FOR “WOMEN ONLY”: UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL SPACE OF A WOMEN’S GYM THROUGH FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

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Women’s only gyms have grown exponentially in popularity in the United States and worldwide. For example, Curves International has 9,000 locations across the globe and 4 million members (Curves International, 2006), while Contours Express has 327 locations in the United States and over 450 locations worldwide (Contours Express, 2006). Despite the popularity of women’s-only gyms, the meaning of these spaces remains unclear. The present study examined the experiences and perceptions of being a member of a women’s-only gym and the role of space in creating these experiences. Grounded in feminist geography and feminist cultural studies, I conducted an ethnography of a women’s-only gym, The Gym, located in Northwestern Ohio. Participants included those women who attended the facility on a regular basis. I engaged in participant observation at The Gym during which I conducted informal interviews with the women. Unstructured interviews were also conducted with eight women, five of whom were working at the facility, and three of whom were attending the facility. Using qualitative data analysis techniques, three higher order themes emerged. These included: “gym culture,” “macro culture,” and “combined influence.” The higher order theme “gym culture” refers to the culture within The Gym while the higher order theme “Macro Culture” refers to the broader culture of our society. Both of these cultures influenced the women’s experiences at The Gym and often collided to create a “combined influence” on the women’s experiences. Results illustrated that the social space of the gym (Lefebvre, 1974/1991) was made up of contradictions between the macro culture and gym culture. While the gym culture was empowering to the women,
the influence of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonically-defined femininity were present. Nonetheless, the gym culture did buffer the potentially harmful effects of the macro culture of our society.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.  INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW.  . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 1

  Introduction. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 1

  Conceptual Framework. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 2

    The Culture and Space of Women’s Physical Activity. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 7

    Femininity and the Physically Active Female Body. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 12

    Exercise Spaces. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 13

CHAPTER II.  METHOD. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 18

  Participants. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 18

  Observations. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 18

  Interviews. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 18

Table 1.  Demographic Characteristics of Exercisers. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 19

Ethnographic Methodology and Procedure. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 20

    Ethnography. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 20

    Participant Observation. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 20

    Interviews. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 22

Trustworthiness. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 23

    Prolonged Engagement. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 23

    Triangulation. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 23

    Negative Cases. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 24

    Reflexivity. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 24

    Confidentiality. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 25
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. RESULTS</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2. Outline of Results</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym Culture</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Space</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Setting</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Perceptions of Physical Space</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Climate</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym Community</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Climate</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual Atmosphere</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adherence</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro Culture</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine and Masculine Expectations</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Feminine Form</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not too Muscular and Trim and Toned</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clashing Cultures</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for Attending Women’s-only Gyms</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Women’s-only Gyms</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid the Male Gaze</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coed Gyms as Intimidating</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

A young brunette woman—drunk with anticipation—wearing a worn out pair of sweats and a white t-shirt walks in to a newly constructed women’s-only fitness facility. She doesn’t consider herself fat and does not want to lose any weight. She just wants to become healthy. Today is the first day of her new and improved lifestyle. She will eat right, drink lots of water, exercise, and get plenty of sleep. She has never “worked out” in the traditional sense of having a routine incorporating cardio-vascular work and weight training. However, she has been active all her life. From the time she was a little girl to the end of her high school career she played tennis; her participation in this sport has since waned due to her hectic work schedule, but she still walks her dogs every day. She enjoys getting outside, smelling the fresh air, and burning some calories.

Wide-eyed and distracted by all the other women lifting weights, sweating, and grunting she slowly makes her way to the front desk. “Hi, I’m here to join your gym. I don’t have much experience…” Before she can state why she wants to join, a short energetic blond hops out from behind the desk wearing nothing but spandex and states, “Oh good. I’m glad to see you’re ready to lose some weight. We’ll have to take your measurements along with your weight and height.” Stunned, the customer/client/apparently-overweight woman replies, “I don’t want to lose weight. Am I overweight? I don’t think I’m overweight; I just want to lead a healthier lifestyle.” In retaliation the woman in spandex retorts, “Well, if we don’t get all your measurements today, we won’t know if you are making any progress. We have the measurements for all our other clients. If you’re too embarrassed we can do it in the back room.
rather than out here in the front.” Not wanting to be rude and feeling pressure to conform, the young woman reluctantly steps on the scale and begins to rethink her decision to join a women’s-only gym.

Women’s-only gyms have become a phenomenon in the United States and world-wide. They seem to be everywhere, promising women a healthier lifestyle in 30 minutes or less, just 3 times a week. One of the best-known women’s-only gyms is Curves International, founded in 1992. According to the company’s web site, it currently has 4 million members and more than 9,000 locations across the globe (Curves International, 2006). It promises a woman that she will “discover the power to amaze [herself]” and receive “the support [she] needs to reach [her] goals” (Curves International, 2006). The success of Curves has led to other women’s-only gym franchises such as Contours Express, which opened its doors in 1998 and has since grown to over 450 locations worldwide with 327 in the United States (Contours Express, 2006). Women seem to flock to these places before work, during their lunch hours, after work, and on the weekends. However, the cultural function of these incredibly popular spaces has yet to be examined. Are they truly empowering and supportive to women or do they replicate hegemonically-defined masculinity and femininity seen in male-dominated gyms?

Conceptual Framework

Just as with all human experience, to fully understand women’s experiences with sport and physical activity it is important to consider the influence of culture and space on those experiences. Feminist cultural studies and feminist geography provide a foundation for investigating the meaning of women’s alternative sport structures and spaces. Cultural studies is a multidisciplinary framework which allows scholars to critique contemporary cultures or social practices of groups and individuals (During, 1999). Culture is a people’s “established beliefs and
practices. It serves as a design for living…[and] includes ideas of what must inevitably be, what is most attractive or unattractive, and what is moral and immoral” (Kramer, 2005, p. 22).

Cultural studies scholars analyze not only the contexts and processes of cultural creation or production, but also the reception and use of cultural products by individuals and groups (Lipsitz, 2001). Therefore, cultural studies posits that individual and collective behavior take place within a larger cultural sphere and that cultural and social forces influence all of our daily experiences, including those within the realm of sport and physical activity. Cultural studies scholars are concerned with the role of this cultural dynamic in creating disparities of power and privilege and ground their research in the everyday experiences of people (Lipsitz, 2001). Ultimately, this leads to an examination of cultural products and power within a confined context.

Feminist cultural studies combines both the feminist and cultural studies paradigms (Krane, 2001a). Scholars in the field specifically are concerned with the interactions of culture and gender (Hall, 1996). That is, they examine gender and gender inequity in terms of its construction within and through the cultural dynamic. Gender is understood as a “social status, a legal designation, and a personal identity” (Lorber, 2005, p. 9) that is associated with being female or male in a society. However, as Butler (2004) explains it is also, “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (p. 1). That is, gender is a performance or a set of expectations projected onto and demanded of the individual. For “the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author.” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). As a social institution, sport reinforces the “the gendered social order” (Lorber, 2005, p. 9) in which masculine characteristics are expected of and projected onto men, not women. Because in patriarchy “man represents both the positive and the neutral” while “woman represents only the negative,” those characteristics considered to be masculine or male
are valued above those characteristics considered feminine or female (Beauvoir, 1954/2000, p. 8).

Feminist cultural studies has been employed by sport researchers to highlight the cultural forces that shape women’s sporting and physical activity experiences (e.g., Cole, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Hall, 1996; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipely 2001; Markula, 1995). It provides a lens through which to understand the contradictions women face within physical activity and sport (Cole, 1993; Hall, 1996). Kramer (2005) explains, “a culture may include ideas that are actually contradictory, and the internal contradictions within a culture may be reflected by contradictions in individuals’ and in groups’ behaviors” (p. 22). This is seen in sport and physical activity. As Krane et al. (2001) write,

On the one hand, sport and exercise can be a very empowering means by which women challenge themselves, gain a sense of identity, and learn their physical capabilities. Yet at the same time, sport and exercise can be repressive as women use exercise as a means to attain the ideal feminine body. (p. 20)

For this reason, an understanding of sport and physical activity as a site, or space, of contestation consisting of both the discursive and physical sites of physical activity is useful. Feminist geography as a discipline theorizes about the intersections of various oppressions and how they are produced and embedded in “material and symbolic space and place” (Nelson & Seager, 2005, p. 7). It is grounded in “‘the body’ and the multidimensionality of embodied experience(s)” for the body is the place in which we live (Nelson & Seager, 2005, p. 1).

Feminist geographers are interested in the relationship between place, identities, bodies, and power. They investigate how the gender hierarchy affects and is affected by spatial structures (Nelson & Seager, 2005). Thus, they highlight the “importance of asking where” social
processes occur in relation to other social processes (Nelson & Seager, 2005). Within sport and exercise, feminist geography examines the relationships among the spaces in which physical activity takes place and the identities and bodies of those who occupy and form the spaces themselves.

Place is understood as contested, uncertain, and fluid terrain defined by social and spatial practices (McDowell, 1999). McDowell (1999) elaborates:

Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial – they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience. (p. 4)

Similarly, van Ingen (2004) writes that spaces should not be understood as being fixed and bound but as “geographies of power,” (p. 254) or the results and extensions of social power relations. She holds that such an understanding requires an examination of the ways in which social space is produced. According to Lefebvre (1974/1991), space and production cannot be separated because social space is produced through social relations and is ultimately shaped through bodies. In short, social space is both the outcome of and mode for social relations (van Ingen, 2003).

“Social space” is made up of spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). “Spatial practices” refers to perceived space or to the construction of actual physical space as well its use (van Ingen, 2003). Spatial practices “embrace production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation” (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 33). In other words, spatial practices are the resultant relationships or outcomes of activities and the bounded or physical space in which they take place. For example, playing basketball, volleyball, or running track are spatial practices that
create and are maintained through a social space. Van Ingen (2003) explains that representations of space are understood as conceived space constructed through discourse (p. 203). They “are the kinds of social spaces that we engage in through our thoughts, ideas, plans, codes and memories” (p. 203). In short, representations of space are conceptual and not concrete although they can become reified. Thus, representations of sport and sporting bodies reflect and construct a social meaning of sport as a social space.

According to Lefebvre (1974/1991), representational spaces are “linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life” (p. 33) in that they allow for the formation of alternative spatial practices and representations of spaces. Thus, lived space is not only empowering as a terrain of counter-discourses and social struggles, but also as an oppressive site where discriminatory practices are carried out (van Ingen, 2003). Van Ingen (2003) argues that this is made clear through an examination of the contradictions, tensions, and social inequalities that exist in sport.

For Lefebvre (1974/1991), social space is linked to hegemony. Antonio Gramsci (1998) introduced the notion of hegemony in the early 1930s to explain how capitalist elite maintained their dominant status and/or power in democracy (1998). Gramsci noted that dominant groups preserve their power not only through physical coercion but also through consensus of ideology. They create a hegemonic culture in which the beliefs and values of the dominant class are internalized by those without power. Lefebvre (1971/1991) believes that it is not possible for a system of domination to exclude social space, because social space is produced through the same social relations that have created a hegemonic system. Van Ingen (2003) elaborates that “space is hierarchically structured…[and] divisions between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic powers are expressed and maintained spatially” (p. 207). This is seen in sport and physical activity as
dominant ruling groups define and maintain these spaces as a masculine domain (Connell, 1990). Johnston agrees (1998), stating that “space is bound into power/knowledge relationships and therefore the spaces of gyms are central to the subjectivity of gym users” (p. 247). Schell and Rodríguez (2000) also describe sport as an institution influenced by male hegemony and that this system of domination affects representations of women in all areas of sport.

**The Culture and Space of Women’s Physical Activity**

Much of the literature on sport, physical activity, and women’s participation in these realms deals with masculine hegemony in some form. Most often, the focus has been on gendered media coverage and representations of women in sport through which women are portrayed as non-threatening to the ideal male heterosexual athlete (Choi, 2000). This relates to Lefebvre’s (1974/1991) understanding of representations of space. According to Lefebvre (1974/1991), representations of space are the most dominant spatial forms in that they are tied not only to systems of production but also to the resulting order those systems impose. Consequently, representations of space or conceived space influence our knowledge, signs, codes, and relations with others. Boutiller and SanGiovanni (1983) note, “Regardless of what is actually happening, it is the media’s interpretation of that event that shapes our attitudes, values and perceptions about the world and about our culture” (p. 184).

Schell and Rodriguez (2000) identify governance, the socialization process, and the media as avenues through which dominant groups regulate the values and norms in sport. This is apparent in that all aspects of sport; from what it means to play sport to how it should be played and by whom, reflect dominant values and ideals. Therefore, Schell and Rodriguez (2000) argue, sport reflects and reinforces dominant ideologies of hetero-masculinity so that it remains a source of hegemonic masculinity or, as Connel (cited in Messner & Sabo, 1990) says, “the
culturally idealised form of masculine behavior” which stands in contrast to hegemonically-defined femininity (p. 83).

Rather than use the term “hegemonic femininity,” which some scholars argue implies femininity as being dominant over masculinity, I use “hegemonically-defined femininity” to illustrate the notion that femininity is constructed within a hegemonic system and to illustrate the notion that there is privileged femininity (Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). Characteristics of hegemonically-defined femininity include “being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate, and gentle” while “strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and independence” are characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Krane, 2001b, p. 117).

Gendered representations of sporting women naturalize gender difference (Duncan, 1990). As Choi (2000) states, society’s ideological pairing of the “sporty type,” a woman who participates in sports, with hegemonic masculinity is the main barrier to women’s participation in sport and physical activity. Sport and femininity have been constructed as mutually exclusive, and within the domain of sport women are expected to distance themselves from the masculine behaviors and bodies that define sport (Choi, 2000; Krane, 2001b). As Lenskyj (1994) explains, “sport is what makes a boy into a man…[it] is not what makes girls into women” (pp. 360-361). Clasen (2001) identifies this female/athlete paradox as being grounded in hierarchical dualisms of Western culture. She writes that because Western culture assumes a male-female binary, those characteristics assumed to be male, such as athleticism, are not associated with being female. Therefore, women cannot just be athletes, which is naturalized for men. Women must always be “framed by their status as athletes and as women” (p. 37).

Choi (2000) writes that one of the most salient recuperative strategies used to keep women athletes from becoming just athletes is under-representation, which symbolically
annihilates them from the arena of sport and physical activity (Tuchman, 1978). Another form of symbolic annihilation is to emphasize women’s appearance, sexuality, or traditional roles rather than their performance or athletic abilities (Choi, 2000). According to Jones, Murrell, and Jackson (1999) this is more frequent when the sport is considered to be masculine, meaning there is an emphasis on aggression and physical contact, such as ice hockey or soccer. Through symbolic annihilation, “the media inform us that sportswomen have little value in relation to sportsmen” (Choi, 2000, p. 33) and simultaneously expel sportswomen from the historically masculine domain.

In their examination of the quantity and quality of women’s sports television coverage, Messner, Duncan, and Cooky (2003) found that “women’s sports are still ‘missing in action’ on the nightly news, and are even less visible on Sports Center” (p. 38) in comparison to previous 1990 and 1994 studies conducted by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles. A similar absence was found by Weiller and Higgs (1999) when they examined the total televised hours for the 1996 PGA, LPGA, Masters, and DuMaurier Tournaments. The men’s competitions received 17.5 hours of coverage as compared to 9 hours for the women.

The mass media’s emphasis on sexuality and traditional roles has been well documented (e.g., Choi, 2000; Cohen, 2001; Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003; Kane & Parks, 1992; McKay, 1994), and the previously mentioned studies are no exception. Messner et al. (2003) state that throughout these same studies, television coverage continued to portray women athletes as sexual objects. For example, KABC’s March 23, 1999 coverage of Sable, a female wrestler who posed nude for Playboy magazine, was the longest news story covering women’s sports in their 1999 sample—lasting a total of 2 minutes and 48 seconds. Additionally, Messner et al. (2003) write that the U.S. soccer team received less
coverage from KCBS and KABC for actually winning the 1999 World Cup Championship than for Brandi Chastain’s shedding of her jersey to reveal her sports bra following the victory. Weiller and Higgs (1999) write that in reference to Julie Inkster at the 1996 Du Maurier Tournament, a commentator stated: “Her husband Brian, a golf professional, helps her but you know when you have a family and two daughters; well that takes precedence over everything” (n. pag.). This implies that if it were not for her husband’s “help” in raising their two daughters, she would not be able to participate in the world of professional golf and that if she did not have his help, she shouldn’t be participating.

The symbolic annihilation of women from sport is not limited to televised coverage; it also occurs in print media. Bishop (2003) found that only 3.3% of feature stories and only 4.4% of photos featured elite women athletes in the 1996 *Sports Illustrated* issues. Shields, Gilbert, Shen, and Said (2004) looked at the quantity and quality of print media coverage afforded to men and women participants of the 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2002 Olympic Games in *USA Today*. The number and percentage of men’s sport articles were found to exceed women’s sport coverage “by fairly large margins” (p. 91). However, when the relative number of women and men athletes taking part in the Olympic Games was taken into consideration, women and women’s Olympic events were found to have received proportionately more coverage. Nonetheless, unless a gold medal was at stake, the coverage of women and women’s events was “at best thin” for those sports considered to be less feminine (Shield, et al., p. 94). The disparity is also seen outside the United States. For example, in their content analysis of Canadian magazine *Globe and Mail*’s print coverage of 16 Winter Olympics spanning between 1924 and 1992, Urquhart and Crossman (1999) found that while the amount of coverage women athletes received has increased over time, they are still under-represented in comparison to men.
Despite the media’s privileging of men’s experiences and subordination of women’s involvement in sport, the passing of Title IX in 1972 decreased institutional barriers to women’s sport participation in educational settings. As a result, in the United States, increasing numbers of women have been participating in organized and unorganized sport and physical activity (Messner, 2002). In fact, female sport participation is at an all time high (Acosta & Carpenter, 2005), which seems to indicate that sport settings have become more inclusive. Still, Sabo and Messner (2001) write that even though women are now let into sport environments, they still are discriminated against. At the high school level boys receive “better uniforms, trophies, practice locations, and game times” (Sabo & Messner, 2001, p. 25), while at the collegiate level men receive more funding for recruitment and scholarships (Acosta & Carpenter, 2005). According to Hargreaves (1994), women may have gained more of an equal opportunity to participate in sport, but they have yet to upset the traditional gender hierarchy. Within this hierarchy, women are constructed as other than and less than men, ultimately resulting in male supremacy (Kane & Parks, 1992). As Elling, DeKnop, and Knoppers (2003) note, “sport may enhance processes of integration and separation or differentiation simultaneously, which might both contradict and reflect dominant meanings and power relations in broader western society” (p. 442).

Consequently, women’s sport remains framed within the realm of masculine hegemony. As discussed above, culture and society inform us that a feminine appearance mandates a certain type of heterosexually-attractive body as well as traditional feminine behaviors. Because representational spaces (i.e., lived spaces) are made up of all other forms of space, the contradictions inherent in being a female athlete are played out in the relationships that exist between women’s bodies, actions, and spatial processes. Thus, it comes as no surprise that women embrace stereotypical feminine roles by downplaying their athletic success (McGinnis,
McQuillan, & Chapple, 2005) and pursuing a culturally idealized feminine body (Brace-Govan, 2002; Krane et al., 2001; Markula, 1995).

**Femininity and the Physically Active Female Body**

The highlighted male-female or masculine-feminine dualism forces women to create separate identities from the cultural categories of woman and athlete, both of which prescribe different body types (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). While a woman should have toned, subtle, bodily curves, an athlete should have a hard, muscular body. Cox and Thompson (2000) further explain that heterosexuality and its media portrayals have been particularly influential in constructing the bodies of sportswomen. While sporting discourses presuppose a physically powerful body, the heterosexual discourse posits gender difference in that the male body should be active and strong (i.e., athletic) and the female body should be passive and weak.

The sport of bodybuilding epitomizes the controversy over what it means to be a physically active woman and still be perceived as feminine. Women bodybuilders actively pursue the traditional male requirement of gaining muscle (Choi, 2000; Hall, 1996), but at the same time they must avoid becoming too muscular (i.e., masculine). Schulze (1997) explains that “[The deliberately muscular female] body is dangerous (and) disturbs dominant notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and any discursive field that includes her risks opening up a site of contest and conflict, anxiety and ambiguity” (p. 9). Consequently, elements of the muscular female physique that can be assimilated into acceptable spaces are highlighted, while those that cannot be are excluded (Shulze, 1997). Thus, in order to emphasize their femininity and counter the masculine marker of muscle, women body builders often legitimize their bodies with symbols of femininity, such as bows in their hair and fingernail polish (Bolin, 2003; Hall, 1996). Similarly, elite ice hockey players (Etu & Williams, 1996), as well as professional female boxers
(Halbert, 1995) and college athletes (Krane et al., 2004), also present a preferred feminine image—such as wearing make-up and pink clothes while competing.

Clearly, women consciously display femininity while competing—a masculine endeavor and space—to stay within permissible cultural, social, and physical feminine spaces. However, displaying femininity through symbols that are attached to the body and having an ideal feminine body are not synonymous. Women athletes can not hide the fact that their bodies are too big in relation to the ideal female body. In short, muscle takes up too much space in relation to the ideal female body, which is now thin, toned, firm, and sexy (Dworkin, 2003; Hall, 1996, Markula, 1995, Schulze, 1997). Indeed, the cultural standard for the ideal female body influences the way many women view their own bodies (Bordo, 1993).

The contradiction between hegemonically-defined femininity and sport performance has been illustrated in the lived experiences or spaces of female athletes. In their interviews with female college athletes, Krane and colleagues (2001) found that many of the women expressed concern that their muscular bodies did not match the cultural ideal. Similarly, Krane et al. (2004) found that female athletes believed that because of their muscular bodies, they were not viewed as feminine in social settings. Thus, while they “acknowledged the positive distinctiveness of the athletic female body,” they also “expressed some desire to look different—that is, normal” (i.e., not muscular) (p. 326).

Exercise Spaces

In congruence with Lefebvre’s (1974/1991) spatial understanding, Ryan (1998) asserts that bodies can be read in terms of the inscription of femininity and masculinity within and through the commodified fitness culture, which produces those bodies. As Spitzack (1990) explains, “the body is a commodity in American culture [and] represents an intersection of
countless prescriptive voices, many of whom stand to profit from the promotion of slenderness” (p. 21). Thus, it comes as no surprise that there has been a proliferation of health and fitness clubs promising to help people lose weight, which has become conflated with being healthy. For this reason it is important to examine the varied social spaces in which physical activity takes place.

In their examination of fitness spaces, Elling and colleagues (2003) make the distinction between “mainstream clubs” and “categorical clubs” (p. 442). Mainstream clubs refer to those in which everyone, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, may join. While mainstream clubs apparently welcome everyone, they still cater to a certain clientele (i.e., heterosexual white males), evident through the contrived atmosphere. For example, they often place elliptical and other cardio-vascular machines directly in front of the mirrors and the other weight lifting machines. Thus, those who choose to do cardio-vascular workouts are spectacles of entertainment for themselves and others. Categorical clubs refer to those designed to cater to specific social groups (e.g., females or LGBT individuals).

Dworkin (2003) conducted an ethnography of a mainstream fitness club, which focused specifically on women’s behavior in this setting. She found that males and females segregated themselves in the co-ed gym. In their pursuit of a strong (but not bulky) physique, women most often frequented the cardio-vascular room and avoided weight lifting; on the other hand, men dominated the weight room and shunned the cardio-vascular room. The strategy of avoidance lessened the chances of building muscle, but simultaneously segregated the fitness center by gender. Women reported not entering the weight room because of the discomfort caused by being one of, if not the only, woman present, as well as their general lack of knowledge about
weight lifting. Not surprisingly, women in this study revealed they would feel more comfortable in the gym if more women were present.

It seems logical to conclude that categorical clubs would lessen the apprehension of those who attend, as the traditional hetero-masculine male against whom all others are judged, would not be present. This is the logic behind the development of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) “queer sportscapes” (van Ingen, 2004, p. 255). van Ingen (2004) defines queer sportscapes as “the material and symbolic places that sexually marginalized participants produce or inhabit as alternative social spaces” (pp. 255-256). One such space is the Gay Games which was developed to provide a place where GLBT individuals, as well as those who support them, could participate in sport in a safe, accepting environment (Krane & Waldron, 2000). Tom Waddell, creator of the Gay Games, believed that competition within a non-discriminatory environment would encourage greater enjoyment and better performances than other competitive venues (Wadell & Schapp, 1996).

Supporting this premise, research has shown that participation in the Gay Games provides a sense of belonging and community (Krane & Romont, 1997). Krane, Barber, and McClung (2002) also found that participation in the Gay Games enhanced the collective esteem and individual identities of bisexual and lesbian women. Similarly, Elling and colleagues (2003) found that meeting similar people and social bonding were important motives for people to create and join gay and lesbian workout clubs. Furthermore, involvement in the Gay Games and other sportscapes has been shown to encourage more political involvement on behalf of GLBT issues (Elling, et al., 2003; Krane et al., 2002).

In 2004, van Ingen conducted an ethnography with the Toronto Front Runners (TFR), the largest running club in Canada specifically for GLBT individuals. Through in-depth interviews
and observation, she examined the health experiences of the members as well as the meaning of the categorical space. When asked what the Front Runners meant to them, participants highlighted the importance of connecting with other GLBT individuals in a safe space. They also stated that TFR allowed them to experience pleasure in their bodies as well as their identities. Van Ingen (2004) explains, “they no longer feel displaced and distant from their own bodies, from others around them, and from sport landscapes” (p. 260).

In a more recent study, Roper and Polasek (in press) examined gay, lesbian, bisexual (GLB), and heterosexual individuals’ perceptions and experiences with being members of a categorical club, the predominantly gay fitness facility, FIT. In congruence with previous studies, they found that the club provided a sense of community and comfort for GLB individuals not present in traditional mainstream clubs. Female participants specifically reported feeling comfortable in an environment that was free of heterosexual masculinity. The women felt they could “disappear” (p.18) at FIT and even lift weights without being self-conscious. One woman stated that she felt comfortable lifting weights at FIT and that even though “there are men there…it’s not the same macho feeling as a straight gym” (p. 19). Like the members of TFR (van Ingen, 2004), these women “have more complete engagement with their own bodies” (p. 259).

While researchers have explored the experiences and perceptions of individuals in queer sportscapes, there has been very little research on women’s-only fitness clubs and their effectiveness and impact on members. The few studies that have been conducted focus on women’s-only martial art dojos. In their ethnography of the women-only martial art dojo Thousand Waves, Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) found that belonging to the dojo was indeed empowering to women on physical, mental, and spiritual levels. Furthermore, all of the women
expressed an improvement in their own body perceptions as well as in the way they perceived the general female physique.

Given the numerous benefits of categorical exercise clubs and the popularity of women’s-only fitness clubs, it is important to explore further the meaning of these social spaces. Therefore, the purpose of this study is qualitatively to examine women’s perceptions of, and experiences with, membership in a women’s-only fitness facility using feminist cultural studies and feminist geography. This study is guided by three research questions: (a) what are the experiences and perceptions of being a member of a women’s-only gym? (b) what is the role of social space in creating these experiences? And (c) do these spaces reflect masculine hegemony or are they empowering women to redefine physically active female bodies?
CHAPTER 2

Method

Participants

Observations. The participants for this ethnography included women who attended a women’s-only fitness facility, The Gym, located in Northwestern Ohio. Based on my observations, the majority of women who attended the facility were in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. While The Gym had approximately 250 members, I observed around forty women who attended the facility on a regular basis. The great majority of the women were White, able-bodied, and presented themselves to be heterosexual.

Interviews. I interviewed a total of eight women out of the forty regular attendees. The interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 55. Three of the respondents were women who worked at the facility, two women attended the facility before they worked at the facility, and three of the respondents were women who attended the facility on a regular basis.
Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of exercisers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Exercise History</th>
<th>Current Exercise</th>
<th>Previous gym memberships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High School cheerleader, cycling, Tennis, weight training</td>
<td>1-4 days/week for 1 hour</td>
<td>The Gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High school basketball, volleyball, track, cross country, and cheerleading; College track and cross country, weight training</td>
<td>3-4 days/week for 1-3 hours</td>
<td>Co-ed gyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cycling, aerobics, weight training</td>
<td>5-6 days/week for 1-2 hours</td>
<td>Co-ed Gyms, The Gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Deb</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High School volleyball, softball, and basketball; Intramural whiffle ball; Summer softball leagues, weight training</td>
<td>4-5 days/week for 1-2 hours</td>
<td>Co-ed gyms, Women’s-only gyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High school volleyball; Recreational basketball, aerobics, running, weight training</td>
<td>5 days/week for 1 hour</td>
<td>Co-ed gyms, Women’s-only gyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Fay</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High school drill team, cycling, rollerblading, aerobics</td>
<td>2-3 days/week for 1 hour</td>
<td>Co-ed gyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Junior High track; High School soccer; aerobics, weight training</td>
<td>4-5 days/week for 1 hour</td>
<td>Co-ed gyms, Women’s-only gyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Aerobics</td>
<td>6-7 days/week for 1 hour</td>
<td>Women’s-only gyms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethnographic Methodology and Procedure

*Ethnography.* The goal of ethnography is to understand the culture of a group from the perspective of that group at a specific time (Berg, 2004; Krane & Baird, 2005). The focus of this study was the interactions taking place at a women’s-only fitness facility located in Northwestern Ohio. Ethnography acknowledges that researchers are not value-free and that these values color the perspective of researchers (Berg, 2004; Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991; Krane & Baird, 2005). It also realizes the potential influence a researcher may have on a setting (Berg, 2004; Ely et al., 1991; Krane & Baird, 2005). These characteristics are in congruence with my feminist perspective and illustrate why ethnography is appropriate for this research topic.

Ethnography involves placing the researcher in the setting being studied (Berg, 2004). Therefore, the first step in ethnography is gaining access to the setting from the gatekeeper (Ely et al., 1991). In this instant the gatekeeper was the director of the facility. I contacted her about the study and she, in turn, contacted the owner of the facility who gave me permission to conduct the ethnography (see Appendix A). Consequently, the director of the facility, as well as all of the employees, were aware of my identity as a researcher. However, to avoid influencing those attending The Gym, I remained invisible as a researcher (Krane & Baird, 2005) at all times, except for occasions when I deemed it necessary to reveal my identity as a researcher and receive verbal consent from the participants (see Appendix B). This occurred most often when I conducted impromptu, unstructured interviews in which people disclosed personal information.

*Participant-Observation.* Ethnography can involve multiple methods, including participant-observation and interviews (Berg, 2004; Krane & Baird, 2005). In fact, Ely and colleagues (1991) suggest that participant-observation and interviewing cannot be divorced from
one another. Participant-observation exists on a continuum depending on the level of participation a researcher takes on (Ely et al., 1991). However, it always involves observing, interacting with, and attending to more than the words spoken by participants (Ely et al., 1991).

Consistent with Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), I took on the role of participant-observer. That is, I became a member of the fitness facility, worked out at the facility, and became involved in the daily activities of the gym. I observed, asked questions, and contributed to conversations when asked to do so. To capture the events going on around me, I discretely jotted down notes—appearing as though I was recording information in a workout journal or personal diary—during and after my own activities at the gym.

In ethnography, field notes are the data and, by extension, the researcher is the data collection instrument (Ely et al., 1991). Thus, my notes were immediately transformed into a more complete field log following the day’s experience. Additionally, my analytical notes and subjective reflections were kept separate from the full field log. I was in the field for—one average—one to two hours a day, five days a week, for 5 weeks. This gave me a total of fifty hours of data that were collected between March and April 2006. During this time, I attended each of the four classes at least once a week and frequented the other areas of the gym. I went to the facility at various times every day, but attended most often when the members were present in high numbers. This turned out to be after 5:00 p.m. on weekdays and around 8:00 a.m. on Saturday.

An essential component to ethnography is fitting in and building a positive rapport with the people one is observing and interacting with (Krane & Baird, 2005). I took great care to try and fit in with the members of The Gym. For example, I established a common ground with the members by exercising with them rather than sitting in a corner and taking notes. I did
cardiovascular work, lifted weights, and attended classes along with the other members of The Gym. Like many of the members, I kept my clothes in the locker room of the facility. In short, I did everything the members of The Gym did on a daily basis. I was also sincere in all my interactions with members. I spoke with the women about whatever they chose on a regular basis and made a conscious decision to let them know me as a person rather than as a researcher. However, I did let them know that I was conducting an ethnography.

**Interviews.** Interviews are an essential part of doing ethnography, as it is the participants’ perceptions the researcher wants to understand. The major purpose of an ethnographic interview is to see the world as the person being interviewed sees it (Ely et al., 1991). I conducted eight semi-structured interviews using an interview guide developed from my observations and interactions with the members of the facility (see Appendix C). This type of interview allowed me the freedom to digress and probe beyond the planned interview questions when necessary (Berg, 2004; Ely et al., 1991).

Before conducting any interviews, I read a form describing the study (see Appendix D) and the consent form the interviewees were required to sign (see Appendix E). The eight interviews were conducted between April 25, 2006 and May 25, 2006 with women with whom I had built a positive rapport. The women were interviewed separately and the average length of the interviews was one and one-half hours. I let the women choose where they wanted to be interviewed. Interestingly, all but one of the women chose to be interviewed at The Gym. However, in order to ensure the confidentiality of the women, the interviews were conducted in a private area of the gym. If the interview was interrupted by another member or employee, I stopped the interview and resumed it once the interviewee and I were alone.
In congruence with a feminist perspective, which criticizes fore-fronting the researcher’s voice and point of view (Kirsch, 1999), I assumed I did not know what is important in the social space of the fitness center. That is, I did not assume that as the researcher my views, thoughts, and opinions of the facility should be privileged over those of the participants and forefront their voices throughout this study.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential to qualitative research and ethnography. Ultimately, it is what makes qualitative research credible (Ely, et al., 1991), as the goal of qualitative research is to represent and understand the people one is studying (Ely et al., 1991; Berg, 2004). I employed several strategies to enhance the credibility of this research: prolonged engagement, triangulation, being aware of and searching for negative cases and being reflexive (Ely et al., 1991, Berg, 2004).

**Prolonged engagement.** Prolonged engagement refers to spending enough time observing in the chosen setting to accurately represent what is going on (Ely et al., 1991). How long one must be in the field to reach prolonged engagement is dependent upon the research question as well as available time (Ely et al., 1991). Ideally, the researcher would stay in the field and do persistent observations until a point of saturation is met. That is, the researcher remains in the field until no new information can be gathered and a thick description of the context has been obtained (Geertz, 1973). A thick description of The Gym was obtained in this study.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation occurs when one compares data obtained by one method to data collected by another method with the goal of finding convergence (Ely et al., 1991). Additionally, triangulation can take place by comparing data collected over time with the same
method. I used triangulation in my ethnography by comparing weekly observations of the facility and impromptu, unstructured participant interviews with information gathered from the semi-standardized interviews. This was achieved by analyzing the observations and unstructured interviews separately from the semi-standardized interviews and comparing the resultant themes and codes. I found these various pieces of data to be congruent in their content concerning the facility and women’s-only gyms in general.

**Negative cases.** Searching for and presenting negative cases is akin to the feminist principle of acknowledging limitations and contradictions present in data (Kirsch, 1999). A negative case is one that does not fit into the emergent findings (Ely et al., 1991, p. 97). However, because individuals experience and interpret the same events differently, negative cases are to be expected. I, like most researchers, found negative cases that did not fit with my larger findings and acknowledge them in the results.

**Reflexivity.** As the researcher, I had to be aware of my own voice (Berg, 2004, p. 155). For my ethnography to be trustworthy and credible, I needed to present my expectations and initial biases. This allows the reader to understand how the project unfolded (Berg, 2004, p. 157). To this end, I approached this study through both a feminist cultural studies and feminist geography epistemological perspective. Feminist cultural studies combines both the feminist and cultural studies paradigms (Krane, 2001 a) and is used to examine gender and gender inequality and its influence in cultural interactions (Hall, 1996). Consequently, I was acutely aware of the influence of gender on the culture of The Gym. Feminist geographers examine the intersections of place, identity, body, and power and examine the interactions between the gender hierarchy and spatial structures (Nelson & Seager, 2005). Thus, I focused on how the gender hierarchy
affected the space that was The Gym as well as how The Gym influenced the gender hierarchy within it’s walls.

I expected the facility to be a place where women can feel accepted for who they are, regardless if their body fits the feminine ideal. I do exercise on a daily basis and consider myself to be in shape. However, I had no experience with The Gym prior to this ethnography and identified myself as an “outsider” (Berg, 2004). In other words, my previous workout experiences were in mainstream facilities, as opposed to women’s-only categorical ones.

I am a thin, tall blonde, 5’11”, who is close to what is considered the ideal feminine form. To lessen my impact on the gym and the women attending, I did make a conscious decision not to lift my maximum weight limit and not to push myself as much as I could have during cardiovascular workouts. I also wore baggy t-shirts and shorts to minimize my athleticism and fit into what was the usual workout gear for the women. Still, several of the women commented on my physical appearance. For example, one of the women who works at the facility commented, “Has anyone ever told you that you should be a model?… You look like a model… You’re so tall and thin. You should do that.” Other women commented on my height as well making comments such as, “You know you are just so tall. You’re blessed.” Clearly my presence influenced the women in some way. While I never felt ostracized, I did feel that I often became what they compared themselves to.

Confidentiality. As a qualitative researcher, I must concern myself with the confidentiality of those I am studying (Berg, 2004, p. 152). While my participants were attending a public space, I still felt they deserved some level of confidentiality. I achieved this by not using the name of the facility, and by assigning pseudonyms to anyone attending the facility, including the staff, or anyone who was interviewed within the results section of this
ethnography as well as in my field log. Additionally, any identifying information including consent forms and audiotapes were kept locked up and destroyed after this project was completed.

Data analysis

The data analysis process involves several steps, the first of which is data preparation (Ely, 1991). Data preparation involved typing out my field notes into a comprehensive field log at the end of every session. For every two hours of participant observation, it took me approximately four hours to type out and organize the events of the day. Data preparation also involved transcribing verbatim both the unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Following data preparation, I reacquainted myself with the data by reading and re-reading my field log and interviews until I felt I understood the essence of their content. That is, I attempted to identify the dimensions of the facility that were important to the participants and the interviewees.

With the assistance of the computer program Atlas/ti, I began coding the data. Data coding was an intense, inductive process that involved de-contextualizing textual data into meaningful units or open codes (Berg, 2004, p. 278). This was accomplished by keeping in mind the main research questions of this study as well as by coding the smallest meaningful units of data. Coding can be thought of both as data reduction in that it condenses data as well as data complication in that it expands or transforms data by asking questions of the data (Coffrey & Atkinson, 1996). Connections among the many open codes were identified to create hierarchical axial codes (Straus, 1987, as cited in Berg, 2004, p. 280). During axial coding, conceptual links were identified. These axial codes were then ordered into higher order themes. Finally, the themes and codes were situated within my conceptual framework. While this may seem to be
deductive, the higher order themes as well as the lower order codes were developed inductively from the data.
CHAPTER 3

Results

The analyzed data revealed two broad influences on the women’s experiences at the gym. These higher order themes were the “gym culture” and the “macro culture.” The higher order theme “Gym Culture” refers to the culture within The Gym while the higher order theme “Macro Culture” refers to the broader culture of our society. While these are two distinct influences, they collide to create “clashing cultures” at The Gym.
Table 2.

Outline of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Order Theme</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gym Culture</td>
<td>Physical Space</td>
<td>The Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Member Perceptions of Physical Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Climate</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Socializing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gym Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional Climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Casual Atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adherence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro Culture</td>
<td>Feminine and Masculine Expectations</td>
<td>Not too Muscular and Trim and Toned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal Feminine Form</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clashing Cultures</td>
<td>Reasons for Attending Women’s-Only Gyms</td>
<td>Benefits of a Women’s-only Gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid the Male Gaze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Co-ed Gyms as Intimidating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Pressure</td>
<td>Healthy Body Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unhealthy Body Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise Motivation</td>
<td>Exercise for Attractiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise for Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extrinsic Motives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gym Culture

The higher order theme “gym culture” illustrates the culture of the facility itself. Generally speaking the culture was one of acceptance and encouragement. This culture was developed through the themes of the “physical space” and the “social climate.”

Physical Space

The setting. The fitness facility has approximately 250 members at any given time with a demographic ranging from young to elderly adults, the majority of members are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. It is located in a strip mall at a corner where two perpendicular sections of store fronts meet to form a ninety-degree angle. On the exterior, the only thing that would indicate the building as a fitness center is the sign above the door. Glass windows run the entire length of the building, but blinds block the view into the facility. Members appreciate the privacy from people outside the facility that the shades provided. For example, Fay, an attendee, noted, “physically I like that their instruction room has shades that can be tipped. We can get light, but we’re not on display in the parking lot.” Gail also appreciated the fact “that people outside can’t really see that much either. So, unlike another women’s-only fitness facility, where it seems like people can look in and look at you, it’s more secluded here.”

In addition to offering the latest in workout equipment, the facility also offers aerobics classes with certified instructors as well as Synergie sessions and massages. Beth, an employee, explained that the purpose of Synergie is to “basically move the water that causes cellulite. You know cellulite forms when water stays in one spot and settles between the fat cells.” Synergie sessions involve wearing a sheer white leotard, lying on a table, and having a large hose suction across your entire body. The machine itself looks something like a large vacuum cleaner. A single Synergie session costs $40.00 plus $50.00 for the leotard, while the massages cost roughly
$50.00 per session. Overall membership fees range from $30 to $35 per month, with a one-time membership fee of $25.

The facility itself is small (6,440 square feet on one level) and is made up of six distinct rooms: a main exercise room, an employee room, an aerobics room, a massage room, a locker room, and two storage rooms. Upon entering the fitness center, one steps onto white tile that runs the entire length of the front of the building and contrasts nicely with the light violet walls of the facility. Immediately in front of the entrance is a small 3x3 foot white marker board with a four leaf clover drawn on it and the words “The Gym welcomes.” The names of the women who recently had joined the facility appear on the board every month. Throughout the facility, the makeshift hallway is separated from the main workout area by a small wall that stands about three feet high. This wall often has potted flowers sitting on top of it. This half wall allows one to view the entire main exercise room from the entrance. As Fay, an attendee, noted, “You can see what you have here, and it’s easy to go from one thing to the next.”

Immediately to the left of the entrance is the employee desk, behind which is a small room where the employees keep their belongings during work. On the other side of the half wall is filing cabinet and magazine rack. The magazines include: People, News Week, Child, Parenting, Us Weekly, Ladies’ Home Journal, Working Mother, Time, Cooking Light, Life and Style, and In Touch Weekly.

The main exercise room has a durable, gray carpet and houses the weight machines, free weights, and cardiovascular (cardio) machines. The weight machines take up the left side of the main room and face the only mirrors in this area. The weight machines include: leg extension and curl, leg press, chest press, modular shoulder press, modular pull down, modular low pull, modular arm curl, modular tricep push down, modular abdominal, modular back extension, chin
dip machine, inner and outer thigh machine, cable cross over machine, and squat machine. There is also a flat bench and a bench seat. Halfway through my observations, the staff put up “staff bios” between the mirrors that some of the machines faced. The staff bios included pictures of the staff along with a short description of how they came to work at the facility and other jobs they have. The biographies were on bright construction paper (pink, red, green, yellow, blue, and orange). I read each biography and found that four of the six women who are working at the facility first came to the facility as members. It seems to me that they truly enjoyed their experiences as members of the gym and wanted to stay.

The free weights are located in a corner of the weight machine area. The metal weights range in size from 2.5 pounds to 27.5 pounds and the rubber weights range from 1 to 8 pounds. In the free weight area, there is a poster on how to stretch properly as well as one on proper form for lifting with upper and lower body parts.

The cardio machines faced the wall, opposite the entrance, with five televisions and a large fake tree. On this same wall there are two posters. One instructs what your target heart rate is according to your age and the other instructs how to assess perceived exertion. The cardio machines include: six treadmills, three elliptical machines, two stair machines, and four recumbent bikes. On a perpendicular wall there is a Synergie poster picturing the right rear side of a thin, tan woman wearing a bright yellow swimsuit. It reads “Are your dimples not just on your smile?” Underneath this poster is a large glass case that holds water bottles and t-shirts with the gym’s name on them. On top of this case, there is a small box and flyers. Next to the box, a note reads, “Ask the nutritionist, if you have any suggestions about the newsletter or for the facility please let us know. All comments are welcome.” The nutritionist has a pamphlet in which she lists her credentials and stresses that she “looks forward to designing your personal
nutritional and wellness portfolio and working with you to achieve your nutritional goals.” She offers three plans varying in price and the extent of consultation one receives. Next to this pamphlet is a paper with nutritional information on topics such as multi- vitamins, vitamin C, B-complex, and soy protein.

There is a single bathroom located in the back right corner of the main room. This bathroom has a tan floor and walls with a pink toilet and wall sink. There is also a massage room located at the front right corner. The massage room is small, approximately 8 X 10 feet, and houses a massage table. Immediately to the left of the massage room is large bookcase, which contains numerous books and pamphlets on women’s health. Between the bathroom and massage room is the door to the locker room. The locker area is approximately 8 X 8 feet with two benches running the length of the area and shoe lockers. There is also a scale, like those seen in doctors’ offices, in the corner of the locker area. There are two individual showers with white curtains, two bathroom stalls, and two sinks facing a wall mirror. The toilets match the bathroom toilet in the main area and are a light shade of pink. When one sits on a toilet there is a little sign that reads, “The Gym members: Please do not flush sanitary napkins, tampons, or applicators any longer. Also, we have complimentary sanitary napkins available at the front desk in case of emergency. Thank you, Mgmt.” On the vanity in the locker room there is also a “comment box” asking for the members’ input about the facility.

The locker room area acts as a hallway to the aerobics area, which is also accessible from the right of the main entrance. While the aerobics area is a separate space, it is partially visible from both the main entrance and the locker room when the doors are left open. This room is where the various classes are held. The classes include: Guts and Butts, Step, Spin, and Trim and Tone. The classes were described by Beth, the fitness director, as follows:
Guts and Butts starts out with about thirty minutes of step aerobics. We move in to lunges and squats. And then we move into some leg lifts—more isolation-type exercises. And then we do ab exercises and lower back, and stretch. Step is very similar. We do the thirty minutes of step aerobics, and then we move into upper body exercises with weights or bands or the ball. And then we do some abs, lower back, core stuff, and then stretch. Spinning is just a forty-five minute cycling class…. Trim and Tone, umm, working pretty much the whole body. It’s low impact, so you don’t do the step aerobics—or you work it in very minimally. And I try to hit every muscle group with a little bit of strength training.

The aerobics room is lined with mirrors on two sides, the wall opposite the exterior wall and the front of the room, and has a padded wooden floor stained light yellow. At the front of the room there are two banners. One reads, “It’s your Gut and Butt” while the other reads, “It’s your ride.” There is a large stack of exercise balls in the far left corner that reaches halfway up the mirrors. There are also “steps,” which are used in aerobic classes, directly in front of the door and along the exterior wall. Left of the doorway, which would be considered the back of the room, are spin bikes. At the back of the room is a weight rack with weights ranging in weight from 2.5 pounds to 8 pounds and a stereo system. Also, the second storage room is accessible from this area.

Overall, the setting was perceived as quite comfortable. As Deitra, an employee, described:

I think this is homey. I don’t think it looks…like, other gyms I’ve been in, some look very industrial and just line after line of cardio equipment. I think the flow of this and I
think the traffic pattern is designed very well—where you can access your weight training equipment very easily. You just go right down the line.

*Member perceptions of physical space.* The women appreciated the fact that the facility is relatively small in comparison to most workout facilities. Members described the gym as, “small and welcoming,” and “nice and small.” The “smallness” created an “intimate,” “very personal gym” setting but also allowed for “plenty of space for what we need.” Gail, a member, commented that, “there’s lots of different things to do but it’s also small enough that it’s not uncomfortable coming in here… It’s just kind of a comfortable place to be in.” Part of what made the facility comfortable was that, “it’s not super crowded. Not with people or stuff;” “it’s roomy. You’re not right on top of everybody.” Carrie noted that,

I have been to gyms that are so crowded that you’ve got treadmill touching treadmill touching treadmill. And I just don’t like that—you know, that you can feel the heat off the person’s body beside you. So I like the way this is spread out. And yet I like the quaintness and smallness of it too.

Interestingly, many women equated the smallness of the gym with the “small” number of women who attend the facility. Women liked that, “here there’s not all the people [like at other gyms]” and “you don’t have to fight over machines.” They felt that other gyms were “too crowded” and too “public.” Megan, a young woman who had worked at the facility for several years, commented that,

We don’t have many people here. We’re a small gym. We never really got into much advertising like another gym, but we’ve been here since 1998. I think it’s so funny because women come and say they’ve never heard of us, but we’ve been here for a long
time. I think it’s good though. We don’t want to get too big. We’re just a small gym. We don’t want too much. We want to stay small.

The women found the small space welcoming, and not as overwhelming as other workout facilities. Amy, an employee, felt that “You don’t feel intimidated when you walk in… When you walk in it’s not this great big huge overwhelming room. It’s just that everything’s right here. And, it’s not this big expansive space where you go, oh my gosh.” Beth, also a staff member, commented that, “it’s comfortable, like, when you’ve been here for a while it’s very familiar.”

Similarly, the women commented that they liked the separate main and aerobics rooms. The women who instructed classes felt that having a wall between the two areas decreased distraction. Carrie, a staff member who was initially a member of The Gym, stated that, “As an instructor, I like it because the class doesn’t get distracted by everybody walking in, coming, going, different machines, TV. They can really concentrate on their workout.” Deitra, an employee, also felt that, “a lot of times when you’re teaching a class and it’s in an open area around, like, other cardio equipment and things like that, it’s hard to hear.” She liked that “you don’t have to listen to the TVs in the background. You don’t have to listen to somebody vacuuming or the treadmills running.” This was echoed by Gail, a member, “I think it would be too distracting—having a workout class and then watching people work out at the same time.” Fay, a member, also felt that the class would be “disruptive” and make it “harder for the gals that are trying to focus on their machine and work out. We would be more of a distraction to them.”

The women also liked that having the separate rooms, decreased the likelihood of other women in the facility watching them work out. In other words, it decreased the normative gaze of the other members. Carrie, an employee who also was a member, commented, “As a class member, I liked it because I don’t have anybody behind me watching what I’m doing. And it can
just be my workouts.” Deitra, an employee, also noted, “I think that helps people not only to feel comfortable, but if they’re doing a new class and they feel stupid because they don’t know the patterns, it’s not like the whole gym is watching. It’s just that class.” She compared The Gym with another women-only facility:

The last gym I worked at up in Toledo, it was, umm, the aerobics floor was centrally located…and surrounding the whole aerobic floor was cardio equipment. So basically women are running on treadmills and just watching this class go on. So it was like the center of attention, especially just watching women do things. Which could put somebody at kind of an, umm, I don’t know, a situation where they’re not feeling comfortable.

Carrie, an employee, also commented that at another women’s-only fitness facility, “the aerobics floor seems like it’s right there with all the cardio equipment that I wouldn’t want people watching me do my class workouts.

Social Climate

The theme of “social climate” illustrates the general atmosphere of The Gym. It is made up of the data categories “diversity,” “socializing,” “gym community,” “instructional climate,” “casual atmosphere.” and “adherence.”

Diversity. Perhaps on of the most striking characteristics of The Gym was the wide range of women in terms of age, fitness level, and body size. This was noted in all my interviews and throughout my observations. During my observations I noted that the majority of women were older, in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, and did not appear to be in the best physical shape. Often the women voiced their appreciation of the diversity making statements like “there’s women that
aren’t in great shape and women who are my age,” “you see all body shapes, you see all ages in here,” and “you’re gonna see all shapes and sizes.” Gail, a member, noted that,

I actually talked my mom into getting a membership here. My mom is in her mid-fifties. And I’m only 25. So, it’s kinda nice that she and I can come and work out together, and it’s no big deal. You don’t get that at other places.

The women felt that a women’s-only fitness facility was a place where women could feel comfortable and accepted because of the “diverse” population. There were others with whom they could “identify.” As Deitra, an employee, noted, “we don’t have mainstream media walking around in here. We don’t have models in here. We have forty and fifty year old women that aren’t models.”

Other women commented that “the women don’t feel judged, they don’t feel out of place” and “it doesn’t matter your ability there at all.” This was echoed by Helen, a member, who commented, “I don’t feel judged. I can work towards whatever goals I have.” Ellen, an employee, stated, “I feel like a women’s gym isn’t the place for somebody to come in that’s amazingly buff, amazingly skinny, an amazingly great elite athlete. So it just kinda takes a little bit of that pressure away.” Deitra, an employee, also commented,

“But, umm, you know, some people are intimidated by what other people think about them and how they look in front of people—especially if they’re not comfortable with their own body image. And, umm, I think that plays a huge role in it. That’s why I think women-only gyms are great, you know, for the people who are, you know, if they’re older and they don’t want to be working out with younger people or if they’re bigger and they don’t want to work out with thinner people. I think it’s a great opportunity for them to still be able to go get the benefits of health exercise and to do that comfortably.”
Carrie, an employee who had attended The Gym as a member, went as far to say that she has, “had people say, umm, when I walked into the gym and saw T at the desk and thought, ‘oh okay.’ But if I walked into the gym and had seen one of our other staff people that’s skinny and seven percent body fat, I probably wouldn’t have joined. So, maybe my age and size is a benefit.”

Despite the culture of acceptance, some women did not feel comfortable attending classes. For example Kristin who had recently joined the facility, stated that she did not want to attend classes because she “wasn’t ready for a class yet.” She “just [didn’t] like the idea of other women watching me. I know they really won’t be watching me, but I just wouldn’t feel comfortable.” While this seems as if she is avoiding the normative gaze, she continued saying, “I want to get in better shape before I go to classes… I want to make sure I can keep up with everyone” indicating that she was comparing herself to the other women. Mimi, a woman who had attended the facility for around 2 years, also commented that she did not attend classes because she didn’t “really like the idea of working out with so many other people. I don’t think I could keep up.”

Socializing. One of the aspects about the facility the women appreciated was the chance for socializing, which occurred on a regular basis among and between members and the staff. Amy, a staff member who had attended the facility before she became an employee, stated, “Sometimes I’ll just stand and chit chat with them, and other times if they start the conversation I’ll stay and chit chat while they’re exercising—which makes it go faster anyway, when you’re talking to somebody.” Ellen, an employee, had this experience as well commenting, “I like to come for a workout knowing that for at least ten minutes of the time I’m gonna be chatting with somebody. It makes it go by quicker.” Gail, a member, also stated, “I come here. But I’ll talk
and stuff while I’m here; it makes time go faster. People are very friendly here.” My experience at the facility was no exception. The women were extremely open and friendly to me. Often they would initiate conversations with me asking questions such as, “How long have you been coming here?” and “I’m not sure I’ve met you, what’s your name?”

Often, socializing came in the form of “exercise banter” in which women would make comments about the classes or exercising in general. For example, women would say things such as, “so how long did you do cardio before the class” or “are you coming to spin tomorrow?” Women also would make comments during classes such as, “Oh my gosh. My legs are going to be so sore,” “Do your legs burn yet? Mine do,” and “Why is this so difficult?”

Social niceties also added to the casual atmosphere. For example, the staff made a conscious effort to say “hello” and “goodbye” to everyone who walked through the door. Helen, a member, noted that they know what your name is. And at first I thought well how could I have made that big of an impression. But then I realized that your name comes up when you scan your card. But I think they do that in order to help facilitate getting to know people’s names. So it works. There’s cheat sheets, but that’s okay, because people feel welcome.

I even had an experience where the woman working the counter could not talk to me when I walked in and she felt compelled to tell me afterward that, “I’m sorry I didn’t get to talk to you when you came in. I was busy with another person.”

The women also would talk about everything from work to family while exercising. During a Trim and Tone class, the conversation turned to cell phones when a woman commented, “I dropped my cell phone in a puddle today. I thought it was going to break, but it’s fine.” Another woman then added, “Oh that’s nothing. I once dropped mine in a pile of horse
poop! It wasn’t the easiest thing to pick up and clean, but it still works.” Everyone laughed at this comment and the instructor added, “Wow. Those things are pretty durable.”

Although, some women preferred to “focus on working out” rather than socializing, they still realized the benefits of the social climate. Ashley, a spin instructor, commented that, “[the facility] is different because of the chattiness. The women are there to talk. They’re not there to work. They just like to talk to each other… All they like to do is talk.” Ellen, a staff member, stated, “I think that’s kinda fun. Umm, part of me is the diehard gym fan that’s like it’s a gym so work out. Umm, but I think I’ve grown a little bit more where I can see the gym as being social and being a good time.” Similarly, Helen, a member, noted that, “I don’t go in to socialize. But, you know, when you see the same people over and over again in the same location it’s nice to know their name and say hi, and have them say hi to you.”

The casual atmosphere of The Gym was one of the main reasons the women chose to attend the facility. It helped some of the women exercise on a regular basis and even led to positive relationships among the members and staff.

_Gym Community._ One of the aspects of the facility that the women appreciated was the sense of community among members and between the members and the staff. Women reported feeling as if they “were part of something,” and that the gym offered a sense of “community.” Members described the facility as “more friendly than other places I’ve been” and “real friendly.” They liked the people and the fact that “they like me here” and “know who I am.” Carrie, who attended the facility before she started working at it, captured this essence in her statement:

So many people talk about, umm, what The Gym is, and even the lady that just left, she said, it’s not just a place to come exercise. It’s a place to come socialize. And she said,
it’s mental therapy and, you know, you can sit at the desk and talk your problems over with people. She said, you just feel so good when you leave, because not only have you worked out, but mentally you’ve unburdened yourself. And it’s like, I can go home now and be a new person.

In other words, they had built camaraderie among the members and the staff. Amy, an employee who used to attend The Gym, described this camaraderie as, “everybody kinda knows everybody, even if you don’t know names—everybody is familiar with people.” Nina, a 55 year-old member, believed that, “a woman can join here and have friends in less than a month and those friends can be members or even staff. Everyone is very friendly. I like to come and work out with them.”

As Carrie, an employee, noted, “there was a rapport. The friendliness. They like to talk. They like to converse. They like to share ideas. I’ve learned a lot from people here. Umm, from mental health to where to find things, best restaurants.” Deitra, an employee, also stated, “I would emphasize friendships and relationships that go on within the members here. I see a lot of that. You know, women are like, ‘I haven’t seen you in so long. How have you been?’ You see a lot of the camaraderie and stuff like that between people.”

This was echoed by Fay, a member, who stated, “I’ve met new people and not had any trouble. I always introduce myself. Umm, and I think there’s women that look for other women when they go to work out. So in that sense, it’s very social that way.” Beth, an employee, also commented that, “I love it that the women that come in here are, like, friends, and they talk about all kinds of stuff.

Danna a woman who appeared to be in her thirties and had attended the facility for two years liked,
that people know me here. It’s not like [another women’s only fitness facility] where you’re just a number. I went there for a while and it was so cold. The people didn’t care about you. Here, the people know who you are. They would call if I didn’t show up for a couple of weeks. They’d be like, ‘Are you okay?’ It’s just such a friendly place.

*Instructional climate.* Part of what contributes to the atmosphere of any place is the people who work there. This facility was no exception. As Deitra, an employee, noted in reference to her colleagues, “the environment is pretty much made by the people that are in it” and Beth, also a staff member, also stated, “I think the gym probably is what it is because it’s the staff that they’ve had for years.”

The goals of the staff varied, but in general Deitra, an employee, felt that there was an “interest in [members’] progress. You know, talking to them, explaining to them, being available to answer any questions.” The staff wanted to help the members function and educate them about fitness. Beth, an employee, noted,

my perspective on fitness has changed more to a long term, and what’s gonna benefit me and benefit my classes throughout their life. And it doesn’t really matter, like, from a weightlifting standpoint, what you max out on in a bench press. Like, that’s not that functional everyday. But being able to balance on one foot or, umm, you know, lift something onto a shelf. Like, that’s very functional.

Deitra liked to teach classes because,

that’s just kinda my way of sharing what I know about it with other people that are interested. You know, show that interest by showing up for the class, showing them different exercises or providing them with a workout that’s different than what they’re used to doing. Which I think also helps with adherence and attendance and making sure
that they’re not bored with the same thing everyday. And so switching things up and showing them different things and how to isolate different areas of their bodies.

Often, the staff tried to emphasize the importance of physical activity to the members. Carrie stated, “we try to emphasize that as a staff member that it’s just a place to come work out. You know? Workout for you and be you and get moving, no matter what you are.” She noted that she started the Trim and Tone class because, “I wanted to give women a chance to lift. I think some women don’t lift unless they’re in a class with instruction.” Beth stated that she tried to make the Intro. to Step class “intense because they only have a half hour and it is only once a week.”

Interestingly, the staff described machines in relation to the female body. For example, during my orientation, Amy, an employee who had attended the facility before working at it, told me when I did triceps extensions that I was “going too far on the way up.” She continued, “You need to end at your chest, at your boobs.” She then laughed, and continued, “That’s why we have them. We know where to stop.” When I asked her where to stop on the way down, she commented, “You stop at your bellybutton.” The members of The Gym also described machines in relation to their bodies. For example, when explaining the inner and outer thigh machine, a woman who appeared to be in her fifties commented, “I avoided that machine for the longest time. I thought it looked too much like a gynecologist, but now I love it.”

The staff also tried to make exercise “fun” and “enjoyable.” They did this by creating various fitness challenges for the members. Ellen commented,

I love this one where I’m teaching and sometimes it’s hard for me to get a word in. We just go. But, they’re having a good time and they’re sweating at the same time—
everybody is. So I think, I think that’s awesome. I think people are gonna continue to exercise a whole lot longer if they’re having fun.

During the classes the staff tried to fit the intensity with the fitness level of the women who were attending. In classes this was achieved by providing exercise cues and exercise overviews before going into exercise moves. For example the instructor would say, “Basic step in four, three, two, one…” or “Why don’t we start with some little steps and then we will go over the steps before we start with the workout.” Instructors would slow a class down if there was someone who was having difficulty. When I first joined the facility, I had never done a step class before and instructors intentionally slowed classes down when they noticed I was having difficulty. Deitra, who instructed Trim and Tone and Guts and Butts, noted,

People’s body types that I look at tell me different levels that I should be working at. If I have mostly younger women in there, and I know that they’re all familiar with exercises ‘cause I’ve seen them do it or they’ve displayed it, then I’ll increase the intensity for the class. But that’s one thing in teaching—that you have to make it acceptable for everybody in the class. And everybody is at a completely different fitness level.

While the above goals are positive in nature, the staff also focused on shaping the women’s bodies. This became most apparent during the classes. Instructors would make comments such as, “extend one foot out. Let’s work that butt,” “you’ll really like this. You can really feel it in your butt. It’s great to tone that area,” and “okay ladies, roll over on your stomach. We’re going to work that gut.” The underlying assumption of these comments is that the women need to change their bodies and specifically focus on their “butt” and “gut.”

Casual atmosphere. The Gym’s “casual atmosphere” is created through both the social climate and the instructional climate. The theme itself is meant to reflect the notion that the gym
has a “laid back” and “a relaxed atmosphere” which the patrons appreciate. For example, Beth, the fitness director, explained that the facility’s “bills don’t have late fees. If you’re late and you come explain to us what happened, it’s not a problem.” In fact this was my experience when I did not have the money to pay the same day I received my first bill. I asked if I could pay the next day and Amy, an employee who had attended The Gym before she began working at it, responded, “Of course. We’re pretty easy going here.” The facility even offers “cards where you can take a card to someone and invite them to come visit for free.” Amy explained,

We don’t push yearly memberships. You know, we’re pretty flexible in our payment schedules. ‘I can only pay $25 this time;’ ‘oh, okay.’ We don’t like to do that, but there are some people who just need that little extra time.

Beth, also stated,

It’s more laid back, because we’re not corporate. There’s gyms in the area that if you even stop by to visit you’re gonna get four phone calls until you finally come in. And we don’t do that. Like, we don’t challenge people that way. I think that’s nice.

A woman who worked at the facility for two years and attends it on a regular basis echoed these comments stating, “We’re not pushy about memberships here. We just go with whatever happens. You know if a woman wants to join, if she’s ready to join she’ll join.” Similarly Fay, a member, noted, “You don’t have to join for two or three years. You can join for a year or a month. And they run specials.”

This casual atmosphere carried over into the way the classes were structured as well. For example, on several occasions I did not sign up for a class but was able to attend anyway. It was explained to me that “you don’t even need to sign up. You can just show up.” Other women did not sign up for the classes either and “just end[ed] up showing up.” Similarly, women would
show up late for class and were welcome to join with comments such as, “don’t worry, we don’t punish people that are late;” “you can join us if you want;” “hello, thank you for joining us;” and “good of you to join us, grab a spot.”

The casual structure benefited the staff as well. For example, Beth, the fitness director, noted the fact that “we don’t have staff meetings,” and Carrie, an employee, also noted, “we don’t even feel pressured here to dress a certain way. I mean, it’s not like we have to have cute matching workout outfits.” Amy, a staff member, commented that,

I just like it here. I just, it’s very low key and I’m a pretty low-key person. It takes a lot to get me flustered. And I’m just, it’s just very low key here and that’s what I like.

Thus, the casual atmosphere made The Gym accessible to both the patrons and the staff.

Adherence. The data category of adherence illustrates how the women viewed exercise and why they exercised at The Gym. The women’s views of exercise influenced and were influenced by the culture of the gym.

Some women viewed exercise as a chore, something to do to achieve their exercise goals. This was expressed through comments such as, “it was hard to get out of bed today” and “I’m tired, but I’m here.” One woman explained that,

I’m tired today and didn’t want to come, but my husband reminded me that I don’t sleep well when I don’t come. Of course he’s right. I said why don’t I just spend three hours outside doing yard work, but I know it’s not the same. So I made myself come.

Despite expressing the idea that exercise is a chore, the women reported that they exercised at The Gym because of the social support they received at the gym. It was the diversity, socializing, gym community, instructional climate, and the casual atmosphere that kept them coming back.
Macro Culture

The higher order theme “macro culture” illustrates the effect of our wider culture on that of The Gym as well as the staff and members of the facility. While the facility clearly had its own culture, it was formed within the larger United States culture and as a result could not escape its influence. The themes within the macro culture included “feminine and masculine expectations,” and “ideal feminine form.”

Feminine and Masculine Expectations

The theme of “feminine and masculine expectations” revealed the influence of hegemonically-defined femininity and masculinity on gym experiences. The influence of the patriarchal macro culture clearly was expressed in the facility’s expectations of what women should know about physical activity as well as what they should be able to do physically. For instance, employees provide fitness sheets for each woman. The sheet is filled out during the orientation, and the employee records the seat setting and amount of weight lifted. A worker walks around with the new member and explains each machine which is identified by a number. This implies that they do not expect women to know enough about exercise that they will remember the names of the machines.

When I had my orientation to the facility Amy explained, “We number our machines so that it is easier for our clients to remember which machine is which… What we do is write down where you have the seat at and where you have your legs at.” However, the orientation does not include an orientation on free weights. Rather, Amy stated, “If you have any questions about the free weights or anything like that you can just ask whomever happens to be at the desk.” This implies that they expect women do not want to lift weights. The fact that the facility provides explicit information for each woman, stands in stark contrast to Amy’s comment that “I think if I
would show a guy how to use a machine he would show an attitude, like what are you telling me?” This protocol, used in orientations, reveals the general expectation that women do not know how to exercise.

The facility also reflected gendered expectations about knowledge and physical ability. This was shown in the lack of equipment such as plates for free weights and heavier weights. Ellen, an employee, stated that she felt the facility did not have this equipment because

I think women in general use them less. I think a lot of women don’t know how to use them. I think often times they’re really focused on cardio to begin with, which I do as well. But then when they get into the gym, they’re more focused on machines. And I think when people guide them through weights, they’ll guide them through machines for the women. And when I see personal trainers working with males, they’ll guide them through the free weights. I think part of that has to do with that we’re not as strong. And free weights there’s a higher risk for injury. But there’s also a higher range that you can go to in terms of lifting. Machines are a little bit easier to figure out how to use and to use them comfortably by yourself. A lot of guys need somebody to spot or lift in pairs. I don’t know if women are as comfortable doing that.

The other employees reinforced this expectation. Deitra, an employee, also said that the facility did not have plates or a bench press because “I don’t think people would use it.” This was echoed by Fay, a member, who stated that “That’s all we thought of with weights. It’s what our husbands did.” Similarly Beth, the fitness director, commented that, “I wouldn’t lift at all if it weren’t for the classes that I instruct. There’s no reason for it… It’s one of those things that I don’t really think of doing because I run so much.” Additionally, during the annual ‘Spring into Fitness’ challenge The Gym offers, cardiovascular work is worth 3 points per minute while
weight lifting is only worth two. This point system reinforces the notion that women should focus on cardio work rather than weight lifting, a trend I did observe at the facility. A large majority of women utilized only the cardiovascular areas or used the free weights and machines very sparingly.

Deitra epitomized the dichotomy between what is expected of women and what is expected of men at a gym when she recounted what happened when a client asked her to develop a workout routine.

I don’t even remember what I had her do, but I remember that the woman who was lifting grunted a lot. She made it a huge deal, you know, with lots of heavy breathing etcetera. The woman that was with her walked over to give her encouragement. She said, ‘You can do it. Push…’ They sounded like two men. It was just so out of place for our gym. It’s what you would expect at a gym for men and women, but not here. I almost felt embarrassed for them.

Ideal Feminine Form

The theme of ideal feminine form reflects the influence of hegemonically defined femininity on what the women believed to be the ideal feminine form. The women expressed a narrow version of the ideal feminine form, that of the White, heterosexual woman. Women are supposed to have “the hourglass figure” and be “gorgeous and stick thin.” As the women discussed this ideal feminine form, the categories of not too muscular and trim and toned emerged.

Not too muscular and trim and toned. The women often thought of lifting weights as something that would cause them to be too muscular. In turn, being too muscular was seen as not feminine and hence as something to avoid. Lindsey, a woman who had just joined the
facility, stated that she didn’t lift weights with her husband because “He wanted big muscles and
he never wanted to do any cardio work… I just didn’t want to gain mass amounts of muscle. I
wanted to do more cardio work.” Similarly, when I asked why she didn’t lift weights very often,
Fay, a member, responded that

[Weight lifting] was just, umm…first of all, it was never a big deal until probably the last
few years—they’re starting to see how important it is for women. Umm, because of my
age. You’re gonna grow up knowing the importance all your life. That wasn’t anything
anyone…as a matter of fact, who wanted bulk?

She also commented that “I’m totally all behind people that do it faithfully. Not heavy, I think
people have taken all kinds of things to extremes… And I think a woman can do that as well.”

Women felt the “pressure to look a certain way and be fit and tone.” They expressed a
desire to fit the ideal feminine shape. For example, they commented that “we’re more about
trimming and toning,” and “someday I want Madonna arms… When I grow up, I want to have
those arms,” and “I just would like to be a little less soft.” Other women explicitly stated that
they did certain exercises to become closer to the ideal. Ellen, an employee, commented that “I
started on the cardio for looking good, weight loss.” Similarly, Gail, an attendee, stated that she
started lifting “weights and stuff because I think that it helps tone my arms and abs and stuff.”

While most women would have been happy to reach the cultural ideal, Helen, a member,
chastised the belief that weight loss is desirable.

people say, oh you lost weight. And then I have this huge political dilemma about how to
respond to that. Sometimes I say, yes I had cancer. Just because sometimes people need
to be reminded that losing weight is not always a good thing… It’s the assumption that
you must always be so happy about that… You can never be too rich or too thin.
Clashing Cultures

The higher order theme “clashing cultures” illustrates the intersections of the gym and macro cultures on the culture of The Gym as well as on the members and staff. The combined influence of the two cultures was apparent in the “reasons for attending women’s-only gyms,” in the “body pressure” felt by the members and staff and in their “exercise motivation.”

Reasons for Attending Women’s-only Gyms

Both the gym and macro cultures influence the reasons these women chose to exercise at a women’s-only gym. The theme “reasons for attending women’s-only gyms” emerged from discussions surrounding why the women chose to attend The Gym instead of a co-ed gym. The theme consists of the data categories, “benefits of a women’s-only gym,” “avoid the male gaze,” and “co-ed gyms as intimidating.”

Benefits of a women’s-only gym. This data category expresses pull factors, or gains attributed to “the all-women aspect” of the gym. For example, some of the women simply stated that they “feel more comfortable here” and they felt that the facility “fits” them. Many clients noted they “joined it because it was women-only” and the “women-only was a big thing.” Marj, a member who appeared to be in her early 50s, explained one benefit as “the machines… fit me. I couldn’t fit on to the other ones, the normal sized ones when I attended co-ed gyms. They were just too big for me. I felt awkward.”

The most common description of co-ed gyms was that they are dominated by men. The women stated, “it’s almost all guys there,” “the majority of people in there are guys,” “there’s normally too many guys at co-ed gyms,” and “the typical weight room [is] just full of big enormous college boys looking at themselves and listening to Metallica.” That co-ed gyms are perceived as being dominated by men led to more specific reasons to avoid those settings.
When asked why she attended a women’s only facility versus a co-ed facility Lindsey, a woman who had attended both women’s only and co-ed gyms, responded, “Well I think women come because the atmosphere is more welcoming. There’s not that competition. You know men want to make everything into a competition. They compete amongst themselves and [with] the women who are present. I can be here and talk to you and I’m not worried about how I’m doing in relation to you.” The women distinguished between a workout “competition” present at co-ed gyms versus the “individual workout level” present at women’s only gyms. Ellen, an employee, also commented that,

I feel like the co-ed gyms, I feel like I’ll see people working at higher intensity than at the women’s gym…which, I think it’s great here. But people chat. They are on the machines. They’re working hard, but not at that pushing themselves so hard level. And I think part of it comes from the competition that guys have in terms of lifting harder and pushing themselves. However, she also felt that women at co-ed gyms competed with each other as much as the men commenting that

I’ve noticed as the years has gone on, because I’ve been going to gyms for so long, that I feel like women much more are into power lifting and lifting more and working harder in the gym. I feel like I see, in some women at least, that competition coming through.

Despite the women’s appreciation of the women’s-only gym, they also recognized that women’s-only gyms are marginalized. Interestingly, the lack of competition and pushing themselves translated into the women seeing women’s-only gyms as not “serious” and as “kind of a joke in town.” Beth, an employee who had attended the facility, explained that she initially did not want to work at a women’s-only facility because of
the whole stereotypes of all- women’s things… Like, I think maybe not being real serious. Just growing up I never considered myself very girly. And I kinda like the competitive edge, you know, which I think you get less of at a women’s gym.

Avoid the male gaze. Many of the women chose to attend a women’s-only gym to avoid the male gaze typically present in co-ed gyms. As discussed earlier, co-ed gyms were seen as “dominated by men” and the women felt out of place in them. Helen’s comment epitomized the sentiment of this code:

I think ideally it is to have a place apart from the male gaze. It’s a safe space where the male gaze isn’t there. Like, one time a male treadmill technician was here, and I wasn’t upset, but it was just such a noticeable thing. Even that was noticeable. So I think it’s a safety thing, a physical safety and a safety from the gaze.

When asked about her experiences at co-ed gyms, a woman who appeared to be in her forties stated, “I don’t know. It was different. I didn’t like all the men. They look at you differently.” A 24 year old woman who used to work at The Gym and who has attended co-ed gyms in the past commented,

[Men are] not there to work out most of the time. They stand around and talk and flex their muscles. It’s just a meat market to them. They like to look at themselves and women. I’m there to work out, you know. Here I can work out and just concentrate on that. I don’t have to worry about people watching me.

A 55 year old woman made a similar comment about her experience at a co-ed university facility:
I didn’t like that there would be men up top, looking down on the woman doing classes on the basketball courts. It made me uncomfortable. I don’t like anyone watching me work out and sweat, much less young men who are repulsed by me.

The male gaze made women “uncomfortable” in general and specifically influenced the types of exercises women felt comfortable doing with men present. Carrie, an employee, who has attended co-ed gyms on occasion, stated that “when I want to do some yoga stretches I don’t know if I want men around when I’m sitting here doing those stretches.” Ellen, an employee, has attended co-ed gyms for the majority of her life and expressed,

There’s certain exercises I won’t do if I’m surrounded by a lot of people… just glute work that we do here that you’re kinda just in awkward positions. Like, pelvic thrusts to the ceiling. You know? They’re a good workout, but if I had five men standing around me lifting I wouldn’t do them there. Certain stretches I won’t do there, just because they’re a little awkward.

Beth, the fitness director, also commented, “there are certain machines and things that are much more comfortable to use in a women’s-only gym. Like, the inner and outer thigh machine. I would never use that at a co-ed gym.” Deitra, an employee, felt that women attended women’s-only gyms

Because of the dimples on your butt. Because you’re not a size four jean…. , the fact that we are swarmed and swamped by this perfect body image and what every woman should look like… it’s one thing to not be that. But when you’re working out you’re not made up; you don’t have cute clothes on. You’re sweating. It’s not pretty to work out. And nobody wants to not be pretty in front of guys. You know? It’s like the whole, the mainstream of what you’re supposed to look like and this is why you’re supposed to
work out. But yet you don’t look like that, and so you need to go somewhere else where you can.

*Co-ed gyms as intimidating.* In addition to avoiding the male gaze the women also wanted to avoid intimidation. Amy is a staff member who has not attended a co-ed gym because “guys, you just feel intimidated with guys around. You know, they’re lifting three hundred pounds and you’re doing twenty. Guys just, you know, they’ve got these buff bodies walking around.” Beth, the fitness director, who regularly attends co-ed gyms stated, “there’s certain rooms where girls don’t even want to go into, because it’s very intimidating.” Carrie, an employee, who has attended co-ed gyms on occasion stated,

I still just feel like I need to go in the corner; like, they need the main part of the floor, and I still feel like I need to go in the corner—and that I’m not as fit as they are. So, maybe it’s just that stigma of, yes I’m equal to you and I’m working my way in there by staying in the corner and maybe eventually will get there.

Deitra articulated: “I would say the whole concept behind a women’s fitness center is to reach out to women and say, it’s okay for you to exercise too. And here’s a place that you can do it without being intimidated in front of men.”

Women also felt embarrassed at co-ed gyms. During a spin class a 45 year old woman commented that,

Well, I come here because I don’t want to be the butt of jokes on Monday at work. When I spin or stretch I always have about five inches between the back of my shirt and pants that shows my underwear line. I don’t want men to see my granny panties. It’s just not something I’m comfortable with. Here I don’t have to worry about it because it happens to all of us.
This embarrassment was expressed to me on my first day at the facility. During my orientation session, I was instructed to get onto a leg curl machine. After I awkwardly did so, Amy, an employee, laughed and said, “See that’s why we’re women only. There’s just no good way to get on those things.” This was also expressed in a Guts and Butts class when Jennifer the instructor, commented, “I stink. I can smell myself. Can anyone else smell themselves?” The women laughed at this comment and Jennifer continued, “That’s why we’re women only. We can stink and no one will care.”

While most of the women felt that there was some intimidation present at co-ed gyms a few did not. Deitra, an employee, stated, “I feel confident enough to go by myself. I know all the lifts and how the machines work. I know some women feel intimated by men being present, but I don’t.” Fay, a member, also stated that attending a co-ed gym “doesn’t bother me… I don’t wash my hair I don’t really care what I look like. I like that freedom. I think if I attended another gym regularly I would be the same. I’m not dressing to impress; I’m going to get a workout.”

It is clear through their quotes that the women viewed co-ed gyms as male dominated, intimidating, and uncomfortable. They were also seen as an environment in which most women could not be comfortable with their bodies. They were viewed as spaces women should not attend.

**Body Pressure**

The theme “body pressure” reflects the idea that the women did not feel pressure at the facility to have the ideal feminine form, but still felt the influence of hegemonically-defined femininity. In other words, there was contradiction between the message of the gym and that of society. They noted that the pressure to have the ideal body came from “society,” “media,” “tv,” and “magazines.” Gail, an attendee, stated, “What we see in the media. That just pressures
every girl. I think that pressures every girl to think, ‘oh I want to lose a couple pounds’.”

Members felt that “women just feel pressure to look a certain way,” “I would be surprised if any woman doesn’t,” and “if you’re a woman and you have a heartbeat and you’re living in this culture, then you have that experience.” Interestingly, Helen, an attendee, felt that there was a different type of pressure depending on age.

At your age, it was about being attractive according to what the [cultural] definition [of the ideal feminine form] happened to be. With my age, it’s still interesting to me that the look pressure is not the same sort of, you know, ‘show us your navel.’ But, you know, 35 and up, the pressure is ‘don’t look like you’re aging. Age but don’t look like you’re aging.’ Botox and face lifts and liposuction and all that business.

Often women saw this pressure as something that had been internalized. Amy, an employee who had also attended The Gym, commented that at The Gym,

I don’t see any pressure [to look a certain way]. If there is, it must be intrinsic for certain people. Because there are certain people who have lost a lot of weight—a lot of weight. And that has come from within. Nobody here has said to them, ‘oh gee you need to come here and work out and lose a hundred pounds.

Similarly when asked if she felt any pressure to fit into the ideal feminine form, Gail, a member, stated,

Here or in society? Here no. I think everybody just looks their own way. You’re just here to work out. Umm, but in society I think women do have pressure to look a certain way and be fit and tone. And I think I pressure myself to look that way, and I know that I used to be thinner before. Like, okay maybe I want to lose some weight and try to look like that again… some people say that. Like, I didn’t work out all weekend and I feel like I
gained five pounds. Or, I noticed that my stomach’s fatter today. And I think people comment on that. But I think you’d hear that at any gym.

Beth summarized this dichotomy, “Umm, [at The Gym] I don’t see women feeling pressured to be thinner because they’re here. I think women are here sometimes, as they are at any gym, because they feel pressure to be thin.”

Despite members noting the lack of emphasis at The Gym, the instructors perceived the need to model a fit body. Deitra, who instructed Trim and Tone and Guts and Butts, also reported feeling pressured to be an example of fitness.

Being a staff member—being somebody in the exercise profession—umm, I kind of relate it to, like, my body is my portfolio. My body is a resume. Umm, photographers carry around pictures they take, and it shows their talents. I am mine. Like the way I look, the way I present my body, I think, in itself it tells a lot about the importance of fitness to me. So, you know, if I were to let myself go and gain some weight and not be the best that I can be, then inevitably to me that’s like saying, well exercise and fitness isn’t that important because I can put it off. And you can too… It makes me want to go. Say I’m struggling to get to the gym one day. Like, I’m so tired. I can just rationalize it and think to myself, you need to be an example. The way you look, the way you act, and the activities you participate in are an example.

Carrie, who instructed Spin, Trim and Tone, and Guts and Butts, felt that maybe I better shape up a little more. Maybe I better tone myself a little more. Maybe I better watch my eating habits. You know? So I have, as an instructor, a negative side that I feel like, hmm they’re kinda looking at me one way and I should be better.
Not only do the employees feel pressure to have “the perfect body,” this pressure also is felt by the members to a certain degree. During the orientation to the facility, a woman is asked if she wants “to do your weight and body fat today?” When I had my fitness assessment done I was first led into the locker room and asked to “step on the scale.” After adjusting the scale, the woman who was doing my assessment asked, “Do you want to see your weight?” She then wrote my weight onto a fitness assessment sheet. This was done “to keep track of your progress.” After this, I was led to the front room where I was asked to “take off my sweatshirt” to allow an accurate measurement. The woman measured the circumference of my right arm, chest, waist, and right thigh. The woman then measured my body with a tape measure and wrote down these measurements on my fitness sheet. The final step in the fitness assessment was to have my body fat tested. This was done with a handheld machine, which I held in front of my body for ten seconds. It then spit out a number indicating the percent of my body that is fat. This was also written on the fitness sheet.

Often body pressure to have the ideal body was expressed through the women’s discussions of their body image. Consequently, the data categories of healthy body image and unhealthy body image reflected the influence of the gym culture and macro culture respectively.

Healthy body image. Despite being aware of the cultural pressure to have the ideal thin body, which most women can not achieve, some women reported what would be considered a healthy body image. They felt confident and comfortable about their bodies at The Gym and did not see a need to change themselves. Fay, a member, noted that, “We all show up in different forms. Some days looking better than others, and some days rattier.” Beth, the fitness director, stated,
Umm, I think I’m pretty comfortable with my body—at least for a girl {LAUGH}.

‘Cause most women or girls don’t really like their body. Like, I’m okay with it. It’s not like I think I’m a supermodel. I don’t feel like I need to change from what I am now. But I also just want to, you know, always just appear healthy and set that example. Because there’s so much pressure to be too thin in our society. And, umm, you know? I don’t ever want to be one of those people who others say, ‘she doesn’t eat.’ ‘Cause I eat all the time. Like, I eat a lot.

Ellen also acknowledged the societal pressure to be trim and tone, but stated,

I used to feel that pressure a whole lot more. I grew up being stick thin and eating whatever I wanted. And then when my metabolism slowed down in undergrad, I gained weight. And that was just so stressful for me. And I felt horrible about myself. And then I got through the process of dropping it. And now I’m just, I feel more comfortable with wanting to be fit versus wanting to be gorgeous and stick thin. It still comes. I might think, ‘oh I wish I could look like that.’ But I feel like now I’m more focused on being fit and being healthy.

Other women did not acknowledge societal pressure directly when they discussed their body image, but did so indirectly. Amy, a previous member who now works at The Gym, stated that when she exercised, “My clothes fit. I have never dieted. I don’t ever diet, because I just don’t. So for me walking and working out works better than dieting... basically that’s it—just how my clothes fit and how my arms look.” Similarly, Deitra, an employee, reported that,

I guess I don’t really look at numbers at all. I don’t look at, umm, like how much I weigh on a scale. I don’t look at, you know, how many inches I’ve dropped or think that way. It’s kind of my personal body image. That’s what I usually focus on.
Unhealthy body image. Some women spoke of their own bodies in a self-deprecating way, reflecting macro societal expectations. They felt their bodies were not good enough and there was “always room to improve.” These women had constructed their bodies in relation to the ideal feminine form and found they had not achieved it.

The women made comments such as, “that’s important when you’re fat like me”; “I am a bit overweight, but I have very strong leg muscles because of [spinning]”; “I don’t look like I’ve been coming for two years, but…”; and “I’m just not in good shape, as you can see.” This self-deprecation was apparent when during a Guts and Butts class. Jennifer, the instructor, commented, “My problem is that my husband loves to cook. He really gets into it and the presentation of everything.” She then grabbed her hip area and said, “This is all cheese and pasta. It’s terrible. When I tell you I have cheese butt, I really mean it.” At other times the women did not compare themselves to the ideal, but to other woman around them. Gail, a member, stated, “every girl does that. And I really do. But I don’t think it’s bad here that you’re always comparing yourself to other people.”

The fact that the women who instructed classes most often were in their twenties and the women who attended the classes tended to be older created an interesting dichotomy. The instructors, unintentionally, represented the ideal the members were trying to reach not only because of age, but also because of general fitness. For example, during a Trim and Tone class, a 50 year old woman commented to the instructor that she “made it look so easy. You look like a cheerleader, we all look like we want to be cheerleaders.” Fay, a 52 year-old member, also commented that she and other women compared themselves to the “twenty something instructors,” but that they
Deitra, a 22 year-old staff member, was aware that members compared themselves to her.

I think for some people a good physique or whatever can be kind of intimidating. You know? Like, this person’s supposed to be training me, and I don’t look anything like them. You know, there’s no way I can keep up with this person’s workout.

Not only did the members compare themselves to the instructors, but the instructors occasionally compared themselves to the members. For example, when asked if she compared herself to the people she was instructing, Deitra stated,

A lot of times, yeah, I would say I do. I don’t know if it’s just human nature, but I am kinda comparative. But you know, that’s not what the class is about. You know? I’m looking at all the mirrors and making sure people have the right form and things like that. Umm, it’s not something that’s constantly on my mind, and I don’t know if that’s what people think about also.

**Exercise Motivation**

The theme “exercise motivation” addressed the issue of why women chose to exercise. Exercise motivation is influenced by both the gym culture and the macro culture. For example, the women reported that they were motivated to attend the facility because of the casual atmosphere of the gym. However, they also were motivated to exercise by their “body image” which was the result of the intersection of both the gym and macro cultures. As the women spoke about their reasons for exercising, three types of motives were uncovered: exercise for attractiveness, exercise for health, and extrinsic motives emerged.
Exercise for attractiveness. One of the reasons why the women exercised was to achieve or get as close as possible to the ideal feminine form reflecting the influence of the macro culture. This became most apparent in the conversations women had about and during the various aerobics classes. For example, the women described the various classes by the body parts they felt the classes worked, implying that they attended the classes to work those areas of their bodies. When asked if she was going to attend Trim and Tone, a woman who appeared to be in her fifties replied, “Yes I am. I like the classes because they really target certain areas. I like Trim and Tone because of the weights. It’s great.” Similarly, a woman who appeared to be in her thirties commented that, “You get a great workout from spin. It really works your butt. It takes a while to get use to it. You should try it when J teaches. She really works your butt. We call her the butt queen. You really get that burn which is great for me… That’s good I need it. I need to lose some of my butt.”

Also during the classes, women casually discussed the need to change their bodies to be closer to the ideal. When discussing her reasons for exercising, one woman in her forties commented, “You know, people are getting ready for those bathing suits.” Lisa, a woman in her forties who exercises quite frequently replied, “I know. Aren’t we all?” During a Trim and Tone class, the instructor, Beth, made the common statement that, “everyone wants good legs for summer.” Similarly, during a Guts and Butts class Jennifer, the instructor, asked, “So has anyone thought about swimsuit season yet?” Helen, a member, replied, “Yes. Unfortunately. Why else would I be here?”

Other women focused on attractiveness and the ideal feminine form when asked why they did certain exercises. Deitra, an employee, stated that she worked out four to five times per week doing both weight training and cardiovascular work,
just basically to target certain areas that I would like to develop. You know, I want leaner arms or more defined arms. Then I’ll do different exercises to do that… I guess it all pretty much comes down to the body image. You know? I don’t need to be able to bench press a hundred pounds or whatever.

Fay, an attendee, also stated that she attended Guts and Butts, Trim and Tone, as well as worked out on her own to change her body to be closer to the cultural ideal.

I try to target different areas now. Before I was just coming and when you first come, they show you how to do the machines. And so that’s how I ended up doing it. But when I noticed, oh I was a little sore from doing a certain machine or a certain exercise, I think I try to do those things more now— things that I know are making a difference on my body.

*Exercise for health.* It is important to note that while hegemonically-defined femininity influenced some of the women’s reasons to exercise, others came to the gym for health reasons. Several women stated that, in general, exercise “keeps me in relatively good health” and that “it’s just a good thing to keep me in shape” and that when you exercise “you feel so much better. When I don’t exercise, I don’t have the energy.” Another woman said that exercising makes her “feel better even when I just walk.” Amy, an employee, commented, “I feel much better to get the blood going again. I feel better after I work out. Even if I just come in and walk, I feel better.” Fay, a member, also said, “…when I exercise, I have so much more energy. And I feel like, you know, I can do almost anything—within reason.” Similarly, Kathy, a woman who was in her 60s and had attended the facility for 2.5 years, commented, “Well, I come here for my mental and physical health. I need to just unwind after work. It’s just a great way to get away from it all. I like that I can come here and no one asks me about things going on at work.”
While these women have a general sense of the benefits of exercise, others exercise for specific health reasons. For example Carrie, an employee, exercised five to six times per week because of her family’s health history. She commented:

My father’s had a stroke my mother’s diabetic and asthmatic. They’re both overweight. They’re not in shape at all. And I have genetically been inclined to all of their bad health problems. So my main goal is to try to stay heart healthy and stay fit and active. Because I’ve seen what has happened with my parents.

Helen, a member, recently started exercising because, “I had two things that have came together about eight months ago. I had a herniated disk and I was in excruciating pain… I want my back to be really, really solid and stable… And that’s coincided with being diagnosed with high blood sugar.” She felt “that the clock has pretty much run out on my good luck. You can get away with that when you’re younger, but you pay the price when you’re older.”

Other women exercised for age-related health reasons. Carrie, a 55 year-old employee, commented that, “I need the weight bearing for the age I am, and osteoporosis. So I use weights to keep healthy there.” Fay, a 52 year-old member, stated, “Something I work on regularly is as you get older you want to keep your balance.” Carrie explained that:

I make it a priority, where I never did before. Before, if I had time I would exercise. Now I schedule the time and work around exercise… it’s the whole health thing. Seeing my parents, seeing what happened. Umm, and I think just a lot of information is out now that wasn’t out fifteen or twenty years ago. And I think quality of, for example, shoes. I mean, things are getting geared more towards fitness and, umm, proper fit in shoes. I mean, I don’t know. It’s just emphasized more that, I think, you need to be fit—no matter what age.
Similarly, Ellen, a 22 year old fitness instructor, commented that:

Health in general seems more important now. I know I’m still really young, but I feel like I’m growing up, so now it’s time to start staying healthy, so I can be healthy for the rest of my life.

She continued that she wanted, “to be strong enough to be more independent. I think it’s just to round out my fitness.”

Extrinsic motives. While there was a clear distinction between attractiveness and health motivations, there were also several other reasons why the women exercised. Fay, a member, said, “I think the sign-up and belonging and putting money down are true incentives to people.” This was echoed by Helen, an attendee, who stated, “I think you have to motivate yourself, and I just realize I’m paying for a gym membership. And I’m going to use it… You almost feel guilty by not working out.” Similar to the notion of paying for a gym membership, women felt that if others knew they had joined the gym and made that commitment they were obligated to come. Kristin had just joined the facility and explained that, “I come to exercise and I exercise because people are here and know I’ve joined.” Helen commented that, “I also like the classes. They’re great. I like them because they make me come and do the work. I work harder in class because I don’t want others to see me slacking. It’s like well I have to do this because everyone is watching me. It’s motivating.”

Other women felt that the various competitions held at the gym motivated women to exercise. For example, the facility had a ‘Spring into Fitness Contest’ which was described by Amy, an employee, as
great fun. All you do is sign up and then keep track of how much you work out. We divide everyone into teams and we try to keep them even, you know, between those who
work out all the time and those who don’t work out so much. You then write down how many cardio, weight lifting, and stretching minutes you do everyday and at the end of the week we add up the points. At the end of it, we give out prizes like we did at Christmas.

It’s a great motivator to workout. You get something back.”

Helen, a member, also felt that “the little contests they do, I think those are very good because they get people to come more often.” She even commented that she “always feels guilty when I don’t come when we have those things. Last year I was on a team that never came and I came extra to make up for it.”

Summary

Within The Gym, spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces created a culture which was healthy, fun, motivating and seemed to promote an empowering environment for women. The Gym’s culture consisted of the physical space, the social climate, and the instructional climate of the facility. The social and instructional climates created a casual atmosphere at The Gym in which the women reported feeling more comfortable exercising than they would have been in a co-ed fitness center. However, the macro culture influence also was present at The Gym. This was apparent in the feminine and masculine expectations of knowledge and physical ability at the facility which promoted stereotypical beliefs that women do not know as much about physical activity and do not exercise at the same intensities as men. Employees and members also reported that the ideal female body was one that is not too muscular and trim and tone at the same time, illustrating the influence of hegemonically-defined femininity on the women’s body perceptions. In turn, the women pursued the ideal female body through focusing on cardio-vascular work at the expense of weight training.
The Gym culture and the macro culture collided in a clashing of cultures at the facility. This created contradictions in the women’s experiences of The Gym. For example, the women reported attending a women’s-only gym simply because it was women only. They wanted to avoid the male gaze and the competition they felt was present at co-ed gyms. However, despite a reported lack of the male gaze at The Gym, the members and staff felt a normative gaze in that they believed other women were judging their bodies in comparison to the ideal feminine form. Additionally, the women believed that others felt women’s-only gyms were not as “serious” as co-ed gyms because of the lack of competition between the women. Thus, The Gym was a contested space. Often, contradictions centered on the women’s bodies and their relationship to it. They reported not feeling pressure at the gym to have the ideal body, but often spoke of their bodies in self-deprecating ways and compared their bodies to those around them and the macro cultural ideal. Additionally, women reported exercising for attractiveness which stands in stark contrast to reports of exercising to be healthy.
CHAPTER 4
Discussion

Framed within feminist cultural studies and feminist geography, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of members and staff of a women’s-only gym as well the role of social space in creating these experiences. Feminist cultural studies guided the examination of the interactions of gender and culture (cf. Hall, 1996). As in previous research within sport and exercise (e.g., Cole, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Hall, 1996; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipely 2001; Markula, 1995), feminist cultural studies highlighted the contradictions women at The Gym experienced with their bodies and behaviors. Feminist geography focuses on the relationships among place, identity, body, and power and focuses on how these varied dimensions produce experiences (Nelson & Seager, 2005). More specifically, in this study, feminist geography revealed examine the intersections of spatial structures and the gender hierarchy, even within women’s only space of The Gym.

Lefebvre’s notion of social space (1974/1991) was highly relevant to the analysis of women’s experiences at The Gym. Social space is made up spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. Spatial practices are the end result of the interaction of a physical space and the activities that take place within it. Representations of space refer to conceived space which is produced through discourse (van Ingen, 2003). Finally, representational spaces are the lived spaces in which we experience life. van Ingen (2003) argues that this lived space is both empowering and oppressive and that this is the case with sport and physical activity.

Overwhelmingly, the women reported a sense of acceptance and belonging at the women’s-only facility. However, in spite of the generally positive and empowering atmosphere
at the facility, they could not escape the influence of hegemonically-defined femininity, which influenced how the women viewed their bodies as well as what they thought of as the ideal feminine form. Further, the women in the study reported feeling “out of place” in co-ed gyms because they were regularly dominated men. Often this feeling of discomfort was the result the male gaze, which although minimized in The Gym, was also present in a panopticonic effect. Thus, there was a “clash of cultures” the resulted the a contested space for exercising women.

Social Space

In congruence with Lefebvre’s notion of social space (1974/1991), the facility was both empowering to the women as it allowed for a counter hegemonic-culture and oppressive in that hegemonically-defined femininity still was felt on all three levels of space: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. On the one hand, the women felt empowered to exercise and move their bodies because of the lack of an overt male gaze and traditional expectations of femininity. On the other hand, they also expressed a certain degree of apprehension about exercising and their bodies due to the internalization of hegemonically-defined femininity. The result was that The Gym was a contested space.

A unique culture was created at The Gym, a women’s only exercising space. The workers and members of The Gym had created a social climate of acceptance at the facility. There was sense of support, camaraderie, and friendship among and between staff and members who frequented the facility often. This is consistent with previous research (Krane & Romont, 1997) that found participants at the Gay Games, another categorical setting for physical activity, reported a sense of community. Roper and Polasek (in press) also reported that belonging to a gay fitness club provided a sense of community and comfort for GLB individuals not present in traditional mainstream clubs. The women at The Gym genuinely cared about each other and
took the time to get to know each other. This was also apparent in the policies of the facility which allowed staff to send out notes or to call members “asking if they were okay” when they didn’t show up during their regular hours. The women also reported that meeting similar people and developing new friendships were motives for joining and continued attending the facility. This finding replicates the results of Elling and colleagues (2003) who reported that social bonding and meeting similar people motivated people to join gay and lesbian workout clubs.

An important element of the gym climate was that the women felt that they could attend the facility without being judged, regardless of age, size, or fitness level. The majority women who attended the facility were in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, felt they needed to lose weight, and many women expressed that they were not as physically fit as they would like to be. However, the women felt that a women’s-only fitness center was a place for women who did not fit into the culturally ideal feminine form. In fact, this atmosphere, created through the interactions of the women within the social space of the gym, provided an alternative space to the spaces of mainstream fitness clubs.

Spatial practices. The spatial practices, or the ways the women interacted with the physical space of the gym, illustrate the contradiction between the physical space as being “dominated by women” and being “dominated by women as a result of exclusion” as in co-ed clubs. While The Gym was dominated by women in the sense the facility was meant “for women only,” it was also dominated by women as a result of feeling excluded from the space of sport and exercise in mainstream facilities. For example, the lavender walls and pink toilets, colors that traditionally represent femininity, clearly demarcated The Gym as a women’s-only space. It is hard to imagine a large, muscular man working out in an environment that is read as a women dominant space.
Additionally, one aspect of the facility that members and employees appreciated was that it had blinds blocking the view into the facility. This made the women feel comfortable exercising because they “were not on display.” Being on display is something that the women reported feeling at co-ed gyms and that they did not like. Similarly, the women enjoyed the fact that the facility’s two main rooms were separate. This was because it decreased distraction as well as the gaze of those who were not partaking in the physical activities designated in each room. While this illustrates that there was a level of discomfort with performing physical activities in front of others and lack of body confidence, it also was minimized to a degree by the structure of The Gym. Consequently, the wall separating the rooms and the women’s interactions with it reproduced the power relations that facilitate a need for women’s-only gyms. If the women felt completely comfortable with exercising in front of others, there would be no need for a wall.

The women also noted that the “smallness” of the facility made them feel comfortable. This was discussed in relation to mainstream facilities that were intimidating to the women. The mainstream facilities felt industrial and cold whereas the women’s-only fitness facility felt warm and “homey.” This effect was achieved by the various home items placed throughout the facility such as plants and the bookshelf as well as by the lavender color of the wall and the gendered pink toilets. However, the comfort of the women may also be the result of the cultural notion that men can take up large spaces while women should take up small spaces. Again, this illustrates The Gym as contested space.

*Representations of space.* The representations of space, the conceptual spaces, in the facility also were fraught with contradiction. For example, there was an emphasis on fitness and health illustrated on the “how to” posters in the main fitness room and in the goals of the staff,
which included educating the women about physical activity and functional exercises. However, there was also an emphasis on attractiveness and fitting the cultural ideal in the names of certain classes (i.e., Trim and Tone, Guts and Butts) which suggest a need to shape those areas of the female body. This need to shape the body was also present in the signs in the aerobics room which read, “It’s your Gut and Butt” and “It’s your ride.” Additionally, the Synergie poster of a thin, toned woman wearing a yellow bathing suit also emphasized the need to be attractive. The emphasis on attractiveness was also present in the notion of shaping and sculpting the body to be closer to the ideal, which was presented by the staff in classes as well as in the policy of measuring women as part of orientation. Thus, the members received some mixed messages—they should exercise to achieve the cultural ideal feminine and exercise to be healthy. Despite the reminders of the ideal feminine form, the women reported feeling no pressure to fit into the cultural ideal at The Gym.

The numerous books and pamphlets on women’s health along with the magazines geared towards women designated the facility as a women’s space. More specifically, they often were geared toward ‘mature’ women, magazines such as Seventeen or Elle were not present, designating the facility as a ‘mature’ women’s space, which would explain why there was a noted absence of ‘younger’ women. Furthermore, the women themselves defined the space as a women’s space through their conversations and descriptions of machines. The women continually described machines in relation to the female body illustrating not only their comfort in the space, but also an ownership of the facility. Additionally, the facility was opened by a woman doctor who wanted her women patients to have the benefits of exercise without feeling out of place.
**Representational spaces.** The space was defined for women by women, yet the representational spaces or lived space of the women proved to be paradoxical. The women in this study reported they attended a categorical fitness club (women’s-only) to avoid “feeling out of place” in mainstream (i.e. co-ed) fitness clubs. The women’s reports of feeling out of place centered on their bodies, consistent with feminist geography, which holds that power relations are acted out on women’s bodies (Nelson & Seager, 2005). The power relations or struggles in The Gym occurred between what hegemonically-defined femininity presents as the cultural ideal feminine form and the reality of the women’s bodies.

Interestingly, the women found it difficult to express why they were motivated to attend a women’s-only gym. While they liked the camaraderie and feeling of acceptance they experienced at The Gym, they frequently stated they attended the facility simply because it was women’s-only. They did not like the fact that mainstream facilities were dominated by men. Employees and members felt that men “turned everything into a competition,” something they did not like at mainstream facilities. They reported that at The Gym they could work out at their own pace and not worry about having people compare their exercise levels or compete with each other. The women felt confident in their exercise abilities. This is consistent with Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) who showed how women in a women’s-only dojo felt empowered physically, mentally, and spiritually. Roper and Polasek (in press) and van Ingen (2004) also reported that categorical club participation facilitated more pleasure and engagement with members’ bodies than was experienced at mainstream facilities.

In addition to avoiding competition, the women reported wanting to avoid the male gaze, as discussed by Laura Mulvey (1989). Mulvey (1989) explained that women in film were often positioned to be looked at by male protagonists and audience members. That is, men had the
power to look at women, but women were denied agency. In this study, the women described
the male gaze as sexualizing their bodies and viewing the women’s bodies as something they
could compare themselves to, something that was inferior to their own. The women did not feel
comfortable in this environment and as a result did not experience pleasure through exercising at
coop ed gyms.

The male gaze was intrinsically absent at the bounded space of the women’s-only fitness
facility. Not only are men not allowed to be members at the facility, the shades on the windows
prevented anyone from seeing into the facility. As a result, the women felt “comfortable” at the
facility because it was a “safe space” away from the gaze. This is consistent with van Ingen
(2004) who found that belonging to the Toronto Front Runners allowed the participants to
connect with other GLBT individuals in a safe space. In short, the employees and members
occupied the space as a women-dominant site which is an assertion of power. This became clear
when a man happened to enter the facility and his presence was immediately noticed. He was an
outsider. The women liked that they did not have to worry about men watching them or feel
pressured to “impress” anyone. They could go to the facility and not dress up in anything other
than an old t-shirt and pair of sweatpants.

While the women felt The Gym provided a place away from the male gaze, it’s
presence was still felt in that members and employees had internalized and wanted to present
what hegmonically-defined femininity promotes as the ideal feminine form. This is consistent
with Foucault’s (1975/1995) usage of the Panopticon to reveal how self-surveillance and self-
policing of bodies occurs. Individuals feel a “permanent visibility” (p. 201) by internalizing the
perspective of an external gaze and thus present themselves in a manner that would be consistent
with social expectations. For example, several employees reported they felt the need to “set an
example” for the other women by having a body that was worthy of being compared to (i.e. a body that was close to the cultural ideal). Consistent with other research (e.g., Dworkin, 2003; Hall, 1996, Markula, 1995, Schulze, 1997), the women described the ideal feminine form as not too muscular yet trim and tone at the same time. Often, the employees and members reported concern that their bodies did not match the cultural ideal and felt pressure to get as close as they could to it. This is consistent with other research on body image (e.g., Krane, 2001b) and was often expressed through a belief that they needed to change their bodies to be more like the ideal feminine form. In congruence with previous research (e.g., Duncan, 1994) the women had internalized the hegemonically-defined definition of the feminine form and were monitoring their bodies to fit this ideal.

However, it is important to note that the women were not homogenous in terms of body perception and most felt very comfortable with their bodies reporting a positive body-image. Nonetheless, even those women who embraced their bodies and had a positive body image felt there was “room for improvement.” Some of the women were larger and “softer” than what they would have preferred and as a result, they exercised to achieve the ideal form. The women at this facility—like those women Dworkin (2003) observed at a mainstream fitness facility—avoided weight lifting and pursued cardiovascular activities. Thus, the message at the facility seemed to be, be who are but, if you can achieve the ideal, do so. This is in stark contrast to the previous research on categorical club participation which found that GLBT members of categorical clubs felt confident in their bodies (Roper & Polasek, in press; van Ingen, 2004). This illustrates more of a macro culture influence on women’s-only gyms than categorical clubs geared toward GLBT individuals.
The feeling of being out of place at mainstream facilities and “in place” or belonging at categorical facilities illustrates the need for categorical facilities. This dichotomy shows the influence of masculine hegemony in sport and exercise, making women feel excluded from mainstream facilities and that categorical clubs or spaces are the products of the relations of power. Additionally, the very lack of men and competition, a traditionally masculine endeavor, translated into the women believing that others saw women’s-only gyms as not “serious.” This illustrates a general devaluing of what the women enjoyed about the facility similar to the devaluing of feminine characteristics in the macro culture.

*Collision Between Hegemonic Culture and the Culture of the Gym*

The women’s views of exercise illustrate a collision between the culture of The Gym and that of hegemonic culture. The women often felt that exercise was a chore implying that it was something they “had to do.” It was something they were forced to do in order to be close to the ideal feminine form. As discussed above, they internalized the narrow construction of femininity set forth by a hegemonic system. However, it was the culture of the gym, the friendships and encouragement the women received at The Gym, which motivated them to attend the facility and adhere to exercise. Thus, the meaning of exercise to the women was in constant flux. It was either something they had to do or it was something they wanted to do because it was enjoyable. Additionally, the women exercised for health related reasons such as wanting to stay fit and to prevent future health problems. Thus, the meaning of the space remained contested, the lived space and experiences of the members and staff resulted in positive social relationships among the women who frequented the facility, as well as both encouraged and discouraged an empowering relationship between the women and their bodies.

*Conclusions*
In conclusion, this study has expanded our understanding of women’s-only fitness facilities and illustrated the usefulness of feminist geography in examining categorical spaces. Rather than being completely and passively shaped by masculine hegemony and hegemonically-defined femininity, the spaces can offer a place where women can feel more comfortable with their bodies than they would at mainstream facilities. In other words, the culture of the gym can buffer the negative influence of the macro culture. This can be achieved by actively constructing a place of acceptance and encouragement with a decidedly minimal intrusion of hegemonically-defined femininity and hegemonic masculinity, as occurred at The Gym. This study also illustrated the complex relations of power that construct exercise spaces and how women navigate the resultant web of contradiction created between two clashing cultures. The complexity of negotiating varied and contradictory spaces can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. For example, some of the women exhibited a poor body image, but the resultant atmosphere of the gym facilitated positive interactions among the members and resulted in a socially empowering space.

Previous research has focused on categorical clubs that cater to GLBT individuals (Roper & Polasek, in press; van Ingen, 2004) with little regard for women’s-only facilities. However, during this study I did not observe any women who presented themselves as a GLBT individual. Nonetheless, given the overlap and contradiction of the findings of this study with the previous research it is important to explore how GLBT individuals navigate and influence the spaces that are women’s-only fitness centers. Furthermore, it is important to further explore the differences in what GLBT individuals experience at GLBT categorical facilities and what women experience at women’s-only facilities.
Additionally, it must be noted that all the women who attended this facility were White and able-bodied which increased their comfort level at The Gym. Thus, future research should focus on those women who are not the majority of a women’s-only facility and their experiences. Similarly, because of the small number of women interviewed and the limited amount of time spent in the field, it is difficult to say if The Gym had a different effect on older women versus younger women or on women who felt uncomfortable at a mainstream facility versus those who felt comfortable at co-ed facilities.

Consistent with other research (Dworkin, 2003; Hall, 1996, Markula, 1995, Schulze, 1997) the women described the ideal feminine form as not too muscular as well as thin and toned. The findings also illustrate the role of masculine hegemony in creating a need for women’s-only gyms. Hegemonically-defined femininity influenced the culture of the primary facility and its members as well.
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Appendix A

Investigation of Women’s-Only Gyms
Owner Informed Consent Form

I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University conducting my thesis research on women’s-only gyms. The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of members of a women’s-only gym. The information gained from this study has the potential to inform research related to women’s exercise and may explain how to make gyms more empowering for women. Your participation as the owner of the gym is entirely voluntary and will not affect your or the gym’s future relationship Bowling Green State University or me. You can also withdraw your permission for me to do research on the premises at any time. I plan to observe and interview members of The Gym. Their participation will be completely voluntary. You may benefit from participation in this study by learning about your gym and how to better serve your members.

I will observe what goes on at The Gym in the classes as well the free-weight and machine area five days a week, two hours per day for approximately 6 weeks. Before observing any classes, I will ask the staff member in charge if I may observe her class. I would also like to ask staff and members if they would be willing to be interviewed. If so, I will ask them questions about their experiences as a member of this women’s-only fitness facility. The interviews will last approximately 90 minutes. I will tape-record the interviews and transcribe them at a later time. During interviews, participants may refuse to answer any question. At any time, they may withdraw from the study without penalty. Their decision to participate or not is completely voluntary and will not affect their future relationship with Bowling Green State University or me.

The risks of participation in this study are minimal. All comments and identifying information revealed during the interview will be kept confidential. Only my advisor and I will hear the interview tapes or read the transcripts. All notes, audiocassettes, and transcripts will be locked in a secure location. Any notes taken at the gym will remain with me and be carefully safeguarded while I am collecting data. In all printed notes or transcripts, the gym will not be identified by name and participants will be identified by their first name or a code name and any other identifying information will be coded or removed. All field notes, audiotapes, and transcripts will be destroyed after the study is completed.

If you have any question please ask them now. If you have additional inquiries later you can contact me at (419) 575-1040 or by e-mail at gayrao@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Vikki Krane, at (419)372-2620 or by e-mail at vkrane@bgsu.edu. (Please note that e-mail is not always secure.) If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgnnet.bgsu.edu).
Your signature below indicates your consent for me to observe The Gym and ask members to participate in interviews. After signing this form, you will be given a copy of it for your own records and use.

Signature _______________________________  Date __________
Appendix B

To Be Read Prior to Informal Interview

My name is Gayra Ostgaard. I am a researcher working on my thesis. The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning of women’s-only gyms. Do you mind if I ask you some questions about your experience as a member and/or staff member of The Gym?

(If they choose not to participate, I will not include them in any of my analysis.)

You may choose not to answer a question at any time. Everything that is said during this conversation will remain confidential. No identifying information will be revealed to anyone other than my advisor and after the study is completed all tapes and transcripts will be destroyed.

(For staff members)

Do you mind if I observe your class/room/area of influence?
Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. How old are you?

2. How would you classify your race or ethnic group?

3. How would you classify your fitness level?

4. What is your exercise and/or sport history?

5. What are your workout goals?

6. What type of exercises do you do?
   - Why do you do those exercises?
   - If attends and/or instructs class(es) ask How would you describe the class(es)?

7. How long have you attended and/or worked at The Gym?
   - How many days per week do you come to The Gym?
   - How long per day are you at The Gym?
   - Do you attend any of the classes? If so, which ones?

8. What led up to your decision to attend and/or work at The Gym?

9. What other gyms have you attended and/or worked at and how was that different from The Gym?
   - Have you ever attended/worked at another women’s-only fitness center?
   - Have you ever attended/worked at a fitness center for both women and men?

8. If you had to create an advertisement for The Gym what would you emphasize?
   - How would you describe The Gym?
   - What do you like about The Gym?
   - What don’t you like about The Gym?
   - What is like it like socially?
   - What is the physical environment like?

10. Describe the culture at The Gym?
    - How would you describe the culture of the gym?

11. Please describe your experiences at The Gym?
• Would you say your experiences have been empowering in any way? How so?

12. What types of interactions do you have with the staff?

13. What types of interactions do you have with the members?

14. What does it mean to you to be a member/staff member of The Gym?

15. Does the atmosphere influence how you feel about yourself? Please explain.

Do you mind talking about how being a member influences how you see your body?

If they agree to discuss this,
• Do you feel pressure to look a certain way? i.e. thin and tone
• Where does this pressure come from?
• Is it present at The Gym?

17. Has your view of exercise and physical activity ever changed? How so?

• How has your member status at The Gym influenced what it means to you to be a woman who exercises?

19. Do you pay attention to the handouts, what’s on the walls, and what the classes are called? What do you think about it?

20. Is there anything else you can tell me to help me understand how you view The Gym and women’s-only fitness centers in general?
Appendix D

To Be Read Prior to Unstructured Interviews

Participation in this interview is completely voluntary.

I will ask you some questions about your experience as a member and/or staff member of The Gym. The interview will be a discussion format, so please feel free to expand on questions if you wish. You may chose not to answer a question at any time. We will simply move on to the next question.

This interview will last approximately one to one and a half hours and will be tape-recorded. My advisor and I will be the only ones to hear the tape.

Everything that is said during this interview will remain confidential. No identifying information will be revealed to anyone other than my advisor and after the study is completed all tapes and transcripts will be destroyed.

(I will then distribute the consent form to the participant.)

Please read this consent form and after you have done so please sign and date it.

Do you have any questions before we begin?
Investigation of Women’s-Only Gyms  
Exerciser Informed Consent Form

I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University conducting my thesis research on women’s-only gyms. The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of members of a women’s-only gym. The information gained from this study has the potential to inform research related to women’s exercise and may explain how to make gyms more empowering for women. As a member of The Gym, you are invited to participate in my study. Participation is completely voluntary. You may benefit from participating in this study by having an opportunity to talk about your experiences as a member of a women’s-only fitness facility and possibly you may learn something about yourself as well.

I have been observing what goes on at The Gym and now I would like to interview some of the regular exercisers at the gym. This is the part of the study that involves you. I would like to ask you questions about your experiences as a member of this women’s-only fitness facility. The interview will last approximately 90 minutes. I will tape-record the interview and transcribe it at a later time.

The risks of participation in this study are minimal. All comments and identifying information revealed during the interview will be kept confidential. Only my advisor and I will hear the interview tapes or read the transcripts. All notes, audiotapes, and transcripts will be locked in a secure location. Any notes taken at the gym will remain with me and be carefully safeguarded while I am collecting data. In all printed notes or transcripts, you will be identified by your first name or a code name and any other identifying information will be coded or removed. All field notes, audiotapes, and transcripts will be destroyed after the study is completed.

During the interview, you may refuse to answer any question and I will move on. At any time, you may withdraw from the study without penalty. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your future relationship with Bowling Green State University, me, or anyone at TheGym.

If you have any questions please ask them now. If you have additional inquiries later you can contact me at (419) 575-1040 or by e-mail at gayrao@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Vikki Krane, at (419)372-2620 or by e-mail at vkrane@bgsu.edu. (Please note that e-mail is not always secure.) If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information, been informed of the interview procedure, and had any questions answered. By signing this form you are indicating
that you are at least 18 years of age and you provide your consent to participate in an interview. After signing this form, you will be given a copy of this consent form for your own records and use.

Signature _______________________________ Date ____________