy sources of information (i.e. peer-reviewed). Two, the authors were very persuasive and sound in the presentation of their arguments. Three, the authors' information coincided with my informants' responses (to my interview questions). As a result, I believed the authors' arguments should be incorporated into this ethnographic study on women in gym subculture. In order to support my study of women in gym subculture, I used ACS's demographic data to address the gender disparity at the Elite Gym and the potential impact it has on women in gym subculture.

In Thomas Johansson's article, "Gendered spaces: The Gym Culture and the Construction of Gender," he does not present quantitative evidence to support his argument. Instead, Johansson's arguments are backed by information from more than twenty authors, and his arguments were supported by his five interviewees' responses. In this ethnographic paper, we ~~will discuss two of his arguments.~~

One, he argued that one's personal dissatisfaction with his/her body compels said person to exercise in a gym for the purpose of remolding his/her body into an ideal form or to maintain ~~their~~ ^{one's} figure (32-34). Gyms take advantage of this purpose through reinforcement of personal dissatisfaction. The presentation of posters and photos of men and women, who have an ideal beautiful body, provide an individual a greater goal for improvement. Consequently, the gym

yes!!

member's envy pushes him/her to achieve greater goals for their body shape. Both informants, Naeem and Aileena, supported Johansson's argument on the individual's purpose to ^{participate} ~~partake~~ in the gym subculture. In the document, Fieldnotes #1 on the Elite Gym and Naeem's Interview, Naeem stated, as a gym member, his purpose was "to [build more muscle mass] ... and stay in shape" (Saleem 7). Similarly, Aileena also stated that she exercised in the gym "to stay fit". Both Naeem and Aileena had lean figures with Naeem being much more muscular. Naeem's purpose in the gym was to continue working toward his ideal figure. On the other hand, Aileena implied she had already achieved her ideal figure and remains in the gym to maintain it. Since, my interviewees' responses supported Johansson's argument, I believe his argument holds true for both males and females in gym subculture.

Two, Johansson also argued that music has a positive impact in performing different movements in aerobics (36). He described aerobics as being similar to traditional dance. After repeated practice, the music's rhythm can be used to help a person perform different movements in accordance to his/her muscle memory. Johansson supported this claim with information from his interviewee, Anette, who stated that the music clears her mind of all of her problems, which helps her focus on performing the proper movements in aerobics. Moreover, Aileena, also supported Johansson's statement. During her interview, Aileena stated "without it (i.e. music), I would not be able to exercise". Unfortunately, her response's lack of specific detail, on how music makes a positive impact in performing aerobics, made it a weak support for Johansson's argument. Therefore, the evidence that I collected does not provide a clear-cut support or rejection to Johansson's argument on music. In the future, I will ask my female informants to provide a clear and detailed explanation on music's impact on their exercise routine to understand it's effect on women in gym subculture.

In Jeanne Maracek's and Jessica Salvatore's article, "Gender in the Gym: Evaluation Concerns as Barriers to Women's Weight Lifting," the archival analysis used to support their paper is not a reliable source of information. The archival analysis examines the first 100-200 google images over four years for "fat burning" and "muscle building" google image searches. The collected data tells us the number men and women performing aerobics and weight bearing exercise for each year. Based on this information, the ratio of women to men performing aerobics and the ratio of men to women performing weight bearing exercise are constructed. The authors used these ratios to support their argument of preferred forms of exercise for males and females. To make matters even worse, Maracek and Salvatore do not explain how the first 100-200 google images provided reliable support for their argument on preferred forms of exercise for males and females. Therefore, the archival analysis cannot be used to support their argument on preferred forms of exercise for both genders.

In this article, Maracek and Salvatore wrote women avoid weight bearing training due to fear of being ostracized by others (557). They supported their argument with the results of a survey that collected information from fifty-six female college students. The students were asked to answer questions by providing a rating from a range of one to seven to qualitatively express how strongly they felt about each issue. This survey gauged women's feelings about performing weight bearing training in the presence of others. The statistical analysis of the survey's answers provided strong support for women avoiding weight bearing training in the presence of other people. Furthermore, my female informant, Aileena, supported the authors' argument. Aileena stated that using light weight bearing training for aerobics (i.e. fat burning exercises) were acceptable for women. At the same time, Aileena expressed that she could not understand why women would perform heavy weight bearing exercises as such exercise builds muscle mass. In

interesting!!

good!!

good sequencing with transitions to show your thought process

other words, she participated in the act of ostracizing women who perform heavy weight bearing training by perceiving them as not fitting the accepted feminine framework. As a result, I believe that Maracek's and Salvatore's argument is justified and true.

The third source of information that I used to discuss women in gym subculture comes from the ACS's statistical data. In order to determine if the Elite Gym favored a particular gender, I compared the gender of Brooklyn's population to the gender of observed gym members in the Elite Gym within an hour during two fieldwork observations. According to the ACS, Brooklyn's population consisted of 47.44% males and 52.56% females in 2016. In the first fieldwork observation essay, *Gym Subculture*, I listed the presence of 16 gym members in the Elite Gym within an hour, which consisted of 13 males (81.25%) and 3 females (18.75%; Saleem

4). In the second fieldwork observation, Fieldnotes #2 on the Elite Gym, I listed the presence of 17 gym members in the Elite Gym within an hour, which consisted of 15 males (88.24%) and 2 females (11.76%; Saleem 3). By comparing Brooklyn's male and female population to the Elite

Gym's male and female population for a single hour, we can see a significant difference between them. Specifically, the Elite Gym had 33.81% - 40.80% higher proportion of males than Brooklyn's proportion of males. At the same time, the Elite Gym had 33.81% - 40.80% lower proportion of females than Brooklyn's proportion of females. Therefore, this comparison of gender statistics between the Elite Gym and Brooklyn supported the argument that the Elite Gym favors males. Secondly, during Aileena's interview, she stated her belief that the Elite Gym favored male gym members because the gym was designed to favor weight bearing training and provided mostly weight bearing exercise equipment. Thirdly, I observed this trend of a much greater presence of males than females in the Elite Gym during my fieldwork observations and

write out #s under 100 except percentages

Can you get this type of data from Elite Gym?

my time as a gym member (i.e. insider) from August 2017 to January 2018. Therefore, I strongly believe that the Elite Gym favors males over females.

Males and females in gym subculture share some similarities and differences. In both fieldwork observations, some males and females listened to music during exercise. They both exercised in the gym to remold or maintain their body's shape. At the same time, they can be different as well. Males prefer weight bearing exercises and females prefer aerobics. In the Elite Gym, women were more disadvantaged than their male counterparts. The comparison of demographic data between Brooklyn and the Elite Gym showed a great disparity in the gender gap, which lends support to the argument that the Elite Gym favors male participants over female members. Furthermore, the artifacts in the form of the gym's collective equipment and use of space favors weight bearing training. Since, such exercises are favored by males rather than females. Consequently, it is hypothesized that the equipment and use of space in the gym plays a major role in attracting members from each gender. Hence, it is believed that if the Elite Gym provided more equipment and space for aerobics, then it would have attracted a greater female population. In order to further study gender and its relation to gym subculture, I would like to interview a larger number of males and females to record their experiences to provide a more developed study of gender in gym subculture.

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— Thorough &
well-researched!!

