

GOING TO THE GYM

COMPARING EXPERIENCES



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PERSPECTIVE

Experiences are purely based on someone's perspective. It is a powerful lens in which we view the world that surrounds us. People often have different perspectives on the exact same situation. An individual's perspective is based on previous experiences and biases that have either been created or passed down by whoever raised that individual. Perspective influences us to pay attention to certain aspects of an experience while neglecting others.



IMAGE 1

GOING TO THE GYM.

We live in a world where no one is perfect. Our society has enabled people to compare themselves to others even if they have never met them before just by seeing a picture. Everyone seems to be increasingly obsessed with fitness, health, and self-improvement. Going to the gym has changed vastly throughout the years. This experience has left a complex environment for both men and women. Since there has been limited time for research this paper will focus on comparing the experience of going to the gym as a woman to the same experience but just as a man. Understanding that this is a paper written by a woman as much as I will try to be unbiased and I have done my research when it comes to the male experiences, there might be discrepancies.

Gyms are dated back to 3000 years ago to ancient Persia. They had specific areas called Zurkhaneh which were for the use of physical fitness. The word "gym" however came from the word "gymnos" which in Greek means naked. Gyms were originally used so that young men of that era could study physical fitness and were a place to bathe and study. These gyms were often used to train the athletes who competed in public competitions such as the Olympics.

Gyms disappeared for a good while and the pursuit of a sculpted body was frowned upon. In the 19th century schools and colleges started building gyms inside their campuses so that their athletic programs could gain more popularity. These gyms were so that students could play social sports and games.

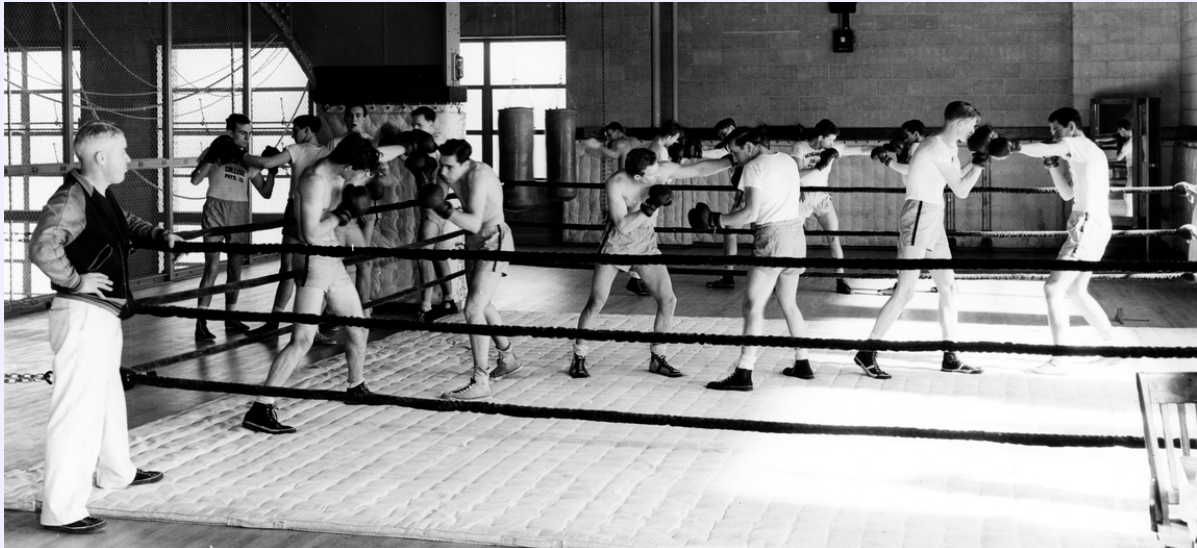


IMAGE 2

A LITTLE MORE HISTORY

Normally people credit the gymnas Hippolyte Trait for creating the first commercial gym when he opened his first club in Brussels, Belgium, and later opened one in Paris, France. In 1901 Eugen Sandow hosted the first physique contest which helped when he later promoted the “fitness lifestyle” he lived by and marketed several types of equipment he used and dietary products.

A little before that in 1844 in London, the YMCA led the way for how we see fitness today. The first buildings constructed with gyms in them date back to 1869. In the United States, on the other hand, Jack LaLanne opened the first U.S. Health club in 1939 but many doctors at the time would advise patients against lifting weights and having a lot of exercise. Even with this his club came with much success and introduced many of the machines that we see in gyms nowadays. He also pushed the idea of women lifting weights but there weren't many who were interested.

The 80s came and the success of LA Fitness and 14 Hour Fitness which were both founded in the 80s made many people interested in going to the gym. During this same period, there was a huge success of Jane Fonda's exercise videos which led many women through the door of these gyms to participate in aerobic dance classes and lift weights.

NOWADAYS

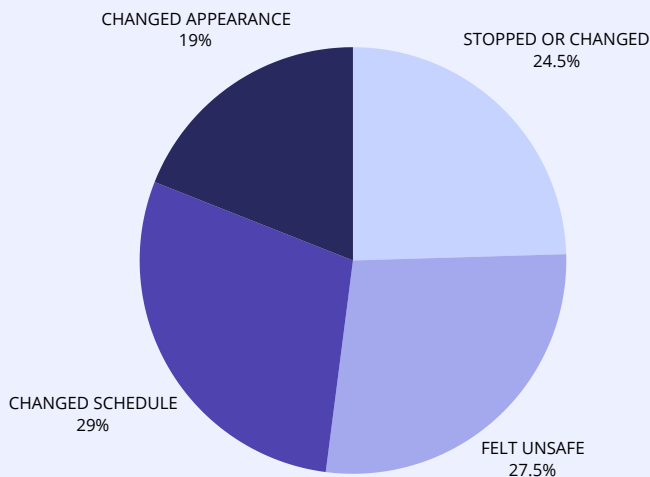
In 2023 and even through the 90's we still see many gym chains all throughout the United States and the entire world seems to be consumed with fitness. Today's gym members tend to look for more intimate gym experiences which gave fire to personal training and specific exercise facilities that cater to customers who desire a more personal touch. With advancing technologies and medicine, we can only expect an even better experience for men and women. So why is it that many women have bad experiences at the gym?



IMAGE 3

FORMS OF HARASSMENT

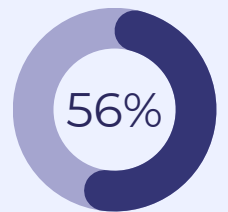
In the same study by RunRepeat they found that there were 3 main forms of harassment. Firstly, was unwanted attention. Secondly, was unwanted comments and lastly was unwanted physical contact. One out of four of female gym members experienced unwanted attention. One out of five women received unwanted comments and One out of ten of the women experienced unwanted physical contact.



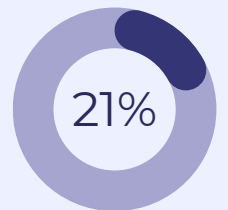
WHAT IS IT LIKE GOING TO THE GYM AS A WOMAN?

An article written by Julia Sullivan back in 2017 describes it perfectly. She wrote: “For female exercisers in big-box gyms it’s a fairly common occurrence: a not-so-subtle tap on your shoulder, followed by a dude motioning for you to take off your headphones.” Disturbances while walking to a different machine or even during a set followed by a terrible “pick-up line” is such a common occurrence, that I find myself expecting and preparing myself for this experience when I walk into a gym.

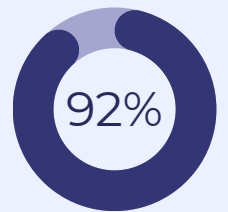
A study made by RunRepeat in June of 2021 found that out of 3,774 gym members 1107 of them female and 2667 male found that 56.37% of female gym members have experienced some sort of harassment at their gym. This number is 2.68X more than male gym members. They also found that 92.31% of these cases go unreported. In the case of the female gym members that experienced this 25.65% stopped using gyms or switched gyms. 28.69% felt unsafe and / or uncomfortable at their gym. 30.13% changed their schedule or avoided certain areas of their gym in order to avoid this experience and 20.19% of them changed their appearance when going to the gym.



WOMEN



MEN



UNREPORTED

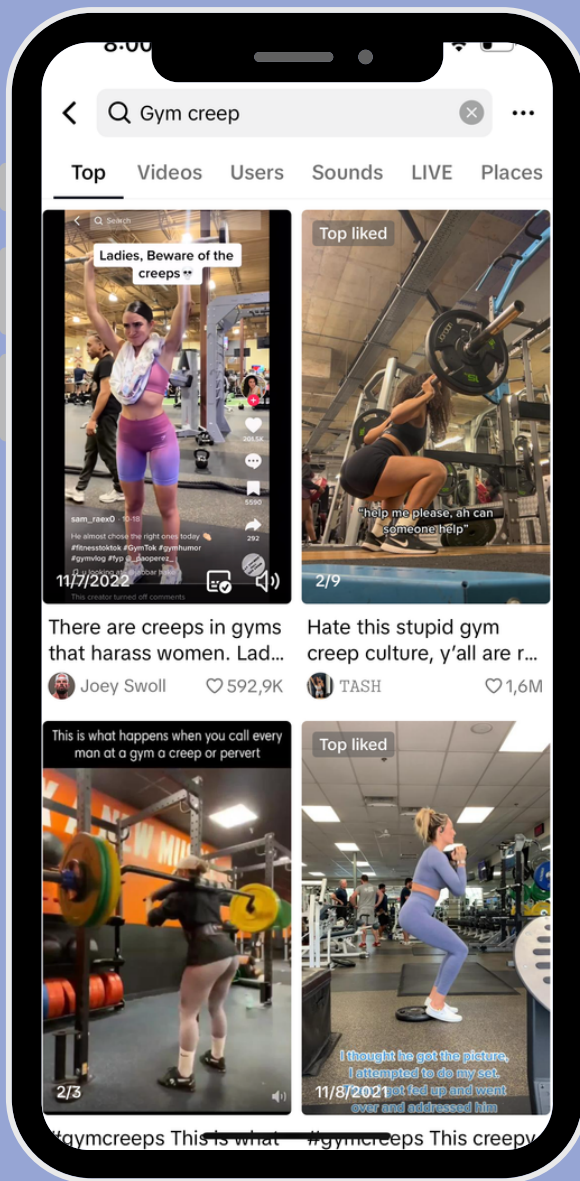
CRITISIM.

Some have suggested that it is wrong to film these people without their permission. According to a BBC article published earlier this year, some believe that these people are being unfairly targeted by the videos posted of the interaction. In this article, they interviewed an influencer in London named Natalee Barnett who has accumulated a following of 1.8 million and her videos have a total of 57 million likes. She says that these videos aren't about the men as individuals but more about making the gym a comfortable and safe environment for all especially for the women being harassed by calling out this behavior.

Throwing people off their fitness journey

Although harassment may not occur every time a woman goes to the gym it happens enough that it becomes a problem that needs to be talked about. Natalee mentions in her interview that it is a therapy for many people, she herself joined because she was really depressed. Some of the reasons people start going to the gym may be because it is a convenient way to access the equipment they wouldn't be able to afford or fit into their homes, some gyms give access to personal trainers and fitness classes, others join because of the physical and mental health benefits as mentioned by Natalee and many go to the gym as a way to achieve a certain look.

Even just hearing stories and watching videos of the harassment many women experience at the gym, discourage many women and girls from going to a gym even if they may really want to. It can really throw some people off and given what you are supposed to do at the gym it becomes even more uncomfortable.



CALLING THEM OUT

As an ever-growing platform - Tiktok has created an even bigger platform for fitness influencers. Many of them have used the platform to film their workouts and experiences at the gym. Women quickly realized that this was one way to catch this harassment on film. Searches of "Gym Creep" or "Gym Weirdo" lead to thousands of videos of mostly women but some men as well as capturing interactions with people who have been harassing them. With one quick look to the comment section, it is evident that lots of people can relate to this uncomfortable situation.

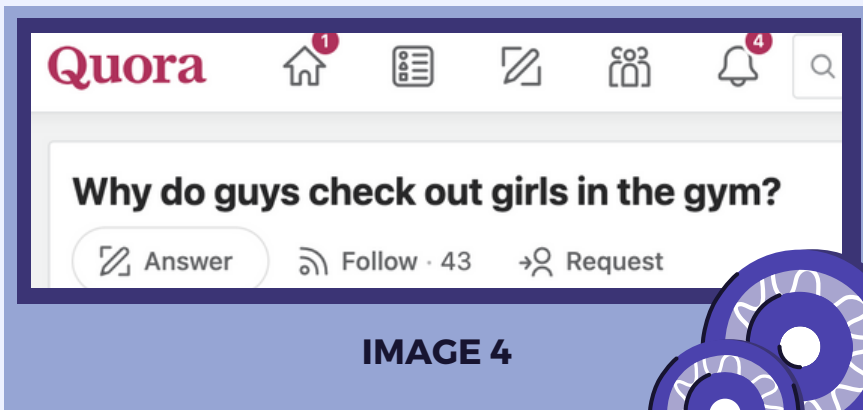


IMAGE 4

The BIG question

Since there isn't much research done on the reasoning behind harassing others at the gym - oftentimes this is because most harassers don't think that they are doing anything wrong. I decided to look up the biggest question I had on Quora - a huge platform where many people give their honest opinions on the internet. Most of the time people on Quora are just there to ask questions and to answer questions with their opinions without much consequence so although it isn't a reliable source by any means it is a source that I used to gather some understanding of the other perspective. Here are a couple of the answers I found interesting.

- Aaron Young says: "The way I feel when I see a well-developed woman's body is exhilarating. I can't believe how great they look (...) Some guys get motivated by looking at ripped pictures of men. For me, it's much more effective to look at the fit girls"
- Shulait Widawsky says: "How could a guy NOT be drawn to stare at a woman working out at the gym?"
- Tom Culp says: "Men are visual. Enough said... what else am I going to look at? Stare at the floor?"
- Luis M. Gonzalez says: "Guys check out girls at the gym because they're smoking hot and that's perfectly natural. Gym girls are usually very fit, they dress with spandex and have rock-solid curvy perfect butts. Besides, gyms are great places to socialize (unless you are fooling around while occupying the power rack. Don't do it. Some guys are serious about lifting.)
- Mark Schneider says: If the ratio is 98% men and 2% women in a gym, then for sure there is some kind of flock mentality going on that things get observed that don't fit the picture. It's primal instincts. If a gazelle walked up in a flock of lions don't you think the gazelle gets noticed?

Okay. But what about the other way around?

Some may be asking: "Well what about the male gym goers that got harassed". Of course, there are men who also experience harassment at the gym. This is not a solely female experience but it is vastly more common for women to experience harassment in a more intense way. I decided to search for the same question just the other way around. When I looked up "Why do girls check out guys in the gym" on Quora nothing came up. So I decided to search once again but this time on Google. Here are the questions that did come up:

- Do girls ever check out guys at the gym?
- Do women in the gym find themselves looking at guys at the gym?

Notice that the questions start with "do" and not "why". These questions are asking about the possibility of girls looking at guys. Many of the answers to these questions were girls saying, yes we do look at guys at the gym. Looking isn't the problem in fact most women don't have a problem with being looked at at the gym. It becomes a problem when there are uncomfortable stares, guys following them around, or even unwanted and unnecessary comments about them or their bodies.

SPEAKING FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

HOW AND WHEN DOES THE EXPERIENCE START

Since I am a woman and have spoken to many women about their feelings and experiences about the gym I will speak on my own experiences and combine them with what I think is the general experience for most women.

Going to the gym as a woman starts way before a woman even becomes a woman. As previously mentioned it is important to think about perspectives when speaking about experience because they form how we think. From a very young age girls have comments made about their bodies and with this new era of social media no matter how much these girls are protected they will be exposed to edited bodies, unrealistic expectations, and some may even experience cyberbullying. Most if not all girls at one point or another have compared themselves to another girl. This comparison can lead girls to go to the gym and in extreme cases can lead to extremely unhealthy lifestyles such as eating disorders. The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders also known as ANAD found that 95% of girls and boys with eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25. A survey done by ASAPS found that 40% of women wanted cosmetic surgery in the future.

It is important that a girl has a good reason to go to the gym because the gym can be a bad experience even without the harassment in the gym and can be amplified by the harassment experienced at the gym. According to dosomething.org “91% of women are unhappy with their bodies and resort to dieting to achieve their ideal body shape”. This experience is even worse during high school and college years they found that “58% of college-aged girls feel pressured to be a certain weight”

Women often have to think about what they are wearing/going to wear and are often blamed for their bad experiences both inside and outside of the gym because of what they are wearing. The experience of going to the gym starts when she has to think about if she wants to go to the gym and if she is ready to deal with what they might notice or experience while she is there. If she decides that she needs to or wants to go, she has to decide what she is going to wear. Some women may not think much about what they are going to wear, and others may change out of the outfit they want to wear after they think about past experiences and what happened to them or a friend when they wore similar clothing.

SPEAKING FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (PT.2)

After picking out an outfit, she might grab her water and the rest of the things she needs to complete the workout she has planned and maybe she will eat something before going. If she needs to drive to get to the gym she will probably listen to some music and even if she's just walking she will probably put her headphones in to listen to music or a podcast she's listening to. When she gets to the gym she will probably need to scan her membership card or if she's in school she might just walk in.

The experience when she walks into the gym itself will differ from person to person and from gym to gym. So now I will speak on my personal experience of going to the Bentley gym. I will walk into the gym and nod to whoever is at the front. I will put on my best "please do not speak to me face" and open the door to the bottom floor of the gym which tends to be filled with men and maybe one or two girls. Then I will walk through and put my things in the locker room. Oftentimes, I will choose to stay upstairs where the treadmills are because I want to avoid the stares and the extreme judgment from the men downstairs. Of course at any point in time I could be interrupted by a million different things and change the order in which I do these things but for the most part it stays the same.

Sometimes I need to use the machines downstairs and on those days I will probably go during the times when there aren't a lot of people at the gym so around 11 am or 10 pm at night and I will probably wear a really baggy shirt and some sweatpants.

Sometimes I'll see some of my friends at the gym and I'll talk to them for a while or work out with them but it doesn't really happen much because of the unconventional times I work out.

I've lost count of the times I have been stared at and followed at the gym but I can say that most of the time it is just that. Other times it can escalate to them coming up to me and saying I am doing my workout wrong and "correcting" my form by excessively touching me or having comments made to me by a group of guys or one guy might approach and ask you out and then after they are rejected they will probably curse you out so the whole gym can hear or there was one time where a guy kept dropping weights near me to try and get my attention and after he did he tried to tell me that I was spending too much time on a machine that he wanted to use.

My experience at the gym is okay for the most part but it is never amazing because of all the aspects mentioned before.

INTERVIEWING

I know many men who go to the gym consistently so I interviewed them to learn more about the male experience when going to the gym.

Like women, many men's experience when going to the gym starts before going to the gym. Speaking with them I noticed that most of them started going to the gym because of a combination of two things. Firstly, most of their friends started going to the gym and they thought "Why not?". It was a good way to spend more time with their friends. I noticed that going to the gym for men is oftentimes a group activity at first. Secondly, they had the desire to achieve a certain "look".

When interviewing them I asked them questions that I asked myself and other girls about their experience at the gym.

The first question was: "When does the experience of going to the gym start for you"

2 of them said it started when they called their friends to set up a time to meet at the gym or when

The other 4 said that they go at a regular time and their experience really starts when they walk through the doors of the gym.

Question #2 was "Do you notice a lot of people looking at you?"

2 of them said no and the other 4 said yes. The follow-up question for the men who said yes was: "What gender do you most notice?" All of them said men are the ones they notice looking most of the time.

The third question I asked was: "Have you ever felt harassed at the gym?". Although one of them asked for further explanation on what I meant by harassment all 6 said no.

Question #4: "Have you ever been approached at the gym?". All of them have been approached in a friendly manner. When asked what were the interactions a couple of responses were "She asked me how many sets I had left on the machine" the other said, "One guy asked me how to use the machine properly."

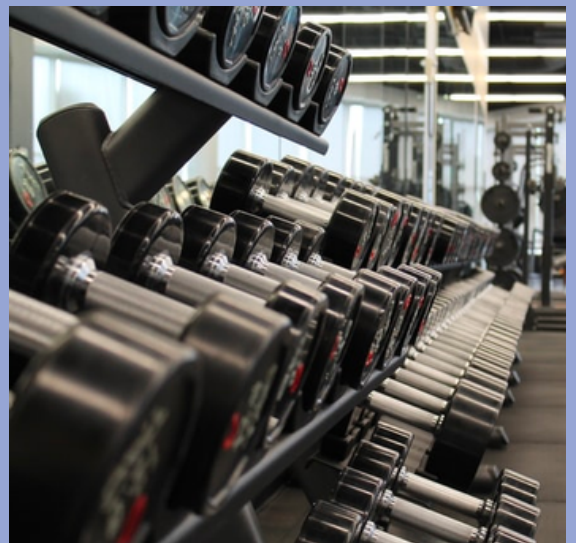


IMAGE 5

Question #5

Have you ever felt intimidated by a woman at the gym?

- all 6 responded with never.

Question #6

Have you ever not gone to the gym because you were worried that you would be looked at, interrupted, annoyed, pestered, or harassed?

- all of them responded with no or never

Question #7

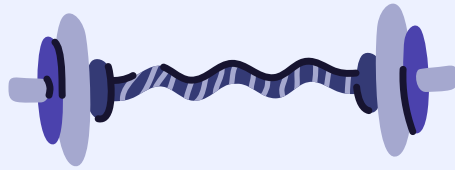
Have you ever approached a girl at the gym?

- 3 of them said no
- 3 of them said yes. When questioned further all 3 had different responses. One said that he only approached women at the gym to ask them about how long they were going to use a machine. Another said that he had approached girls he knew at the gym and sometimes they would be with friends that they didn't know and he would talk to them as well. The last one said that he asked out a girl before but he noticed her looking at him a lot and they had exchanged many pleasantries before he approached her. He told me to mention that they went on several dates after so "it was definitely reciprocated"

Question #8

What was your worst experience at the gym?

- 4 of them said that they never had a bad experience at the gym.
- One of them said that if he had a bad experience at the gym he doesn't remember.
- The other said that he didn't have a bad experience at the gym but he had a story about his friend that went to the gym and someone pulled out a firearm on someone else and his friend witnessed that.



Question #9

In a general sense do you believe that most men have a similar experience as you?

- all of them said yes

Question #10

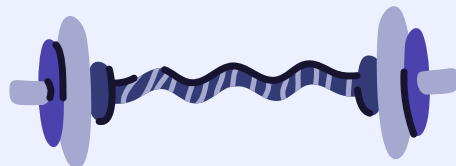
Have you ever witnessed a girl being harassed?

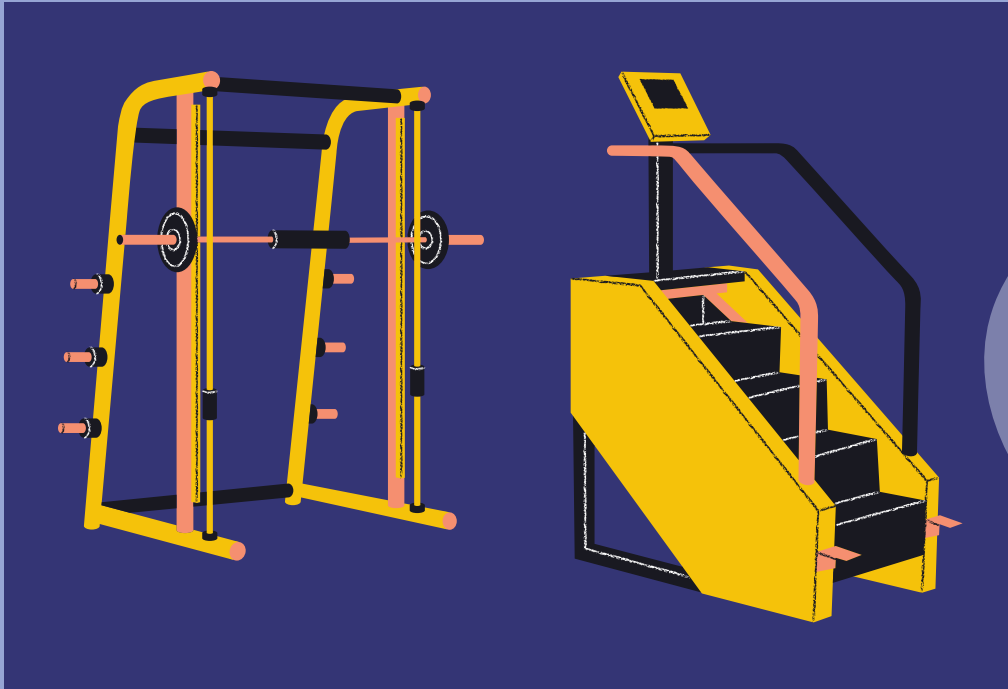
- Surprisingly all of them said no

Question #11

Do you believe most women at gyms get harassed?

- 2 of them said they don't believe women get harassed at the gym
- the others said something along the lines of women probably get harassed but I have never seen it happen so I don't think it happens very often.





gym equipment

MEMORIES

In general, it seems that the experience of going to the gym as a woman has its similarities and differences from the experience that men have. It is interesting to see how these experiences are affected by the perceptions we have and how our past experiences have shaped them. Specifically, it is interesting to note memory and how different people pick up on different things. When I recall an experience such as going to the gym I am often using my Long-term memory because even though I go to the gym pretty often I have to use a lot of my past experiences to form my opinions. When I asked some of the men in my life about their experiences of going to the gym they were also using their long-term memory which is known to be faulty and it takes time and effort to get the information to stick unless it becomes an intense or core memory. So it makes sense that the men that I talked to and most men in general don't notice women being harassed because oftentimes they haven't experienced that themselves so they don't really pick up on it and because it is not a direct experience it might take several experiences for them to really notice the women around them getting harassed.

DESIGN CHOICES

One of the main and intentional design choices made by gyms is their layout and space allocation. For example, in the Bentley gym, the decision to put all of the machines on one floor and all of the cardio on another is a very intentional choice. If I was in charge of changing the gym I would completely change its layout.

On this side of the gym, there are long mirrors from the floor to the ceiling. While talking to girls about their experiences at the gym I found that many women like to look at themselves while doing workouts specifically while on the treadmill. I can imagine that this might be beneficial for some men who may like to do the same thing.

I put some cycling machines facing the other side because there are windows that look into a corridor of the outside gym which may be interesting to look at if someone is doing cardio.

The black part of this design would be a small dark room with color-changing lights and yoga mats. In this room, there would also be mirrors which would make the room seem bigger. People would be able to sign up for yoga classes that would be offered by the university.

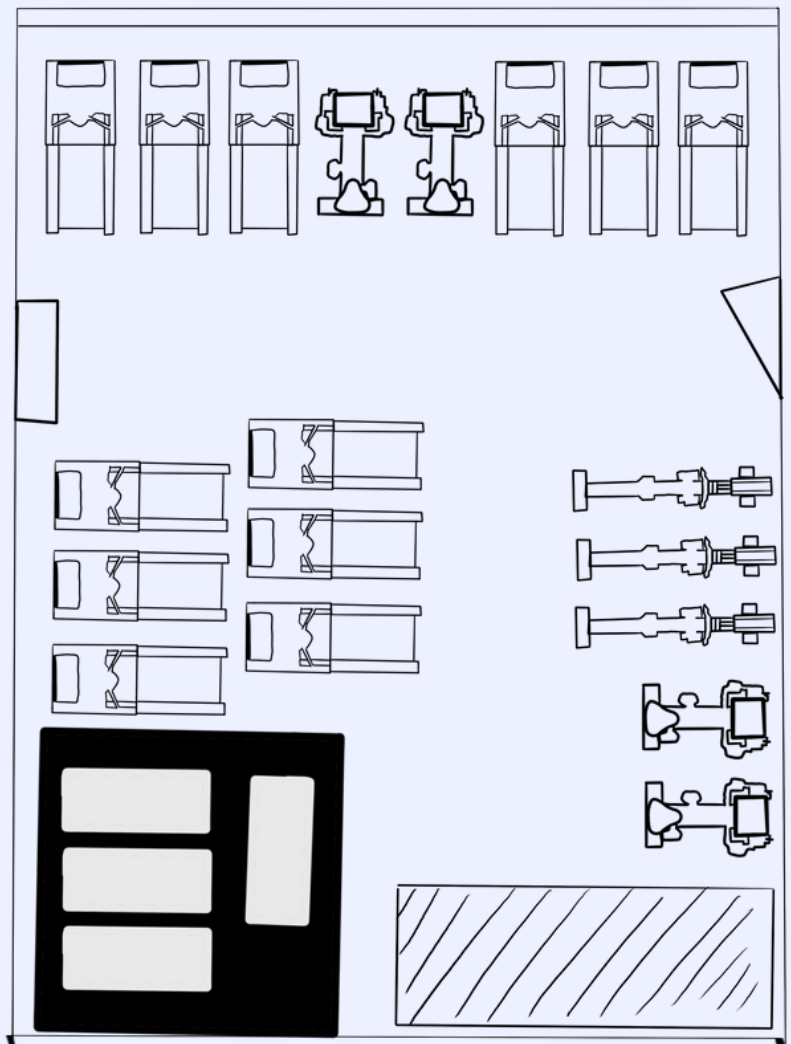
The striped part of the room would be a carpeted area with small weights, jump ropes, and boxes amongst other things to help finish the cardio room

my layout

I am not an interior designer but if I were to be designing for a better female experience at Bentley University this is how I would layout the first floor of the gym.

I chose to put all of the cardio equipment on the bottom floor so that women don't feel as intimidated to go to the gym because most of the women would be downstairs.

I put most of the treadmills facing this way because there are beautiful long windows on this side of the gym where you can see the field. When there are treadmills that face the natural light is a better experience for anyone who may like to walk outside more but may not want to because of the weather.



Equipment choices

Gym owners and designers for gyms carefully choose what equipment they will provide to meet the needs of their customers.

If I was re-designing the Bentley gym I would offer all of the machines it has now such as the Stairmaster, free weights, and all the other functional fitness equipment but I would also include a yoga room as mentioned before. A dance and free movement expression room that also includes ballet bars and other equipment to appeal to many different audiences.

I would also update the gym equipment and maybe partner with Pelaton to offer students an interactive experience with virtual classes that they can choose to use or not. I would also make sure that students are able to connect their phones to the cardio equipment so that they can track their steps and how many calories they are burning based on their personal profile. By connecting students to their equipment it makes it easy for the equipment to suggest workouts for the student that is in line with their goals. This would make it safer for students to not overwork themselves and get advice from a real healthcare professional

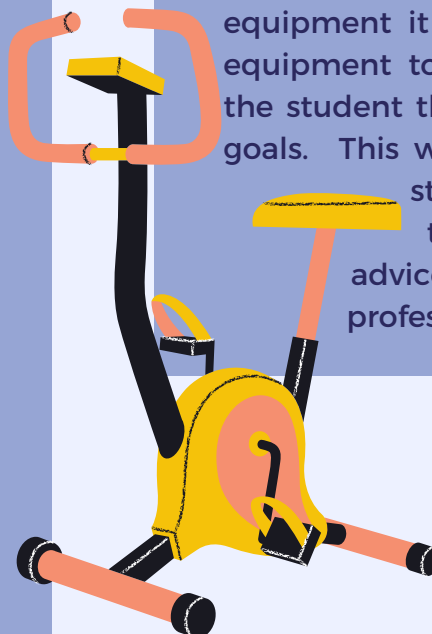
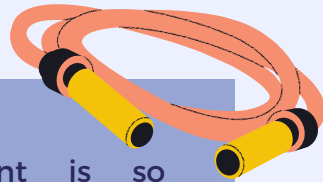
Because the equipment is so technological I would make sure that there is a discreet panic button that would alert a gym employee immediately to go check up on the situation and would also start recording the interaction.

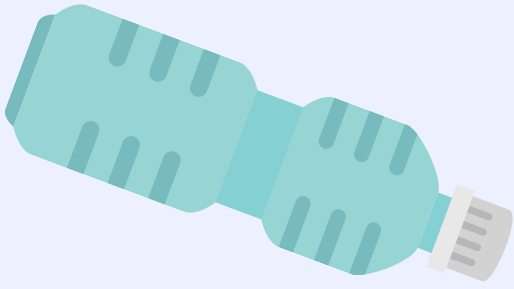
In the locker rooms, I would put biometric lockers that can only be opened by a password or fingerprint so that no one has to experience someone stealing something from them.

In order to prevent injuries I would also install a “cool down room” for students to cool down their bodies before going home. This room would have amenities such as massage chairs, foam rollers, and a stretching area to support post-workout recovery.

So that girls and boys feel more comfortable going to the gym it is important to build community and the way I would do that is through social events, classes, and challenges which would help the community to grow together.

To prevent harassment, other than the equipment and cameras all around the gym I would also implement a reporting app system where students can anonymously report a situation that happened in and around the gym.





Hydration

hydration is very important so I would have bio-degradable water bottles and refill stations all over the gym which would make it a better experience for both men and women because I've lost count of the amount of times that I have forgotten my waterbottle at home when going to the gym and I don't drink as much water as I probably should. I would also, make posters around the gym telling people not to forget to eat and drink water.

Posters

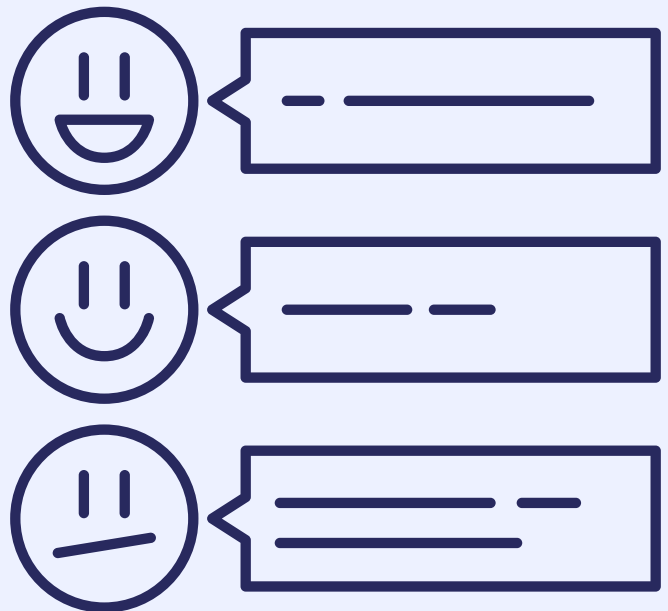
On the poster note, I would also have many posters about how to identify an eating disorder and how to help a friend that you may think has an eating disorder. I would also make the gym host mental health sessions with health care providers that can help build a balanced diet and help people with eating disorders recover in a healthy way.

INTENTIONAL INCLUSION

There are a couple of things in the Bentley gym that aren't inclusive. The main thing I think of immediately which can gravely impact how different people interact with the gym is making an accessible gym. Firstly all gyms but especially Bentley's gym should have automatic doors. Some people with disabilities really struggle to open doors so it should be an amenity that is included for them. There should also be an elevator in the middle of the gym where students who need the elevator don't have to leave the gym and then come back in again just to access the full gym. The Bentley gym doesn't; have accessible parking which is also a big hassle for people who need it and aren't able to access the Bentley gym fully because of it. There should also be accessible lockers for students who may need it. Bentley has been really struggling to adapt to people who are legally blind or who have difficulty seeing. Braille should not only be all over the floors so that people can guide themselves throughout the gym independent of who they are but there should also be braille signage on the equipment. All of the virtual classes that would be provided should have subtitles and should be extremely descriptive for students who may want to follow along but can't visually see what the teacher is doing. A sensory room should also be included in the gym for students who may need a low-stimulating area when they are becoming overstimulated.

Gender-neutral areas

Although my research is mostly based on the two main genders, it would be foolish to ignore that not everyone fits into that and there should be gender-neutral bathrooms and areas for them to feel included and heard by the community that they are also a part of.



Feedback is a great way of improving on every level. Students and staff that frequent the Bentley gym or any gym for that matter should have a good feedback system or app. They should be able to give their feedback and opinions on how the gym is doing and ways to improve the experience for next time.

Obviously, the gym isn't going to be perfect for everyone but getting feedback and implementing these changes is a great way to start making the experience better for all in a variety of different levels.



Customer feedback Kiosks

These little machines outside stores that allow customers to rate their experience inside the store or place are called customer feedback kiosks or customer satisfaction terminals. These devices are supposed to collect real-time feedback from customers about their experience, wherever they might be. Normally they have a bunch of smiley faces that are supposed to represent a customer's satisfaction level. Customers should press the button that best summarizes their experience and this quick and simple feedback system helps determine how successful the company is in retaining and satisfying their customers. Once companies have this information it makes it easier for them to improve their customer service, product quality, and overall experience,

I would suggest putting one right outside the gym doors that way there is a direct feedback line between the customers or gym-goers in this case which can lead to improvement on the part of the gyms.

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IMAGE 3 -

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