The Tampa Gym Study: An Ethnographic Exploration of Gyms, Female Gym-Goers and The Quest for Fitness in Tampa, FL

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The Tampa Gym Study: An Ethnographic Exploration of Gyms, Female Gym-Goers and The Quest for Fitness in Tampa, FL

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
with a concentration in Biocultural Medical Anthropology
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Keywords: exercising, workout, women, public health, obesity, physical activity

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandma, Beatrice, also endearingly nicknamed “Ma,” and to my mother, Diane. They have both been the biggest support for me through my life, no matter what direction I decided to take. My grandmother had a love for anthropology and was so proud of me for pursing a degree in this field. My mother helped me in every way imaginable to be able to apply, enroll, and complete the academic degrees that I have earned. They both never doubted me and always showed tremendous support and love in all ways imaginable.
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ABSTRACT

The Tampa Gym Study was an ethnographic examination of veteran women exercisers, their workout routines, and their attitudes towards the workouts that they undertake in two Tampa area gyms. The study’s principle objective was to study “fitness culture” in these facilities and the manner in which that culture is embodied in the language women use to describe themselves and their exercise behaviors.

The obesity crisis in the United States has been significantly responsible for an increase in membership in gyms and fitness facilities nationwide. The “culture of fitness” as it is embodied in these facilities has impacted women and their desires to pursue fitness and “the body beautiful” in the workouts that they undertake in these places. The Tampa Gym Study was designed to interrogate women about their perceptions of working out in facilities that were once rarely used or frequented by women. Key questions in this study focused on the place of women in the gym, the strategies that they use to remain committed to their exercise routines, the statements they use to describe themselves and their efforts, and the degree to which their statements represent a shared culture of fitness that are endorsed by other women who work out in such facilities.

The study was conducted in two parts. Part I was an ethnographic study using participant observer methods that was conducted in two gyms in the Tampa, Florida metropolitan area. The researcher engaged in working out, observing, and interviewing 26 Black and White women veteran exercisers who used gym facilities consistently at least two times per week. Interview
data from Part I of this study was used to construct a survey that consisted of 77 statements expressing key elements of gym culture. A total of 76 women, 38 Whites and 38 Blacks, were surveyed and survey data were analyzed using binomial analysis to assess levels of shared agreement with statements about gym culture.

Interview and observational results from Part I of the study revealed a number of significant themes about gyms and about exercising. (1) Women expressed that they perceived the gym to be a place where they belonged. (2) They described their workouts as being “me-time,” that is, a period that they perceived to be devoted to their needs, their goals, and their fitness objectives. (3) They described the importance of clothing/workout gear as a means of measuring their progress in achieving their fitness and personal appearance goals, and (4) observations undertaken of women in these facilities revealed the importance of social media in the workouts that are undertaken.

In Part II of the study, both Black and White women survey takers expressed substantial agreement with all but 10 of 77 statements about fitness and working out. The lack of striking racial differences in survey responses suggests that socioeconomic status rather than race explains the levels of agreement observed among survey respondents.

The findings from this study represent an important contribution to the use of ethnographic methods to study fitness culture. Previous studies of women in gyms were undertaken before the development of social media platforms and before the use of technology like Smartphones were widespread. The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of the role of such media in promoting the pursuit of fitness. Observations of exercisers in workout settings revealed the economic impact that products such as Athleisurewear and Smartphones are having on advancing participation in gym culture. Additionally, the lack of significant
differences in the survey responses of Black and White exercisers in this study was highlighted.

In view of the upper middle-class status of both White and Black respondents in this study, these findings suggest that social class more than race explains the high rates of concordance between Black and White responses to statements about gym culture.

Results from the Tampa Gym Study also suggest that the judicious use of social media to engage women in becoming more physically active might succeed in positively impacting the nation’s crisis with obesity and sedentary behavior. Alarmingly, however, study results also suggest the existence of a “feedback loop” in which the desire to consume more and more food is offset by the option of “working it all off in the gym.” This loop cannot be sustained, it was noted, because exercise cannot keep pace with the increased consumption of calorie dense foods that are such an important part of the American diet.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter outlines the theoretical foundations for this mixed methods study and focuses on the relationship between the so-called obesity epidemic, the anthropological examination of the constituents of “gym/fitness culture,” and the use of ethnographic and survey methods to study female gym members. It describes the manner in which these methods were used to observe and analyze the embodiment of that culture in the behaviors, attitudes and the language of female users of gyms. It also describes efforts to analyze and describe their motives for working out and their strategies for maintaining their commitment to maintain a consistent exercise routine. It proceeds from an assumption that gym and fitness centers are commercial drivers of popular culture and are, therefore, appropriate objects for ethnographic investigation.

The research settings were two gyms/fitness centers in Tampa, Florida. I present the main research objectives for this study as well as a brief overview of the methods that were used. I will conclude with a synopsis of the five chapters that comprise this dissertation study.

Anthropological Research: Obesity Research, the Quest for the Body Beautiful and Ethnographic Examination of Gyms and Gym Goers

In chapter two, I present a review of the literature focusing on the number of different research perspectives that drive the studies of gym culture and gym users. From the
anthropological literature I examine the ways in which the body has been treated in
anthropological thought (Scheper Hughes and Lock 1987; Lock 1993; Wolputte 2004) Following
Foucault (1975), I examine the manner in which the body is the surface upon which social forces
are inscribed and embodied. The most important of these social forces, consumerism and
consumption (Graeber 2011; Meneley 2018) drive a paradoxical relationship between
consumption of food that leads to obesity and the consumption of fitness services in a gym to
remove the fat created by excess food consumption. As Menley (2018) points out, in a capitalist
society, citizens are expected to be buyers who consume the products, the services, and the food
that they purchase. Graeber (2011) goes so far as to assert that anthropologists in particular are
especially prone to treat all matter of human activity in this era as part of a larger pattern of
consumption. "Why is it that when we see someone buying refrigerator magnets and someone
else putting on eyeliner or cooking dinner or singing at a karaoke bar or just sitting around
watching television, we assume that they are on some level doing the same thing, that it can be
described as 'consumption' or 'consumer behavior,' and that these are all in some way analogous
to eating food" (Graeber 2011, 489)? Perhaps, it is because the consumption of food in the US in
21st century has gone beyond support for the products of capitalism and has become a threat to
the health of the public.

Food consumption has become so extreme that patterns of overeating are described by
public health researchers as “an obesity epidemic”. The social pressures created by having a
stigmatized, fat body add increased incentives to enter a gym (Trainer 2016).

For 30 years, the US Public Health Service has been concerned with the increasing
proportion of Americans who are overweight or obese (Ogden, Carrol, Kit and Flegal 2014).

“According to the most recent Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)
data, adult obesity rates now exceed 35% in seven states, 30% in 29 states and 25% in 48 states. West Virginia has the highest adult obesity rate at 38.1% and Colorado has the lowest at 22.6%. The adult obesity rate increased in Iowa, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island and South Carolina between 2016 and 2017, and remained stable in the rest of states” (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2019).

Public health researchers have identified a number of causes for this trend. They include: changes in eating habits, increased levels of sedentary behavior on the part of children and adults, larger portion sizes being served in restaurants and fast food establishments, and a dramatic increase in the array of energy-dense, high calorie foods that are available for snacking and general consumption (Farley and Cohen, 2005; Farley et al. 2009; Brownell and Frieden, 2009; Dunford and Popkin 2017).

At the same time, a worldwide industry devoted to fitness and exercise has been growing. Americans are joining gyms and spending billions of dollars to become fit. They are working and sweating to sculpt their bodies and in so doing, are paying for memberships in facilities that are designed to help them reach their goals, as described below:

The global fitness and health club industry generates more than 80 billion U.S. dollars in revenue per year. The North American market had an estimated size of more than 28 billion U.S. dollars in 2015, of which 90 percent, around 25.8 billion U.S. dollars, was attributable to the United States. The U.S. is the single biggest market worldwide not only in terms of revenue but in regards (sic) to the number of members in health & fitness clubs as well. (Statista, 2018; https://www.statista.com/topics/1141/health-and-fitness-clubs/)
Social scientists have been attracted to understanding the cultural, psychological, and social factors driving these trends. Prominent among these factors are: [1] The pursuit of the body beautiful (Reischer and Koo 2004; Vartanian, Wharton, and Green 2012); [2] a gym culture that influences the manner in which gym goers negotiate gym spaces (Sassatelli 2010; Hedbloom 2012; Sassatelli 1999); [3] media framings that privilege the thin body as representing discipline and responsibility and the fat body as representing sloth and gluttony (Bordo, Susan 1993; Moffat 2007; Saguy and Gruys 2010); and [4] the pursuit of an identity that is embodied by the manner in which one’s physical appearance has been molded by the work done in a gym (Rojas 2015).

How are the messages that are prevalent in the mass and social media being heard and enacted by adults who frequent fitness centers, gyms, and other exercise facilities? Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2006), in examining the fitness industry and its impact on women’s health, assert, “′health pursuits′ that are promoted [by the fitness industry] are thinly disguised beauty pursuits and pressures. A healthy lifestyle is often undertaken for the sake of beauty and not health” (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006, 214).

Nonetheless, among the most influential of the examinations of women in the world of sports and fitness, Bolin and Granskog’s work, Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture, and Exercise (2003) represents the most significant and important contribution to the discourse on women in the world of fitness in recent years. As feminist ethnographers, their work represents a situated engagement in sports and exercise in which the ethnographer is both participant and observer. The transformation of the sports terrain and/or the gym from a unique masculine domain into one in which female participants impose a different order and an alternate worldview occupies center place in this body of work. “Such an approach is only one
strand in the broader genre of the ‘new ethnography’ and takes some anthropologists into a
dimension of research we conceptualize as ‘extreme ethnography’ in which one is ‘being’ or
‘becoming’ whom one studies…” (Bolin and Granskog 2003, 10-11).

Research Settings: Sunshine State Gym (SSG) and the Active Style Gym (ASG)

In chapter three, the methods chapter, I describe the research settings for this study as
well as the goals and objectives that guided my research. Following the work of Bolin and
Granskog (2003) and of Sassatelli (2010), this study was an ethnographic examination of women
gym members in two fitness facilities in Tampa, Florida. The Active Style Gym (ASG), a
pseudonym, is a large franchise gym located in South Tampa. It is a facility that offers the gym
goinger a wide range of amenities and is staffed by a diverse group of personal trainers who are
experts at aiding the exerciser to achieve his or her goals in the pursuit of physical fitness.

The Sunshine State Gym (SSG), a pseudonym, is a small local gym that is located in a
middle-to upper-class apartment complex in Tampa. The gym serves residents of this complex
and is well equipped to meet the needs of the solitary exerciser. It has a full range of exercise
equipment and offers fitness classes as well as the services, by appointment, of personal trainers.

Research Objectives

This mixed methods study was conducted in two parts. Part I was a qualitative
examination of experienced women exercisers using participant observation in the two research
settings. I observed women exercisers in their workouts at the gym and conducted interviews
with veteran women exercisers about their perceptions of gyms, exercising, and working to
become physically fit. In Part II I surveyed female gym-goers about aspects of gyms and gym
culture. Specifically, the main objectives were as follows:

1) To determine the reasons why women choose and use the gym to exercise

2) To assess the perceptions of women exercisers as to the significance, if any, of being a
   woman in the gym.

3) To identify goals and motivations to keep at a workout routine.

4) To identify their strategies to persist in their efforts to resist the urge to drop out,
   including the use of self-talk messages.

5) To assess the shared knowledge and the differences, if any, between Black and White
   female gym goers with respect to their reasons for their choice of gym, their perceptions
   about being a woman in the gym, their strategies for maintaining an exercise routine and
   for resisting the temptation to drop out, and their use, if any of self-talk strategies.

**Synopsis of Findings**

Chapter four, the results chapter, I describe my observations of the exercise patterns at
the gyms and the qualitative findings based on the semi-structured interviews I conducted with
women exercisers in the two gyms. I focus particular attention on the manner in which the
commercialization of gym culture has increasingly been driven by the use of social media and
the development of highly lucrative links between working out and the clothing/attire that
women wear for their workouts. In Part II of Chapter four, I focus on the findings from the
analysis of survey data obtained from Black and White survey respondents (n=76) in Part II of
the study. I focus particular attention on the similarities in the responses of Black and White
respondents.
In chapter five, the conclusion and discussion chapter, I discuss the main findings from Part I and II of this study and the manner in which these findings are related to the extensive literature in anthropology and in public health on the obesity crisis and the role of gyms and the fitness industry in responding to the crisis. The study adds to the extant literature on gyms and gym culture by examining the role of social marketing as an increasingly important driver of this culture and by identifying the similarities that exist between Black and White women exercisers, a finding that stands in contrast to racial differences that are typically reported in social science and public health research when racial comparisons are undertaken.

Many themes from anthropological research are present here: The study of efforts to create “The Body Beautiful,” studies of the body as the medium upon which are inscribed the exerciser’s workouts, his or her strenuous efforts to become physically fit, and finally studies examining the trim, fit body as a form of physical capital. These are all themes that recall Foucault (1980) and his investigations of the role of the body in society and they are all themes that are present in efforts to study heavily commercialized gym culture in the 21st century.

The study concludes with a series of recommendations as to how anthropologists might continue to explore elements of fitness culture and its relationship to consumer driven American culture. Included are a series of recommendations as to how findings from this research can be used in the development of public health interventions designed to increase levels of physical activity among all Americans, but particularly among Black women whose levels of obesity and physical inactivity are frequently cited concerns in the public health literature on the so-called obesity epidemic.
Conclusion

This chapter provided an introduction to the Tampa Gym Study (TGS) a review of the literature on the Anthropological framings of the body, the quest for the body beautiful and the social pressures that drive individuals into the gym were presented. The public health literature that identifies the obesity crisis as a driving factor promoting the use of gyms as a means of eliminating fat and remaining physically fit was also reviewed. The study’s research objectives and methods were presented as well as a brief overview of the study’s findings and conclusions.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will present a review of the research literature that was used to guide and inform the creation of the Tampa Gym Study. The anthropological focus on the body and the ways in which it has become an object to be perfected and presented as a form of capital will be explored. The body as “physical capital” and the gym and fitness center as site of its perfection and presentation will be shown to be of particular interest. The rise and significance of the fitness industry here in the United States as well as in much of the developed world will be examined with particular interest devoted to issues of race/ethnicity and gender as factors determining who is working out in gyms and fitness centers. The role of social media in pushing the trends to join gyms and engage in activities to promote and create the body beautiful will also be discussed. Central to the presentation of this body of research will be an examination of the commercialization of the fitness industry and the degree to which the growth of the numbers of persons seeking gym membership are driven by media messages and platforms directed to the consumer who seeks places and opportunities to work out.

The Body and Anthropology

“Although certain sociologists continue to create elaborate body typologies anthropologists, by contrast have virtually abandoned this project, although the problem of
framing analysis, delineating boundaries, and demarcating just what is signified by the ‘body’ remains a source of creative tension” (Lock 1993, 134).

Much of the anthropological literature on the human body examines the relationship between modern American consumer-driven culture and its impact on fitness and health. As will be shown subsequently, what emerges is a paradox. Americans are encouraged to consume. Consumption, in this context, involves both overeating and, subsequently, consuming fitness services in gyms to get rid of the fat that excess food consumption has created.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) in their review of the anthropology of the body propose three perspectives examining concepts of the body in Western society: 1] the individual body-self; 2] the social body, which encompasses the impact of culture, society and nature; and 3] the body politic, which is a function of social and political forces. Wolputte (2004), in a subsequent review of the anthropological literature on the body, extends Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s review by describing embodiment as a means of collapsing the subjective and objective experience of being in the world. Embodiment is proposed as a concept by Csordas (1990) that resolves the mind-body duality because, as noted by Rojas (2015), embodiment allows us to understand how the human mind’s perceptions of the world are a part of the body’s lived experience of the world.

Foucault is frequently referenced in these reviews. In his discourse on prisons, discipline and punishment, for example, the prisoner becomes the quintessential example of the manner in which social forces are embodied; the prisoner’s patterns of thought and perception as well as behavior are imposed and controlled by the penal system (Foucault 1975). In this view, social forces are a dynamic contributor to cultural norms and cultural norms, in turn, influence or create the social forces that configure the manner in which the body exists in society.
Of particular interest here are two related social forces that exert significant influence on modern culture in general and on the body in particular: consumption and consumerism (Graeber 2011). “Consumerism is considered essential to the positive functioning of capitalism; during the Cold War, capitalist consumerism was emblematic of an American way of life and after 9/11, President George W. Bush urged citizens to consume as a patriotic duty” (Meneley 2018, 118). As will be shown subsequently, one of the most important ways in which consumerism and consumption are embodied in this era has been through our dietary habits and our consumption of internet-based entertainment, dual forces that have led to substantial increases in sedentary behavior and in rates of obesity.

The irony, of course, is that the modern consumer has unparalleled access to food (see, e.g., Evans, Welch, and Swaffield 2017) and the possibility of accessing a fitness facility where the excesses of an overabundance of food can be mitigated. Using Foucault’s (1976) ideology, Americans internalize dominant cultural norms viz. eating large and frequent doses of fast food, watching several or more hours of television and getting low levels of physical activity, and on occasion doing something to counteract those unhealthy behaviors by going to the gym. The 21st century “obesity epidemic” and the “culture of physical fitness” are all the paradoxical byproducts of these trends, a yin/yang relationship that has important historical roots.

One of the most prominent attempts by an anthropologist to place obesity into historical perspective comes from Brown (1991), who argues that the predisposition of human beings to become obese has been linked to both biological evolution and human culture (Brown 1991). Human history is replete with periods of famine in which survival depended on the individual’s ability to rely on the body fat that is stored during periods of plenty. “Human predispositions to
obesity are found in the context of past food scarcities but are maladaptive today in the context of affluence and constant food surpluses” (Brown 1991, 32).

It is at this point that much of contemporary anthropological thought centers on the need to understand and more fully explore consumption and consumerism as significant drivers of contemporary culture (Graeber, 2011; Maboloc 2015; Varul 2015; Trainer et al. 2016; Meneley 2018). As Meneley observes in her examination of consumerism in the prestigious Annual Review of Anthropology, consumerism is an essential building block of capitalism but its importance to the economic functioning of modern society is being questioned and problematized by obesity, “Like fat on the body, once a prestigious sign of affluence which now signals quite the opposite, excessive consumerism, so mocked by Veblen as a sign of the nouveau riche, now indicates a lower-class position – and it is increasingly medicalized” (Meneley 2018, 118). The paradox is that consumerism encompasses both the problem (eating is the quintessential expression if not a definition of consumption) and the solution (being a fitness consumer whose time in the gym is devoted to working off the excesses of consumption). This paradox is embodied during the winter holidays when the excess consumption of substantial quantities of food results in a New Year’s resolution to join a gym to “work it off and get thin again” (From bodybuilding.com, 2019: https://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/2013-100k-transformation-contest-press-release.html),

These extreme realities reflect the contradictions of cultural values and cultural ideals in the U.S in the 21st century when neoliberal trends configure the choices that the individual has to achieve a state of well-being. In her examination of emergent trends in anthropology, Ortner uses the term dark anthropology to describe the bleak outlook of so many individuals in a world whose economy is shaped by neoliberalism, “Indeed, workers throughout the new economy have
been forced to adapt to a life in which jobs are precarious, unemployment is likely, and spending long periods of time as ‘independent contractors’ is normal” (Ortner 2018, 58). What can be controlled, however, is the work that the individual brings to shape and mold the body. Efforts to give the body an attractive experience that increases in value in a world is important, as Ortner points out, because one’s appearance is a source of wealth (Ortner 2018).

A further look into these realities can help explain gym culture and the problems our society has with retaining a gym membership and exercise routine. As Trainer et al (2015) explain “As anthropologists and others in related disciplines have pointed out, in the United States today, the body is the pivotal identity anchor and the site of many of the key self-defining performances in people’s everyday experiences. For those dealing with a social label of ‘fat,’ the physical body can feel like a personal failure – and an inescapable one at that” (Trainer et al. 2015, 523).

And as Reischer and Koo (2004) indicate, the current anthropological literature has focused its attention on two elements of the body’s importance in contemporary culture. First as a symbol, as an embodiment of cultural trends – e.g. the ideal body, upon which cultural artifacts such as clothing are placed and exhibited – and secondly, as an object of human agency upon which exercise, sport, and other efforts are inscribed. The body beautiful, as the authors note, thus becomes the “primary site for the construction and performance of gender, and specifically of femininity”, and the social forces that shape the world in which women conduct their lives (Reischer and Koo 2004, 297).

But how are studies of the body in a gym to be undertaken? Rojas (2015) notes the existence of a vast literature in the social sciences that is devoted to the study of gyms, fitness centers, the individuals who use them, and the practices that they exhibit there. However, the
concept of embodiment provides an important key to conceptualizing all of the ways in which the body can be studied and understood. “The notion of embodiment attempts to overcome the idea of social matters as spread in the body, to speak of the body as a genuine field of culture, highlighting its potential, intentional, active and relational dimension. The agent is an embodied, biological and conscious being who interacts with society” (Rojas 2015, 196).

The work on the body that is so essential to being in a gym, he points out, involves the exerciser’s mind, the emotions, and the spirit, as well as the transformations that the body will undergo. “By constantly going to the gym the body enters into practice and the practice into the body.” The body, thus, is a laboratory from which we can study a world “full of meanings, embodied knowledge and shared values” (Rojas 2015, 206).

Consumerism and embodiment are elements of a complex system. As Fuentes (2016) notes it is a system that is constantly being shaped by ecological pressures. As noted previously, consumerism is a driving factor in the obesity epidemic, by virtue of our constant temptation to eat. It is equally a driving factor in the fitness industry where individuals strive to remove the fat that has been gained from excess food consumption. It is a system in which cause and effect operate interactively. As noted earlier, Americans are encouraged to consume. Consumption, as has been shown, involves both overeating and, subsequently, consuming fitness services in gyms to get rid of the fat that excess food consumption has created. The urgency to “hit the gym” is driven by the increasing pressure of public health researchers and policy makers to combat the so-called “obesity epidemic.” In essence this “feedback loop” is one in which the desire to become thin feeds the need to be in the gym and being in the gym enables the exerciser to consume excess calories knowing that the excess can be worked off in the gym.
Public Health and the Obesity Epidemic

One of the most important stimuli for the worldwide fitness movement has been growing international concern with obesity. For 30 years, the annually increasing proportion of Americans who are overweight or obese has been the focus of concern for the US Public Health Service (Ogden et al. 2013). According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in 2015-2016, approximately 40% of U.S. adults aged 20 and older have obesity and another 32% were overweight. Specifically, the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), using measured heights and weights, concludes that, “Over the most recent decade between 2007-2008 and 2015-2016, increases in obesity and severe obesity prevalence persisted among adults, whereas there were no overall significant trends among youth. Changes in demographics did not explain the observed trends” (Hales et al. 2017, 1725).

These trends are often described as “an obesity epidemic” (Cohen and Farley 2008; Brownell and Friedan 2009). Moffat (2008) questions how much and to what degree has the crisis language that treats obesity as an “epidemic” is simply “a social construction.” Prominent in her observations of this constructed epidemic is the work of Boero (2007), who questions how much of this “postmodern epidemic” represents an “unevenly medicalized phenomenon lacking a clear pathological basis” (Boero 2007, 41).

Nonetheless, there are gender, racial, ethnic and socioeconomic differences in the prevalence of obesity in the US (Hales et al. 2017; Ogden et al. 2017; Flegal et al. 2016) as well in the prevalence of levels of physical inactivity (Wilson-Fredrick et al. 2014; Whitt-Glover et al. 2007). Findings from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) have consistently suggested that obesity prevalence varies by SES but exhibits a more complex pattern when examined by race/ethnicity and gender.
Among non-Hispanic whites, for example, there were distinct differences between men and women and within levels of educational attainment. Approximately 34% of White men with a high school diploma or less were obese compared with 28% of White male college graduates. By contrast, 43% of White women with a high school diploma or less were obese compared with 27% of those with a college degree.

A significantly different pattern was observed among Blacks. Approximately 36% of Black, non-Hispanic men with a high school diploma or less were obese compared to 40% of those in this group with a college degree. The opposite was observed among Black, non-Hispanic women with obesity prevalence among those with a high school diploma or less reported at 57.8% compared to 52.1% of those with a college degree.

Similar patterns exist in patterns of physical activity among US adults. A number of national surveys provide data on such patterns with the largest being the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), which typically has sample sizes in excess of 400,000 participants. Findings from the 2011 BRFSS suggest that 18.4% of Hispanic adults met both guidelines for aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities per week compared to 21% of non-Hispanic blacks and 20.7% of non-Hispanic whites (MMWR 2013). However, the fact that these data are self-reported poses challenges and there are questions about the accuracy of trends that are based on these estimates. Whitt-Glover et al (2007) in an examination of data from the 2003 BRFSS, the 2004 and the 1999-2004 NHANES surveys found that there was significant variability of prevalence levels of self-reported regular physical activity levels among Blacks with the proportion of regular physical activity levels varying between 24-36% with the lowest levels of activity associated with women. Some of the variation is associated with different
measures of physical activity that were requested of respondents; nonetheless, the patterns of activity were similar across surveys.

The causes for this trend have included changes in eating habits, increased levels of sedentary behavior on the part of children and adults, larger portion sizes being served in restaurants and fast food establishments, and a dramatic increase in the array of energy-dense, high calorie foods that are available for snacking and general consumption (Farley and Cohen 2005; Farley et al. 2009; Bownell and Frieden 2009; Dunford and Popkin 2017). As noted, these trends have spawned a growing industry of fitness and exercise and a dramatic rise in the number of Americans, both children and adults, who report that they are overweight or obese and who report that they are either on a diet, contemplating going on a diet, or are just coming off a diet.

According to the Gallup Poll, which surveyed the 52% of all American adults who report having lost weight in the past, 65% of the survey’s respondents reported some form of dieting as their method they used. By contrast, approximately 39% reported using some form of physical activity to reduce weight (Gallup 2012). A recent poll conducted by Statista (2018) noted the second most frequently reported new year’s resolution was to lose weight or get in shape (45% of all respondents 18-years old or older).

But is dieting likely to work to reduce weight? A growing number of researchers and public health experts have insisted that human beings live in an “obesogenic environment” that encourages overeating and a sedentary lifestyle (Farley and Cohen 2005, Cohen and Farley 2008, Sallis and Glanz 2009, Farley et al. 2009; Colls and Evans 2014). Humans lack the capacity to resist food when it is everywhere, and their evolutionary heritage demands that they seize every available opportunity to eat. More than just an individual problem and challenge, there is significant evidence that obesity spreads in the social and family networks to which an individual
belongs (Christakis and Fowler 2007). A review of the literature on social network influences on obesity by Powell and colleagues (2015) identified three interrelated processes: “social contagion (whereby the network in which people are embedded influences their weight or weight influencing behaviours), social capital (whereby sense of belonging and social support influence weight or weight influencing behaviours), and social selection (whereby a person’s network might develop according to his or her weight)” (Powell et al. 2015, 1).

A central tenet in the thinking of public health researchers and officials is that physical activity is as important as dieting in the management of weight. As Novicki (2011) argues, “The dominant public health paradigm posits that obesity is caused by caloric overconsumption and insufficient physical activity, and therefore, individuals must overcome their condition through a combination of diet and exercise.” Health, in this context, depends on “a lifestyle change” (Novicki 2011, 16-17).

But what works? If exercise is an important factor in achieving the comparatively rare goal of maintaining weight loss, what kind of exercise program manages to help users achieve their goals? A wide variety of factors from lack of time to a lack of motivation and lack of access to appropriate facilities are associated with a widely reported statistic that “50% of people who start an exercise program will dropout within 6 months” (Linke, Gallo, and Norman 2011, 198).

As individuals worldwide struggle to control their weight and to engage in activities that will help them slim down, their efforts are guided by a veritable avalanche of information about what and how to eat, how to diet, how to lose weight, and how to exercise to regain health and to develop a healthy, sexy look. Much of the information is directed towards appeals to vanity (e.g. Hatoum and Belle 2004; Oh’Hara, Cox and Ambrose 2014). These messages range on a continuum from appeals to engage in healthy eating and exercise regularly in order to achieve
good health to scare messages exhorting us to avoid becoming overweight and unattractive at all costs. Americans are joining gyms and, in so doing, creating a fitness industry that generates billions of dollars a year nationally.

The global fitness and health club industry generates more than 80 billion U.S. dollars in revenue per year. The North American market had an estimated size of more than 28 billion U.S. dollars in 2015, of which 90 percent, around 25.8 billion U.S. dollars, was attributable to the United States. The U.S. is the single biggest market worldwide not only in terms of revenue but in regard to the number of members in health & fitness clubs as well (Statista, 2018; https://www.statista.com/topics/1141/health-and-fitness-clubs/).

Nearly 60 million people in the US are members of gyms (International Racquet and Sportsclub Association 2013). A study done in the UK on gym goers motivations to become members of gyms and exercise there, Nick Crossley, states that memberships of gyms in the UK (14 %) is double that of memberships to church/religious memberships (7%) and only a couple percentage points lower than trade union memberships (16%) (Citizens Audit 2002). What is the cause for this trend in memberships to gym outnumbering religious memberships? Religion is and has been for hundreds of thousands of years, a way of life for millions of people across the globe. What is so important about being a gym member that has people commit to become part of gym groups?

Significantly, minority women are largely absent from the extensive literature on gym and fitness club membership. Mullen and Whaley (2010) found low rates of minority participation in an online research study that the authors describe as one of very few in the research literature that examines reasons for joining a gym or fitness center. Their sample
respondents were 92% White while Asian, African American, Hispanic, and American Indian study participants were evenly distributed among the 8% who were not White.

A substantial portion of the social science research on gyms, physical fitness, exercise patterns, or the reasons for exercising is done with samples drawn from colleges and universities with predominantly white institutions with few minority students. The result is that many of these studies lack diversity in their study samples and typically acknowledge this limitation. O’Hara et al (2014), for example, in a study of the role of appearance versus health outcomes in exercise motivation write, “The generalizability of the study’s results is limited to predominantly Caucasian, college-aged females. Results may have varied if the sample was more diverse in terms of age, race, body composition or physical activity experience” (O’Hara et al. 2014, 116). Similar limitations were present and acknowledged in a range of studies of fitness and exercise participation patterns (e.g. Easton et al. 2018; Raggatt et al. 2018; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2017).

**African American Women and Exercise**

A notable exception is in the public health research literature that focuses on racial/ethnic health disparities. The overrepresentation of Black women among those who struggle with being overweight or obese has made them the focus of numerous public health interventions designed to promote improved nutrition and the benefits of physical activity (Eyler et al. 1998; Whitt-Glover et al. 2007; Baruth et al. 2013; Versey 2014; Greaney et al. 2017; McCoy et al. 2017; Whitt-Glover et al. 2017).

Such studies fall into two general categories: those which focus on the attitudes and the barriers that Black and minority women must confront in order to become more physically active.
(Eyler et al. 1998; Baruth et al. 2014; Versey 2014) and those that focus on interventions that are
designed to get Black and minority women more engaged in physical activity (Greaney et al.
2017; McCoy et al. 2017; Whitt-Glover et al. 2017). Few, if any studies, focus on observing,
interviewing, and following Black women in fitness centers as a principal objective of exercise
research.

One notable exception is a chapter in Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on
Women, Culture, and Exercise entitled, “Cultural Expressions of African American Female
Athletes in Intercollegiate Sport” (Stratta 2003). Of particular note, is the fact that not one
research study specifically examining Black women in sport at any level is cited in the chapter’s
references. Stratta’s work does offer a number of conclusions that can help explain why Black
women are absent from so much of the research examining physical activity, exercising and
exercisers, and sports in general. “I propose that African American female athletes are
predisposed to feeling like athletic intruders when participating in predominantly white team
contexts…. African American athletes must sacrifice and compromise their culture to fit in to the
existing cultural system of intercollegiate sport” (Stratta 2003, 104-105).

In the research cited here, physical, emotional, social, and economic constraints are
frequently cited as barriers to exercising in general as well as to joining gyms or fitness centers
(Eyler et al. 1998; Greaney et al. 2017). A study that sought to provide no-cost memberships to
the YMCA for low-income Black women in rural communities, for example, was largely
unsuccessful. Although 70% of those in this intervention activated their memberships, 42% had
no subsequent visits and the 47% who did use the membership had fewer than 10 visits over the
course of a year. The authors concluded, “These findings suggest that although women may be
motivated to sign up to use community-based resources to promote physical activity, providing
access to these resources alone is not sufficient to promote sustained use” (Greaney et al. 2017, 347).

The focus on improving health and controlling weight among African American women has meant that many public health interventions are directed at women who are overweight or obese (Baruth et al. 2014; Greaney et al. 2017; Whitt-Glover et al. 2017). Most of these interventions are conducted in community settings such as churches but gyms and fitness centers are rarely if ever locations for such efforts. One factor cited by Baruth et al (2014) that might explain both the failure of the study conducted by Greaney et al with YMCA memberships as well as the small number of published research studies based in gyms is the sensitivity of many women to issues of body size. In a series of focus groups with a sample of predominantly African American women, “Many women talked about issues related to their body size, including others making cruel comments, being the biggest person at the gym, being intimidated by exercise, and being unable to do certain things” (Baruth et al. 2014, 342-343).

A number of conclusions seem warranted from these studies. First and foremost, Black women are, at best, a relatively small proportion of the women in engaged in US fitness centers and gyms (Mullen and Whaley 2010). There are numerous barriers to the involvement of this group in physical activity in general and in gyms in particular, body size being of particular significance (Baruth et al. 2014). Although joining a gym might be a rational approach to becoming physically fit and controlling weight, the fact that there are few Black women in gyms rules out gym membership as a strategy for achieving these goals. It is not surprising, therefore, that so few social science research studies of gyms and fitness centers have low rates of Black and minority representation in study samples.
Social and Cultural Drivers of Obesity and the Quest for Fitness

Race, ethnicity, and SES notwithstanding, the concerns about the body-- health, weight and physical appearance-- are important elements influencing 21st century culture.

In anthropology “the body” became such a central concept and significant object of study that by the mid-1980s, the study of “the body” burgeoned into a fully formed subfield: “the anthropology of the body.” …Since then, “the body” has come to be understood as simultaneously subject and object, meaningful and material, individual and social and has served as the basis of a stunningly large number of inquiries in the discipline. Whether understood as text, symbol, or habitus, the body has proved a fertile site from which anthropologists have mounted refutations of abstract, universalizing models and ideologies and interrogated operations of power, systems of oppression, and possibilities for agency and political change (Francia Macia-Lees 2013).

Gyms have become a focal point of ethnographic investigation because of the unique way in which the body can be examined and in a contemporary establishment specifically tailored for shaping and configuring the body. The body is the vehicle through which the world is experienced. The body is valued when it is fit and able and permits us to achieve our life’s goals and objectives. Given its critical importance in life, human beings are susceptible to activities that hold the promise to sculpt, mold, and perfect this vehicle. This is the core attraction of exercising in gyms. “In contemporary Western societies, the fit body has in many ways replaced body decoration as a potent symbol of status and character both for men and women” (Sassatelli 2010, 1). The body thus becomes physical capital and is thus a site of investment as well as a medium of exchange.
Foucault is often the primary reference for this literature. His efforts to understand the body as the platform upon which social as well as intellectual energies are directed are cited by numerous scholars interested in understanding contemporary engagement and fascination with exercising and with the places where work on the body can be undertaken (Butler 1989; Crossley 1996). For example, in the Body and Power he is asked about the body and he notes:

Mastery and awareness of one's own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body: gymnastics, exercises, muscle-building, nudism, glorification of the body beautiful. All of this belongs to the pathway leading to the desire of one's own body, by way of the insistent, persistent, meticulous work of power on the bodies of children or soldiers, the healthy bodies (Foucault 1980, 56).

One of the most significant of these social forces is mass media. Sassatelli’s ethnography, Fitness Culture, for example, is devoted to the manner in which fitness has become commercialized and personalized to fit the needs of potential clients and consumers. “There has been a remarkable diffusion of fitness training aids – from aerobics videos to home-fitness equipment – for individual use at home” (Sassatelli 2010, 6). The diffusion of messages about fitness through a multitude of media platforms has both positive and negative impacts, however.

Food is cheaper and more available (Farley et al. 2009; Brownell and Friedan 2009) but, ironically, the culturally approved desire to have a thin, fit, fat-free body can result in being less healthy than if one is slightly overweight, physically active, and engaged in eating a nutritious diet (Lavie, Schutter, and Milani 2015; Elagizi et al. 2018). Finally, the consumer is also exposed to a steadily increasing number of platforms that are being offered that lend more and more
opportunities for increasing sedentary behaviors to be enacted (e.g. Netflix, hulu, videogame platforms).

In addition, our medical system, the biomedical system can be seen as a sickness-based care system rather than a prevention focused system (Kleinman, Eisenberg, and Good 2006. https://focus.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/foc.4.1.1400). Patients make visits to the Western doctor when they already have a problem and are experiencing sickness. With young people in the US being a major target for this new form of consumerism (the consumption of available leisure time): “Teens now enjoy more than five and a half hours of leisure a day (5 hours, 44 minutes). The biggest chunk of teens’ daily leisure time is spent on screens: 3 hours and 4 minutes on average. This figure, which can include time spent gaming, surfing the web, watching videos and watching TV, has held steady over the past decade” (Pew Center 2019; http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/20/the-way-u-s-teens-spend-their-time-is-changing-but-differences-between-boys-and-girls-persist/).

The paradigm of fitness centers can be seen as an extension of the biomedical system in which the gym is often used as a countermeasure to all the unhealthy behaviors that Americans take part in/embody. “Contemporary fitness gyms thereby appear as the byproducts of, or the reaction to, commercially led normative injunctions which have been described as inviting individuals to joyfully take responsibility for their bodies and to invest in body maintenance in order to preform culturally appropriate self-presentation” (Sassatelli 2010, 2).

Brewis et al (2011) provide data from surveys done in nine countries that suggest that fat stigma, specifically expressions of negative stereotypes of overweight and obese persons, are becoming globally prevalent. Public health campaigns that make use of educational media are cited as potential drivers of these trends because of their focus on healthy bodies and the need to
avoid the health problems that are associated with being obese. The authors suggest that, globally, there is a “cultural shared idea” that being fat or obese is justified as a basis for assessing the personal and social value of an individual (Brewis et al. 2011).

The desire to lose weight and to develop a lean, fit, and sexy look is at the core of the motivation for many Americans to use a gym or become a member of a fitness center. Although there is substantial evidence that almost no one can be successful at achieving long-term weight loss (defined as losing at least 10% of initial body weight and maintaining the loss for at least one year), Wing and Phelan (2005) provide evidence from the National Weight Control Registry that approximately 20% of those who are overweight achieve this goal. Significantly, included among the successful strategy that NWCR members reported was high levels of physical activity. “Eighty-nine percent reported using both diet and physical activity for weight loss; only 10% reported using diet only” (Wing and Phelan 2005, 223S).

How are the messages that are increasingly prevalent in the mass media and in the social interactions of American adults being heard and enacted by adults who frequent fitness centers, gyms, and other exercise facilities? Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2006), in examining the fitness industry and its impact on women’s health, assert, “‘health pursuits’ that are promoted [by the fitness industry] are thinly disguised beauty pursuits and pressures. A healthy lifestyle is often undertaken for the sake of beauty and not health” (Hesse-Biber et al. 2008). Lambert underscores this assertion in her interviews with college women around health messages. “Participant 2 reported that her primary concern was to ‘be skinny’, fit into her clothes, and ‘look cute’, while being healthy was less important. She acknowledged holding an aesthetic-oriented view of health, ‘it’s not like I’m not concerned in the long run about my health’ while simultaneously defending her position as society-driven, ‘everyone is always looking’ (Lambert 2012).
Media images are also posited as a significant contributor to eating disorders. Biber and Hess (2014), for example, suggest that these conditions exist in part because of media-induced notions of the “cult of thinness.” Such notions have generated a huge industry that profits from the sale of fitness resources from diet foods, exercise equipment, cosmetic surgery, and, by extension, membership in gyms and fitness centers. Media images of eating disorders are also associated with racialized perceptions of the causes of such disorders. Saguy and Gruys (2010) examined news media articles about these disorders and noted that young White girls suffering from anorexia or bulimia were described as struggling with an illness beyond their control while nonwhite women were portrayed as out of control or lazy, struggling with conditions that reflected bad personal choices or unwise decisions about food and eating.

Concern with body image has consequences for the exerciser as well. Fear of being fat or having an unattractive body was found to be associated with poor dietary and exercise habits (Vartanian et al. 2012) and media influences, particularly those associated with social media, have been shown to have both positive influences on exercise patterns for those seeking to improve health but negative influences on those who are seeking to improve their appearance (Wakefield et al. 2010; Vaterlaus et al. 2015).

However, as Polivy and Herman (2007) argue, “It is primarily women who are (or feel) pressured to conform to the thin ideal, who see themselves as too fat, and who define their self-worth on the basis of their perceptions of their weight and shape” (Polivy and Herman 2007, 63). Attitudes towards body dissatisfaction and strong desires to avoid becoming fat develop early in both boys and girls, however, and have distinct consequences for adults later in life (Grogan and Richards 2002; Berman, et al. 2005; Stice and Presnell 2006; Polivy and Herman 2007).
A frequent theme in research examining the relationship between exercise, dieting, and weight control for women focuses on the objectification theory, which posits that women are acculturated to believe that their value as human beings depends on their looks/appearance (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Fredrickson et al. 1998). “This perspective on self can lead to habitual body monitoring, which, in turn, can increase women's opportunities for shame and anxiety, reduce opportunities for peak motivational states, and diminish awareness of internal bodily states” (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, 173). One important consequence of this perspective is that it can lead to disordered eating, unhealthy exercise patterns, and more severe mental illness such as depression (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Fredrickson et al. 1998).

A number of studies have substantiated the fact that the desire to use exercise to improve appearance has negative consequences that are not associated with exercising to improve health (Vartanian et al. 2012; O’Hara, Cox, and Amorose 2014). Both studies recommended that efforts to promote exercise to improve health be supported. “By using exercise as a source of empowerment and a means of improving these physical capabilities, women may be less likely to be influenced by society’s constant ambush of objectifying images and messages designed to create the normative discontent they tend to experience for their body” (O’Hara, Cox, Amorose 2014, 117).

Grogan and Richards (2002) present interesting data from a series of focus groups conducted with men and boys suggesting that males too experience social pressures to have lean, muscular figures, however, “They were fearful of becoming fat for social (rather than health) reasons, and they blamed those who became fat because of perceived lack of willpower (to exercise and not eat too much)” (Grogan and Richards 2002, 230). The pressure is on men and women to avoid the stigma of becoming fat and physically unattractive as a consequence.
Ethnography of Gyms

The act of working out, of exercising, and engaging in body building regimens are all activities that are manifestations of this agentic body. In studying this set of activities, ethnography was the most dominant research method present in the literature examining gyms, gym goers, and the activities in which they are engaged. In these ethnographies, the observer/researcher is present as a gym member, not merely as a passive observer (Crossley 2006; Linder 2007; Hutson 2012; Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015).

Many of the ethnographic studies engage in observations using theoretical perspectives that are worth examining in greater detail. Fletcher Linder, for example, is more than an anthropologist: he is a body builder who details his engagement with the experience of being in the gym and going through the routines of his craft. He uses “the first-person ethnographic present to convey affective, cognitive, and physical details of bodybuilding experience” (Linder, 2007, 456). His intent is to go beyond the “reflexive self” of autoethnography to describe “the private, interior spaces of a bodybuilder.” Of particular interest is his desire to reconcile his experience as an anthropologist with his experience as a devoted, accomplished practitioner of the bodybuilder’s art.

It is no accident, for example, that I use an amalgam of phenomenological, Kantian, and Latourian perspectives to underwrite the confessional narrative. My purpose in this telling is to use these perspectives to help make the plea to see bodybuilding – indeed all of human life – as a metabolic entanglement with Things, and to highlight how embodied tellings of intimate facts require abandoning easy distinctions between the anthropologist and the anthropologist’s object of study (Linder 2007; 456).
One notable exception is Bladh (2015), who examines these activities via “fitness blogs” on the internet. She uses methods of discourse analysis as derived from Foucault and from Foucault’s “theory concerning care of the self as a technology of the self.”

Similarly, Crossley (1996) is one of many ethnographers engaged in the often challenging task of making sense of Foucault’s many musings about the body. Crossley’s reading of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, for example, is that Foucault not only describes society’s need to mold, shape, and configure the body, but, Foucault maintains, the body is both acting as well as acted upon. The importance of the gym, or of the fitness center in this Foucauldian view is best summarized by Crossley as “Clearly a space can be designed, equipped and organized to enable effective control over bodies, quite independently of those (particular) bodies, but such spaces can only serve their political function to the extent that they are populated by bodies who will animate and execute the function” (Crossley 1996, 107).

Subsequently, Crossley (2006) in his article, “In the Gym, Motives, Meaning and Moral Careers,” examines another aspect of the gym experience by interrogating the motives and the meaning of gym membership. As an ethnographer, he brings many years of ethnographic fieldwork –some of it focused on methods of studying embodiment in physical exercise (Crossley, 2001)– into attempting to determine motives for working out as well as the motivation to continue. As such, his explorations focus less on what is done in the gym as a set of embodied practices and social interactions and more on the reasons for being there in the first place. His efforts help place into perspective an important element of the question: who joins the gym and what are the characteristics that they share or that set them apart from other members?

He distinguishes between those who have recently signed up for membership in a gym and those who have elected to continue. “Starting at a gym and continuing at a gym are two quite
different things and have a different context, as is demonstrated by the fact that many people do not stick at gym-going beyond a few weeks” (Crossley 2006, 29). The author engages in a lengthy discussion about the theoretical foundations in sociology for ascertaining the nature and the scope of motives. Significantly, however, he makes two critical distinctions among gym joiners: viz. those who are seriously engaged in sport (football players, runners, triathletes, etc) and those who wanted to lose weight. Reasons for wanting to lose weight varied. “In all of these cases, the agent’s self was at stake. They had discovered their bodily condition to have deteriorated and thereby fallen out of alignment with their self-image” (Crossley 2006, 30-31).

Sassatelli’s extensive, 15-year long ethnographic examination of gyms and “fitness culture” provides an additional and more extensive ethnographic examination of these spaces. She holds that “grand theories” do not adequately capture the nature of the gym, the multitude of fitness practices that are embodied there, the motivations of those who train there, nor the commercialization of fitness that has made the gym industry a major economic enterprise in this century. Rather, she is concerned with showing the manner in which users of gym spaces and those who create, manage, and expand these spaces represent “an ongoing dialectic achievement” (Sassatelli 2010, 3). “Fitness gyms occupy a strategic position for the study of embodiment and embodied subjectivity in contemporary, Western consumer culture. Largely organized via commercial relations of some sort, they intersect body discipline and consumership” (Sassatelli 2010, 199).

Her book builds on a series of earlier examinations of the gym as a place where “situated body practices” are undertaken in the quest for the perfect body, a quest that involves the negotiation of space, time, meanings and identities. Her focus on the pursuit of the perfectly toned body in her book is an extension of her early efforts to portray this pursuit as a cultural
goal that must be attained through a set of interactions within the gym where there are other actors, a physical space, organized an unorganized activities, and a commercial organization that has been established to make these actions and interactions possible (Sassatelli 1999).

In this earlier body of work, she adopted a “Goffmanesque view of interaction,” which she defines as an effort to capture the interactions that occur in the social world and to examine interactions in which the actions of the individual are connected, albeit loosely, with “the cultural order.” Significantly, these interactions are limited by a set of conditions and constraints that are imposed by the organizational structure of the fitness facility. “I will consider how time and space are locally orchestrated, how interaction during training is managed and how these arrangements both promote and rely on specific forms of relation with oneself and one’s own body” (Sassatelli 1999, 243). The end result, the fit body, is thus transformed by individual will and desire, and by culturally-defined notions of how the body is present and engaged in the personal, the social, and the commercial worlds that the individual navigates. “Thus negotiated, it can be subjectively appropriated as a fit body, layered with meanings rooted in different social situations and experiences, a body which indeed is felt and deployed as a conspicuous sign of social worth” (Sassatelli 1999, 244).

In her later studies of gyms in both Italy and England, she extends this analysis to examine the commodification of the fitness industry and the place of the gym in connecting the individual exerciser’s desire for the “fit body” to both the places where such fitness is achieved and to the rewards that are forthcoming should that ideal body be achieved (Sassatelli, 2010). The industry that has arisen to meet the demand for a place where the body can be perfected is, as she notes, a cultural phenomenon and a tribute to the neoliberal notion that the body is a product that can be perfected with hard work.
In perhaps the most radical attempt to use ethnographic methods to examine and understand the body and embodiment as it is experienced in exercising and working out, Allen-Collinson and Owton’s “Intense Embodiment: Senses of Heat in Women’s Running and Boxing,” uses sociological phenomenology to explore the “sensuousities” of a distance-running-woman and a boxing-woman (Allen-Collinson and Owton, 2015). The term ‘phenomenology’ requires some explanation, they note, because of its special use in sociological inquiry as a particular focus for, to use their terms, “autoethnographic/autophenomenographic research projects.” In its purest sense, phenomenology centers on the premise that human experience of the external world is conveyed by our senses. We do not know the world as it is, we know the world that is conveyed to us by sight, touch, taste, and sound. Sensory experience as it is embodied in exercise, sports, or working out are thus a legitimate object of study and inquiry for the social scientist. ‘Sociologized’ forms of phenomenology acknowledge and address social-structural influences upon embodiment, highlighting the politically and ideologically influenced, historically specific, and socially situated nature of human embodiment and experience” (Allen-Collinson and Owton, 2015, 248). This focus is used to explore the sensation of heat that is generated via intense physical activity that transcends the boundaries of normal experience. “Aliveness” as a sensation/experience in intense exercise is contrasted with other forms of embodiment, and the subjective realm of this experience becomes the object of inquiry in their explorations of boxing and running.

Andrews, Sudwell, and Sparkes (2004) examine the “geography of fitness” by engaging in an exploration of the gym as a space in which “fitness geographies” might be studied. Their particular focus on body builders was designed to understand the particular interface that exists between men engaged in that sport and the unique ways in which they make use of the health
geography of the gym. In sharp contrast, Craig and Liberti (2007) describe the development of women only gyms to understand how a gendered space is created and used by women in what has historically been seen as a masculine setting.

The engagement of women in gyms, however, represents a critically important shift in the cultural dynamics of the 21st century. The belief that gyms are gendered spaces in which women enter and engage at their own peril has shifted dramatically over time. Currently, according to Statista (2018), approximately half of all gym memberships are held by women. Women are more likely to drop out of gym membership, but their ongoing importance in the fitness industry is difficult to ignore. According to Influencer Marketing, of the top ten “fitness personalities” on Instagram, 9 are women, suggesting that they are connecting to an audience for whom their gender and their accomplishments as women in a “man’s space” is of singular interest and importance (Influence marketing, 2018; https://influencermarketinghub.com/top-10-instagram-fitness-models-will-inspire-get-fit/).

Among the most influential of the examinations of women in the world of sports and fitness, Bolin and Granskog’s work, Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture, and Exercise (2003) represents the most significant and important contribution to the discourse on women in the world of fitness in this century. As feminist ethnographers, their work represents a situated engagement in sports and exercise in which the ethnographer is both participant and observer. The transformation of the sports terrain and/or the gym from a unique masculine domain into one in which female participants impose a different order and an alternate worldview occupies center place in this body of work. “Such an approach is only one strand in the broader genre of the ‘new ethnography’ and takes some anthropologists into a dimension of research we conceptualize as ‘extreme ethnography’ in which one is ‘being’ or ‘becoming’
whom one studies or, in the new anthropological argot, ‘going native’” (Bolin and Granskog 2003, 10-11).

The varied ethnographies that are presented in Athletic Intruders all share a number of findings in common. Perhaps the most salient is the view that women engaged in sport and fitness are not engaged in becoming more masculine or becoming more able to emulate men in these domains. The quest for identity and the role of the sport or the fitness activity becomes worthwhile and worth the investment of time and resources when women are able to create new possibilities for themselves, their bodies, their social identities, and the roles they play in their work (or play) outside the gym. The new woman is being created in the fitness spaces that women are increasingly creating in sports or in exercise settings. “The paradigms shaping research on women in sports are embedded in the changing cultural matrix in which women approach sports and exercise through their bodies, through models of femininity, and in conjunction with gender inequity in a complex society” (Bolin and Granskog 2003, 248). As will be noted in subsequent segments of this study, the approaches outlined by Bolin and Granskog were significant contributors to the methods used in the Tampa Gym Study.

**Dissertations on Gyms and Fitness Culture**

Three dissertation studies – one in anthropology and one in sociology and one in women’s studies – contribute to the sense that, following Crossley (2006), “Increased rates of gym joining, therefore, are an indirect effect of late modern social changes – a response to the weight gain caused by these changes as mediated through agents’ concern and resolve to doing something about it” (Crossley 2006, 34). The first, “The Body is Made to Move: Gym and Fitness Culture in Sweden” by Christina Hedblom (2012) is an ethnographic study that arose
from the fact that, as she notes, “The percentage of people who participate in fitness activities in Sweden has increased from 58 percent in 1998 to 69 percent in 2004.” (Hedblom 2012, 12). In her work, she attempts to distinguish between various components of gym culture that include, among others, ideas about health, body ideals, and science, and for which, concerns about fat, personal appearance, and the agent’s need to act to promote health are all present.

The second, “Training Bodies, Building Status” (Hutson 2012), examines the fitness industry and begins the first chapter with telling statistics about the fact that “Americans are obsessed with appearance, beauty, and health” (Hutson 2012, 1). Consequently, 50 million Americans might be described as “fitness consumers” by virtue of a commitment to exercise regularly and engage in market activities in pursuit of this commitment. The dissertation’s third chapter (the study comes from the University of Michigan where dissertations can be three publishable papers on a related theme) is an ethnographic study of why physical trainers in gyms are often engaged in working with clients to do exercises that are labelled as medical treatment. The motivations for this set of activities arise from “1) the contemporary moral panic over body weight, 2) physician endorsement of exercise as a curative to obesity” (Hutson 2012, 109), and a third reason having to do with the fact that trainers are credible agents for helping clients achieve their goals.

The third, “Is this working out: spatial analysis of women in the gym” (Newhall 2013). Newhall conducted participant observer ethnography of women in fitness programs in gyms in order to understand “how the prescriptions for embodied femininity are mediated by and negotiated in fitness spaces” (Newhall 2013, 3). Using theoretical perspectives from cultural geography (see, for example, Andrews, Sudwell, and Sparkes 2005), she attempts to describe gyms as social spaces in which individuals both create and are shaped by social relationships.
These spaces are not simply empty voids. They are endowed with meaning that is a reflection of what women do there, how they use the time that is spent there, and by the consequences that ensue from their having been there.

Finally, as has been the case with much of the literature cited here, Newhall (2013) acknowledges the influence of Foucault, whose writings about space and its role in creating discourses about embodiment help to guide an exploration of gendered spaces in fitness facilities.

In all of these dissertations there is the recognition that body builders and the first-time user of a gym are all engaged in a process to forge and create an identity that is founded in working the body. “Today, in the absence of traditions, we instead try to create meaning and identity through the choice and maintenance of a lifestyle. Central to this construction of identity is aesthetics. The creation of identity in late modern society is also to a high degree a body project in which the self is largely constructed through a representation of body appearance” (Hedblom 2009, 68).

**Social Media and Exercise**

An additional, important driver of the “fitness revolution” in the 21st century has been the impact of social media. According to Statista, in 2017, 80 percent of the US has a social media profile, “According to estimates, the number of worldwide social media users reached 2.34 billion and is expected to grow to some 2.95 billion by 2020” (Statista 2018, 1). Facebook is the preferred social media outlet for all age groups with almost 9 in 10 adults between the ages of 18 and 45 having an account (Statista 2018).
Nowhere is the penetration of media more prevalent than with young people. Estimates of the time emerging adults spend on media suggest that most waking hours – approximately 12 hours a day – are devoted to some form of media (Coyne, Walker, and Howard 2013). Uses vary, but media use is associated with identity formation, facilitating intimacy, developing autonomy, and assisting with the development of body image. Social media are also dramatically engaged with the fitness industry and with packages such as Fitspiration, the abbreviated form of “Fitness inspiration,” a health and exercise trend found on a variety of platforms from Instagram, to Facebook, and Tumblr. Its content, often in the form of personal photos and text messages, allow users to follow others and to generate content that encourages other users to follow whoever seeks to post something relevant. Fitspo and other Instagram platforms have a substantial influence with one online marketing site claiming that the 20 top Instagram exercise stars have a combined following of more than 90 million people (Mediakix 2018) (http://mediakix.com/2017/04/top-fitness-influencers-instagram-millions-followers/#gs.zPV8iJ0).

Research into the impact and influence of social media generally note that posts by personal trainers and athletes are the most commonly assessed followed by posts from typical users who are simply “putting it out there” to let those who might be interested what they are doing. However, the potential for harm is present, particularly when the images that users consult create feelings of inferiority or of low self-worth because of comparison making behaviors. Raggatt et al (2018), for example, conducted a study to assess the perceived influence that this medium has on health and wellbeing In an online survey, the authors used fitspiration to recruit participants in a cross-sectional survey that assessed a variety of sources of psychological distress from eating disorders to compulsive exercise behaviors. Overall, approximately 18% of
respondents were classified as being at high risk for an eating disorder and another 18% as having high levels of psychological distress. The authors concluded that while the benefits of the platform included finding social support and providing access to health information, sample respondents were also clear that some of the content might negatively influence wellbeing and their perceptions as to what constitutes healthy goals (Raggatt et al. 2018). Similar findings were reported by Vaterlaus, et al. (2015) and by Easton and colleagues (2018), the latter reporting that participants in their study of fitspiration worried that women users would be particularly vulnerable to the negative elements of this social media platform.

Nonetheless, evidence for the positive impact of social media on exercise and physical activity does exist and is frequently cited by researchers examining efforts to promote positive health behaviors. Wakefield et al (2010) in an extensive literature review of media impacts on health conclude that campaigns in the general media that focus on the initiation of exercise and physical activity are relatively successful. Social media is frequently cited as important sources of how-to information for exercisers seeking to master key exercise/workout techniques; additionally, the motivational impact social media can have is also a significant, universally recognized benefit of social media (Coyne, Padilla-Walker and Howard 2013; Millington 2014; Yang and Ngoc 2017).

Methods for Assessing Gyms and Fitness Culture

Qualitative methods thus far are amongst the most important ways to assess what happens to exercisers in a fitness facility. Sassatelli (2010) has devoted decades to the study of “fitness culture.” Her ethnographic examinations of gyms and of gym goers, as has been noted previously, well represent the power of description and language to convey the manner in which
culture is expressed in the actions and words of those in the gym. The question that must be posed at this juncture is what are the quantitative tools and analytic techniques that can be used to provide empirical measures of culture and cultural expressions?

The work of Susan Weller (2007) offers an important approach to these issues that is reflected, as shall be demonstrated, in the methods used to conduct the Tampa Gym Study. In this context, the use of the terms “gym culture” and “culture of fitness” all invoke the notion that physical activity in a gym has cultural meaning that informs the manner in which gym goers approach their work in a fitness facility. Gym users, therefore, have a “set of learned and shared beliefs and behaviors” that can, in principle, be identified and measured empirically. These shared cultural beliefs, Weller asserts, can be assessed to create estimates of the normative beliefs of a group (Weller 2007, 339).

Weller (2002, 2007) asserts that language usage and, specifically, the manner in which members of a group respond to a group of related questions provide important insights to culture. Shared beliefs can be calculated by assessing the degree of homogeneity that exists in group responses to a series of questions about, for example, symptoms and illnesses. Generating a set of statements about exercise, or about the qualities of a good workout facility, or the status of women in fitness culture can be used to assess the level of shared beliefs (Weller et al. 2002). When members of a cultural group use language to describe what they do, what they believe, and why they hold such beliefs, such shared beliefs and values can provide a unique view into the cultural norms (Baer et al. 1999; Weller et al. 2002, Weller 2007).
Conclusion

The literature examined in this review presents a variety of perspectives on fitness and its pursuit through exercise. The anthropological literature on the human body, it was noted, focuses on the relationship between modern American consumer-driven culture and its impact on fitness and health. What emerges from the relationships that are highlighted in this literature is a paradox. In a market-driven consumer culture, Americans are encouraged to consume. Consumption, it was noted, involves overeating. Overeating and a consumer-driven entertainment industry lead to sedentary behaviors. Sedentary behaviors and a lack of physical activities then lead to the development of the so-called obesity epidemic and, subsequently, consuming fitness services in gyms to get rid of the weight that excess food consumption has created.

The current public health focus on obesity and on increasing levels of sedentary behavior has contributed significantly to the creation of the fitness industry here in the United States as well as in other nations. It is an economic enterprise that has experienced dramatic growth with billions of dollars in revenues and gym memberships that number in the tens of millions, however gym dropouts happen within the first year of membership just about as often as members stick with their membership.

As a cultural phenomenon, anthropologists have pointed to a variety of factors that are driving these trends. First among many is their focus of the human body and its role as a platform upon which many personal and social trends operate. A consumer culture has developed to transform and shape the body. Fitness centers and gyms create the spaces and the processes for this transformation. The individual exerciser is equally active, as well, and is engaged, as Sassatelli describes it, in “an ongoing dialectic achievement” (Sassatelli 2010, 3). The gym and
the gym user are engaged in a dance of demand and supply in which the demand for activities that can be bodily transformative must be matched by spaces and objects for these activities that the gym is uniquely structured to supply.

However, the current state of the fitness industry is one of constant evolution. Women, a group once thought to have no place in such settings, are now significant drivers of the fitness industry. Gyms remain somewhat gendered spaces with men and women sometimes engaged in different exercises and workout routines. However, the economics of acquiring and retaining gym members require that these facilities ensure that women are both attracted to these spaces and can have their needs fully accommodated while there.

The health advantages of having women engaged in recommended physical activities are substantial, but there are disadvantages as well. The fitness industry and fitness culture contribute significantly to the objectification of women, who are often in gyms to improve their looks and to acquire a sexy exterior. For example, sales personnel at large commercial gyms often assume the objectives of prospective gym members to be ones in which are completely related to appearance rather than objectives related to health. Common motivations for working out that are appearance related are highlighted as a reason to be at the gym. Getting into “bikini shape” for the upcoming summer, for example is a common desire that is played upon by sales staff and through marketing and media messages urging to get into the gym as a solution. These messages put pressure on women to focus on appearance related goals. Health becomes a secondary concern for many women. Worse, the temptation to go to extremes to create the body of one’s dreams can lead to eating disorders and physical injury from overly strenuous exercising.
While gyms and fitness centers are ideally situated to assist men and women to become physically active as well as physically fit, the statistics on the dropout rates for gym members are discouraging. Marketing studies conducted by the fitness industry consistently demonstrate that around 50% of those who join a gym fail to use its facilities consistently or fail to return to work out altogether (Muller and Whaley 2010). Thus, while many potential exercisers start the process of working out, a substantial number quit after relatively short periods of time.

Dropouts are more pronounced among women and it is not entirely clear why this is the case. Now that women are increasingly represented among the individuals who use gyms to work on their fitness, issues related to their motivation to join a gym and to their ability to maintain a workout routine are increasingly being asked by the leaders of the fitness industry, by public health researchers, by public health practitioners, and by those who see significant commercial benefit in selling fitness products to consumers.

The advantages and disadvantages of these trends in fitness are significantly and dramatically impacted by the rising social, economic, and cultural impact of social media. The penetration of media into the activities of daily life has been dramatic. Young adults spend more time per day – upwards of 12 hours – on social media than any other activity. The content related to fitness, exercise, dieting, and attaining the perfect look is a powerful influence on personal behavior as well as on profits to the fitness industry. With tens of millions of followers, fitness experts and trainers are positioned to have a very significant impact on what exercisers do in the gym as well as on the producers of the goods and services that these consumers will use. Social media, therefore, is driving the commodification of the fitness industry to a substantial, significant degree.
Many questions about the role of gyms in assisting its women users to reach their goals remain to be answered. What factors bring women to join a gym? What are the factors that keep them engaged in an exercise routine over the long term? How do women exercisers make use of the spaces, places, equipment, and the fitness personnel that are present in a typical commercial gym? If a fitness culture exists and is present in the community of individuals using gyms and fitness centers on a regular basis, what are its components? Is there any evidence that elements of that culture might be identified and used to engage more women to join gyms and to use them to become and/or remain physically fit? How does the increasing importance of social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram influence gym culture and exercise routines? How are individual objectives affected if at all by factors such as social media? How does that influence manifest itself concretely? In the following chapter the objectives and the methods for the Tampa Gym Study are outlined.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODS

This mixed methods ethnographic study of female gym goers was conducted in two gyms in the Tampa, Florida metropolitan area from December 2017 through May 2018. Its primary objective was to identify the factors that motivate women to become gym members, to identify specific strategies that gym goers use to achieve their exercise/fitness goals and objectives and to identify their strategies for maintaining an exercise program over the long term. This study was envisioned as the formative phase of a future study of the impact of gym culture on the exercise behaviors of women gym goers. It proceeds once again from the assumption that the gym or fitness center is a commercial driver of popular culture.

The advantages of a mixed methods study design for research of this type are that they provide a means to triangulate qualitative statements about the gym/exercise experience with a statistical analysis of the degree to which those statements are affirmed or denied by a different set of respondents. The assumption is that the attitudes and the behaviors that are the key elements of gym culture are a part of the language that gym goers use to describe their experiences there. Such statements about the gym experience that are made by one set of gym goers should, in principle, be statements that all other gym goers will recognize and endorse as accurate representations of their experience. Mixed methods studies are the ideal medium for exploring and validating such statements.
The Tampa Gym Study was created using the principles that have been created by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and articulated in the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition (HHS, 2018 https://health.gov/paguidelines/second-edition/pdf/Physical_Activity_Guidelines_2nd_edition.pdf). These guidelines advance physical activity as essential for the prevention of disease and the promotion of an important set of health benefits. The guide's recommendations are based on a large body of research that demonstrates that an active lifestyle should be one in which an excess of inactivity is avoided because of its harmful consequences and is one in which recommended levels of aerobic, muscle strengthening, and bone strengthening exercises are a regular part of one's lifestyle routines. The guidelines list a diverse set of activities to meet these levels, many of which, walking for example, are easily implemented by a substantial portion of the adult population. Engaging fitness experts, physical trainers, fitness facilities and gyms are all recommended in the guidelines as resources to help individuals and communities achieve and maintain appropriate levels of physical activity. The Tampa Gym Study provides an important examination of the role that such facilities currently play in this national quest to improve the fitness levels of US adults.

The work of Shari Dworkin (2003), one of the contributors to the volume, Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture, and Exercise (2003), served as an important methodological guide for my observations. She notes that the major advantage for her research was her familiarity with gym culture and her knowledge of “how to do the many exercises combined with a familiarity with the lingo, rules, and etiquette” of these spaces (Dworkin 2003, 135).

As an ethnographer engaged in the observation of women in two different gym/fitness centers, I believe I benefited a great deal from my position as a woman as well as my status as a
regular exerciser who has achieved a level of fitness and expertise that many women in these
gyms are striving to achieve or already maintain. My research required that I observe, approach,
and recruit women whose level of expertise in exercising was similar to mine or whose workouts
demonstrated that for them, working out was a high priority. I assessed their level of
commitment by going through a set of criteria questions at the point of initiating my recruitment.
I needed to be sure that potential research participants viewed me as a peer and would be
comfortable talking about their exercise routines. I understood how much they needed to
perceive that they were chatting with a colleague who also understood how challenging and
intense it can be to maintain a workout routine over the long term.

Research Objectives

1) To determine the reasons why women choose and use the gym to exercise

2) To assess the perceptions of women exercisers as to the significance, if any, of being a
woman in the gym.

3) To identify goals and motivations to keep at a workout routine.

4) To identify their strategies to persist in their efforts to resist the urge to drop out,
including the use of self-talk messages.

5) To assess the shared knowledge and the differences if any between Black and White
female gym goers with respect to their reasons for their choice of gym, their perceptions
about being a woman in the gym, their strategies for maintaining an exercise routine and
for resisting the temptation to drop out, and their use, if any of self-talk strategies.
Sampling and Study Sites

My observations of women in the gym were based on finding exercisers who were engaged in active or highly active levels of activity, as defined by the HHS physical activity guidelines as active "the equivalent of 150 minutes to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a week," or highly active as "the equivalent of more than 300 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a week" (HHS 2018, 106). It is important to note that standard practice for a full workout in a gym involves "doing a circuit" in which the exerciser is actively engaged in solitary activities using a variety of muscle-strengthening and aerobic-intensive exercise machines. Individuals engaged in doing a workout circuit stand apart from exercisers who are there to join group activities that are typically offered in classes for Zumba, Spinning, or Pilates, for example. Although many of the women interviewed for this study take part in those classes, the focus for my research was for the individual exerciser who was typically engaged in highly active workouts.

It is important to note that many women are avid exercisers who are not committed to using gyms or gym membership to achieve their fitness goals. Membership at a gym is understood to be just one of many strategies for achieving recommended levels of physical activity. Florida, for example, affords the avid exerciser with a large variety of opportunities to become physically active outside of those offered at the gym. Bicycle riding, walking, running and rollerblading are examples of physical activities that are often typically performed outside the gym and that are quite effective in helping individuals become physically fit. Exercising at home with a wide variety of fitness devices that are suited for home use provides additional opportunities for getting a vigorous, effective workout. Additionally, workout videos or virtual
fitness classes presented on phone applications have become a popular way to fit in a workout in the privacy of one’s home (or office).

However, I chose to recruit women for this study solely at fitness facilities because that is a central location where people perform exercise and where the major objective is to be physically active. A fitness facility is set up specifically and precisely to encourage exercise. A full variety of machines, open spaces, fitness classes and employees such as personal trainers are there to help assist gym goers in their quests to get fit. Gyms typically offer a variety of exercise options that appeal to a variety of exercisers. Hence, gyms can, in principle, provide the ethnographer with a diverse audience from many different backgrounds who all share one basic objective: to become "fit" by using the spaces, equipment and gym staff as their tools to develop a new improved self.

I also chose gyms as the study sites because they offered me a place to do participant observation. As an observer, I was uniquely positioned to watch and engage individuals as they were working out. I was well position to see how gym goers interact with each other and how the setting (the business of a fitness facility) encourages physical exercise. Looking at the advertisements on gym walls as well as all of the images and promotional materials that are present in these spaces provided me with key artifacts of gym culture. Observing how people navigate the space in the gym as well as what they do there helped me understand how users invest meaning in their efforts and in the results, they strive to achieve. And most importantly, doing participant observation in the gyms where I recruited a small group of women for my interviews and subsequently, a much larger group of women for the surveys, gave me an opportunity to triangulate observational, qualitative, and quantitative data. My study provided me with the opportunity to compare my participant/observer data, with interview data and finally,
with data from survey responses. In total, with data from a total of 102 women gym members, my analysis provided me with an understanding of many of the drivers of gym culture and my results offered a much more comprehensive analysis of gyms and of gym users than would have been possible from just one data source alone.

I focused on two gyms instead of having a third or fourth research site because I knew from years spent working out in such facilities that two gyms would provide me with an opportunity to compare and contrast my findings in ways that would not have been possible if data from three or more facilities had been collected. The nature of participant observation is to not only obtain a close look at what is going on in a particular setting, but to understand as much as possible what is happening by fully taking part in the actions being performed. Being in two gyms made it possible for me to devote enough time and work in my exercise routines to be perceived as an insider. That particular perception, experience told me, would not be possible if my time were divided between three or more locations. I used my experience as a veteran exerciser, in other words, to make these determinations. And finally, this study was envisioned as the formative phase for a much larger national study. Thus, focusing on two gyms was assumed to provide sufficient data for the development of a much larger study to be conducted in the future.

Part I: Qualitative Study

Participant Observation

In December 2017, I initially joined Active Style Gym (ASG) a pseudonym for a national franchise with gyms throughout the United States, for the purposes of being able to conduct this research at this locale. I chose this gym because it is a high-end gym with lots of amenities, new
equipment and many members. I also had been a member at locations in New York and another location in Tampa, so I was already familiar with this type of facility and this brand. It is in a very centralized location and is a well-known gym franchise across the country. I chose the Sunshine State Gym (SSG) a pseudonym, because 1) it is a smaller local gym in Tampa and 2) I was already a member. I chose two different gym organizations to see whether the gym culture varied, or was similar, regardless of properties associated with each facility (e.g., location, size, cost, management).

I worked out in both gyms without recruiting anyone for about 6 months. I wanted to get the feel for the energy, style and culture of the gyms while becoming a familiar face before beginning recruitment. At this time, I spoke with a lot of women who were members of each gym. At ASG, I signed up for weekly personal training. I spoke with my own trainer as well as others about exercises, the gym and its members. During this ‘warm up phase’ I engaged with other women sharing a floor space to stretch; when I observed a woman doing a particular exercise and asked about it. Conversely, women would ask me about an exercise; we would just chit chat in the sauna and have other informal conversations around classes such as Yoga, Pilates and Zumba.

**Sampling**

The first phase of this study took place in the two gym facilities mentioned. Inclusion criteria included adult women (21-39 years old) who were either White or Black women who [1] had a membership in one of the two gyms for at least 6 months, or had been a member of any gym for at least a year, [3] were English-speaking and [3] who reported that they visited the gym at least twice per week. The intention was to recruit 32 women for Part I. However, a total of 26
women were recruited from the two gyms for study Part I. The majority of this group was from ASG (n=18). The remainder of the group were from the smaller gym, SSG (n=8). There were three factors that explain the relatively small number (n=8) of participants from SSG. 1) There is a much smaller number of members at SSG. 2) There are very few numbers of African American women members at SSG and 3) The facility closed with little warning for a period of time during data collection for updates and maintenance.

Sample size for this component of the study is consistent with recommendations of Weller and Romney (1988). “Usually with a coherent domain, 20 to 30 informants are sufficient. Larger or smaller numbers of informants are necessary depending upon the agreement in the responses” (Weller and Romney 1988, 14). Because it was expected that there would not be substantial variation in the statements made by women gym goers with respect to their exercise patterns, a sample of 20-30 respondents was deemed sufficient.

**Recruitment Strategies**

The ways in which I interacted with potential informants varied as my interactions with women in each setting were adjusted throughout the study by trial and error. However, the ways in which I recruited individuals to participate in my study were similar at each gym. As someone who is very familiar with gyms and with the different people that attend them, I approached women of varying athletic body types (i.e. thin and toned, larger in size and muscular, larger in size and toned, thin and muscular). Upon visual inspection that was largely based either on the individual’s looks, the frequency of which they were seen working out or the types of exercises being performed, I was able to identify a potential eligible participant.
I recruited women in different spaces at the gym, including the first floor in ASG which is the cardiovascular floor as well as upstairs, which includes weight training machines and a free weight area. In SSG the cardiovascular machines are in one room and the weight training room in another and both rooms are used to recruit women exercisers as well.

At ASG, I recruited most of my participants in the gym as they were either about to start a workout, in the midst of working out, or about to leave the gym post workout. More specifically, I recruited some participants while they were walking out of the locker room. In some instances, it was unclear if they were beginning their workout or had already completed their exercises, and on their way out. Capitalizing on the moments when gym members were not busy either working out or talking to someone proved to be a successful strategy.

A lot of members at the gym use headphones to listen to music or watch television shows (while doing cardiovascular exercises). This is worth mentioning because in a lot of instances, I had to get the potential participants to remove their headphones, turn off their music and pay attention to me. To some degree, I was interrupting their routine. In addition, many people reported in the interviews, that they consider their time at the gym as “me-time” and therefore I knew that I was in some respects, taking away from what they considered to be as time for themselves. This is why, for Part I, I chose to use a technique that involved getting potential participants to express that they were willing to participate and then exchange contact information for setting up an appointment and location at a later date. This strategy worked well as they were able to plan ahead for the interview and it did not interfere with the time they allotted for working out as well as being in a more private setting away from the sounds, people and the overall energy at the gym.
I also recruited some participants outside the gym in the walkway to the parking lot. I did not recruit anybody in the locker rooms as I did not feel this would be a comfortable situation and did not want to disturb anyone while they were (un)dressing or just getting out of the shower or doing their hair or makeup. In SSG there were instances where I was able to recruit study participants outside as well as inside the gym. I also recruited a few participants in the sauna. The fact that I was a member of each gym in which I recruited people to my study and that I worked out in the gyms several days a week and trained with one of the master trainers at ASG about twice a week characterized me as a “level-one insider” as described by Andreas Giazitzoglu, 2018 in his writings about his dissertation research. As a person that is serious about working out and doing it with an expertise level that can be recognized by others, I found this to work to my advantage. I was comfortable in the setting that I was recruiting participants because I was not only a familiar face, but was wearing similar athletic clothing, training with a master personal trainer and doing workouts that can be seen and that are prized around the gym.

At both gyms, I had just finished working out myself or was in the middle of a workout routine and seized an opportunity to recruit participants at moments when there was a lapse in utilizing a workout apparatus or literally in the middle of performing a particular exercise or before or after their workout. Some were not eligible, mostly because (1) they had only been working out for a few months, (2) had just gotten back into working out after some significant lapse of time, or (3) because they only frequented the gym and worked out once a week or sporadically or (4) because they were members of the specific gym for less than 6 months. Almost everyone I asked said yes and the three individuals who said no did so because of their reported time limitations. Of the participants recruited, the large majority had a track record of working out consistently for at least two years, but most women had a long history of working
out and or playing and training for sports for most of their whole lives. I refer to these women as veteran exercisers.

The interviews for Part I of the study were scheduled as an appointment and done mostly outside of the gym at four different local Starbucks’ locations. A handful of the interviews were done at gym one at the nutrition bar. At gym two some interviews were done on the second floor of the gym where there is a business center. These open-ended interviews lasted 45 minutes to 75 minutes.

**Data Collection**

Part I of this study used a semi-structured interview to elicit reasons for gym attendance and of benefits derived from exercising. Participants were asked to describe the techniques or strategies for maintaining motivation in exercising, and to provide examples of the “self-talk” that exercisers used to motivate themselves and complete exercise routines. In addition, they were asked to provide details of their history and experience with exercising at a gym.

**Data Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews**

I typed up the interviews and coded them for thematic analysis. In the first phase of the analysis, comparisons were undertaken to assess differences in responses with respect to 1] the reasons experienced women exercisers chose to exercise in the particular gym 2] exercise motivations and goals; 3] self-reported strategies women employ both to persist in their efforts to exercise and to resist the urge to drop out; and 4] to assess the differences, if any, between Black and White women gym goers with respect to their reasons for their choice of gym, their
strategies for maintaining an exercise routine and for resisting the temptation to drop out, and their use, if any of self-talk strategies.

A detailed analysis of these semi-structured interviews was analyzed, and results are presented in Part I of the results section. In Part II of the study salient themes that emerged from these data were used to create a survey described below.

**Part II: Quantitative Study**

**Sampling**

The sample consisted of 76 adult millennials (21-39 years old) White or Black women who [1] had a membership at ASG for at least 6 months, or had been a member of any gym for at least a year, [2] were English-speaking and [3] who reported that they make a minimum of two visits to the gym per week. Due to the closure of SSG during the data collection period, Part II of the study was exclusively on recruiting respondents from ASG. In addition, participants in the qualitative study were excluded from taking part in the survey. Equal numbers of Blacks and Whites were selected (n=38 Black women, n=38 White women). Sample size was consistent with the methods employed by Baer et al. 1999, in their research on inter and intra cultural agreement as to causes and treatments of the common cold. In that study approximately 40 participants at each site were interviewed and was seen as an adequate sample.

**Data Collection: Instrument**

Interview data from Part I were analyzed to produce a set of statements designed to: 1] be representative of the language used by someone embodying the critical elements of gym culture and 2] be articulated as a set of statements to which informants responded to with yes/no
or agree/disagree answers. Specifically, the propositions were extracted from a review of interview transcripts. Of particular interest were statements that described common, frequently articulated opinions and value statements about working out. Statements that reflected highly idiosyncratic expressions of gym behavior were excluded and statements that expressed what the speaker believed to be commonly held values and beliefs were highlighted.

In order to capture values and sentiments about gym going and exercise that were not present in the transcripts, additional items were created that were designed to imitate statements that are often found in advertisements promoting joining a gym or promoting the purchase of exercise equipment for a gym-like workout at home and concepts derived from similar research.

There were seven themes that emerged from the analysis of Part I for which a total of 77 statements were created. The seven themes were organized into clusters that included: (1) the key components of a good gym [Gym =10 items]; 2) the key components of a good workout [Workout= 12 items]; 3) strategies to keep motivation [Motivation= 18 items]; 4) key statements representing the importance of women being in the gym [Women in Gym= 6 items]; 5) circumstances that would tempt me to drop out [Dropout=12 items]; 6) self-talk statements that I might use to keep me working out [Self-talk= 7 items] and 7) tips about working out that are worth sharing with others [Tip=8 items]. Each statement was read aloud and respondents were only permitted to respond, “I agree” or “I disagree” or “yes” or “no”. Responses were recorded on an iPhone and uploaded to an Excel file for analysis. Respondents were asked to respond to all questions to assure that there were no missing, not applicable, or I don’t know responses.

The survey questionnaire was administered to 76 women who were recruited from ASG and who had not been part of the study one interview. Their responses were then analyzed to identify an existence of shared language and agreement among women gym goers about
exercising in a gym/fitness center. The guiding assumption here is that women gym goers embody a set of attitudes, ideals, and values as to what can and should be done in a gym workout that includes the strategies they use to maintain motivation and to continue consistently to return each week to work out.

The surveys for Part II of the study were done at the moment of recruitment for almost all participants in this section of the study. The survey was administered by the researcher and was short enough to convince people to take at that moment. The survey on average took 10 to 15 minutes. Some surveys were administered over the phone as this was a way to not lose a qualified informant and to be able to work around their schedules. The survey at the gym sites was administered by using a cell phone, through using a google form in which the researcher checked boxes to each question indicating that the informant either agreed or disagreed with the statements being read and then submitted the individual survey and responses to the google form. Since, it could be difficult to answer yes, I agree, or no I disagree for some questions, I instructed participants to answer quickly as to not overthink their responses.

For both parts of the study participants received a consent form to read over, keep and one to sign and give back to me. All participants were assured their information would remain anonymous and that this research was for my PhD research at the University of South Florida.

**Data Analysis of Questionnaire**

This analysis follows Weller et al (1993) in that it assumes the “Consistency among informants is usually indicative of shared knowledge” (Weller et al. 1993, 115). To assess this, dichotomous statements are generated that elicit either an “agree or disagree” or “yes or no” response from research participants. A binomial analysis can then be conducted to determine the
shared answers within and across groups. The greater the shared beliefs, the stronger the conclusion that such statements represent how members of that culture communicate with each other about what they do, what they believe and what they value.

Following Weller et al (1993) and Baer et al (1999) responses to the 77 statements were analyzed to determine the shared answers among survey respondents to each statement within the 7 statement clusters that were created from the themes that came out from interviews of Part I study participants. The analysis sought to identify a set of statements that might be assumed to represent the shared language and beliefs of those engaged in fitness/gym culture. The following objectives guided the analysis: to identify 1) The number of statements by cluster that generated 68% or more “I agree” or “I disagree” responses, 2) the number of statements by cluster that generated 31% or fewer “I agree” or “I disagree” responses and 3) the number of statements per cluster with levels of agreement between 32% and 67%, representing no shared pattern of agreement/disagreement.

A binomial analysis was used to examine differences in response rates by race to statements constructed to demand a dichotomous choice to either agree/yes or disagree/no response. The analysis of these responses determined evidence of “shared beliefs” if 68% or more of survey participants signaled agreement with a given statement. When both Blacks and Whites demonstrated this agreement with both individual and clustered statements about exercise and working out, the null hypothesis that there are no racial differences in shared beliefs about fitness/gym culture was judged to have been affirmed.
Summary

This chapter presented a description of the data collection methods used for this mixed methods study. Research objectives were described for Part I and Part II of this study. For the first study, a description of the participant observation and ethnographic methods for observing women in gyms was provided. Part I sampling including a description of inclusion criteria was detailed. The methods used in recruiting participants to the study were detailed as well as the structure of the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with research participants. The data collection and analysis of interview data was described as well as the methods that were used to create the survey instrument that was used in the second part of this study. The sampling methods used to recruit respondents to the survey were presented and the strategies used to conduct the analysis of survey data were also provided. The survey instrument that was produced was described, as well as a description of the binomial analysis that was used to analyze survey data.

Endnotes

1 See appendix 2-4 for informed consent, interview guide, and questionnaire
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

This study was designed to expand Roberta Sassatelli’s (2010) assertion that the gym or fitness center is a commercial driver of popular culture. The message that is presented in television commercials, in newspaper advertisement and in social media is clear: “Want to get fit? Get to the gym.” As noted by Sassatelli (2010) the body and it’s molding into a product that advertises the health, well-being, the attractiveness and the desirability of the exerciser are thus commodities and the gym is the place where this commodity can be purchased. The two gyms that served as locations for this study, the Active Style Gym and the Sunshine State Gym, are products of that commodification and are therefore an essential part of that culture of fitness.

This study is centered in that milieu. The findings presented in this chapter can be understood as an extension of Sassatelli’s decade-long research on gyms and fitness culture that was conducted in a variety of locations throughout Europe. Her work frames the gym and the exercisers in them as participants of a “lived consumer culture.” Accordingly, this study sought to observe the participants in that culture and understand the self-reported goals, motivations and strategies of the women exercisers in this study.

In this chapter, a description of the study sites where fitness participants were observed, interviewed and surveyed, the Active Style Gym and Sunshine State gym, will then be described. A description of each gym and a comparison of the two facilities will be presented. In addition, the integral role of personal trainers at the gym will be explained. A table describing the
characteristics of the sample participants will be presented and will be followed by a presentation of findings from the open-ended interviews of participants. A synopsis of participants’ goals and objectives with working out will be provided. A discussion of the strategies that women exercisers use to persist in workout routines including an examination of the role of social media will be presented.

Results Part I

Description of Study Sites: Active Style Gym (ASG)

Active Style Gym (ASG), a pseudonym, is a large franchise located in South Tampa that is one of many locations that this franchise maintains in Tampa and throughout the country. This particular gym offers amenities including a lap pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, basketball and racquetball courts and a kids’ club. In addition, the facility offers an array of classes including yoga, spin class, kickboxing, and Pilates. Additionally, the personal trainers who work at ASG are advertised as among the best this nationwide franchise has to offer.

ASG has a large sales staff situated at the entrance of the gym. All users must pass employee desks when entering the gym from the front entrance. Frequently, there are tables and signs set up to advertise personal training services, upgrades to memberships, and adding a guest to an individual member’s account. Sometimes there is a staff member – typically a fit, attractive and quite personable representative of the franchise’s image of fitness and good looks – who is present, greeting members, asking them if they have already received their free personal training assessment. This assessment includes measuring body fat, assessing the value and the efficacy of the user’s exercise goals as well as a free session with a personal trainer.
There are two spaces in the gym that are set up exclusively for gym goers who work out with a personal trainer. Before-and-after photos of members who have significantly transformed themselves into impressively toned paragons of fitness are posted throughout the facility. In the locker rooms there are containers where a form can be filled out and placed for writing down the user’s fitness and exercise personal goals. The incentive for filling out this form is to be eligible to win free personal training sessions. The walls have photos of attractive, well-toned men and women working out. The television screen in front of the exercise machines flashes between music videos, tips from ASG staff about working out, tips about nutrition and the importance of having user’s focus on post-workout hydration.

ASG gym goers are primarily middle- to upper-class individuals of varying ages, race/ethnicities, and genders. One can, on any given day, observe a significant number of stay-at-home moms who are there to use this gym, along with a varying mix of young people and seniors. College students and graduate students from local institutions of higher learning are present along with visitors from out of town with ASG-franchise memberships. The gym is often frequented by athletes from professional sport teams who are especially visible during their sport’s off-season. For example, I saw members of the Tampa Bay Rays baseball team on more than one occasion at this gym. Bodybuilders, yogis, personal trainers, runners and the average gym goer all can be found there in the course of a routine visit.

**Description of Study Sites: Sunshine State Gym (SSG)**

Sunshine State Gym (SSG), a pseudonym, by contrast, is a small local gym located in an apartment complex inhabited by persons with sufficient income to enjoy a range of amenities. In principle, if not in practice, everyone who exercises in this gym lives in the complex and pays a
separate fee for the use of the gym. Users of this facility are predominantly young and white. I have never encountered more than 20 members at any time I have been there. While much smaller than ASG, the facility offers a half basketball court, a lap pool, sauna, as well as a general weight room and cardio room. There are no sales staff and only one front desk clerk. The facility also offers fitness classes, including yoga and Zumba, and offers the services of personal trainers as well.

**Comparison of Gyms**

The study sites were chosen to identify differences, if any, in the characteristics of women users of these facilities with respect to their motivations, workout strategies, workout attitudes and strategies for maintaining a workout regimen. What is immediately striking is the obvious difference in size and in the intensity of the activities in each location. ASG, while larger, is significantly more crowded than SSG at all times of day. However, unlike ASG, SSG is open 24 hours a day and seven days a week. There is also only one staff member at SSG at any time, whereas ASG, the larger gym, has much more staff at hand including a full-time sales team. ASG, for example, has a potentially intimidating (or inspiring) array of rooms, workout equipment, and workout spaces for the user to navigate. Personal trainers become, as a result, a critically important part of the gym scene because they are the guides and the experts in exercise science whose job is to help the exerciser find the success he or she desires.

**Personal Trainers: Roles at The Gym**

Personal trainers’ roles in the gym are not simply to teach or train clients how to work out. Being a motivator, tailoring workouts to individual clients, allaying anxieties all the while
making working out fun and interesting are, nonetheless, just a small part of what personal trainers do. Even more importantly, as Sassatelli (2010) explains, fitness professionals play a vital role in negotiating or renegotiating the client’s goals and objectives so that workout struggles and workout victories are placed in perspective. Fitness personnel in gym settings are acutely aware of the risk of having a client drop out because personal goals were too ambitious to be achieved. They are also aware of the risks that users encounter if they overestimate their abilities because of the success they have achieved with one set of workout routines. Keeping matters in perspective for their clients and assisting clients to adapt to more suitable, achievable goals are important tasks the trainer must strive to achieve. The challenge is often one in which clients are encouraged to do more than strive to “look good.” One personal trainer at ASG mentioned that she prided herself on how she helped a young client to renegotiate her initial objectives at the gym. “One teenage female client… I am particularly proud of what I have accomplished with this woman. She just wanted to be skinny and now her mind has completely shifted. I got her doing squats with barbells and pushing through the last few reps” (23 ASG).

Getting people out of their comfort zone, into a workout routine, and establishing trust are all elements of a working personal trainer/client relationship whose importance to the commercial success of the facility cannot be overemphasized. “Newbies” (i.e. first-time exercisers), people who are out of shape, shy individuals, people who have never been in a gym are all examples of individuals who are prone to a variety of emotions including anxiety surrounding not feeling as if you fit in, not looking like a pro or not seeing results fast enough. Fitness centers try to avoid uncomfortable experiences by making working out fun, cheerful and motivating, while offering a variety of ways to be physically active. Personal trainers are critical
to this mission. They offer the assurance, motivational push and, of course, their expertise and their knowledge of exercise to all from seasoned regulars to novices and to anyone in between.

The ability of personal trainers to enact and embody different roles is tantamount to a fitness center’s ability to engage just about anyone who walks in the door. The gym environment is not a place where only those who love fitness come. Hence, commitment to the process of getting fit, healthy, toned, or engaging in activities for stress relief must be earned. The personal trainer’s job, therefore, is to assist consumers to successfully exploit the services and resources in the facility, while earning the trust and ongoing financial commitment of members.

As time goes on, the exerciser begins to understand what is realistic and practical; one learns what types of routines overall ‘work’ well. Often, one’s personal workout objectives do not necessarily produce the desired body ideals (with or without the aid of a fitness professional). As Sassatelli (2010) notes, “A number of contradictions thus harbor the world of fitness. While fitness programs are sold as leisure, and trainers help clients to participate in fitness, for clients there is quite a bit of work to be done” (95-96). Thus, personal trainers are not the key to success for everyone. Personal trainers offer encouragement, knowledge, and accountability and assist with the process of figuring out objectives and exercises that fit best for the client.

**Participant Observation**

*Positionality*

Bolin and Granskog, (2003) classify their work as “experiential reflexive ethnography.” The term “experiential” is used because of the full participation of the anthropologist in the setting, or group, or activity under study. Accordingly, their approach has guided much of the direction for the conduct of this study. As the authors note in their introduction, “one important
trend in reflexive ethnographic research is the positioning of the anthropologist and her or his status as an insider/outsider or as in-between. Many of the researchers involved in the ethnography of physical activity are full participants in their sport/exercise research” (Bolin and Granskog 2003, 10).

Results

Women who frequented each facility were there by themselves and engaged the spaces and exercise equipment as if ready and highly motivated to transform themselves by their efforts. The types of transformations desired varied among study participants. Some mentioned wanting to lose weight, but the majority of the women I interviewed reported that they exercise to improve their physical health and fitness. Women from both facilities confirmed that there are gym members training for a variety of bodybuilding and modeling (including bikini) competitions present at both gym sites. Others still describe being present because they are training for a specific sport.

A striking image at ASG is how many exercisers use earphones to listen to music while working out or just walking around the gym. Music or advertisements are pushed through a public address system throughout the facility as well. Some people wave or have friendly short conversations with gym acquaintances. Most people are very focused on their phones while they are doing cardio or stretching and in between reps that they are performing on the machines. Looking at Facebook or Instagram or some other social media or texting is the norm. Selfies are taken in locker rooms for use on social media or for use as a barometer of where an exerciser is positioned in relation to the achievement of their goals.
Personal trainers and other staff are sprinkled throughout the ASG facility, grabbing their clients to train or giving a tip or two to the engaged exerciser. When the gym is busy, usually in the evening, exercisers will often vary their use of equipment and will often rotate through a variety of exercise spaces and equipment centers. The ASG is equipped with cardiovascular machines on the first floor, along with stretching areas with mats, a spin room, and a multi-purpose room where classes for yoga, Zumba and Pilates are held. When there are no classes being held, the space will still be used. Frequently, an exerciser or two will be found in that space engaged in a bodyweight workout, stretching, dancing, jump roping, punching or kicking the hanging punching bags. The pool and Jacuzzi are also located on the first floor with showers, bathrooms and a sauna located in the locker rooms.

The second floor of this facility includes a large area of workout machines, a designated area for personal training and a weight room. The weight room, like almost any other weight room at any gym has a floor to ceiling mirror in which people watch themselves curl, squat and use the free weights in a variety of different ways at different angles, movements and intensity.

The attire worn at the gym is quite varied. A newer trend for 2019 is that men wear leggings underneath shorts. Women wear a variety of workout outfits. Some women are even in just their sports bra and leggings. A great deal of matching and sometimes expensive attire is worn.

Observations

Sunshine state gym (SSG)

The SSG gym has separate rooms for cardio and weight training as well. There is a sauna in the locker rooms that is used quite regularly. A lap pool is located right outside the facility
where one can go in and out from the gym. While one is sweating on the cardio machines, the outside world is visible through the glass wall. While exercisers are able to use the gym around the clock, it is rarely crowded.

Similarities of ASG & SSG

Both facilities exhibit characteristics of many similar facilities. But what is most similar is that they both strive to offer amenities and equipment that are quite varied. Both facilities are not particularly niche gyms, such as CrossFit or rock-climbing gyms, which offer more specific equipment and are set up for particular types of training only. These two facilities are set up for anyone at any level of fitness who would like to use a variety of machines and enjoy a variety of activities.

Subcultures in the gym

As noted earlier, the book, Athletic Intruders: etc. (Graf and Conklyn, 2003) was an important contribution to efforts to understand the engagement of women in a substantial number of sports and exercise cultures. Each of the book’s chapters provides an ethnographic examination of a particular sport or physical activity. As the authors note, it is a study of the athletic endeavors of women in all of the ways that physical activity can be portrayed.

These subdivisions are, in essence, subcultures. Expressed more precisely, each sport and each of the varied strategies for exercising (e.g. CrossFit) can be defined as a subculture within sports and fitness culture. CrossFit adherents are not like Zumba devotees. Individuals who play baseball/softball share very few of the same approaches to their sport as soccer players. Similarly, exercisers are performing different exercises and workouts in various parts of the gym
and typically, these efforts are often the result of trying to improve performance in a particular sport or as a result of attempting to isolate and work on just one aspect of a complex set of exercise routines. Such routines, perhaps, are ones that target a specific muscle group or a specific activity such as jogging for which leg work or back work is desired. Also, there are differences in workouts whose goal is to train for a functional movement for a sport/activity versus particular workouts, which are done to sculpt the body in a particular way to look good in a bikini or for a bodybuilding contest, for example. Hence, the enormous varieties of workout routines that are visible in a gym reflect in part, the enormous variety of gym and fitness subcultures whose members seek out these facilities to perfect their craft.

**Gendered spaces in gyms/men in gyms**

Among the most significant of the observations of note at both fitness centers was that there was no obvious spatial segregation of the genders in either of the facilities except for bathroom/locker rooms. In other words, there were no gendered spaces that were created exclusively for women or men to exercise. This is an important finding given that ethnographies of gym spaces published in the 1980s and 1990s were very largely concerned with exploring gyms as gendered spaces in which women gym goers struggled to find a place (see, e.g. Bolin and Granskog 2003).

There is little to suggest that those conditions exist in either of the facilities studied. It is evident that fitness facilities are structured to create welcoming spaces and to promote an atmosphere of inclusivity rather than exclusivity amongst its members. Robust images of men and women are posted throughout the gym and give the strong impression that everyone is welcomed there, even if their approach can be intimidating to some. The images are of highly fit
and attractive exercisers but there are also a variety of visual efforts to simultaneously show off the ideal body but to attempt, as well, to ensure that all who are in the space, irrespective of size, shape, or fitness level are welcomed.

The study sites typically had a mix of genders. In contrast to my observations of men in gym ten years ago, men were increasingly sprawled throughout the gym spaces, using cardiovascular equipment and happily on the gym floor stretching and getting limber alongside women. This contrasts with their limiting themselves to weight rooms and their locker room, which I observed 10 years ago. I noted there was roughly an equal number of males and females present at any given time throughout these facilities. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these men and women represent about 21% of the US population which is actively engaged in fitness.

In-depth Interview Results

As Table 1.1 shows, part I was conducted with 26 women in two sites, 10 of whom were African Americans and 18 of whom were Whites. Although the study originally intended to have equal numbers of White and Black women in each site, the sample was terminated at 26 because no new themes were being presented. Having reached saturation, recruitment for this study was terminated at this point. As noted in Table 1.2, the SSG participants were all White, while the entire sample of African American women respondents were recruited from the ASG. The lack of Black women in the SSG reflected the fact that very few residents of the apartment complex are Black. SSG participants had somewhat higher self-reported levels of education (all of the participants from SSG had at least some college as compared with some 6% of ASG who had
only completed high school) and were much more likely to report being single than those at the ASG (88% vs 61%).

**Table 1. Sample Demographics**

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<th></th>
<th>Active Style Gym (n = 18)</th>
<th>Sunshine State Gym (n = 8)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>African American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average Age (years)</td>
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<td>28 (range 22-32)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Average Length of Membership at Gym (In Months)</td>
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<td>3 Times or More</td>
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<td>Average Workout Intensity (self-reported) (Scale 1 “relaxed/easy” to 5 “all out/hard”)</td>
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<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As per the study’s inclusion criteria, all women had been a member of a gym for at least a year; had been a member of that particular gym at least 6 months; and had consistently worked out at least twice a week or more consistently. All but a few participants would be defined as veteran exercisers, that is, an exerciser who has worked out consistently for at least five years or more. Participants were interviewed about their experiences, preferences, motivations, insights and strategies to persist in an exercise routine over the long term. The duration of interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 75 minutes.
The self-reported frequency of workouts was three times or more per week. Participants were asked to rate the intensity of their workouts on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being “all out/hard”. The mean reported level of intensity was 3.8 among participants at the SSG and 4.2 at ASG, suggesting that, on average, participants were exercising at relatively high levels of intensity. Thus, in many respects, with this level of vigorous activity, participants represent an anomaly and a commitment to achieve and maintain an active lifestyle, a lifestyle that public health experts encourage other Americans to emulate.

As Table 1.2 shows (page 74), African American and White exercisers were largely similar with respect to age and level of education with the vast majority of the women in each group having attended college. The most important difference between the two groups was with respect to their relationship status. Among Whites, only one woman (6%) reported being married compared with three married women (30%) among African Americans. As exercisers, the two groups were almost equivalent with similar workout intensity levels and with all but one African American woman using the gym three times or more per week.

All 26 women in the study responded to interview questions about their decision to work out in a (particular) gym with a minimum of three different reasons and is reflected in Table 1.3 (page 74). For example, one veteran exerciser at SSG explained that she attends this particular gym because of its convenience to her job and home, amenities offered and the fact that she was aesthetically pleased with the gym.
Table 1. 2. Demographics: Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American (n = 10)</th>
<th>Caucasian (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Age (years)</strong></td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(range)</td>
<td>(22-39)</td>
<td>(22-38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Graduate Work</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Relationship</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Length of Membership at Gym (In Months)</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gym use per week</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Times or More</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Workout Intensity(self-reported)</strong></td>
<td>(Scale 1 “relaxed/easy” to 5 “all out/hard) 4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. 3. Why Women Chose Their Gym for Exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American (n = 10)</th>
<th>Caucasian (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60% Convenience/proximity</td>
<td></td>
<td>68.8% Convenience/proximity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% Amenities (including classes, pool, kids club, etc.)</td>
<td>37.5% Amenities (including classes, pool, kids club, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30% Multiple Locations</td>
<td>25% Type &amp; Variety of Equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% Familiarity with Facility</td>
<td>18.8% Employee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% Aesthetics</td>
<td>12.5% Multiple Locations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% Price is Good</td>
<td>12.5% Aesthetics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Employee</td>
<td>1 Not Too Crowded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted in interviews, from participants in both facilities, convenience, including having a gym in close proximity to work or home, was cited by 60% of African Americans in the TGS and by 68.8% of Whites as a factor in gym selection. One interviewee from the ASG explains why she became a member there. “I chose it (the gym) because it was in close proximity to where I lived at the time and has consistently had a location close to where I lived in another
area…They’re also a nationwide chain, so when I travel to visit friends in other states I can usually find a gym to use instead of just doing calisthenics for a workout” (15 ASG).

Having multiple locations as part of a gym franchise was cited as an important consideration for some of the gym goers who reported a need to stay active in order not to fall off the exercise/workout bandwagon. Some participants overcame the obstacle of missing a workout session when traveling for work or to visit family. They overcame the travel obstacle when they joined the ASG, which offers multiple-location access (with a multi-pass membership) to facilities all over the US. Many other participants engaged in a similar thought process during the course of interviews, when deciding amongst various gyms within Tampa Bay and ultimately choosing ASG or SSG. “I like the classes they offer. I tried another gym, but liked this one better, including the classes. I like that there are a lot of locations so when I go home to Pennsylvania I can there and one by my work in Clearwater. It is easy and convenient” (12 ASG).

Familiarity with the facility was also reported by 20% of African Americans (significantly, whites from the TGS did not include this as a reason for gym choice). An African American dentist from the ASG, in response to an interview probe, explained why she chose her current gym: “I have been going to ASG for so long, I just know ASG. Some layouts and equipment and I am just familiar with it. It is convenient as well, but more so because I am familiar with it” (14 ASG).

*Goals/objectives of exercisers*

Participants described important differences in the primary workout objectives and goals (Table 1.4) that they reported pursuing (e.g. being strong, being thin or being fit enough to run a
marathon) as well as differences in the strategies they use for maintaining an exercise regimen (e.g. putting on gym attire before getting to the gym, entering in a competition, looking to social media figures for motivation or not wanting to be like unhealthy family members). (Table 1.5)

Table 1.4. Goals/Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals/Objectives</th>
<th>African American (n = 10)</th>
<th>Caucasian (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>70% Physical Health (managing an existing health condition, attempt to prevent</td>
<td>70% Physical Health (managing an existing health condition, attempt to prevent disease</td>
<td>50% Physical Health (managing an existing health condition, attempt to prevent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disease including family history of x)</td>
<td>including family history of x)</td>
<td>disease including family history of x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% Lose Weight</td>
<td></td>
<td>50% Aesthetics / Appearance (including toning, building muscle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40% To Be Fit / Be In Shape</td>
<td></td>
<td>31% Lose Weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40% Aesthetics / Appearance (including toning, building muscle)</td>
<td></td>
<td>25% Mental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% To Look, Feel or Fit Good in Clothes</td>
<td></td>
<td>25% To Be Fit / Be In Shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% Increase Energy</td>
<td></td>
<td>19% To Feel Better, To Feel Endorphins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Training for Sports / Competitions</td>
<td></td>
<td>19% Training for Sports / Competitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 To Be a Role Model</td>
<td></td>
<td>19% Reduce Stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 To Feel Better, To Feel Endorphins</td>
<td></td>
<td>13% To Be Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Enjoy Working Out</td>
<td></td>
<td>13% Increase Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Meet People or To Be With Friends</td>
<td></td>
<td>13% Habit (addiction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Reduce Stress</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Longevity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 To Be a Role Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Confidence Booster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Enjoy Working Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Meet People or To Be With Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 To Look, Feel or Fit Good in Clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Ward Off Injury</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants described changing their exercise routines over the course of their exercise careers. Most were committed to working out whether they had the support from others or not. The participants reported that they have figured out a way to make working out a routine practice, like brushing your teeth. An interview respondent from SSG explains the advice she would offer to any novice exerciser; “It is important to realize it is a lifestyle change. It is good to have a goal, but if you want to see consistent results, it has to be for a lifetime. It can’t be for a couple months to keep results. Once you get into a routine…. it gets easier” (2 SSG).
An African American nurse, a member of ASG described in her interview with me, the consequences of deviating from her work out routine: “Habit, I wouldn’t say I’m addicted to it, but if I don’t’ work out longer than 3 days, I can’t sleep as good and get irritable. So, it’s part of my circadian rhythm” (15 ASG). This sentiment – that working out is such an integral part of normal life that to be void of it for just a few days engenders negative psychological and physiological effects – was a frequently cited by exercisers. A 31-year-old Caucasian yoga instructor from ASG well represents the sentiments expressed by veteran exercisers. During the interview she explained her long history with playing sports and being active: “Since I’m a child I’ve always been someone that likes to go outside and playing and dancing and doing gymnastics and love to go swimming and play sports. I think being active has always been part of my daily routine and my body feels weird when not doing it. Even when I’m on vacation I am craving it” (13 ASG).

For some women, exercise is their hobby. A young African American exerciser at ASG in her interview, described her involvement in exercise as an addiction. “You can’t just want to see results but need to maintain it. It is an addiction. You want to see what you can make sore the day after that. You want to see how far you can push yourself. You get addicted to that rush. Not everybody does” (20 ASG). Veteran exercisers were unanimous in their agreement with this sentiment. A 28-year-old competitive weightlifter from ASG describes her workout history and how it has evolved during the interview with her.

In 8th grade, my school required you to do a sport, which was gen phys ed, basketball or weightlifting, which none of the girls wanted to do. Started with basketball and I sucked at it, so I switched out of it to do weight training. I was 80 pounds. I went to a meet and it was a USA W. I came in first place. I kept up with
it. I ended up weightlifting competitively for 4 years after that and then once I went to college... at that point I was kind of addicted to it and it was a good zone out for me to weight lift. My release was going to the gym even when I was so busy. At least every day or every other day I would work out and then get back to my schoolwork and it helped me focus. Then I graduated and I just kept working out after getting out of school” (15 ASG).

On the other hand, to become regular, committed exercisers, respondents universally and without exception reported having overcome barriers to exercise that have prevented all too many other Americans from becoming physically active. At a minimum, because these women meet the recommended levels of physical activity recommended per the CDC, their strategies for overcoming these obstacles have particular significance. This finding is particularly significant in the case of exercisers who have been working out less than five years but have managed to develop sustainable exercise routines, despite having little to no history of being engaged in sports or regular physical activity.

Some participants during the course of interviews, noted having had a sort of “wakeup call” as the motivation for beginning an exercise program. An African American overweight beginning exerciser from ASG describes how she and a friend began their fitness journey and became workout partners. During an interview with her she said, “A picture that me and my friend saw... It looked like we ate someone else. I said, look at our faces. We said we have to go to the gym. We did a side by side six months after working out... and wow. I feel better than I did before. I initially lost 10 pounds. I think maybe I gained some back, but my clothes fit better, and I am feeling better” (11 ASG). This young woman began an exercise routine recently – she reported starting “two-three years ago” – and was part of a family with no ostensible history of
sport or regular exercise. As uncovered through open-ended interviews with TGS informants, transitions and evolutions in workouts are inevitable for a committed fitness seeker.

Similarly, a Caucasian private trainer with a new line of clothing apparel who works at the ASG describes the source of her inspiration to get serious: “When I moved to Florida, my habits changed. Seeing people online on social media inspired me. Seeing how happy they are. I did my first 5k here in Florida. I felt like…I am at the beach; I want to look good in my bikini. I am only getting older. The more I get older I need to work out” (22 ASG). She had only been working out three years; however, she quickly adopted a new lifestyle upon her move to Florida. Her goals reflected a significant concern with her appearance, which is a sentiment that was reported frequently by beginning exercisers.

However, White exercisers, during the in-depth interviews, were the only ones who reported going to the gym because it improved their mental health and/or emotional outlook on life. One young white personal trainer who complained of having attention deficit disorder (ADD) explained how working out helped her stay focused, a particular important benefit given her condition. She explained that her primary objective and one of her initial and long-lasting reasons for working out as, “I have ADD. When I work out, my goal is to gain focus. Whatever goal you have in fitness it can transfer to regular life” (23 ASG).

The concept that exercise serves as a means to engage physical activity as a tool to affect one’s mental state and emotional disposition demonstrates how the transformation of one’s physical and mental state is at the core of women’s goals at the gym. The mind and body connection that develops with exercise – which Rojas (2015) describes as embodiment “where agents reflect on their practices” – was frequently understood as an experience had by many participants. A gym member from ASG explains how she went from a deep depression to
feeling social and confident in the gym. When asked what her motivations and goals were, she explained, “Mental health…I was depressed and was a cutter and got to my confidence and once I found the gym, it was my outlet. And I am a different person in the gym. I am different person in the gym because I feel so confident there. I am more social there” (17 ASG). Although mental health was only mentioned by four of the White TGS participants and “reducing stress” by three whites who were interviewed as a primary reason for exercise, it is interesting that no African Americans listed mental health as a reason for being at the gym at all.

Health vs. appearance

Physical health and appearance goals represented the overarching objectives for the majority. Fifty-eight percent of exercisers (Table 1.4) reported physical health related goals which included wanting to manage current health concerns and prevent sickness and disease. In addition to physical health goals, related health goals were cited by participants. Examples included wanting to increase energy, wanting to challenge oneself physically, wanting to set good examples for one’s children. By contrast, as shown in Table 1.4, 31% of TGS participants cited appearance-related objectives as reasons for working out, but slightly less than goals related to looking out for one’s health. Appearance goals included toning, building muscle and wanting to shift their overall look. There were also motivations that were related to appearance such as wanting to lose weight, to look good in clothes, and sometimes related to attaining a certain look for a bodybuilding, fitness or bikini competition.

During the course of interviews, exercisers sometimes described shifts in their objectives at the gym that they have made over time. The longer one exercised, the greater the likelihood that a more health-focused approach to working out would develop, if it had not already been a
primary focus. However, wanting to improve one’s appearance was widely held by all types of exercisers, irrespective of other reported motives for exercising. Appearance goals were expressed by women exercising for just two years as well as for women who have been working out most of their lives. Perfecting workout routines to reflect progression in one’s objectives was common amongst the TGS sample. When asked about her workout goals, an African American exerciser from ASG described her motivation as

To be healthy…I have been working out consistently for a little over two years. To lose weight…I have been vegetarian for about a year. I stopped counting calories and looking at the scale. Overall, I came to be healthy. I am on another spiritual level and view things differently since I have been eating less meat and working out. Your whole outlook changes. I sleep well and wake up in a good mood. And my clothes fit better (19 ASG).

These shifts in diet and the decision to not be guided by either the scales or the number of calories in a meal were typical of the change in focus that exercisers often described. A young white personal trainer described her shift in objectives thusly: “I started working out in high school. Every summer I wanted to be skinny. I was self-conscious, in hopes of getting skinny. Luckily, I found strength training. I switched my mindset to get strong instead of skinny” (23 ASG).

Having health goals were often indirectly motivated by family members. A number of interview respondents described not wanting to look like an overweight aunt or not wanting to be like a family member with chronic, often preventable ill health. One TGS informant noted,

Not letting myself get to a certain point is important. It makes me think about I am coming here not just for a physical appearance, but that I am working out for
my heart and lungs. But now that my dad has a bad heart, it makes me think when I am on the elliptical that I am pushing my heart in a good way. My mom has a carpet cleaning business, so she is out there with young guys working for her, but she still does the job with them. Having a balance and getting up and doing something is important (12 ASG).

The influence of family members came in different forms. During the course of an interview, a young equestrian star from SSG noted that her family inspired her to work out. She explained their influence on her health and fitness goals by stating,

“I know people who didn’t exercise their whole lives and started having problems. I have most of my family members that are old and have way less problems and living a quality lifestyle. Most people think about the health aspects only when they you get older. Part of being healthy, is mentally and feeling good with yourself. Not vanity wise. But feeling good in your own skin, whatever your skin is, there is no stereotype to it. For me working out it gives your discipline and challenges you and life does that as well, so I think it applies” (3 SSG).

Nonetheless, exercisers described themselves as being well aware of their appearance and the degree to which their workouts would improve their looks. As an African American gym goer from ASG expressed it, “Appearance! I just want to look good naked. I don’t care how much I weigh. I don’t care. I just want to know that I look good” (20 ASG).

Many exercisers reported having a desire to attain an ideal healthy weight. In addition to weight and health, having a body lower in body fat was frequently mentioned as the ideal “look” exercisers were striving to achieve. This goal was not expressed as “pounds lost” or as a particular reading on the scale. Rather, participants reported in their interviews, paying much
more attention to how clothes fit or how a bathing suit framed one’s figure. The mirror rather than the scale was most often cited as a measure of success in achieving work out objects. Many women commented that they were much more likely to pay attention to how they looked in clothes, in a bathing suit or naked, than the scale. Thus, during interviews, feeling good, liking the image that was reflected at them from a mirror, and being able to compare how before and after photos reveal desired changes were the primary methods participants reported for assessing their successes or failures in regard to health, appearance and losing weight objectives.

Table 1.5. Women’s Strategies to Persist in Workouts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American (n = 10)</th>
<th>Caucasian (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80% Working Out is Fun</td>
<td>81% Working Out is Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70% Clothes Matter</td>
<td>75% Others have Influenced Them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60% Social Media Use</td>
<td>75% Workout Mainly Alone (&quot;me-time&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60% Workout Mainly Alone (&quot;me-time&quot;)</td>
<td>69% Influencing Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60% Influencing Others</td>
<td>56% Clothes Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60% Others have Influenced Them</td>
<td>50% Sports Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% Sports Background</td>
<td>44% Music Matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40% Workout Currently with Trainers</td>
<td>38% Social Media Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% Workout Mainly with Partner</td>
<td>19% Workout Mainly with Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% Music Matters</td>
<td>13% Workout Currently with Trainers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clothes matter

Designing and selling clothing for the fitness buff has become a major industry. As was noted by participants, “looking the part” is an integral component of the gym experience in which gym outfits and workout gear play an interesting and often overlooked role for motivating and keeping the female exerciser into the gym. The choice of outfits women put on for working out as well as to choosing clothes for life outside the gym may be seen as an extension of the concern about appearance.
Walking around any public place such as a shopping mall, the movie theater or on the University of South Florida campus, it becomes clear that clothing originally designed for exercise and sports is also worn in settings other than a gym/any workout space. This type of dressing is becoming a more dominant trend in fashion especially amongst women. Athleisure wear is now worn in a variety of settings besides in the gym or on the field of sport. It is now normal and even trendy to wear certain athletic clothes in a variety of different places, not just the gym. Wikipedia describes athleisure, for example, as “a trend in fashion in which clothing designed for workouts and other athletic activities is worn in other settings, such as at the workplace, at school, or at other casual or social occasions.” Athleisure outfits are yoga pants, tights, sneakers, leggings and shorts, that "look like athletic wear" and are characterized as "fashionable, dressed up sweats and exercise clothing.” The idea is that gym clothes are supposedly making their way out of the gym and becoming a larger part of people's everyday wardrobes” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athleisure). Since clothing is both functional as well as an outward representation of the individual, understanding the symbolic and practical functions of gym clothing became an important objective for my ethnographic exploration of the elements of gym/fitness culture. Participants made frequent mention of the importance of their attire in describing their preparation for the gym, using it variously as a barometer of success in exercising as well as a means of rewarding the success of their efforts once an exercise goal had been reached.

Measuring success with clothes

Exercisers reported in interviews that their wardrobes are used to evaluate progress in achieving their exercising goals. For example, when asked about how she measures her
successes or exercise shortcomings, an SSG member explained, “Mostly I define it by how I fit into my clothes. I was going to have to buy a size 10 and I said I have to eat better and get more consistent with the gym. I weigh myself regularly… that is somewhat important to me… but what size pants can I fit in and what do I look and feel wearing those pants, what do my arms and butt look like matters most to me” (1 SSG). As was true with the majority of TGS participants I interviewed, this young woman admitted both to caring somewhat about her weight but was much more connected and concerned with how she appears and feels in her clothes.

Similarly, a member of the ASG franchise gym noted, “I sometimes measure my success with a scale. I have only lost four pounds in my recent efforts. But clothes are fitting better on me, so even though scale wasn’t moving much, my clothes look good on me, my legs are more toned. I routinely go for physicals to check on what is going on with me” (12 ASG). Another participant reported how her clothes and their fit often determine what to work on in the gym. “I judge myself based on how I look, and then, if I feel like I’m getting squishy or not fitting into my clothes, I feel like I need to do more cardio. If I went up in size, I’d work out more so I wouldn’t have to go up in size for good” (15 ASG).

And while clothes were frequently used to assess the success of a workout regime, many respondents describe the manner in which apparel served as a motivational tool.

*Clothes and motivation*

Interview respondents frequently reported that putting on workout gear was an important strategy for getting motivated to go to the gym and work out. “It would help if I brought my workout clothes to work and I would change at work, so I’d already be in my workout clothes. If I think about it too much, I don’t do a lot [of working out]. If I get into gym clothes that is 75%
of the battle. I’m already at least half committed” (4 SSG). Similarly, a private personal trainer in the ASG explained how her clothes assist her with workouts. “I always need to feel good in my outfit. Sometimes just putting on something that matches everywhere [I go], I feel like I am in my zone” (22 ASG).

Observations in the gyms in Tampa, revealed that the wardrobe of the typical female exerciser at the gym involves more than just the old-fashioned sweat suit. Twenty-first century workout apparel in these two gym includes, among other items, workout tops, leggings, shorts, socks, hair accessories, tennis shoes, braces or bandages, and a variety of technological fitness items such as a smart watch or a fitness tracker and earphones for the music that many exercisers, male and female, describe as essential for getting into “the zone.” As one TGS participant noted in an interview, “I just put on the gym clothes right away and then just do it. If I don’t do that, I usually won’t go” (8 SSG).

Significantly, both White and Black participants concurred in the importance of being appropriately attired and having an appropriate workout wardrobe. An African American respondent from ASG describes the manner in which her clothing serves as a barometer for how well her workouts are progressing: “How I look after. I fit into my clothes. When I don’t have to spend more money on my clothes, I am good to go. There is nothing like having to spend money for bigger clothes. I had to do it before” (16 ASG).

Clothing as both motivator and reward

As noted by a private personal trainer who uses clothes as both a motivator and reward, “I like workout clothes. So, for every girl, I feel like once you get a new pair of workout clothes, it gives you that feeling like I want to go to the gym because I look cute. It does a wonder. You
got new leggings. When I see the progress that I’ve made I want to go harder” (22 ASG).
Similarly, another TGS participant explained, “I think about clothes I have at home and if I work out hard this week, then maybe I can fit in them,” (15 ASG) and as noted by another colleague, “When I put on a pair of pants that I don’t fit in, it motivates me to go. I think, who cares just go, just do it, even if I’m tired” (6 SSG).

During the course of observations and conversations in gyms one of the most important facts of gym life is the tedium of some workout routines. One TGS participant in noting this challenge stated, “My schedule can be tedious at work sometimes. I still will most of the time force myself to go [to the gym] even if it’s just for a 30-minute workout. I talk myself into going and sometimes bribe myself with clothes and makeup. If I go to the gym, I deserve to buy myself something, even if it’s just a small item” (5 SSG).

“Me Time” versus working out with a partner

18 of 26 (69%) of the respondents from Part I of the study referred specifically to their time at the gym as “me-time,” that is, time that is devoted entirely to working alone in the sole pursuit of the individual exerciser’s goals and objectives. Respondents report that they may work out with personal trainers on occasion, but they generally do not choose to exercise with colleagues, family members, or friends. There is some “light sociability” that is observed as exercisers may greet and chat briefly with others who are also working out, but the majority of study participants reported a preference for working out solo. Fully 75% of respondents from SSG reported exercising alone as compared with 50% of respondents from ASG who report that they work out with a partner.
An ASG participant explained, “Even if my friends don’t work out, that’s ok. I don’t have a lot of friends that work out, surprisingly. My sister is athletic so we can thrive off each other, but I like going to the gym alone. It is for me” (17 ASG). A participant from ASG concurs, “I don’t mind working out with somebody, but I also like to work out by myself because I do high intensity stuff. I work out non-stop until I finish” (21 ASG). Such sentiments were not confined to SSG participants. As noted by a Cuban American bodybuilder and veteran exerciser from ASG,

Every now and then I’ll meet someone at the gym, but a lot of people couldn’t keep up. I know that is stupid and kind of rude. I never work out with my boyfriend…we have different goals. Working out all alone is what I prefer. But motivation for cardio, I like to do with people for that. But lifting, no, I like my music and like to be by myself (24 ASG).

Her story was typical of veteran exercisers who had to undergo a radical transformation of values and workout objectives as they got older. She reported that she was initially inspired by her “skinnier” friends to get fit. That motivation to look more like her friends turned into a love for exercise and a desire to keep it up. It became so part of her life, she reports, that she committed herself to teach people how to work out by becoming a personal trainer at ASG. She adds modestly that she has become an inspiration because she worked to achieve the skill and the motivation to fulfill her fitness goals. Although her initial inspiration to transform her body started with her friends, it is significant that she, like so many exercisers in the TGS, has evolved to a point that she does not willingly include them in her routine or speak of them as a requirement for her motivation.
Other reasons for working out alone included: not being on the same level of expertise with potential workout partners; having different fitness/body objectives; and not having a schedule that is open enough or flexible enough to accommodate a workout partner, despite the potential social and emotional support that a partner might provide. One participant from ASG mentioned that when she does cardio, “its fine to have a partner with you, even motivating, but when doing other types of workouts where you are on the floor sweating and have time constraints and have particular objectives, it isn’t really productive to have a workout partner” (13 ASG).

It was evident in my observations, that SSG and ASG are both built to offer opportunities for both socializing and engaging in solitary, “me- time” activities. However, despite using the facilities at ASG at all times from nights to late afternoons, and on both weekends and weekdays, it was also evident in my observations that while gym goers can be open and friendly to others, will make jokes, provide encouragement, debate and discuss the best form for a particular workout routine, deep philosophical discussions among exercisers were rarely observed. Simply put, women participants rarely reported going to the gym to socialize. The emphasis placed on engaging in a focused, productive workout means that “me-time” is the main priority, not making new friends that extend beyond the fitness facilities walls.

A 32-year old participant who reported having a very varied workout routine that includes dance, yoga, and a variety of other sports and who has been a member of the large franchise gym for more than 10 years, noted that she prefers to work out by herself. “I have friends in my life that say they want to work out, but they don’t end up doing it. The people in my everyday life are not as avid into working out. So actually, it is hard to work with them
because everyone wants to go out every day and that doesn’t help the lifestyle that I’m looking to have. They make it more difficult” (14 ASG).

Participants also reported that women who are inconsistent exercisers are potentially a serious distraction for the committed exerciser. In the gym during a workout, an inexperienced exerciser may lack the skill to engage in the specific routines that the veteran is there to complete. On the other hand, the less experienced exerciser could be intimidated by their friends’ capabilities or inspired by them. Working out with a buddy at first could be seen to be beneficial, but upon closer inspection it is clear that there are some outcomes that could be seen as negative.

An exerciser from SSG explained:

“I go to yoga with a friend. I try to do some sort of exercise together, but I prefer working out alone. People are not on the same wavelength and drag me down or do something completely different. It is also like my me time, so it is my selfish time to clear my head. Even when I go with my friend, but I don’t like when she talks so much, and she sometimes gives me anxiety before a [fitness] class” (5 SSG).

Focusing completely on training - as opposed to going to the gym to seek out a date or for taking photos of oneself to pretend like you are working out - was a frequently repeated sentiment among TGS exercisers. One participant at SSG explains her take on working out alone, “I get into my zone. I am the kind of person that likes to work out alone. I will have my headphones on and won’t realize if someone I know is near me. One hour can pass so quickly. I zone out without realizing it” (3 SSG).
Social media and exercise

At the onset of this study, I set out to understand, among others, the role of social influences (negative or positive) on the motivation to exercise and maintain a sustainable workout routine/practice. During the TGS’s 18-month duration (specifically, the period between 2017-2018), Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, SnapChat continued to evolve as integral components of 21st century communications media. With daily tweets generated by President Trump and countless newspaper headlines about Facebook and its role in the 2016 presidential election, social media became commonplace features of American life and culture. As of this writing, it is clear that almost anyone on planet Earth with a Smartphone would have an avenue to post photos or videos with accompanying text that has the potential to be viewed by millions of viewers.

Accordingly, one of the most important findings to emerge from the TGS was the manner in which a wide assortment of social media platforms has potentially replaced the workout buddy or partner. During the course of observations, more women were seen working out alone than with a partner or trainer and many of those women were seen using social media. Social media personalities and applications (apps) were frequently cited as motivational tools and resources to support the exerciser in her quest to achieve her goals and objectives. Social media (SM) were incorporated into a workout routine in a variety of ways. Media users were classified as “active users” if they not only sought to use SM but were, themselves, actively posting messages and images to a variety of SM sites. Passive users of SM were those who consulted media messages and images but did not seek to post such material on SM sites.

Both active and passive users reported that SM served as a source of motivation and support for their workout goals. Active users, for example, often reported posting before- and after- photos of having achieved a fitness goal as well as motivational messages and advice about
how to thrive and survive one’s workouts. Both active and passive participants cited the use of fitness apps and virtual fitness classes as critically significant ways for women to get motivated and supported to exercise. Additionally, some users reported using group text messaging as a method for building support for their efforts to become and remain physically active.

As noted earlier, this technological advancement has had a significant impact on fitness culture. That impact was evident in the observations I made and in comments by participants during interviews with them. An African American beginner exerciser from AGS explained how she fights against hesitations to go to the gym: “Sometimes I just don’t want to go. I look at my phone and scroll through Instagram and see others working out and think I need to go to the gym” (25 ASG).

Using social media for inspiration, motivation and for workout tips and resources was reported by the majority of the participants in both of the gym research sites. Many women reported following fitness figures for sources of inspiration, to have a model of someone whom they would like to look like or be like. Approximately one third of the informants reported that they posted images of themselves on Instagram or other online platforms. Their entries include details of their workout routines, before & after photos of themselves or of an exercise routine they have mastered, and motivational messages regarding exercise and fitness as well. A gym member describes the types of tips she gets on social media: “I think I read this on social media but buying new gym clothes has motivated me to go to the gym” (24 ASG).

An overarching theme that emerged from interviews and observations is that women are much more engaged with social media for motivation or fitness resources than on the input and advice from friends or work out partners. In general, exercisers reported overwhelmingly being more interested in working out by themselves rather than with a partner. Instagram messages
from such exercisers, therefore, are more likely to be focused on finding personal inspiration and motivation than seeking advice, counsel, succor, or support from family and friends.

A veteran exerciser in her late 20s from the ASG who had just recently become a private personal trainer, posted this statement on Instagram, for example, “If I can do it, anyone can do it. It takes physicality and mentality to get up every day to challenge yourself to be a better person” (22 ASG). This was said, despite the fact that she had only been working out and training seriously for a couple of years. She says, “I just tell myself hey, you need to go to the gym. You have people that are inspired by you. I tell myself, I gotta get this done. It is a habit. It takes 21 days to break a habit. If I go out of town and miss a week of working out, I feel miserable. Now I will get a guest pass now [for other gyms] to work out on my time” (22 ASG).

Choosing to follow a fitness icon (who is often someone lacking in the credentials or the certifications of a certified personal trainer) represents an important, emerging trend as elicited through interviews and observations of women at ASG and SSG. What matters in the selection of an icon to follow is often ‘the look,’ that is associated with popular social media figures. Participants have mentioned that looking at fitness figures makes them want to emulate the body and the workouts that they see. As one participant put it, “I want to get to that level” (19 ASG).

A Muslim, Cuban veteran exerciser participant from ASG provided a useful glimpse into the use of Instagram: “My sister took me to CrossFit, but Jaimie Eason, a bodybuilder has free workout routines. I did it for three months and that kept me going. That motivated me to keep going. I put my progress up on Instagram too” (24 ASG). Another participant from ASG described her involvement with social media and exercise. “I started watching videos and I found certain fitness models and public figures that I really became interested in on social media and now my social media is filled with it” (21 ASG).
**Athletic/sports background**

A history of playing sports was an important common background of participants with 50% of African Americans and 50% of White participants reporting such a history. Being a consistent exerciser was often described by participants as a function of having had an athletic background involving participating in team sports as a child or from having an active family who was a sports enthusiast, or for a few participants, having both. One participant noted, “I have been in sports my whole life. I played field hockey. My mom did too. (Without them) I don’t think I’d be working out as much” (15 ASG).

An African American ASG participant described being significantly influenced by her mother’s involvement in sport. “My parents always worked out. They started me and my sisters at a young age. I have a little workout room in the house. When I was young, I started working out with them. I think I would have still been working out, but I think I would have started later” (16 ASG).

Some women are at the gym training for a sport or competition. In most cases, participation of sports ended with graduation from high school or college. In a few cases, sports such as horse riding and beach volleyball were still pursued. Competitions were a frequently mentioned form of involvement in a sport. A handful of women of the TGS mentioned that—at the time of the interview—they were training for competitions such as bikini contests, or bodybuilding competitions, or related contests to assess the beauty of one’s physique. Several other women discussed previous involvement in competitions and a desire to train to enter another competition at some point in the future. All mentioned the importance of using the equipment in the gym to assist in their training.
Although a history of sports activity was an essential part of becoming active in the gym, not all women shared such a history; it is clear, however, that a history of sport does assist in giving women the confidence and the ability to utilize a workout facility efficiently and effectively. A participant from ASG explained the impact of her history with sports and working out.

“I always played soccer growing up. I played in high school and then in a women’s league after that. When I moved to Florida when I was 22, I stopped playing and started going to the gym more. My parents never went to the gym or my sisters. I am the only one in my family that goes. Having soccer in my background and not wanting to let myself go to a certain point [was the motivation] for the gym” (5 SSG).

**Having an influence**

During the course of interviews, 69% of participants detailed a variety of ways in which they were influenced to take up exercising and/or were influenced by others to become involved in fitness training as well. As one respondent explained it, “I have been working out from a very young age. Credit to my parents. Parents kept me and my 6 siblings active. Family was definitely an influence. All my siblings stay active as well” (7 ASG). An ASG exerciser noted similarly, “In college I put on some weight. I had a friend that was doing a 90-day challenge at Gold’s [gym]. She motivated me to be her workout partner. She was big on coming to the house and helping me make food and it was a big mentorship for me. I lost 15 pounds and got a personal trainer together. She caught me right when I got into college and put me on the right path” (8 SSG). With no exercise or sports background growing up, this 30-year old white exerciser from
SSG gave a lot of credit to her friend in college with pushing and assisting her with a workout routine and she refers to that experience as a way to keep her current routine.

By contrast, an African American participant cited a public figure, a famous singer, for motivation. “Beyoncé…when I think about what I want to look like. I want to be small like her and look like that in my clothes. I listen to a lot of her songs when I work out” (11 ASG). Significantly, having an inspiring idol or role model to look to for motivation was frequently mentioned by social media users as an important influence on their exercise programs. Following such personalities in social media and emulating their workout routines was frequently reported by TGS participants as a significant source of motivation to keep to their workout routines.

A total of 65% of women reported that they have worked to become a positive influence on others to workout. The majority of these exercisers expressed confidence that they had the skill and the ability to serve as a motivator or the mentor to others who are struggling to be healthy; to become physically active and to assist in helping to create the lifestyle changes to improve the health and wellbeing of others. It is possible that the veteran exercisers of this study and by extension, other veteran exercisers, might become important community resources for public health interventions designed to increase the participation of women in efforts to achieve their health and fitness goals.

Discipline and fun

Eighty percent of African Americans and similarly 81% of White interviewees from this study expressed that they felt that working out is fun. A young white female exerciser explained during an interview with her, how she attained what she described as a “balance” in her life by having such a consistent workout routine. “I want to eat whatever I want or drink whatever I
want and do whatever drugs whatever I want. I think everyone deserves to have the fun stuff too” (13 ASG). A Trinidadian ASG member concurred: “50/50 certain aspects I enjoy. Who doesn’t want to stay in bed and not do anything, but then I feel cranky, but then I feel better when I get outside? It doesn’t have to be super intense” (16 ASG). Toggling back and forth between enjoying the workout and not wanting to do it is a common battle for individuals looking to exercise regularly.

When a Black female beginner exerciser was asked if she enjoys/thinks exercise is fun, her response was consistent with those from other beginners: “I don’t hate it, don’t love it. I just wish I knew more, but that is the process. Learning different workouts, once I feel confident in what I’m doing, then I enjoy it. I love how I feel after. It is a good time. When you see the results, it is a cool thing” (10 ASG). Seeing the results in one’s body contours, becoming proficient and comfortable in the gym environment, using the range of exercise machines that are available in a particular location, and developing proficiency in the execution of a variety of exercises were cited almost universally by TGS participants as the key element that transforms the exhausting working into fun.

Many participants suggested in my interviews with them, that finding what they enjoy doing in the gym is the key to maintaining consistent progress and essential for the motivation to keep coming back for more. As noted in interviews with some veteran exercises, they were clear about why the gym needs to provide a variety of options to the user. An ASG veteran personal trainer noted pointedly: “Cardio is boring to me, so I’ll make new playlists of music or switch machines. I do online research during cardio to make time go by. Lifting weights gives me so much satisfaction that it is never boring. So, it is easy for me to do something I love and not too difficult to add the cardio on which I don’t like so much, but I’m already in workout mode so its
works” (18 ASG). The facility’s ability to facilitate “getting into workout mode” is rendered that much easier by having a wide range of workout possibilities available to the user.

**Indulging and working out**

Gym goers sometimes talked about being in the gym after having a night of overeating and excessive drinking. A common phrase, “I’m working it off” or some variation of this sentiment, was one that I heard on more than one occasion at the gym and during the course of an interview or survey. During one interview with a White nurse and member of SSG, she allowed that she and her “bestie” were big foodies and drinkers. She said that they can be bad influencers on each other. “Let’s go get some drinks and have some late-night Chinese after,” she explained that this was a likely activity that she and her friend would engage in together. She then expressed her enthusiasm for also enjoying physical activities. She said, “It keeps me honest to at least work off the junk” (2 SSG).

An African American social worker from ASG explained in an interview how when she traveled, that the hotel would have a decent gym. “Sometimes I’ll eat something bad, but at least I can do something about it” (4 ASG). She described how she does not want to fall too far behind when being away from her normal routine because she has been in that situation before and it is hard to get back into the workouts after even just a couple of weeks.

A young white mother of two from ASG explained the difficulty sometimes in eating well with her two little ones. “Sometimes it’s hard to plan everything well and every now and then I will eat fast food with my kids. The next day, I try to work harder at the gym to make up for what I ate at Arby’s or Wendy’s” (15 ASG).
**Self-Talk**

Self-talk refers to “the internal dialogue” that exercisers use to maintain their motivation and the level of intensity needed to complete a workout routine. Self-talk is a common feature of extended difficult workouts. Through self-talk, the exerciser becomes his or her personal coach and mentor. In that role, self-talk is repeating encouraging messages to continue and to not quit, as if a real coach or motivator was present in the facility and motivating the exerciser to stay with the program. Self-talk was referenced in interviews as one of the strategies that women participants used for keeping up with workouts at the gym. When asked to list some of the simple, general phrases women used for self-motivation, examples such as, “You will feel better after,” or “Keep at it, don’t stop now,” or, “Only a few more left,” were cited.

One veteran exerciser and participant gave the following examples of self-talk during the course of an interview with her:

> “Well, there’s the competition thing…I still have four more pounds to lose so thinking about that helps. I say to myself, ‘I don’t have anything else going on today, why don’t I do 20 more min of cardio or something like that?’….Do something instead of doing nothing….I can have a fudge pop when I get home if I do an extra 20 minutes….’” Or, “Is it worth eating this cookie that is worth 250 calories…. Is it worth 25 min on the elliptical” (20 ASG)?

Participants also described using mind games to increase motivation to work out as well to assist in enduring the pain and discomfort that vigorous workouts almost inevitably produce. In these instances, the past event – typically involving a task or challenge that was successful – was perceived as being just as, if not more difficult, than the exercise being attempted.
An SSG member who is also a member of the National Guard detailed how she engages in mind games in order to motivate herself to go to the gym and work out. “I envision events that I can see taking place…. wanting to be ready for those….In the military there are a lot of physical tests, so I want to make sure I do very well with those. I want to feel confident before walking into a physical test. I also think to myself you’ve done harder than this. This is nothing compared to X. Just suck it up buttercup” (4 SSG). Thinking about previous events or getting ready for a competition or some event or activity was often described as a resource that one can use to help focus in on the end goals.

A personal trainer and power lifter described her routine: “Sometimes I have to break things down, so, say I have 10 exercises I have to do, I’ll tell myself just focus on the first one if you want to quit after that quit….next thing, same thing….Don’t focus on the whole mile you have to go…. focus on first goal” (23 ASG). One SSG member revealed during an interview, that it took time for her to build up a habit of exercise, but the result was that she developed a sustainable set of habits and routines. “I love being sore now. It took me five years to enjoy working out” (7 SSG). The appendix provides a list of participant’s self-talk.

Results part I summary

The study was designed to serve, in part, as an extension of Roberta Sassatelli’s (2010) ethnographic research in gyms. The study aims were identified and a description of the two gyms that served as TGS study sites was provided. Detailed observations of the activities in both facilities was described. The positionality of the researcher was reviewed along with a series of observations conducted in each gym facility. The shifting status of women in gyms, once thought to be the province of men, was also discussed. It was noted that there was no evidence that either
of the two gyms contained “gendered spaces” that served to segregate or isolate women from men.

A description of the women who were recruited to be research participants was provided as well as a description of their reasons for choosing to join and workout in the facilities where they were interviewed. Participants reported having been a member of their gym for at least six months. They reported working out consistently for at least 1 year, twice a week at minimum. The majority of the sample had been working out for more than five years. A comparison of African American exercisers was presented with minor differences between the groups.

Goals and objectives of women exercisers from the TGS were highlighted. Health and appearance goals were related and frequently cited reasons for being in the gym. The tension that exists between participants’ pursuit of appearance as opposed to health-related workout goals was presented in interviews as well. The strategies that women exercisers pursue to maintain and persist in their workouts were subsequently presented. A discussion on the surprising influence of clothing on fitness routines was provided. The fact that women reported being much more concerned with the pursuit of “me-time” in the gym than working out with others was the preferred way to be in the gym. The influence that social media now have on women exercisers in and outside the gym as sources of motivation as well as a primary source of information on workout techniques was described as an important, developing trend in the fitness industry.

A discussion of emerging themes concludes the overview of the findings from Part I. Having a sports background was identified as an important feature for most women exercisers with being able to be consistent with a workout regimen. Having an influence on others and others having an influence on women exercisers was also debated to have a strong significance
on women and their motivations to continue exercising. Lastly, examples of self-talk and related strategies for keeping up the motivation for exercise were provided.

**Results Part II**

**Scale Creation**

There were seven themes that emerged from the analysis of Part I for which a total of 77 statements were created. The seven themes were organized into clusters that were included in the survey: (1) the key components of a good gym [Gym =10 items]; 2) the key components of a good workout [Workout= 12 items]; 3) strategies to keep motivation [Motivation= 18 items]; 4) key statements representing the importance of being a women in the gym [Women in Gym= 6 items]; 5) circumstances that would tempt me to drop out [Dropout=12 items]; 6) self-talk statements that I might use to keep me working out [Self-talk= 7 items] and 7) tips about working out that are worth sharing with others [Tip=8 items]. Each statement was read aloud, and respondents were only permitted to respond, “I agree” or “I disagree” or “yes” or “no”. Responses were recorded on an iPhone and uploaded to an Excel file for analysis.

A binomial analysis was used to assess shared answers/agreement about fitness and exercise concepts in gyms. “Because items with a 50:50 (50% yes and 50% no) split cannot be classified as either yes or no, a binomial test can be used to identify items significantly different from a 50:50 split” (Weller et al. 1993, 115). As modeled after Weller et al (1993) a threshold of 31:68 was used for this sample (n=77) to assess/measure whether responses to survey items are classified as “yes/agree” or “no/disagree.” For example, in this study, 76% of Black women responded “agree” and 79% of White women responded “agree” to the survey item, “Watching others work out motivates me to work out.” Therefore, this item can be classified as true across
both race/ethnic groups because responses rates are both more than 68% for both groups. On the other hand, when asked if one of the ways to stay motivated is because of the encouragement of friends to continue to exercise, only a shared answer amongst Whites is classified (at 71% “yes/agreed”) but not for Blacks because (only 60% answered “yes/agree”). Response rates in between 32% and 67% are classified as “/-neither yes nor no”.

**Results**

As shown in Table 2.1, five out of seven clusters generated shared answers (“yes/agree” or “no/disagree”) of two-thirds or more of the survey items within each cluster amongst Blacks and Whites. Statements describing tips an exerciser might share with someone just beginning an exercise program (tip items) generated unanimous (100%) agreement by Blacks as well as White survey respondents. Statements about what a good gym should feature (gym items) had agreement of 80% of the items in that cluster. In addition, 83% of statements about being a woman in the gym (women/gym items) had shared responses amongst Black and White women. Finally, more than two-thirds (67%) of the what constitutes a good workout cluster (workout items), had shared responses amongst Black and White respondents.

**Table 2.1. Clusters With 67% or More of Survey Items with Shared Answers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th># Agree/Disagree # Items</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tips Items</td>
<td>(8/8)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym Items</td>
<td>(8/10)</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workout Items</td>
<td>(8/12)</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women/Gym Items</td>
<td>(5/6)</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropout/Gym Items*</td>
<td>(5/6)</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*proportion of disagree responses*
Patterns of agreement and disagreement within each cluster of statements presented a number of contrasts. Statements about what a good gym should have (as shown in Table 3.1), for example, has such contrasts. Substantial levels of agreement (more than 68% of women responded “no/disagree”) to the survey item were reported for the statement “I feel the need to wear trendy outfits when working out” as well as with the notion that “membership fees for the gym were important” for working out.

As shown in Table 3.1 (page 104), respondents overwhelmingly agreed that “yes/agree” “The gym should be close to my home or work” and overwhelmingly responded “no/disagree” to the statement, “The gym’s membership fee is the only reason for my motivation to workout” In general, the gym’s variety of equipment, proximity to home or work and being ok with wearing “unfashionable” clothes to the gym represented some of the most important features of the gym with highest concurrence rate of agreement for those survey items in the Gym cluster.

**Table 3. 1. Gym Features**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed-YES features</th>
<th>Agreed-NOT features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working out in the gym is more important to me than working out at home.</td>
<td>I feel like I have to wear trendy outfits to the gym or I’m embarrassed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym should be close to my home or my work.</td>
<td>The gym’s membership fee is the only reason for my motivation to workout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching others work out motivates me to work out.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym layout and appearance are important for the quality of my workout.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym’s variety of machines are important to my workout.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am OK with wearing unfashionable clothes to the gym.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondent asked: For me...*
Table 3. 2. The Gym Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The gym is the only convenient place for me to work out.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym has staff who are important for a good workout.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working out in the gym is more important to me than working out at home.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym should be close to my home or my work.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I have to wear trendy outfits to the gym or I’m embarrassed.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching others work out motivates me to work out.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym layout and appearance are important for the quality of my workout.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym’s variety of machines are important to my workout.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gym’s membership fee is the only reason for my motivation to workout.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am OK with wearing unfashionable clothes to the gym.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Y = agreement with the statement
*N = disagreement with the statement
*- = no consensus

When responding to statements about the content of a good workout (Table 4.1, page 106), respondents endorsed statements about the type of workout that should be included (e.g. doing a variety of cardiovascular exercises, muscle-strengthening exercises, stretching exercises) and about outcomes that should be experienced if the workout was good (e.g. make it possible to have a good meal, should make you experience a burn, make it possible to be active with friends and are good because it gets me out of the house). With highest levels of agreement (“yes/agreed”) for the importance of muscle strengthening workouts for burning fat, using the floor for stretching and other exercises and the fact that workouts are important so that one can be fit to do active stuff with friends or family, had equal levels of agreement for Blacks and for Whites.

Blacks and Whites did not have agreement, however, with two statements within the workout cluster (Table 4.2, page 106). Blacks endorsed the notion that one should be rewarded for pushing oneself during a workout, but Whites were somewhat less convinced. By contrast, Whites largely shared a response of “no/disagree,” with the statement that workouts need to be
done daily in order to see benefits while Blacks had no agreement either direction (classified as “-/neither yes nor no”).

**Table 4.1. Workout Features**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed-YES features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should have a lot of variety in what you do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should include cardiovascular exercises to ensure weight loss or maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should include muscle strengthening workouts for burning fat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should include use of floor spaces to stretch or do other exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are important so that I can be fit to do active stuff with friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should make you experience the burn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow you to eat a good meal when done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are good so I can just get out of the house.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Respondent asked: Workouts…)*

**Table 4.2. Workout Questions with No Shared Answer**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Should be rewarded when I push myself hard.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Need to be done every day in order to see benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Respondent asked: Workouts…)*

*Y = agreement with the statement*

*N = disagreement with the statement*

*- = neither yes nor no*

**Table 4.3. Workout Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Should have a lot of variety in what you do.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Are best when they leave you sore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Should be rewarded when I push myself hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Need to be done every day in order to see benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Should include cardiovascular exercises to ensure weight loss or maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Should include muscle strengthening workouts for burning fat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Should include use of floor spaces to stretch or do other exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Are important so that I can be fit to do active stuff with friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Should make you experience the burn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Allow you to eat a good meal when done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Require someone spotting me for the most challenging workouts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Are good so I can just get out of the house.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Respondent asked: Workouts…)*

*Y = agreement with the statement*

*N = disagreement with the statement*

*- = neither yes nor no*
Blacks and Whites shared answers with five of six statements describing the place of women in the gym (Table 5.1). There were identical levels (for Blacks and Whites) of agreement (“yes/agree”) with the statement that “… being in the gym will make me more attractive” and identical levels of shared, “no/disagree” responses (for Blacks and Whites) with the statement “…weight training will make me look less feminine” Both groups substantially endorsed the notion, “I feel that a gym is a place where I belong” as well as the statement “I like being in a gym-space that men once dominated.”

**Table 5.1. Being a Woman in the Gym**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed-YES features</th>
<th>Agreed- NOT features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that being in a gym will make me more attractive.</td>
<td>I worry that weight training will make me look less feminine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The presence of other women in the gym encourages me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that a gym is a place where I belong.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like being in a gym-space that men once dominated.</td>
<td>(Respondent asked: As a woman…)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.2. Being a Woman Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: As a woman…)  

Y = agreement with the statement  
N = disagreement with the statement  
- = neither yes nor no

The 18 statements about one’s motivation to be in the gym generated 11 statements with a shared agreement among both Black and White respondents. The statement “One of the ways I
stay motivated to exercise is to focus on how I feel after a workout” reported the highest level of agreement among Whites and among Blacks. The statement “one of the ways I stay motivated is to see my clothes fitting better on me” had high agreement (“yes/agree”) as well, for both Blacks and Whites. Similarly, “one of the ways I stay motivated to workout is to care more about how fit I am than about my weight,” had equal rates of agree responses (“yes/agree”) for both races/ethnic categories (Table 6.1).

By contrast, Blacks and Whites both had shared answers of “no/disagree” with the notion that they remain motivated to exercise because they are in love with someone or because they wanted “to make my ex regret that we broke up.” Both groups shared a response of “no/disagree” with the notion that one remains motivated to work out “by doing the same workout all the time” (Table 6.1), but the remaining seven statements failed to generate 68% or more of shared responses on the part of Black and White women (Table 6.2).
Table 6.1. Motivational Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed-YES strategies</th>
<th>Agreed NOT strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To focus on how I feel after a workout.</td>
<td>Because I am in love with someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of how I look in old and or new photos of myself.</td>
<td>Because I want to make my ex regret that we broke up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To recall how I feel when I wasn't in my ideal form (i.e. chubby or too thin or no muscle).</td>
<td>By doing the same workout all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By putting on my athletic wear.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see my clothes fitting better on me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To care more about how fit I am than about my weight.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: One of the ways I stay motivated to exercise is...)

Table 6.2. Motivation Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: One of the ways I stay motivated to exercise is...)  
Y = agreement with the statement  
N = disagreement with the statement  
- = neither yes nor no

As shown in Table 7.1, when statements about strategies to avoid the temptation to drop out were examined, 67% of the items in this category were agreed to have the answer of
“no/disagree” among Black and White exercisers. None of the 12 statements generated 68% or more “yes/agree” responses among either Blacks or Whites representing the notion that both groups are not tempted to drop out by any of the circumstances in which the “temptation to drop out” statements describe. The statements with the highest levels of shared responses of “no/disagree,” among Black and White women, were when asked if they were tempted to drop out “…if they can only workout a couple of days a week,” when asked if they would be tempted to drop out “…when there is a lack of a personal trainer to hold me accountable”. Finally, when asked if they are “tempted to drop out, when the scale shows I made little progress” (Table 7.2).

Table 7.1. Temptations to Drop Out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed-NOT features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because it’s boring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I can only workout a couple of days a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I get too busy to find the time to come to the gym to work out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When there is a lack of a trainer to hold me accountable for my workouts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I am really stressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I am trying a new workout that is really hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the scale shows I made little progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the gym is a luxury that costs a lot of money.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: I am tempted to drop out...)

Table 7.2. Temptation to Drop Out Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Because it’s boring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>When I have to bribe myself in order to get the energy to come work out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>If I can only workout a couple of days a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>When I get too busy to find the time to come to the gym to work out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>When there is a lack of real progress in my workouts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>When there is a lack of music to help me fight the boredom of working out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>When there is a lack of a trainer to hold me accountable for my workouts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>When I am really stressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>When I am trying a new workout that is really hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>When I am very sore from a previous workout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>When the scale shows I made little progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Because the gym is a luxury that costs a lot of money.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: One of the ways I stay motivated to exercise is...)

Y = agreement with the statement
N = disagreement with the statement
- = neither yes nor no
Self-talk expressions varied in their levels of shared agree responses among Black and White survey respondents with five of 11 statements in this cluster reporting more than 68% levels of shared “yes/agree” responses among both groups (Table 8.1). Both groups overwhelmingly concurred in their use of their expression “almost there!” The self-talk statement, “Prove them Wrong!” had levels that represented agreement of (“no/disagree”) among Blacks, but no clear answer classified as “-/neither yes nor no” of a shared answer for Whites. The self-talk statement “my ex should regret that we broke up!” is another example when there was no shared response amongst Whites (“-/neither yes nor no”) and by contrast, a pattern of agreement (“no/disagree”) among Blacks, representing no shared pattern of agreement between the two groups (Table 8.2).

**Table 8.1. Self-Talk with Agreed Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed – YES self-talk</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost there…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You really CAN do this.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C’mon…you did this once, you can do it again.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just do it!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I can do that, I can do this!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Respondent asked: Is this statement similar to something you say to yourself to motivate you to complete your workout?)*

**Table 8.2. Self-Talk with No Shared Answer**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>- Prove them WRONG!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>- I want my ex to regret that we broke up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Respondent asked: Is this statement similar to something you say to yourself to motivate you to complete your workout?)*

*Y = agreement with the statement*

*N = disagreement with the statement*

*- = neither yes nor no*
Table 8.3. Self-Talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: Is this statement similar to something you say to yourself to motivate you to complete your workout?)

Y = agreement with the statement
N = disagreement with the statement
- = neither yes nor no

Finally, 100% of tips one would give a new exerciser had shared agreement among both Blacks and Whites. The statement “Do it for yourself” was the only statement among the total 77 with 100% agree responses among both groups. The statement “You will feel like crap for a little while, but one day you will feel incredible after exercising,” reported the lowest rates of agreements among both groups within the “tips about working out” cluster. (Table 9.1 & Table 9.2)

Table 9.1. Tips About Working Out with Agreed Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreed -YES tips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being realistic with your goals is important to maintenance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The habit of working out frequently is slowly built up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will feel like crap for a little while but one day you will feel incredible after exercising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t compare yourself to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do it for yourself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in a variety of workouts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take rest days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward yourself for achieving a fitness/health goal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: Would you offer this tip about working out to someone else?)
Table 9.2. Tips About Working Out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Respondent asked: Would you offer this tip about working out to someone else?)

Y = agreement with the statement
N = disagreement with the statement
- = neither yes nor no

 Instances of No Clear Shared Response Amongst Blacks and Whites

The me-time themes cited in Part I and Part II of the study are especially pronounced among Black women. In survey responses a number of the issues that generated shared answers of “yes/agree” or “no/disagree” from one group, but, no clear shared response amongst the other group, were those that suggested the influence of me-time thinking, on the attitudes that women, especially Black women subscribe to about working out. For example, the statement “I am motivated by looking at social media starts to inspire me” generated a “no/disagree” response from Black women and a lack of shared response by White women. Where White women said “yes/agree” to “One way I stay motivated is by encouragement of friends or family,” Blacks did not share this response.

Statements about what are the features that constitutes a good workout that did not produce shared response amongst Black and White women were “Workouts should be rewarded when I push myself hard,” which Blacks had a response of “yes/agree” and Whites had no clear shared answer. “Workouts need to be done every day in order to see benefits,” generated no clear answer amongst Blacks and a “no/disagree” amongst Whites. Here, it seems that the appropriate
or desired level of intensity levels of working out in terms of frequency and reward or not, are not shared amongst Whites and Blacks in this study. Similarly, in the Temptation to dropout cluster, the statement, “I might be tempted to drop out when I am sore from a previous workout,” received a “no/disagree” from Blacks in this study and no clear answer from the White category.

Self-talk messages received two different responses out of the 11 self-talk messages in this cluster. Both statements that received “no/disagree” responses from Blacks had no clear answer amongst Whites. These statements were “I want my ex to regret that we broke up” and “prove them wrong”.

**Results Part II Summary**

Notably, the analysis revealed only minor differences in the belief and values of Black and White female exercisers about their fitness experiences. Findings suggest that there is a high degree of concurrence in their attitudes towards the following categories highlighted in Table 1; the key components of a good gym [Gym items], the key components of a good workout [Workout items], key statements representing the importance of being a women in the gym [Women in the Gym items], tips about working out that are worth sharing with others [Tip items] and circumstances that would tempt me to drop out [Dropout items]. Most notably, the Tips about working out cluster, had a shared response of “yes/agree” with all eight items within the cluster. Secondly, 83% of the statements about being a woman in the gym had shared answers and 80% of statements about the key components of a good gym had shared answers.

The categories that had the least amount of shared answers were self-talk and motivational strategies, with respectively only 46% and 61% of survey items having shared answers within those clusters. Consistent with observations and with the data analysis of
interview findings about me-time is the fact that these two clusters of responses generated the least degree of concurrence, which suggests that those items are not part of shared gym/fitness knowledge or beliefs. In addition, it should be noted that the one statement that the entire sample of 77 women gym goers agreed, “yes/agree” to was a tip worth sharing with someone else: “do it for yourself.” Me-time it should be recalled, refers to the individual exerciser’s commitment to use the gym as the ultimate expression of personalized satisfaction with the work being done to perfect the body/themselves. In other words, self-talk messages and motivational elements/strategies are ones that can be quite personal.

Further investigation into other elements of the shared beliefs of exercisers should be an essential step to understanding the structure and content of gym culture. Further studies and ethnographic inquiries of gyms, workout spaces, and fitness facilities are certainly warranted. Comparison studies of gym-dropouts should be undertaken, using similar methodologies to understand what the shared beliefs and perspectives of the majority of people in the US who drop-out of gym memberships and workout routines quite quickly after initially getting started and or joining a gym.

**Endnotes**

1See appendix 3-5 for interview guide, questionnaire, and all questionnaire data
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

The study was a mixed method exploration of gym culture guided by the ethnographic methods used by Bolin and Granskog 2003. The study also included a survey of Black and White exercisers who were asked to register their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about elements of gym culture to assess what is the shared knowledge of gym and fitness culture amongst this sample.

Rojas, for example, notes that there exists an “embodied knowledge” in exercising that transforms the individual exerciser. As he states, “First, the research process starts from the empirical and not from theory” (Rojas 2015, 202). Being in it, and not simply observing it, has provided me with a series of insights about the experience of women in gyms and the manner in which we can learn from their efforts as we struggle as a nation to overcome the crisis created by our national levels of sedentary behavior and obesity.

Because the study examined women who were almost all veteran exercisers – that is, exercisers who have a history of working out regularly for five years or more – the goal was to identify how they have succeeded in their efforts. An analysis of their success will have the potential, hopefully, to assist other women to achieve similar goals and objectives.
An Anthropological View of The Body, Fitness and Fitness Culture

Anthropologists have long been intrigued by the body and ways in which to frame its significance in human culture (Scheper Hughes and Lock 1987; Csordas 1990; Wolputte 2004; Rojas 2015). Of particular significance are the ways in which culture and society are embodied (Foucault 1975; Rojas 2015) and are influenced by contemporary social forces, most notably: consumption and consumerism (Graeber 2011; Meneley 2018). Consumerism provides unparalleled access to food and this unparalleled access results in obesity. “Like fat on the body, once a prestigious sign of affluence which now signals quite the opposite, excessive consumerism, so mocked by Veblen as a sign of the nouveau riche, now indicates a lower-class position – and it is increasingly medicalized” (Meneley 2018, 118). The paradox is that consumerism encompasses both the problem (eating is the quintessential expression if not a definition of consumption) and the solution (being a fitness consumer whose time in the gym is devoted to working off the excesses of consumption). This paradox is embodied during the winter holidays when the excess consumption of substantial quantities of food results in a New Year’s resolution to join a gym to “work it off and get thin again.” (From bodybuilding.com, 2019: https://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/2013-100k-transformation-contest-press-release.html)

The problem with fat on the body helps explain the rise in fitness and gym culture as a response to the ever-present pressure to overeat and develop body fat (Trainer et al. 2015). What is created is a feedback loop in which system outputs can become system inputs, specifically, overeating feeds the need to be in the gym, and being in the gym enables one to overconsume, conscious of the fact that excess calories can also be worked off.

This feedback loop operates on multiple platforms. It operates on the individual level, with the pressures to go in the gym being fed by the excess consumption of calories, and it
operates at the level of the fitness industry, which encourages the consumption of fitness services in response to the excess consumption of calories at the population level.

The response, as pointed out by Reischer and Koo (2004), has become the quest for the body beautiful, and the body beautiful becomes the site of human agency to create that body. The gym, as pointed out by Rojas, thus becomes an essential and significant location for individual agency to transform the body.

**Significance of Racial/Ethnic Differences in Study Findings**

One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study concerned the place of women in gyms. One of the most frequently reported findings from earlier studies of women exercisers describes gyms as ‘gendered spaces’ that women struggled to enter comfortably (Bolin and Granskog 2003; Dworkin 2003). Coen, Rosenberg and Davidson (2018) observed, “Gyms are common places to engage in physical activity, but they may also potentially reinforce and routinize gender differences. Evidence points to the significance of gendered factors in shaping gym-related behavior and opportunities” (30). Significantly, participants in Part I of this study did not describe gyms as having such gendered spaces and survey responses from Part II overwhelmingly affirmed statements such as “I feel that a gym is a place where I belong” and “I like being in a gym-space that men once dominated.”

This study was conducted at a time when differences between Blacks and Whites with respect in exercising and in using exercise facilities have received a great deal of attention (Eyler et al. 1998; Whitt-Glover et al. 2007; Baruth et al. 2013; Versey 2014; Greaney et al. 2017; McCoy et al. 2017; Whitt-Glover et al. 2017; DeVito et al. 2018). These studies have documented significant differences in the desire to engage in physical fitness activities, the levels
of such activity with which women are engaged, and in the persistence of women in such endeavors. However, significantly, qualitative interviews in Part I of this study and findings from survey data collected for from Part II failed to detect major differences in how Black and White women conduct their workouts. Expected differences in their reported use of these facilities or in their perceptions of how they would be received in gym settings did not materialize. Black women did not report in qualitative interviews that they perceived themselves to be somehow set apart from Whites using the gym facilities. There were no reports of feeling shunned or avoided, nor were there complaints that they suffered unequal treatment or that they did not feel comfortable in the gym. There were also no major differences in women’s objectives or strategies to remain active when probed (in Part I: interviews) and surveyed (in Part II: survey) about a variety of elements of fitness and gym culture.

These unexpected findings may be partially explained by the demographic make-up of gym members in the US, particularly among both Black and White members of the ASG franchise. Members pay premium prices for their membership there and the participants in this study were upper-middle class in their education and income, characteristics that they share with the average fitness club member (IBIS 2018 http://clients1.ibisworld.com/reports/us/industry/default.aspx?entid=1655). It is quite possible that the most important characteristic of women in the study is, therefore, their social class, not their race. As members of the same economic class, it is quite possible that class similarities - not racial differences - best explain the findings from this study.

Secondly, women in this study repeatedly made it clear in qualitative interviews that exercise is a solitary activity that is conducted away from family, friends, and life partners. Although women acknowledge that working out with others – including a significant other –
does occur, they also described workouts as “me-time,” that is, time that is spent alone, apart from others, and in the dedicated pursuit of workout goals and objectives. Such a viewpoint is one that privileges solitary activity with little attention paid to the distractions created by other exercisers or by the myriad other activities that are taking place in the gym space. Focusing on oneself, tuning people out with earphones and looking at one’s cell phone for forms of entertainment or for fitness motivational resources on social media platforms is common.

There were only a few differences in how Black and White women responded to the 77 items in the TGS survey. The me-time themes cited in Part I and Part II of the study are especially pronounced among Black women. In survey responses a number of the issues that generated shared answers of “yes/agree” or “no/disagree” from one group, but, no clear shared response amongst the other group, were those that suggested the influence of me-time thinking, on the attitudes that women, especially Black women subscribe to about working out. For example, the statement “I am motivated by looking at social media stars to inspire me” generated a “no/disagree” response from Black women and a lack of shared response by White women. Where White women said “yes/agree” to “One way I stay motivated is by encouragement of friends or family,” Blacks did not share this response. This might suggest that Black women exercisers from this study are not as influenced, as a group, by others, be it friends, family or social media fitness figures. Similarly, based on a study with young Black girls, they do not generally look at celebrities for role models of diet and exercise routines because they do not perceive those women such as Oprah Winfrey and Toni Braxton to represent or share the same daily realities that they do (Boyington et al. 2008). One participant from the study by Boyington et al. describes White women’s values: “I guess the white girls are raised to be [that way].”;}
“[White girls] care about what they look like. They care about what people think. Like if they are too skinny they’ll go home and cry. They have low self-esteem” (Boyington et al. 2008, 5).

Statements about what are the features that constitutes a good workout that did not produce shared response amongst Black and White women were “Workouts should be rewarded when I push myself hard,” which Blacks had a response of “yes/agree” and Whites had no clear shared answer. “Workouts need to be done every day in order to see benefits,” generated no clear answer amongst Blacks and a “no/disagree” amongst Whites. Here, it seems that the appropriate or desired level of intensity levels of working out are not shared amongst Whites and Blacks in this study. Similarly, in the Temptation to dropout cluster, the statement, “I might be tempted to drop out when I am sore from a previous workout,” received a “no/disagree” from Blacks in this study and no clear answer from the White category. Again, intensity as a theme/element may be drawn from the responses to these survey statements and may suggest different values or influencers for Black and White women.

Self-talk messages received two different responses out of the 11 self-talk messages in this cluster. Both statements that received “no/disagree” responses from Blacks had no clear answer amongst Whites may represent and fall in line with a running theme in this study about working on oneself (“me-time”) and also not caring (as much as White exercisers) about other people’s perceptions/opinions in regard to them being at the gym and working out. These statements were “I want my ex to regret that we broke up” and “Prove them wrong”.

The fact that all women in the study are members of the same gym(s) and who might share a similar SES can explain how Black women in the gym are more alike to White women in the gym than to other Black women who are not present at the gym. Black women in the gym are more culturally isolated. They do not share, or at least have overcome, primary concerns that
often hinder other Black women from being in the gym consistently. As noted by Boyington in her research, messing up hair and nails from getting sweaty are seen as barriers for Black women (Boyington et al. 2008). The time and money necessary to upkeep hair and nails apparently keeps some Black women away from exercise and the gym. In addition, having a bigger body is more widely accepted amongst African American women than it is with White women (Kumanyika et al. 1993). Here again, with more than 60% of the statements on the survey producing very similar patterns of agreement and disagreement among Black and Whites, the assertion that there were few, if any, important differences in the survey responses of these two groups is supported by the data.

And as noted in my observations of the franchise gym, the atmosphere that permeates that setting is one that is overtly welcoming and diverse. The multiethnic feel of that gym would impress any person seeking to exercise in a setting where the race and ethnicity of the exerciser are of little or no importance. The diverse images of men and women of different racial/ethnic backgrounds in the gym support an environment that strives to be inclusive.

Nonetheless there are a variety of factors that set the women in this study apart from other women who seek to become regular exercisers in gyms such as ASG. One-half of the women who were interviewed in Part I of this study had a history of engagement in sports. An African American study participant during the interview noted, “My parents always worked out. They started me and my sisters at a young age. I have a little workout room in the house. When I was young, I started working out with them. I think I would have still been working out, but I think I would have started later” (5 ASG). Having developed both the taste and the ability to work out at a relatively young age, her experiences as a young woman instilled in her habits that have continued into her adult years. Those women whom I interviewed who had been engaged in
competitive sports often cited a history of sports competition that had a significant influence on their adult exercise habits.

**Importance of Starting Young**

The experience of adult exercisers in the study who began being physically active in sports as children is worthy of careful note. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has historically had a significant level of programming directed at ending the nation’s obesity crisis and it has consistently recommended that obesity prevention begin with youth. In the introduction to their report, “F as in Fat” (Levi et al. 2013), the authors note, “If we fail to reverse our nation’s obesity epidemic, the current generation of young people may be the first in American history to live sicker and die younger than their parents’ generation” (Levi et al 2013, 3). If the history of exercisers in this study can serve as an example, national efforts to engage children in sports to facilitate their becoming physically active as adults should be supported.

**The Role of the Fitness Industry**

The fitness industry is poised to play a part in this effort. A report published by Club Industry, “America’s Obesity Crisis and the Fitness Industry’s Role in Resolving It,” contains an open plea to the industry’s leaders to focus on ways in which fitness centers can become relevant, critical actors in the battle against this problem.

Our hope is that each of you will look more closely at what you are doing to make a difference in your community. At the risk of sounding callous, the obesity crisis is an opportunity for you. Finding ways to deliver results for people – whether you are a commercial club operator, a non-profit, a university rec center, a parks
and rec facility or a medical wellness facility – will make you relevant. And relevance gives you a future. It also changes the future for this country. It’s a bit of a patriotic act. Or you could call in a humanitarian act. Or you could call it good business. It’s all the same thing (Club Industry 2018, 4).

Findings from the study can play a role in assisting the industry to make such a difference. The report from Club Industry (2018) provides an extensive description of the obesity and sedentary crisis in the US and its impact, most notably, on underserved populations, specifically, those in poor communities of color. It notes that the barriers that prevent such community members from using fitness facilities can and should be overcome. Many of the findings from this study may assist in such an effort, particularly given the fact that race/ethnicity was not observed to be a factor in the engagement of African American women study participants in full exercise programs at the Active Style Gym. A description of the factors that seem to have a positive impact on the participation of veteran women exercisers in such facilities, irrespective of their race, follows.

For example, fitness facilities such as the Active Style Gym have made good use of images and advertising to appeal to a diverse population of exercisers, especially women. However, as noted by Cohen (2018), one of the contributors to Club Industry’s report, the majority of such advertising is directed at the fit. She writes, “The fitness society in particular is welcoming to the unfit. But if these are the people who need our services the most, why aren’t we serving them” (Cohen 2018, 4)?

The presence of racially and ethnically diverse populations at the ASG does suggest that the fear of racist treatment may not be a factor in the participation of African American women exercisers, particularly the women in this study. The fact that almost none of the interviewees in
Part I of this study mentioned race as a factor in their participation in workouts and that there were virtually no differences in the responses of African American survey participants as compared to their White counterparts in this study suggests that an important first step towards reducing some of the barriers to using fitness facilities in the quest for health and physical fitness has been taken. The only mention by one exerciser from Part I of the study suggested that coming from an African American family with no background in sports made it harder for her to pick up a new behavior later in life.

The extensive literature on the lack of participation of Black women in exercise and physical activity suggests that despite the need to develop healthy behaviors in nutrition and in exercise, Black women are conspicuously absent in fitness centers and in interventions designed to promote good physical and nutritional health (Wilson-Frederick et al. 2014; Greaney et al. 2017). In an integrative review of the literature on barriers to physical activity among African American women, Joseph et al. (2015) note that at the level of the community environment, significant barriers include a lack of local facilities for exercising and a lack of African American women as physical activity role models. Because more than 68% of survey participants in this study agreed with the statements (demonstrating a shared group answer), “The gym should be close to my home or work,” and, “Watching others work out motivates me to work out,” creating fitness programs in convenient locations and ensuring that participants are constantly surrounded by physically active role models has significant potential to reduce some of the barriers that prevent Black women from exercising in greater numbers. In addition, the majority of the sample from Part I reported having fitness coaches, fitness role models or someone that had influenced them to become and remain active. Might African American veteran exercisers such as those interviewed and surveyed for this study fill that role? Perhaps the increasing importance of social
media in the fitness world – a trend from this study that will be discussed subsequently – can provide the means for the wider exposure of accomplished, veteran African American women exercisers to influence fitness trends in the Black community.

**Women in Gyms**

But what other factors from this study suggest approaches for making physical fitness an attractive and accessible practice for all women, not just women of color? Seven major themes emerged from the qualitative interviews from this study: (1) the characteristics of a good gym are important; (2) there are essential elements of a good workout; (3) there are strategies that can be used to maintain one’s motivation to work out; (4) there are circumstances that can tempt one to drop out of exercising; (5) it is important for women to be engaged in using gyms to exercise; (6) there are self-talk statements that are used to maintain focus and motivation to exercise; and (7) there are tips that can be shared with beginner exercisers that can improve their chances of success with an exercise program.

These themes provide a useful template for a discussion of these issues. Two of the themes focus specifically on the characteristics of the gym itself. Survey respondents, for example, privileged the importance of the gym’s layout, and specifically, the availability of a variety of fitness equipment machines. Paying a substantial fee for membership in the gym was not a factor in becoming motivated to workout, suggesting that spending a lot of money on joining a facility does not ensure that a member will continue to come. The gym’s ‘look’ is important, particularly if – as one of my interviewees pointed out – being in the facility is enough to “get in the mood to work hard!” Marketing of workout facilities to attract women from
underserved populations can and should make use of the fact that well-appointed gyms offer the beginner a wide variety of avenues for getting started in a vigorous workout program.

One of the major themes, being a woman exerciser in the gym, is substantially enhanced by the presence of other women. The survey statement that best establishes this point was, “The presence of other women in the gym encourages me,” (a statement endorsed by both Black women and White women survey respondents). When gyms create welcoming spaces that specifically encourage a diverse group of exercisers to come work out, women exercisers will feel at home. The survey statement, “I feel that a gym is a place where I belong,” was highly endorsed by Black and White survey respondents. Social marketing directed at underserved community members can benefit significantly from images that promote the notion that being a woman in the gym is both encouraging and not at all unusual.

But the question becomes how does a woman develop the motivation to begin exercising and to persist in their efforts once begun? Another important theme that came out of this study suggests that a prime motivating factor was not just a desire to be healthy, but a strong desire to improve one’s appearance. Two of the six statements from the survey that were endorsed by more than two-thirds of both Black and White women respondents focused on looks: One of the ways I stay motivated is to see my clothes fitting better on me and recalling one’s appearance in both old photos and/or new ones. Nonetheless, another two statements which were endorsed by both Black and White survey takers invoke health and feelings of well-being as important motivating factors: viz. recalling how I feel when I was NOT in my ideal form and caring more about being fit than about my weight. Advertising gyms as solutions to the problem of ill-fitting clothing (as a result of gaining weight) and as a way of improving one’s health and fitness have
always been an objective of Americans who join gyms after the winter holidays to lose weight gained during Thanksgiving and New Year’s Eve celebrations (Gallup Poll 2013).

However, if advertising can bring women into the gym, the question of how to keep them there in the face of high attrition rates becomes critical. The theme that concerns identifying the factors that tempt the exerciser to drop out speaks to the 50% dropout rate that is associated with first-year gym members (IBIS 2018). Here, unfortunately, the survey fails to provide a great deal of guidance. None of the 12 items in the survey that identified these reasons for dropping out achieved an agreed shared answer on the part of survey respondents. In the qualitative interviews in Part I of this study, the descriptions that exercisers gave for motivating themselves to exercise and to work hard were often described as strategies to remain focused. Finding the right mix of motivational strategies and tricks to remain with an exercise routine was described, in other words, as the most effective strategy for dropout prevention. The 12 statements that were used in the survey related to temptations to drop-out, represented a collection of individual comments from Part I exercisers, but as survey results from Part II demonstrated, there was a shared pattern of responses indicating that women from this study have figured out how to not drop out under a variety of circumstances asked about in the survey.

**Me-Time**

The many comments that interviewees shared in which they described their time in the gym as me-time underscore how working out for both Part I and Part II study participants has become a very solitary activity. As noted earlier, 17 of 26 respondents from Part I echoed the sentiment of a White woman exerciser from the SSG who told me, “I prefer working out alone.
People are not on the same wavelength and drag me down or so something completely different. It is also my me-time, so it is my selfish time to clear my head.”

Similar sentiments about the preference for working out alone were noted by a number of participants in the ethnography conducted in Italy and England by Roberta Sassatelli (2010): “…training is not just about keeping in shape but also about realizing and forgetting everyday worries that go along with work and sometimes with your relationships. Coming here is like retreating into a little corner of the world where no one bother me, where I don’t have to take anyone else into consideration, and where I can concentrate wholly on my training” (Sassatelli 2010, 65).

In addition, my participant observations demonstrated an important connection between social media and me-time. One of my frequent observations was of people following a routine that was being shown on their phones or of people holding their phones as they went through an exercise routine or setting the phone down right next to them on the floor while they were stretching or doing floor exercises on the mats. Others might set the phone on the treadmill or on the bike or on other cardio machines so that it might be used while walking throughout the gym or be used while in between a set on a machine, and finally, while they were resting. Headphones were ubiquitous among those working out alone, an act that signals to veteran gym goers: “I’m working out alone here…this is me on ‘me-time.’”

All of which seems to contradict the survey item: “Watching others workout motivates me to work out,” which the majority of respondents endorsed, but is not completely validated by my personal/observations. My casual conversations with gym goers in most facilities suggests that what is endorsed in this statement is not the desire to be working out collectively with others, it is rather the pleasure of being in a place that is busy with a lot of people who are
individually doing their routines. It is, therefore, a question of the ambience. A busy, active, noisy facility encourages the sentiment, “I’m with them and I am just like them!” The exerciser does not need to engage in joint workouts. What is desired instead is to be in a place where one’s level of intense activity is understood and where the act of being there signals that one belongs there. At its best, one experiences me-time as wholly endorsed by the setting the gym provides because so many other exercisers are engaged in doing exactly that.

Gyms actively promote this ambience. The exerciser is encouraged to be a part of a program for posting items on social media about the gym (ASG), including before and after photos of themselves, in exchange for free promotional items such as personal training sessions or items of gym clothing and gear.

**Discipline and Fun**

What are the aspects of working out and exercising that can be used to convince others that getting into a gym is worth the time, energy, and money? Many veteran gym goers characterize their workouts and their exercise routines as fun. Despite the fact that many workout routines are taxing and often painful, the joy that many exercisers experience at the height of their exertions should not be underestimated. Fun is an often overlooked aspect of working out vigorously as are the anxieties, fears, doubts, hopes, failures and successes that are all part of the gym experience for the committed, active exerciser. Sassatelli (2010) discusses discipline and fun as two different overall experiences that are available to the interested exerciser.

One of Sassatelli’s research participants neatly expressed the nature of discipline and fun as experiences when working out at the gym. “I follow the teacher carefully, I’ll do everything, I’ll sweat my guts out, but I’ll do it! And I have learned that I can enjoy myself, perfection is not
important, what matters is that you try hard and have fun” (university student from Florence, Sassatelli 2010, 136).

The “fun” theme was a frequently mentioned element of working out by interviewees in this study. As noted previously, a Black woman participant from Part I commented when asked about enjoying exercising, “I don’t hate it, don’t love it. I just wish I knew more, but that is the process. Learning different workouts, once I feel confident in what I’m doing, then I enjoy it. I love how I feel after. It is a good time. When you see results, it is a cool thing” (8 ASG). The “process” that she references is the routine of becoming familiar with the machines, working with a personal trainer (if possible), becoming proficient in workout routines, and seeing the results in the form of better fitting clothing, better body contours, feeling more attractive, and attracting the notice of others all represent the positive results of working out that make the process fun for many respondents.

Motivation, Clothes, and Rewards

Not surprisingly, one of the most important tips that veteran exercisers from Part II agreed that they would give to a new exerciser is “Reward yourself for achieving a fitness/health goal,” a statement highly endorsed by both Black and White survey respondents. Interestingly enough, one of the surprise findings for me in the conduct of qualitative interviews for this study was the role that clothing plays in the “reward yourself” theme that so many exercisers described. As a Part I participant noted when asked about how to measure success in working out, “Mostly, I define it by how I fit into my clothes. I was going to have to buy a size 10 and I said I have to eat better and get more consistent with the gym” (15 SSG).
Clothes do more than indicate success or failure with working out, clothing was found to be a significant motivator for going to the gym. As one ASG member commented, “If I think about it too much, I don’t do a lot. If I get into gym clothes, that is 75% of the battle. I am already half committed!” Survey responses from Part II of this study revealed similar trends in how clothing is used as a motivator: African American and White respondents had an agreed answer of “yes/agreed” with the statement “Putting on my athletic wear is motivating.” In addition, high and equal levels of Blacks and White survey respondents agreed the answer was “yes/agree”, to: “I stay motivated to exercise by seeing my clothes fit better.”

As indicated earlier, the economic drivers that are promoting this set of trends are at the core of the commercialization of fitness culture. As has been noted throughout this study and as has been so neatly captured by the subtitle of Sassatelli’s book, “Fitness Culture: Gyms and the Commercialization of Discipline and Fun,” the conflation of exercise, fun, looking good, and dressing well have all been significant driving forces in the economic expansion of the fitness industry. Athleisure, for example, is a prime example. It is defined by Wikipedia as, “a trend in fashion in which clothing designed for workouts and other athletic activities is worn in other settings, such as at the workplace, at school, or at other casual or social occasions” (Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athleisure, accessed 2/23/2019).

Social Media, Exercise, and Fitness Culture

Social media has also become a significant trend setter in fitness culture. As noted earlier, according to Statista, in 2017, 80 percent of the US had a social media profile. “According to estimates, the number of worldwide social media users reached 2.34 billion and is expected to grow to some 2.95 billion by 2020” (Statista 2018, 1). Facebook is the preferred social media
outlet for all age groups with almost 9 in 10 adults between the ages of 18 and 45 having an account (Statista 2018). Fitspiration, the abbreviated form of “Fitness inspiration,” is a health and exercise trend found on a variety of platforms from Instagram, to Facebook, and Tumblr. This service provides a platform for a variety of users engaged in fitness activities to post photos, videos, text messages and other content that can be designed to promote health, fitness, nutrition, and exercise materials for widespread use by the general public. Fitspo and other Instagram platforms have a substantial influence with one online marketing site claiming that the 20 top Instagram exercise stars have a combined following of more than 90 million people (Mediakix, 2018) (http://mediakix.com/2017/04/top-fitness-influencers-instagram-millions-followers/#gs.zPV8iJ0).

At the onset of this study, I set out to understand the role of social influences (negative or positive) in regard to motivation to exercise and maintain a practice. During the TGS’s 18-month duration (specifically, the period between 2017-2018), Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, SnapChat continued to evolve as integral components of 21st century communications media. With daily tweets generated by President Trump and countless newspaper headlines about Facebook and its role in the 2016 presidential election, social media became commonplace features of American life and culture. As of this writing, it is clear that almost anyone on planet Earth with a Smartphone can post photos or videos with accompanying text that has the potential to be viewed by millions of viewers.

The majority of the women interviewed in Part I of this study reported the use of social media for inspiration, motivation, and workout tips. An additional group reported posting images of themselves on Instagram and other online platforms. Survey respondents in Part II did not express significant concurrence with the two statements that described social media use, but,
Black respondents share an answer of “no/disagree” with the notion that they are inspired “by looking at social media starts to inspire me.”

However, among interviewees in Part I of this study, 69% of the women interviewed noted that they have influenced others or been influenced by others, some by social media influences, to work out. The power of social media to guide others into exercising cannot be ignored. As was cited earlier, an African American beginner exerciser from Part I of this study described how these media help her overcome a reluctance to go and workout, “Sometimes I just don’t want to go. I look at my phone and scroll through Instagram and see others working out and I think I need to go to the gym” (8 ASG)!

The fact that contemporary exercisers and gym goers can be influenced by social media to exercise, poses a set of important alternatives. Using such media to motivate individuals to go to the gym has been noted but having veteran exercisers become more engaged with social media as a way of inspiring others to emulate may well have some as yet untapped potential to engage more women in fitness activities. Simply put, every veteran exerciser has the potential to influence others to exercise in much the way so many participants in this study described themselves as having been influenced and even inspired by others. This will require many exercisers to make room in their workout schedules to recruit others to emulate them, perhaps via social media. Whatever the platform, the capacity to influence others to exercise via social media can and should be developed. It may require making space in a busy exerciser’s me-time workout schedule to focus on the needs of others, but the fact that so many research participants in this study already seek to influence others is cause for optimism. If each one can teach one, a significant set of inroads into resolving the obesity and sedentary behavior crisis will have been made.
The Paradox of Gym Culture

As an anthropologist, however, it is impossible to avoid the realization that my observations and my semi-structured interviews only placed in sharp relief the paradoxes of gym culture. To enter the gym is to enter a world where capitalism is on immediate and gaudy display. The Athleisure wear that adorns the bodies of both male and female exercisers makes it clear that one’s apparel is as important as sweat in communicating to the observer one’s commitment to get fit. The advertisements that are everywhere extol the virtues of this piece of equipment or of that particular nutritious muscle-building snack. The solicitations to get the services of a personal trainer to “up your game,” and get as fit as the poster exercisers whose taut, lean, fat-free bodies are everywhere on display make buying such a service all the more irresistible. One wants desperately to see research of this process of self-development and self-improvement serve as a counter to the “dark anthropology” that Ortner (2018) describes so poignantly. One wishes, in addition, to embrace, as she suggests, the notion that studies of well-being and an engagement in happiness studies that anthropologists are invited to undertake can also include ethnographies of exercise. If anthropological study can embrace the horrors and constraints of the neoliberal agenda, then examining activities that give human experience purpose and direction seems warranted as well. As she notes, “’happiness’ seems to provide a powerful entrée into this question. I also agree that anthropologists are almost certainly better suited to ask these kinds of questions, and to think deeply about answers than the survey researchers who seem to control much of the happiness research today” (Ortner 2018, 59).

Nonetheless, the paradox of 21st century consumerism is evident in the comments of many of my research participants. The twin, conflicting options available to us all include getting fully engaged in the consumption of food [foodies] and working off the excess by joining a gym.
A veteran exerciser who enjoys physical activity and who is also a yoga instructor shared that one of her reasons for working out neatly demonstrates this desire, “I want to eat whatever I want or drink whatever I want and do whatever drugs whatever I want. I think everyone deserves to have the fun stuff too. I like to have a balance” (4 SSG). Similarly, a participant from ASG noted in describing her relationship between her workout and her lifestyle, “I drink a fair amount, just because someone is celebrating something or they are off and so I have to tell myself, you gotta burn the calories that I drank yesterday” (20 ASG).

One SSG exerciser described the use of a social media application designed to signal when a workout might be required. “I can have a fudge pop when I get home if I do an extra 20 min. ‘Is it worth eating this cookie that is worth 250 calories, is it worth 25 min on the elliptical?’ I use the Lose It! app. Scan food and it tracks your calories for the day. So, it is kind of in your face” (15 SSG).

Sadly, these exercisers well embody Maboloc’s observation that “The market-driven consumer economy uses people as the new medium of exchange. The untamed psyche of people makes them imbecile conformists, enslaved by the latest fashion trends that simply further the interests of capitalism” (Maboloc 2016, 144).

If data from Statista are correct, 60 million people are members of the more than 36 thousand commercial gym/fitness facilities, or approximately 1 American in 5 (Statistia 2019: https://www.statista.com/topics/1141/health-and-fitness-clubs/). Such figures rival those associated with membership in religious communities (Pew Research Center 2015) and suggest that engaging in fitness activities are the new locus of the individual’s quest for meaning. The nobility of working out to perfect the body certainly has the sense of an almost religious devotion to an all-engaging activity. As Sassatelli observed: “Gym going is described as reasoned
commitment, a form of self-government that responds to one’s own true, natural needs. This allows fitness fans to define themselves as moral subjects, the best judges of their own ‘nature,’ and the wise managers of their own lives and bodies” (Sassatelli 2010, 205).

However, if membership in a faith community can be described as an expression of solidarity with a group and the embodiment of the individual’s connection to others, the gym, in my study, was the quintessential expression of the cult of the individual. The constant refrain of “being in the gym is me-time” suggests that consumerism as it is expressed in gym culture is less about joining with others and much more about perfecting the individual as a solitary activity that is undertaken in the presence of others, but which is experienced and enjoyed alone.

Fuentes (2016) provides one of the most important and theoretical foundations for integrating the results of ethnographies such as this with the quest to synthesize an evolutionary approach to contemporary ethnography and anthropological study. Human evolution, he notes, is guided by selection pressure, a set of forces that are present at all levels of the biological world. Such pressures, he asserts, exist today.

Selection exerts pressures at various nodes in the system, and responses to those pressures emerge at individual, group, and community levels. This pattern of reactive response to social and ecological pressures and contexts at various levels creates a local ecology of interactive material, social and cognitive aspects that are passed from one generation to the next; it creates an inherited ecology, a cultural context (Fuentes 2016, S24).

Gyms and fitness centers are part of the human niche and the pressures these centers exert on human development (and evolution) serve as both counterpoints to our patterns of consumption – especially food consumption – and efforts to perfect and elevate the individual at
both a physical and moral level. There is, in the gym, the unmistakable sense that pain is gain and what is being gained is more than just a toned body. There is the sense of smug superiority that stands in contrast to the horrors of being obese and to the terror of being an object of fat shaming. Thus, all that is noble and all that is stigmatized will find a locus in the gym.

How will these trends evolve? What will be the fate of adults in a consumer society who find themselves between the opposing poles of increased food consumption, on the one hand, and increased pressures to be healthy, fit, and in the gym on the other? Both are vying for attention and for market share, and anthropology, as Fuentes (2016) asserts, is uniquely positioned to observe the process.

Health vs. Appearance

Survey results suggested that respondents were indifferent to whether or not they wear fashionable clothes to the gym and largely disagreed with the notion that they have to wear trendy outfits when they go there to work out. Such responses seem to suggest that exercisers are indifferent to their appearance and to the manner in which their clothes enhance that appearance.

It is important to reconcile observations made as a participant observer with findings drawn from interviews and surveys. Periodically, there were important differences between what was seen and what was derived from the analysis of interview and survey data. My participant/observations of veteran exercisers in the two gyms suggested that exercisers were in fact concerned about their appearance. There were occasional instances where I came upon someone, unawares, fixing their hair, looking in the mirror, looking at a particular part of their body, taking selfies in and outside locker room in front of the mirror. They were not only taking
selfies, but taking a many of them, perhaps to get the best-looking photo. In the culture of 2019, the selfie is the quintessential example of an obsession with appearance and self-expression. Gym users are not exempt.

It was evident that while the pursuit of health and appearance related goals were important for most of my participants, it was evident, as well, that health is, for most, reflected in how one appears. Looking good equals being healthy and being healthy is visible in one’s good looks. This concern extended to clothing. For example, changes to the fit of one’s clothing are a sign that there is a problem or, by contrast, an indication that workouts are succeeding. As was noted frequently in my interviews, women are happy when they must buy smaller sizes to fit their toned figures and are very unhappy if clothes must be purchased to account for weight gain and to hide the visible increases in weight.

One might, therefore, interpret the survey results about fashionable clothing as expressing greater interest in clothes that fit and show off a toned body than in being fashionably attired. As a fitness trainer once remarked to me off-handedly, one can be fashionable and overweight whereas being fit will make even unfashionable clothing look good.

**Gym Population: Ideal/Healthy Weight vs Obese/Overweight**

National concern about obesity and with getting Americans more physically fit would lead one to believe that gyms would have a population of exercisers many of whom would be obese and struggling to lose weight. From my personal observations of both gyms, the large majority of gym goers in these two fitness facilities were of ideal weight. The fact that most people in the gym are already physically fit in appearance speaks to two essential challenges to the notion that the gym is a viable solution for overweight or obese individuals who are looking
to achieve a healthier weight. First, as is noted in the Club Industry newsletter (2018), gyms attract individuals who are already familiar with and fascinated with fitness. Long-term gym goers are the types that have figured out how to overcome any barriers to their fitness routine. Their exercise regimen is a well-integrated element of their lifestyle. As a consequence, however, walking into a facility such as ASG can be intimidating to anyone who does not fit this image. This potential to be intimidated can make it difficult for those who are sensitive to environmental cues such as these to feel as if this is a place where they fit in.

Even though gyms make efforts to be accepting of anyone who walks in the door, regardless of size or fitness expertise, the social pressure in this environment to tone up and fit into the visual norms of such a facility can be counterproductive in many ways. The most obvious is when someone drops out because they sense that they cannot meet the visual standards created by the already fit. And, as suggested earlier, gyms are an important component of the overeating/gym feedback loop as they become the natural destination for anyone stuck in a cycle of overeating and needing to drop the pounds that their meals and sedentary behaviors have packed on.

**Personal Interactions with Gym Staff**

Many of my interactions with gym staff in the course of a normal workout highlight the manner in which gym personnel are an integral part of this feedback loop. During one of my workouts at ASG, for example, a manager approached me while I was moving fast and deep breathing on an elliptical machine. He asked me if I knew the threshold for heart rate, and, “Do you know where you want to be at?” I had told him, “yes, I believe I do”. He proceeded to ask my age and without asking any further questions, explained that I need to be in the range of 125-
140 beats per minute in order to get into the fat-burning zone. I begrudgingly thanked him because I did not want to lose my rhythm, but regretted not furthering the conversation. I wanted to challenge the assumptions that generated his part of our interactions. How did he know my goals, I wanted to ask? I had just finished working out with my personal trainer, lifting weights, doing circuit and functional training. I wanted to point out that I do cardio after to work on endurance. My primary goal is not to burn fat. It might be a goal from time to time, but not always, and not first on my list. The assumption that a woman is in the gym to get rid of fat was generated by the plethora of publicity campaigns that urge women to join the gym to look better and to fit into, in its most extreme form, swimwear.

Large franchise gyms target messages to individuals who are insecure and overweight/obese. But, these messages are not the ones that are appropriate for people who want to lose weight and get healthy. Asking people if they want to lose weight or get in shape for the summer or a special occasion does not feed into a healthy relationship with fitness. These types of messages play into yo-yo dieting and yo-yo gym patterns of gym attendance and gym attrition. One gym manager remarked to a colleague of mine that the facility counts on having individuals join gyms at the start of the New Year, making a pact with themselves and with others that they are going to hit their New Year’s resolution of losing weight through exercise and changing their eating habits. The problem is that their attempts are unsustainable because the motivation to join a gym is tied to an image in the mirror, and not to having a lifestyle that is committed to maintaining a healthy level of regular physical activity.

A 2015 workshop sponsored by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), Physical Activity: Moving toward Obesity Solution underscored the importance of lifestyle changes as a solution to the challenges of increasing rates of obesity and decreasing levels of physical fitness. Workshop
presenters highlighted the fact that there is no real incentive to changing the way they live. As one presenter noted, “Why is anybody going to want to change his or her level of physical activity? People like their fast food, their big-screen televisions, and their automobiles. Yes, they would like to be fitter and leaner, but they are essentially choosing not to become fitter and leaner” (IOM 2015, 25). Such choices to be are only sustainable if they are a functional part of an individual’s lifestyle, and periodic trips to the gym to lose a few pounds, despite the pressures of fitness center advertisements, will not suffice.

**Final Thoughts**

In the course of this study, the role of marketing and advertising as a driver of consumer culture was always evident. In spaces in the gyms that I observed, when the television was turned to a commercial station, the advertisements that were aired underscored the trends that had driven many exercisers to work out. I was sitting by a television once in the ASG, waiting on a protein shake when an advertisement for an exercise cycle, the Peloton, occasioned many murmurs of approval on the part of exercisers in the immediate vicinity. The screen held the image of a trim and quite fit young woman on the cycle, furiously pedaling while a screen strategically mounted as an integral part of her machine held the image of a fitness trainer who was exhorting everyone within range to "push it", as he cycled furiously with enormous intensity. Like everyone else watching, my first thought was, wow, I want one!

The image was powerful. The exercise cycle and the fit young woman who was pedaling away at top speed were neatly framed by her presence in a very attractive apartment that had been transformed in the screen image to an exotic location where others on the screen were also furiously cycling. She seemed to be enjoying her connection to a trainer who was perhaps
thousands of a mile away, who was also on a Peloton, exhorting her with the cycle's aid to achieve levels of intensity that were bound to improve her heart, her legs, and her spirit.

Seconds later, the screen had moved to another commercial that provided another image altogether. This ad was from a very popular fast food restaurant that announced with great fanfare that a double-decker bacon cheeseburger could now, for just four dollars, be accompanied by a fish filet sandwich and a large coke. And all of this is for just four dollars. The contrast was even more powerful.

The notion that I had just witnessed a significant feedback loop was dramatic: in one advertisement, a new meal combo containing thousands of calories was being made available at a very affordable price. In the other, viewers were presented with an exercise machine with the potential to minimize the harm of the extra calories provided by the burger. And it had all been presented within five minutes of each other. As an anthropologist engaged in a study of gym culture, it was impossible for me to fail to make the connection between these two opposing trends - increasing caloric consumption being promoted by the same advertising ingenuity as that providing the savvy exerciser with an image of a machine with almost magical powers to make the harms of any meal evaporate with the sweat of a technologically enhanced workout. On more than one occasion, I wondered if I had stumbled upon some conspiracy to entice us to consume calories on the one hand so that we might expiate the guilt of this overindulgence by enticing us to endure an exhausting workout that was offered as a painful pleasure.

Technological advancements contribute significantly to this scenario. In an article entitled, "Big Data and the transformation of food and beverage marketing: undermining efforts to reduce obesity" (Montgomery et al. 2019), the authors note that 21st century data analytics offer substantial opportunities to combat obesity and obesity-related chronic diseases. From
mobile devices to Instagram, the enormous amount of data that are generated through individual devices like our smartphones and by the data generated by our internet viewing habits can be collected and analyzed. The authors note, however, that more sinister uses of Big Data and modern analytics are possible.

If current trends continue, these techniques will be used primarily to promote junk food, sugar-sweetened beverages, and other unhealthy products, thus increasing health disparities, and worsening health outcomes. Marketers now have unprecedented ability to follow individuals throughout their daily lives, delivering offers designed to reinforce habitual consumption patterns, trigger impulsive behaviors, and link point-of-purchase opportunities, thus diminishing opportunities for reflection or deliberation about wise eating decisions (Montgomery et al. 2019, 114).

Such techniques can also be used to enhance the exercise experience and entice fitness junkies to buy products such as the Peloton machine or to join a gym to work off the excess weight. Consumer patterns related to exercise data, and tailored to an exerciser’s workout profile, for example, can be generated by sensor technologies such as smart glasses or smartwatches (Duking, Homberg, and Sperlich 2017). Biofeedback techniques that can be used to maximize workout efficiency can also be provided by a smartwatch or a cell phone and can be used by commercial interests to tailor advertising to individual workout/exercise profiles.

And as noted previously, the intrusion of the selfie into the workout space and the use of social media as way of enhancing the exercise experience is already a staple in the gyms that I frequented. The individual workout can now be a spectacle that is shared with the world.

These technological advances hold the promise of improving the performance of any exerciser, irrespective of the sport or the exercise preferences of the user. The many subcultures
that have arisen in the sports world and in the fitness industry constitute an ever expanding
market for these innovations and as Smolianov et al (2018) suggest, "As these innovative
approaches become more affordable, portable, and popular, the challenge will continue to be,
how to bridge the gap between high-tech and common use appropriately. How can we design
these new technologies so that the masses improve their lives?"

The presence of such technologies is everywhere present and visible in the gym. They are
an important driver of gym culture. There are sophisticated exercise machines that measure the
exerciser's heart rate, breathing, and the calories she or he has expended. Personalized, wearable
biofeedback sensors that are of increasing sophistication and power can complement these
machines. Thus, the modern gym goer is a showcase for technological advances. From
professional athletes who use the gym to stay in shape during the off-season to body-builders to
Zumba enthusiasts, the ASG, like other gym franchises, provides the opportunities, the space,
and the technological equipment for members of all of the gym and sports world subcultures to
exercise. And all are engaged in the use of these technologies to enhance their performance.

When observing exercisers in the gym, however, it is not always easy to identify the
exercise subculture to which any given exerciser belongs just by observing their exercise
routines. The average veteran exerciser will engage in a variety of workouts that will include a
range of different exercise machines. "Circuit training," which involves conducting a workout by
creating a circuit of machines, types of exercises, various stretches, and the use of different
spaces in the gym was the norm for most of the women participants in this study. For many such
exercisers, "spot reduction," a type of exercise that targets a specific body part for muscle
building exercises, will guide which gym machine and which particular exercise routine will be
followed (Kubala 2019).
The focus of so many exercisers on this tightly structured set of routines accounts in large measure for what was termed in this study as "me time." When exercisers in the ASG, for example, seek the company of other exercisers, they will take a class offered by the gym in any of a dozen different types of exercises from Zumba to Pilates. However, on the exercise floor, the circuit is completed mainly alone. Professional baseball players are observed working on shoulders, biceps, and hips so that an effective swing of the bat can be performed. Bodybuilders will spend hours working on a calf, or their oblique’s, or on their gluteus maxima. Many will be guided by their sensory devices, but the most common technology in view will be their smartphones and much of their phone use will be directed at creating selfies. Me time allows the user to focus exclusively on the goals and objectives of the workout, but it is the selfie that connects the user to the social world of cyberspace and makes the results of a solitary workout a spectacle that can be shared with the world.

The selfie has become a technological mirror and an increasingly important component of gym life. Rainesford Stauffer (2018) in an article entitled, "How selfies are quietly changing the ways we work out," notes, The gym selfie, experts say, is more than just a visual brag or photo-driven pep talk. Social media is fundamentally changing the way we work out—and the way we see ourselves in the mirror. In 2019, Professors Tricia Burke and Stephen Rains found that individuals who saw more workout posts in their feeds were more likely to feel concerned about their own bodies, especially if the posts came from a person they felt looked similar to them. This means that even a passive scroll through Instagram can be more about stoking self-consciousness, in oneself and in others, than providing motivation—and that we internalize these more easily than we think. “If people become preoccupied with their weight, that could manifest itself in less healthy ways,” Burke told me" (Stauffer 2018, 2).
Significantly, the author cites a study done by the Harris Poll that was commissioned by a commercial gym franchise in which 43% of a sample of 1500 gym goers reported that they took photos and videos while at the gym. Significantly, 27% of those were selfies. "Taking one for the gram," i.e. taking a selfie to post on Instagram, has become a staple in fitness culture. The selfie thus becomes an element in the feedback loop. It provides an image of progress in the workout; it mirrors how one’s dress or shorts now fit perfectly after rigorous efforts to reduce (or build up) the thighs; it connects us to "the temple of sweat" and proves to the world that the exerciser has expiated the sin of overeating and has found the grace that has been achieved in the form of a slim, trim, sexy body that represents the best body that money - and hard work - can buy.

Thus, the feedback loop that connects the food consumer to the fitness consumer is enabled and promoted by social media platforms that showcase the selfie and in so doing, provide the motor that keeps the feedback loop engaged and in operation. “How do I look? Check out my flat stomach. Here’s what I did to get this result. Last night’s cheeseburger and fries….BEGONE!!” Will new technologies, from Big Data to smartphones, provide the means to maintain the feedback loop indefinitely? Is there an end in sight? The simple answer is that human beings can consume more calories in a day than can possibly be burned off by exercise. One hour of vigorous exercise can only burn the calorie equivalent of a half a cheeseburger, so that if the fast food industry continues to make more calories available at low cost, the consequences for the human waistline will be disastrous. Increasing levels of physical activity are only part of the solution.

The Tampa Gym study represents an important means to maintain a finger on the pulse of the evolving fitness culture and of the technological trends that are driving it. The statistics that inform of us of trends and of the audiences that they are reaching can only tell part of the story.
Ethnographic observations allow us to direct observation of how trends are embodied and enacted in the gym. As gym culture evolves to embrace new technologies and as new groups of users alter the demographic structure of the gym population, observing these changes and subjecting them to ongoing analysis will provide the anthropologist with a unique view of a rapidly expanding element of modern culture.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that should be noted. First, it is an exploratory study with a comparatively small sample. It was conducted in two gyms in Tampa, Florida, which limits the ability to generalize its findings to all gyms and all gym goers in the United States. Secondly, participants in this study were not randomly selected and their responses to the study’s research questions may not represent the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of other women of ASG and SSG and other women exercisers nationally.

Third, the focus of the Tampa Gym Study was to examine veteran exercisers who achieve high levels of physical fitness, as defined by the HHS Physical Activity Guidelines (2018). My research participants, it has been noted, provide a proof of concept that women can resist the persistent national trends that have seen very low levels of physical activity being reported by adult Americans. However, it is obvious that the road to fitness does not lead exclusively to a gym or fitness center. The Guidelines list a host of activities that will assist individuals to achieve optimal levels of exercise in the course of daily living. The gym is, therefore, a sufficient condition for helping individuals achieve fitness but is by no means a necessary condition for such a goal; that goal can be best achieved by a change in individual and community lifestyles to include the pursuit of good health in a wide variety of settings and activities.
Because the focus in this study was on women in their 20's and 30's, similar research on women in their 40s and 50s (middle age) as well as seniors should be the next step for providing a fuller description of women gym goers. It would be important to see how gyms accommodate these other age groups and what the similarities and differences are in the experiences of women of different ages. Important questions to examine would include what are the barriers for women of these age groups in becoming physically active and maintaining a sustainable exercise routine? Additionally, how do veteran exercisers of these other generations overcome them? These are important contributions to the field of public health that will be possible with the development of such studies.

In regard to Part II, there was no effort to collect data on any respondents other than race/ethnicity, therefore there is no possibility for measuring potential selection bias in the sample. However, given the small number of refusals (n=5), it is unlikely that this would cause significant problems with the validity of the findings reported.

Finally, the one-time use of cross-sectional survey methods to assess patterns of agreement or disagreement among survey respondents with statements of gym culture has limitations, the most important of which is the ability to detect which statements, if any, are subject to changes over time.

**Contributions to Anthropology**

This study was undertaken to examine the and extend the work of Roberta Sassatelli’s (2010) research into contemporary fitness culture and its commercialization, and to explore the impact of “fitness culture” on women gym users. A two-part study was undertaken at two gyms in Tampa, Florida. The primary objective of this ethnographic research project was to identify
the factors that experienced women exercisers use in choosing a gym to exercise and in remaining motivated to maintain a workout regimen. The project was informed by the ethnographic and anthropological explorations of gym culture and of the commercialization of fitness (Hedbloom 2009; Sassatelli 2010). It examined the manner in which this culture is embodied in the self-reports experienced by women gym goers who were asked to describe their experience in gyms and exercise programs.

The quest for the body beautiful (Reicher and Koo 2004) and the manner in which exercise has become the embodiment of social and commercial cultural trends on the body, represent a continuing focus of anthropological research (Rojas 2015). The findings from this study extend that research focus in four important ways. First and foremost, this study’s mixed method design provides the means to triangulate my qualitative, observational and interview data with the statistical analysis of quantitative survey data. Such triangulation adds strength to the assertion that key elements of gym culture are described and expressed by gym users. These users describe their experience in gyms using language that is substantially used and shared by other gym goers.

Second, it describes the increasingly important role that social media and the fashion industry play in promoting gym culture and its increasing economic impact on American culture. Third, it describes the position of women in gyms and notes that earlier concerns about the gym as a “gendered space” have all but disappeared from the discourse of the women exercisers who participated in both Part I and Part II of the study.

Finally, the study compared two racial groups (Black and White) from two different types of gym settings. It notes that Black and White women participants in this study did not differ substantially with respect to their attitudes about exercising, their strategies for staying
motivated, their strategies for avoiding the temptation to drop out of exercising, their beliefs about the place of women in the gym, their use of self-talk, and the tips they would impart to beginning exercisers. The lack of significant differences between these two groups is significant in the face of the social science and public health research on obesity and physical fitness that routinely reports large, significant differences between the races on these and other issues. These findings represent important contributions to the growing literature on obesity prevention and on the promotion of physical fitness for all Americans.

Identifying the relationship between cultural drivers to promote obesity and cultural drivers to combat obesity represents a feedback loop that few if any in anthropology have identified or named in this fashion.

**Contributions to Applied Anthropology**

This study also contributes to a number of new approaches to the use of ethnographic research methods. As noted previously, since the publication of Sassatelli's landmark book on fitness culture, the impact of social media on exercisers and on interest in the fitness industry has risen dramatically. As shown in this study, the very significant inroads that social media platforms have made to impact everyday life must also include the medium's impact on the promotion of exercising as the embodiment of health and beauty and on the fitness industry as well.

This study connects these two phenomena - viz. the dramatic rise in the memberships in gyms with the similarly dramatic rise in the use of social media to enhance a gym workout - and demonstrates how the use of ethnographic methods can give the applied anthropologist an important tool for studying and edifying these trends. The book “Athletic Intruders” was
published more than a decade before this study of women gym goers was undertaken. Since then, examinations of women in sport and in the field of gym-based exercisers have not been in the forefront of applied anthropological research. Hopefully, this study can change that trend and can inspire increased interest in researching how fitness culture is impacting women in the US and worldwide.

Although ethnographies conducted in gyms and fitness centers often focus on just one facility, an advantage of the Tampa Gym Study was the use of two such facilities to gather the qualitative data that were used in the development of the quantitative survey used in Part II of this study. Broadening the number of places from which participants were recruited and interviewed was done to assure that statements about gym culture were elicited from more than one location. Thus, the range of topics that respondents covered in my interviews reflect the experiences of women who work out in both large gym franchise locations as well as from women in more modest, non-commercial gym settings.

Public Health Contributions

Ethnographic studies can inform much of public health research and practice. This study, with its focus on veteran women exercisers, represents an attempt to use expert exercisers as sources of recommendations for non-exercisers to become members of fitness centers and in so doing become more appropriately physically active. Focus groups and qualitative interviews are already a part of the research methods of many public health researchers, but ethnographic methods have not been as frequently used in such settings. This study contributes to the use of public health ethnographic research methods and demonstrates the value of collecting and using expert testimony as a means of improving the use of fitness facilities.
Linking the desire of many leaders in the fitness industry who want to become more active in public health campaigns to improve levels of physical fitness with the goals and objectives of many public health programs to increase levels of physical fitness and activity suggests that possibilities for partnership between groups should be investigated. As demonstrated by the findings of this study, there is much to be gained by examining the exercise habits and patterns of exercisers from groups who are overrepresented in obesity statistics (e.g. Black women) and underrepresented among those who are pursuing active physical activity efforts. This study demonstrates the potential for stronger partnerships between public health programs and the fitness industry and suggests that such a partnership might yield impressive gains.

Recommendations and Conclusions

A number of conclusions and recommendations are warranted from the findings summarized here. The first is that efforts to engage all Americans in physical activity, not just women, should begin young. The fact that so many interviewees in Part I had been actively involved in sports and that they reported that their adult exercise habits stem from early involvement as youth cannot be overstated.

The second conclusion/recommendation to emerge from this study’s findings is that the fitness industry not only has the potential to become a significant actor in promoting increased levels of physical activity, the industry itself has shown evidence that it recognizes this potential and has urged industry leaders to become more involved in public health campaigns to improve access to workout facilities. Creating partnerships with the fitness industry to achieve these objectives deserves serious consideration from public health workers who are tasked with
developing programs to improve public participation in fitness activities. In addition, the medical field should partner more closely with the fitness sector to engage recommended and healthy levels of physical activity. Since both fields are focused around health and being at a gym exercising is one way to become healthier, taking a multi-disciplinary approach to solving the obesity problem makes sense.

Using social marketing techniques and strategies to increase interest in working out in fitness facilities in communities of color should be increased. Creating campaigns that are well segmented to reach women at all levels of US society is well within the reach of the fitness industry. They have succeeded in helping fitness centers reach the fit and able members of the community, thus the challenge becomes developing equally effective campaigns for underserved communities where the need for access to fitness programs is critical.

The third recommendation involves the expanded use of social media campaigns. Instagram and other media platforms have already had a dramatic impact on the exercise behaviors of a substantial number of Americans. The media’s generally positive impact on the exercise behaviors of participants in this study has been duly noted here. Recruiting veteran women exercisers and training them in the use of social marketing and social media techniques may result in dramatic increases in the number of new exercisers seeking to enjoy the many benefits of exercising.

My interactions with veteran women exercisers have convinced me that their expertise represents an untapped potential that can and should be deployed in the service of getting all Americans more physically active. The millions of Americans who resolve every New Year’s Eve to join a gym and to work off the excesses of the holiday season suggest that there is already widespread public awareness of the need to reverse the trends of the obesity crisis. The women
participants in this study are representative of a vast untapped potential for change. Engaging that potential and making broader use of the fitness industry’s resources must be viewed as an idea whose time has most definitely come.
REFERENCES


Boyington, Josephine E. A., Lori Carter-Edwards, Mark Piehl, Jeanne Hutsoh, Debbe Langdon and Shilpa McManus. “Cultural Attitudes Toward Weight, Diet, and Physical Activity


APPENDIX 1:

IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL

December 6, 2016

Danielle Rosen
Anthropology
Tampa, FL 33607

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review

IRB#: Pro00027584

Title: An Ethnographic exploration of gyms, female gym-goers, and the quest for fitness in Tampa, FL.

Study Approval Period: 12/5/2016 to 12/5/2017

Dear Ms. Rosen:

On 12/5/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
protocol_version #1_11.8.16

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
SB adult minimal risk_part 1_consent form.pdf
SB adult minimal risk_part 2_consent form.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research...
proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Kristen Salamon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board
APPENDIX 2:  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Part I

Study ID: Pro00027584 Date Approved: 12/5/2018

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

Pro # 27584

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called: The Tampa Gym Study

The person who is in charge of this research study is Danielle Rosen. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by Professor Roberta Bier.

The research will be conducted at two facilities: LA Fitness Signature Club as well as the YMCA Tampa

This research is being sponsored by the University of South Florida’s Department of Anthropology.

Purpose of the study

This is a study of women who use gyms or fitness centers as part of their fitness routines. We would like to ask you what encouraged you to join a gym as well as what types of exercise you do when you are here. Questions that will be asked include wanting to know how you maintain the motivation to complete a workout as well as how you motivate yourself to return each week to continue your workouts.

The interview should take about 30 minutes. The questions are focused on your time in the gym and your workouts. There will not be any questions about intimate details about you or your private life. The results of this study will be used to help other women who would benefit from a program of exercise to learn how they might begin the process of working out. With your permission this interview will be recorded. It will be transcribed and the transcription will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Florida.

Social Behavioral

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Why are you being asked to take part?

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are a woman who is a member of this gym who works out here at least once a week on a consistent basis.

Study Procedures:

1) to describe how you chose to work out in this gym;
2) to describe what you do when you are here and engaged in your workout;
3) to describe the sort of “self-talk” you use to maintain your level of motivation;
4) to describe the kinds of effort you make every week, if any, to make sure that you maintain a workout schedule;
5) and to add any other details that contribute to your efforts to have the kind of workout that works best for you.

The interview will be done in one of the spaces here at this facility that offers privacy. You will only be asked to do this interview once; there will not be a follow-up. With your permission, the interview will be audiotaped and the principal investigator will be the only person with access to them. The tapes will be maintained in a secure locker at the University of South Florida and will be destroyed five years after the study is completed and a final report is submitted to the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Total Number of Participants

About sixteen individuals will take part in this study at one facility and another sixteen women gym goers will be asked to take part at the other facility. A total of thirty two individuals will participate in the study at all sites.

Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

Benefits

You will receive no benefit(s) by participating in this research study.
Risks or Discomfort

The following risks may occur:

- There may be some discomfort associated with discussing your health if your workout routine is associated with your health, your weight, your physical appearance or your physical condition, but you should feel free to avoid these topics if they are uncomfortable.

Compensation

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Costs

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and the study coordinator;
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Professor Roberta Baer at (813)-974-0805.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.
Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_________________________________________  ______________
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study          Date

_________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

_________________________________________  ______________
Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent          Date

_________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

Pro # 27584

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand about the information about the study listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called: THE TAMPA GYM QUESTIONNAIRE

The person who is in charge of this research study is Danielle Rosen. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by Professor Roberta Baer.

This research study is being conducted in two sites: LA FITNESS and the YMCA in Tampa.

This research is being sponsored by the University of South Florida Department of Anthropology.

Purpose of the study

This study consists of a questionnaire that contains a series of statements about exercising, working out, and going to a gym. You will be asked to read these statements and mark whether or not you agree or disagree with the sentiments that are expressed in each statement.

Why are you being asked to take part?

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are a woman who is a member of this facility who works out here at least once a week consistently.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

Social Behavioral
1] read a series of statements about working out, using a gym facility, and maintaining the motivation to keep to a workout routine;
2] to agree or disagree with the statements in the survey depending on whether or not the statement is or is not an accurate description of you and your workout routines at this [and other] gym facilities;

It will take you approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire and you will not be surveyed as a part of this study again.

40 women in each facility will be interviewed for a total of 80 research study participants.

**Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You do not have to participate in this research study. You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time.

**Benefits**

You will receive no benefit(s) by participating in this research study.

**Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

**Compensation**

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

**Costs**

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and the study coordinator, research
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.
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Consent to Take Part in this Research Study
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Signature of Person Taking Part in Study              Date

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Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

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I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

__________________________  _______________________
Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent              Date

__________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
APPENDIX 3:
PART I IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Data Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we begin, first, here are some questions about you

1) *Year you were born*________

2) *Race/Ethnicity*_____________

3) *Education*
High school diploma___ Some college___ College degree___ Some graduate work___ Graduate degree___

4) *Relationship status*
Single___ Married___ Divorced___ In a relationship___

5) *How long have you been a member of this gym?* _____(months)

6) *How often do you use this gym per week?*
Less than three times per week___ More than three times per week___

7) *On a scale of 1 (relaxed/easy) to 5 (all out/hard), how would you rate your workouts in the gym?* _____
8) There are many reasons for coming to the gym to work out. From the list below, check all that apply to you and your reasons for coming to the gym.

For my health___
To lose weight___
To improve my appearance___
Physician’s orders___
Get in shape for sports___
Other (specify)________________________

Part I: Interview Protocol

Where are you from originally?

What do you do for a living?

Why this gym as opposed to any other gym?

What are your goals and motivations when going to the gym and can you please rank them in their importance and their influence they have on motivation and ability to take action.

What are things that hinder you from going? What are things that make it impossible to go? And how do you stay motivated and fight against them to overcome those barriers to go?

What do you need to do to get yourself there? What steps exactly? (e.g. how do you get to the gym? How much time do you need there? What do you need to do to carve out that space of
time? Do you need to drop of kids somewhere? Get a babysitter? Do you take them with you?

Do you need to get up earlier to go before work?)

How did you get into working out in the first place? Was your family an influence? Were friends
an influence? Someone else (doctor, coworker, etc)?

Does your workout get boring at times? How do you continue to work out when it gets boring?

What do you do after the gym/work out?

How do you feel after going to the gym/working out?

Do the people in your life now support you working out?

Do you have any friends/partners that you work out with? Does it help you continue? If they
don’t go, do you not go? Or do you go alone anyway.

Do you ever work out with a trainer? If so, why if not, why not?

**These questions are probes to generate more information if the respondent has not said a great deal....**

What is at stake for you when you work out? What will happen if you do not go to the
gym/workout?
What types of workouts do you do? Why? What keeps you doing those exercises?

Do you think you will ever stop working out? If so why, if not why not?

Do you ever hesitate to work out? Do you have to push yourself to work out?

Is working out a part of your daily or weekly routine? Do you go to the gym at the same times every day or week?

What keeps you continuing on at the gym?

What is your favorite part of exercising? What is your favorite thing to do for exercising?

What would you do without exercise/going to the gym/ what would you do instead?

Have you been an influence on others to workout/join a gym?

Has anyone else been an influence on you to work out?

Is there anything else besides working out that you do in order to reach your goals that you stated and ranked in the beginning of this interview? (e.g. a particular diet, yoga?)
APPENDIX 4:

PART II QUESTIONNAIRE

Gym Location __________________
Race/Ethnicity __________________

Here are a series of statements about gyms, working out, being a woman in a gym, using self-talk to persist at a workout and other tips about working out. Please try to answer these questions quickly as to not overthink your answer.

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements about the gym. [Read the following phrase before each statement that appears below: For me]

1) The gym is the only convenient place for me to work out
2) The gym has staff who are important for a good workout
3) Working out in the gym is more important to me than working out at home.
4) The gym should be close to my home or my work
5) I feel like I have to wear trendy outfits to the gym or I’m embarrassed.
6) Watching others work out motivates me to work out.
7) The gym layout and appearance are important for the quality of my workout
8) The gym’s variety of machines are important to my workout
9) The gym’s membership fee is the only reason for my motivation to workout.
10) I am ok with wearing unfashionable clothes to the gym.

Please tell me if you agree, disagree with the following statements about exercising. [Read the following phrase before each statement that appears below: Workouts…]

1) Should have a lot of variety in what you do
2) Are best when they leave you sore
3) Should be rewarded when I push myself hard
4) Need to be done every day in order to see benefits
5) Should include cardiovascular exercises to ensure weight loss
6) Should include muscle strengthening workouts for burning fat
7) Should include use of floor spaces to stretch or do other exercises
8) Are important so that I can be fit to do active stuff with friends.
9) Should make you experience the burn
10) Allow you to eat a good meal when done
11) Require someone spotting me for the most challenging workouts
12) Are good so I can just get out of the house

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements about being a woman in the gym. [Read the following phrase before each statement that appears below: As a woman…]

1) Gyms have some spaces that are friendlier to women than others
2) I worry that weight training will make me look less feminine.
3) I believe that being in a gym will make me more attractive
4) The presence of other women in the gym encourages me
5) I feel that a gym is a place where I belong
6) I like being in a gym-space that men once dominated

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements about staying motivated to work out. [Read the following phrase before each statement that appears below: One of the ways I stay motivated to exercise is]

1) To prove to the ‘haters’ that I can get fit.
2) Because of the encouragement of my friends to continue to exercise
3) Because I have skinny pants and fat pants to motivate me to keep at my exercises
4) To focus on how I feel after a workout.
5) Because I am in love with someone
6) Because I want to make my ex regret we broke up
7) Because of how I look in old and or new photos of myself
8) By depending on exercises I see on social media
9) To recall how I felt when I wasn’t in my ideal form.
10) By looking at social media stars to inspire me.
11) By putting on my athletic wear.
12) Because my significant other also works out.
13) To see my clothes fitting better on me.
14) To make my workouts fun.
15) By going to the gym to help me sleep
16) Knowing that working out will improve my appearance
17) By doing the same workout all the time
18) To care more about how fit I am than about my weight.
Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements about temptations to drop out. [Read the following phrase before each statement that appears below: I am tempted to drop out…]

1) Because it’s boring
2) When I have to bribe myself in order to get the energy to come work out
3) If I can only workout a couple of days a week.
4) When I get too busy to find the time to come to the gym to work out
5) When there is a lack of real progress in my workouts
6) When there is a lack of music to help me fight the boredom of working out
7) When there is a lack of a trainer to hold me accountable for my workouts
8) When I am really stressed.
9) When I am trying a new workout that is really hard
10) When I am very sore from a previous workout
11) When the scale shows I made little progress.
12) Because the gym is a luxury that costs too much

Self-talk

Here are things that people say to themselves when they are exercising. Please tell me, yes or no if the statement is similar to something you say to keep at your workout

1) Almost there…
2) You really CAN do this.
3) C’mon…you did this once, you can do it again
4) No pain, no gain
5) Just do it!
6) Prove them WRONG!
7) Want to be the best, got to DO your best
8) Just do a little bit
9) If I can do that, I can do this!
10) Quitters never win
11) I want my significant other to regret that we broke up
Please tell me, yes or no, if the following tips about working out is a piece of advice you would offer to someone else.

Tips about working out

1) Being realistic with your goals is important to maintenance
2) The habit of working out frequently is slowly built up.
3) You will feel like crap for a little while but one day you will feel incredible after exercising
4) Don’t compare yourself to others
5) Do it for yourself
6) Participate in a variety of workouts
7) Take rest days
8) Reward yourself for achieving a fitness/health goal.
**APPENDIX 5:**

**PART II QUESTIONNAIRE DATA**

Table A. 1. All Questionnaire Data

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