

Gender Socialization and the Gym Experience

Gym culture, from college campuses to social media, is exactly that: a culture. There are traditions, norms, attitudes, and stereotypes associated with the community. Further, there are gendered roles, with slang terminology such as “Gym Bros” and “Gym Baddies”. Gender is an unavoidable distinguisher within any social scene, and through my observations, I found indications that this remains true within fitness spaces as well. Differences in experience, comfortability, and socialization have the potential to change the gym environment itself. Comparing my outside observations, interactions, and conversations, I found that the geography, as well as the social landscape, of the gym is not randomized. Rather, routines and time spent may have connections to deeper gender biases and socializations, affecting interactions between individuals and the spaces they inhabit.

As a woman who has frequented the NYU gyms, I have had the experience of feeling uncomfortable or out of place at the gym. While going with a male friend eases my discomfort, I find myself still self-conscious in gyms because of the feeling of being watched by men, as well as the pressure that women always have to be attractive, even while working out. In my conversations with friends about their experience as women in gyms, I wondered what specifically it was about the gym environment that garnered such separations between genders. Past just basic misogyny in public settings, the experience was more specific to that and more related to the geography of the space. This is what led me to focus on a gym setting and use the research question of how gender presentation within a campus gym affects the ways that individuals not only interact with each other but the space around them.

Collecting the Data

When I first entered the research location, NYU's gym, known as 404 Fitness, at 1:00 pm on a Thursday, it was relatively quiet. There was a healthy amount of people moving throughout the floors, but it wasn't too crowded, and there was always at least one machine open for each type of workout. Many people were coming from class or leaving for class, as they went into locker rooms with backpacks or arriving in jeans just to change into workout clothes.

There were three floors in the gym, but I focused on the main floor, which was the most expansive and had a wide diversity of equipment. In the front are rows of cardio machines, with treadmills, ellipticals, stairmasters, and stationary bikes. On the sides of the room instead of walls are huge mirrors, which people often stop to look into. Along one wall of mirrors is a strip of turf, designated for stretching or floor workouts, which is where I initially sat to observe. Across the room, along the other mirrored wall, are the seven benches with free weights, which were rarely empty. In between the main and top floor was a small loft, with two couches that looked out over the gym. This became my "home base" for the two hours I observed on the first floor of 404, as it allowed me to blend in with the setting without bringing attention to the fact that I was not working out.

Qualitative Findings

Immediately, it was clear that the number of male-presenting individuals outnumbered the female-presenting, especially near the weight training areas and the non-cardio machines. As I watched the women, I noticed that there was a clear gendered separation in the space. It seemed that in choosing locations to either wait for a machine to be open, their free weight workout spot, or the benches they chose, there was a pattern emerging: they chose the spaces in the outer corners of the gym, or against a pillar. More specifically, the women would find a wall, corner, or

surface and remain there. One girl whom I observed from when she first entered the gym to when she left, noted as “Pink Headphones,” stayed in the corner for her entire workout even if benches or machines were open. The only time this routine changed was to go to the cardio section of the first level. While waiting for a machine, I noticed that one girl I was watching would wait by a column rather than next to the machine in use.

This was different from the larger groups of men, who would congregate in any open area or simply surround the machines the group was using. I noticed that the groups that were the most obtrusive to the space were larger groups, with usually about three to five men. They seemed more comfortable in the free weights section, especially the larger group, and spent minutes catching up and talking. One of the groups of men I was observing had even been talking for almost 30 minutes, completely engrossed in their conversation, using the equipment as seats or tables for their water bottles. Once I noticed this, I started to look more specifically at the time that the groups spent working out versus talking, rather than simply noting that groups were being formed. I started to notice as men saw other men they knew, the more time they spent simply socializing in the space with little to no incentive to move away from the machine, even as more people came in.

Quantitative Findings

Throughout the two hours, I was in 404, there were always more men than women in the whole space. When I first came in at 1:00 pm, there were 10 women on the first floor, and 20 minutes later there were 18 women, with more than double the number of men. There were three pairs of women circulating the space together and two that were partnered up with men. These groupings tied into another more quantitative theme in the geography of the gym: the specific ratios of genders in certain workout areas. Just on the squat rack, there was a consistent ratio of

one woman to three men or no women at all. This is not to say that women were not present in the space, but rather that there was never a moment where the women's presence dominated in the free weight section. The number of women on a bench in the free weights section never rose over two at a time. They remained in their respective corners, even if they had claimed a bench, with them often being on either end of the row of benches.

The only area of the gym that was primarily women was the cardio area. It was consistent that there were more women on the machines than men. Every time I counted, the number of women in the area heavily outweighed the number of men, such as at 1:46 p.m. when I noted that there was one man on stairmaster in comparison to the seven women, and again at 2:10, with eight women on cardio machines and three men. For every one of the three women that I was watching more carefully they had at least one part of their gym routine that had cardio. This was not true for the three men I tracked.

Interaction

The qualitative and quantitative data that I collected were not only supported but also specifically called out through interactions I observed and conversations I had with my subjects in the spaces. Regarding my observations of the groups of men versus the groups of women within the space, I found that the men I spoke to said that crowds didn't change their workout routine and that they enjoyed it when more people were in the gym because they would just socialize. One man I talked to said, "Half the time I'm here just talk to other people, even if I don't know them." The other man I talked to said something similar, saying that being full makes it more fun to come to the gym. This was resoundingly opposite to what the women I talked to said. Both women said that most of the time, their routine is dependent on whether there are a lot of people. When I asked them about their experiences in the gyms, they both brought up that

they would avoid machines if they saw a lot of men waiting. One said specifically about the Smith machines, “The men are waiting in line and I don’t want to be like how many sets you have left... too much testosterone.” In the interviews, the population of women on the cardio machines versus men was also reflected in their answers, as all of the women I spoke to about their gym routine included cardio, whereas none of the men mentioned it.

Reflections on the Process

Doing this research exercise was a completely foreign experience for me. While I had some experience doing interviews, never had I attempted to do this type of observational research, so it was, to be candid, uncomfortable, and challenging. Before settling in on the couches on the loft over the first floor of the gym, I began my observations from the stretching turf, pretending to stretch and talking into my phone using the recorder for notes to make it seem like I was simply on the phone. However, as time passed and more people came to the turf, my presence was not as covert. People made eye contact with me as I did my observations, which would have been the opposite of the point of observing the natural state of the gym. And so, I moved around a little bit, standing next to machines and typing on my phone while texting, until finally decided the couches above the first floor were a better vantage point. I had not realized how difficult analyzing such a large space would be, so I tried to focus on a few major sections.

Aside from the discomfort, it was an interesting experience to see the interactions I have been a part of from above. After doing the research, I spoke to other women about it, and we realized how accurately the observations I had made were connected to habits in the gym. It was illuminating, while also slightly unsettling.

These connections are one of the many reasons that my positionality has such a huge impact on not only my perception of gym culture but also my place as a non-male presenting

person in these spaces. I found myself being more critical of the communities found in the gym, and I was especially aware of the large groups of men as my initial reaction was discomfort.

Conclusions

My main finding in this ethnographic research project is that there is an indicated correlation between gender presentation and the social and physical geography of fitness environments. Based solely on my observations and conversations with patrons of the gym, I found that for many men, the gym is a social space. As a result, men find comfort in the gym environment, whereas for women there is not the same sentiment. This difference may affect the physical areas women inhabit, making their gym routines informed both by personal goals and social interactions. This might lead to women going to spaces with fewer men, specifically investing time in the cardio machines. However, there are a few limitations to this work. Firstly, two hours in only one gym is not nearly enough time to come to such broad conclusions, and speaking to a few patrons gives important context, but not grounding evidence. There is potential for this project to be expanded, but to be more accurate in interpreting the results, I need many more observations.

Another aspect of this research that should be questioned is the act of identifying gender from a distance. In their work “Gender Trouble,” Judith Butler introduces their gender performativity theory, citing gender as a socially constructed performance rather than a biological fact. It is important to note that the genders of those observed are based on stereotypes regarding gender presentation. There are issues with this, but there are potential positives as it relates to the experience of existing in these spaces. Meaning, by differentiating the observations based on societally created characteristics that shape the way different people experience social interactions, it has the potential to still accurately track the experiences of the community.