

**Women and Weights:  
Lived Experiences of Women Within a Mixed-Gendered Gym**

by

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**Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

**Abstract**

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The gym has the potential to be a valuable resource for adult physical activity. Yet, despite this, the gym environment remains a particularly underdeveloped area of study. Women's gym experiences in particular is an area of research that needs a greater focus, as currently the literature tends to focus on women's gym experiences in extreme or isolated contexts. Thus, this research sought to illuminate the female, gendered experience within a traditional, mixed gendered gym context. Through the use of unstructured life story interviews, this research illuminated the dominant gendered expectations that women perceive within the gym space and how these expectations interact with/in women's gym use. Through this exploration this research also discussed what women perceived could be changed in order to benefit their gendered gym use.

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### My Story

*I grew up playing sports and was often voted the Most Valuable Player, team captain, and athlete of the year. As a teenager, my part-time work revolved around fitness too. I was a lifeguard, swimming and aerobics instructor, as well as a coach and referee. In later years, I continued to focus my career on physical health and became a personal trainer and nutrition specialist. One might think it was my background in athletics that drew me to a career in fitness, but this was not the case.*

*My passion for fitness did not grow from my own athletic ability in sports and exercise, but rather from the struggle my family members faced to get physically active. For as long as I can remember, my mother has always been on a diet and struggled to exercise. Later, my mother's struggles also became true for my two younger sisters. Being very athletic myself, I grew frustrated with my family. I was constantly pushing them to try exercising as a way to feel happier about their bodies. Due to time commitments, organized sport was not an option for my busy mother of four children, and my sisters felt that their skill level would not allow them to participate. Consequently, going to the gym seemed like a logical solution.*

*Over the years, I constantly encouraged them to be physically active by lifting weights at the gym. I recommended books, and offered to work out with them and teach them how to use the gym. I even went so far as to provide them with free memberships, but they still would not go to the gym. When I asked why, their responses always used to be the same; "I am too fat to go to the gym. I don't want others to see me. I have no idea what I am doing. What is the point of lifting weights? I need to lose fat, not gain muscle." They even expressed their concern for my own choices saying that if I lifted too much weight my already "athletic legs" would become too large and unfeminine.*

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*Watching my family members struggle to get fit opened my eyes to many other women who face the same challenges. I wanted to help women with their struggles and thus, I pursued a career in personal training with a specialty in nutrition and wellness. Working as a personal trainer I soon realized the extent to which gyms disempower women. As a personal trainer, part of my job was to meet with new members and discuss their goals, skill level, and to sell them a prescribed personal training program. Through the initial meetings, it became clear to me that several new female members were scared and nervous of entering the gym, and at the same time they were desperate to lose weight or change their bodies.*

*During my years as a personal trainer, I sat through countless consultations, hearing different versions of the same story. My personal training consultations left me feeling deflated, as most of the women with whom I met, simply could not afford personal training. As a result women were sent into the gym to “figure it out”. Many gyms offer some guidance in the form of an orientation, which consisted of showing women how to use the cardio machines, suggesting some introductory aerobics classes, as well as demonstrating how to use the circuit style weight machines. The weight room is not included in an orientation.*

*Typically, the end result was many women stuck strictly to the aerobic classes and cardio machines. Some women would dabble in the circuit weight machines, but only machines in which they felt would target their “problem areas”. However, in numerous cases, women cancelled their memberships altogether because they did not know how to use all aspects of the gym and did not get the results they were looking for out of their membership.*

*It was these experiences that made me question the gym environment for women. Why are women so intimidated and scared of the weight training space? Why can some women push through their fears and be successful, while others default to cardio equipment and/or aerobic*

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*classes or non-participation? These are questions that need to be addressed in order to stop the perpetual cycle of women's avoidance, misuse of the gym, and attrition rates.*

### **Introduction**

The benefits of physical activity are well known across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). Despite this knowledge, levels of physical activity are low amongst Canadians. According to Statistics Canada, only 17% of men and 14% of women are meeting the physical activity recommendation of 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week. In particular, women have alarming rates of low muscular strength. For example, the 2007-2009 Canadian Health Measures Survey indicated that less than one third of females were able to complete just one repetition of the muscular strength curl-up test (Statistics Canada, 2011). This is concerning, as having musculoskeletal fitness has “substantial health benefits, particularly among women and older people, including decreased risk of mortality, increased mobility, less functional impairment, greater independence, reduced likelihood of falls, lower levels of pain, and an overall increase in quality of life” (Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 2).

Women's low muscular strength levels, combined with overall levels of inactivity is a significant health concern. As such, it is imperative that we understand the gym environment, as the gym has the potential to be a valuable resource for adult physical activity (Craike, Symons & Zimmermann, 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Yet, despite the important role that that gym may play, research within the gym environment is a particularly underdeveloped area of study (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). There is even less research that focuses on the uniqueness of a women's exercise and gym based experiences. Of the limited research that does explore women's gym-based experiences, most has focused on women within an extreme context, such as bodybuilding (Bolin, 1992; Brace-Govan, 2002; Patton, 2001; Shea, 2001).

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Exploring the unique challenges that women face is essential, as in today's society women are subjected to differing, gendered cultural ideals of how a woman should look and act (Markula, 1995). Understanding women's experiences within a gym is thus crucial, as exercise is a tool that women may utilize to bring their bodies closer to this ideal (Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012). It has been suggested that these cultural bodily ideals are so deeply rooted that women may not be consciously aware of how exercising to achieve this ideal may inhibit them from participation in other activities (Shaw, 1994; Shaw, 1996). As such, research needs to explore not just women's exercise behaviours, but also the sociocultural context that influences and reinforces these exercise choices. Salvatore & Marecek (2010) spoke to this saying:

Despite the central role that exercise plays in many women's lives— through its relationship with sports and athletics; with body image and (dis)satisfaction; and with mood and stress regulation—few researchers have addressed girls' and women's exercise behaviour and the sociocultural context in which women make decisions about how, when, and why to engage in which types of exercise (p. 556).

In today's fitness industry there are many choices for female gym users. A growing trend includes gender specific gyms and designated gender specific gym spaces (Abel & Buff, 2010). This trend is seen with the success of the Curves Franchise, a women-only fitness and weight loss center which has “grown to be the largest fitness franchise world-wide” (Miller & Miller, 2010, p. 7). This growing trend raises the question of why so many women are choosing to exercise in women-only spaces? What aspects of the mixed-gendered environment are causing women to seek alternative, women-only exercise options?

Using the methodology of feminist-informed narrative inquiry, the purpose of this research is to illuminate the female, gendered experience within a traditional, mixed gendered

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gym context. Through unstructured, life story interviews this research sought to draw light onto the dominant gendered expectations that women perceive within the gym space, and uncover how these expectations intersect with, and inform women's gym use. The illumination of these often silenced narratives, will work to begin the discussion on the changes that women perceive would benefit their gendered gym usage.

### **Literature Review**

Today's current society is governed by patriarchy. According to Johnson (2004), "patriarchy a set of symbols and ideas that make up culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to literature and film" (p. 29). Within a patriarchal culture, ideas of masculinity become associated with the norm and simply "being human", thus leaving womanhood and femininity marginalized to the position of "other" (Johnson, 2004, p. 29). A patriarchal society itself is oppressing, and the people that are socialized within this society tend to accept, identify with, and participate in it (Johnson, 2004). Oppression then becomes the status quo, and the only thing required of individuals for the oppression to exist is to do nothing.

I will begin this section by exploring the developmental aspects of how and why women are exposed to the patriarchal gender norms. I will then review how this gender socialization relates to female's experiences with physical activity. Next, I discuss how these cultural ideals then translate to the gym environment through a discussion on women's motivation for gym participation. A discussion of the cultural environment of the gym will follow, including an exploration of a knowledge gap for women in the weight room. Lastly, I review the constraints literature including constraint negotiation strategies.

#### **Gender Norms**

As previously stated, within our patriarchal society being masculine is the norm, while femininity/being female is considered "other" (Johnson, 2004). When discussing masculinity and femininity there is often a tendency to refer to males verses females. Yet, it is important to note that sex and gender are not the same. According to West and Zimmerman's (1987) definition sex is determined through "the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying

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persons as male and female” (p. 127). In contrast, gender is an achieved status that is “constructed through psychological, cultural and social means” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 125). Although gender is an achieved status, one may argue that, much like sex, gender can too become somewhat fixed, as we cannot stop “doing” gender; it becomes part of our basic identity (Lorber, 2001, p. 180).

Becoming gendered is the product of social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Unlike sex, “gender is not just natural, or something one is, but rather something we all produce through our actions. By repeatedly acting ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ we actively create those categories” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 14). Through social interactions individuals learn what is expected, and then act and react in these expected ways (Lorber, 2004). Through these processes gender norms become sustained, reproduced and legitimized (West & Zimmerman, 1987). They become a “timeless truth” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 14).

Butler (1990) describes gender as a performative act. Upon birth, a child becomes gendered not from an innate biological affinity for masculinity or femininity, but rather this is constructed through the repetition of a specific discourse. This discourse is culturally constructed, and lays out what is the normative behaviour for being female/male (Butler, 1990).

Children become gendered from infancy. Upon birth, individuals become assigned a sex category based upon the appearance of the infant’s genitalia (Lorber, 2004). Butler (1993) discussed this gendering as medical interpellation, in that through medical interpellation the body becomes labeled as male or female. Yet, from that moment the sexed body then becomes gendered through the repetition of normative discursive powers (Butler, 1993). As such, the infant’s sex category then becomes a gender status through the naming, dress, and use of gender markers such as gender appropriate toys etc. (Lorber, 2001; Lorber, 2004). Parents and other

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adults, through treating children differently based upon the child's gender, then reinforce this gendered status. This is shown by individuals being gentler with girls, while 'roughhousing' with boys (Lorber, 2001, p. 186).

The school system further encourages this separation by discouraging children of opposite sex from playing together in games or sports. Men are typically seen as being "bigger, stronger and wiser", while women are often presented as fragile, weak, and requiring of men's help (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 138). Thus, "little boys appropriate the gender ideal of being able to affect the physical and social environment through exercise and physical strength ... [while] little girls learn to value appearance by managing themselves as ornamental objects" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 141).

The managing of gender within society is disciplined by an anonymous power that organizes individuals within the culturally and historically prescribe societal norms (Foucault, 1977). Gender norms are enforced through both the informal sanctions from peers, as well as by formal punishment from authority (Lorber, 2004). Therefore, society holds individuals accountable for doing gender correctly. If we "fail to go gender appropriately, we as individuals – not the institutional arrangements – may be called [into] account" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 146). Most individuals voluntarily accept societies prescribed gendered norms, as these norms become deeply embedded into the individuals' sense of identity and self-worth (Lorber, 2001). As such, we as individuals within this society reinforce this discreet discipline through our perceivably natural self-surveillance (Foucault, 1977).

The role that exercise plays in women's lives are thus rooted in the ideals of what it is to be female within a gendered society. As such, due to this gendered socialization, women may



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begin to view exercise as a means of managing their femininity and their appearance (Dworkin, 2003). The question remains, how does one learn the gender order of physical activity?

### **Gender Norms and Physical Activity**

Regardless of gender, everyone is encouraged to lead an active lifestyle (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Yet, how one is introduced to physical activity and the role that it plays in one's life may differ based upon gender. As such, when it comes to physical activity, gender plays a large role in segregating what is acceptable for women's fitness from men's fitness (Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009).

Previous research demonstrates the school environment is key to exposing students to healthy behaviours, such as physical activity (Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009; Craike, Symons & Zimmerman, 2011; Van Daalen, 2005; Cockburn & Clark, 2001). For example, in a study conducted on youth in both middle and high school, Craike, Symons and Zimmermann (2011) found that schools provide key opportunities for physical activity. When those opportunities are restricted or reduced, there is a subsequent decrease in student physical activity. In particular, Craike *et al* found female students had the fewest opportunities and as a result, the lowest levels of physical activity. In addition, other research has demonstrated that female students drop out of physical education (PE) classes earlier than males, which has a long term negative impact on their levels of physically activity (Van Daalen, 2005).

PE class is a space where young females are faced with many challenges. For example, PE forces females to participate publicly amongst their male peers, which may lead to feelings of ineptness and ridicule/teasing over their bodies and their exercise abilities (Van Daalen, 2005). This is concerning in that, as adolescent girls become self-conscious of their bodies, the presence of males in exercise spaces can strongly affect adolescent females' frequency and quality of

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physical activity. Upon entering middle school, some girls prefer to avoid the intimidating presence of males by having female only PE classes, and may feel more comfortable with same-sex teachers (Van Daalen, 2005).

Cockburn and Clark (2002) suggested that the very nature of PE class (revealing clothing, bodily expressions, the need to sweat and get dirty, etc.) exposes young women's 'feminine deficit'. This feminine deficit is felt when young women are unable to measure up to the socially constructed ideal body image, which leaves girls feeling embarrassed about their bodies. Many young women will then drop out of PE class, or limit their participation as a way to protect their self-image and avoid displaying an image counter to that of the coveted feminine image.

Through PE class, females began to see physical activity as being attached to proving one's athletic abilities rather than exercising for fun or health benefits (Van Daalen, 2005). Larsson, Fagrell and Redelius' (2009) review of PE teaching methods, revealed that teachers perceive male students as dominating gym time and space, and were generally seen as more capable in their athletic abilities. This gender divide was reinforced through teaching evaluation standards. That is, female students were taught that they should not feel obligated to perform as well as males, and were often times held to different grading standards. It is through these gendered evaluation practices that females internalize feelings of being weaker and less athletic than males their age (Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009).

Within a school environment, PE class first socializes youth into exercising. Yet, although both boys and girls are taught at the same time and within the same walls, gender segregation has a tendency to emerge (Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009, p. 14). This gender segregation is apparent through the unequal opportunities, disempowering grading standards, as well the perceived self-consciousness young women report about their bodies. Yet, issues of gendered

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exercise socialization also exist outside of the classroom, such as in afterschool sports and activities.

Research has demonstrated that through sport, boys are encouraged to utilize space much differently than girls. Wearing (1989) argued that unlike girls, young men are encouraged to claim space and attempt challenging bodily tasks. As a result, women do not realize their full bodily potential, nor claim physical spaces. Without being trained to overcome these limitations, women are often left feeling self-conscious and incapable.

As discussed, girls are taught the gendered nature of exercise from the early ages of infancy. From a young age, society teaches girls to “polarize (heterosexual) masculinity and (heterosexual) femininity and their associated collective identities” (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002, p. 661). This then leads to an avoidance of exercises that may threaten the female identity by being unable to measure up to the socially constructed ideal body image, as well as limits their abilities to claim space and utilize their body’s full potential (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002).

This early socialization creates the foundations of how women view exercise as adults. Due to this gendered exercise socialization, even before entering the gym space many women have perceived ideals and expectations of what is it to be female and how females are expected to behave. As such, understanding the socialization and gendered norms is imperative to understanding the female gym experience.

### **Motivation and Gym Participation**

Due to gender socialization, motivations for physical activity most likely will differ based upon an individual’s gender. Further, it is important to understand gym motivation, as it plays a key role both directly and indirectly in their physical activity participation (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001). As such, motivation for exercise is an essential component of a women’s gym experience.

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It has been a commonly supported concept, that leisure participation is positively influenced through an individual's motivation to obtain enjoyment and health benefits (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Loucks-Atkinson & Mannell, 2011). Based upon this concept, the gym may not be considered as leisure, as most women do not seek enjoyment from exercising, but rather relate working out at the gym to torture (Dworkin, 2003). Indeed, exercising is not considered enjoyable for many women, as several studies have demonstrated that working out is simply a means to an end. More specifically, Pridgeon and Grogan (2012) found that for many women "the gym was merely a means of obtaining the ideal body image, which is to be flaunted outside the gym" (p. 395). Thus, enjoyment is often not a motivator to get women exercising.

Health benefits may not motivate women to exercise either. Dworkin (2003) conducted an ethnographic study on women's gym habits that aimed to understand why participants exercise at the gym. While all respondents alluded to the health benefits of exercising at the gym, their actions were found to be contradictory to their mantras. That is, while reporting they exercise for health benefits, participants noted that they worked out in pain, while sick, or with injuries. Working out in any of these conditions may cause further bodily harm, and as such is contradictory to good health.

Perhaps the most common motivation that women report with respect to exercise is weight loss (Craig & Liberti, 2007; Crossley, 2006; Dworkin, 2003). The desire to lose weight can have a strong effect on the types of gym exercises women choose. For example, while men's motivation for building muscle may lead them to choose weight training, women's motivation for losing weight may lead them to seek fat burning exercises such as cardiovascular machines that burn calories (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Frederick and Shaw (1995) demonstrated that exercise motivated by body concerns might actually constrain individuals *into* particular

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activities. That is, even though enjoyment is low, women may choose to participate in pursuits such as aerobics to achieve their desire for weight loss.

It is important to understand what motivates women to exercise as it plays a key role in successful ongoing participation, as one's ability to adhere to gym participation is rooted in intrinsic motivations (Crossley, 2006). This is problematic for many women, as weight loss motives are extrinsic in nature and may only lead to short-term gym participation (Iso-Ahola, Hamberger, Savage, Oviatt, Goldstein, & Ambach, 2006). Thus, understanding women's motivations and body image struggles is imperative to understanding their gym participation.

### *Motivation and Gym Participation – Cultural Bodily Ideals*

As noted above, many women report exercising because they are striving for an ideal body. Dworkin (2003) found that women work out to obtain a certain *look* that can be described on a continuum ranging from supermodel thin, to toned and athletic. This slender, toned body ideal is not easily achieved, and may cause women to feel inadequate and constrained with regard to exercise choices that they feel will help them achieve an idealized *look* (Dworkin, 2003; Sassatelli, 1999). Cultural body ideals are deeply rooted so that women may not be consciously aware of how exercising to achieve this ideal may inhibit them from participation in other activities, such as weightlifting (Shaw, 1994; Shaw, 1996). More specifically, women may choose only exercises that they think will help them achieve an ideal body, thereby ignoring others that they may enjoy or might have positive implications for their health (Mansfield, 2011; Shaw 1994).

As mentioned above, the idealized female image has evolved into one that is more accepting of a muscular physique, as opposed to the super thin, non-body that has historically dominated (Bolin, 1992). Mansfield (2010) attributed the change in standard to the Jane Fonda

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1980's aerobic movement, and media's impact on women's body ideals. Markula (1995) argues that societal standards are set for women, and aerobics serves as a means to achieving this ideal. Although women participate in aerobics and work toward a bodily ideal, Markula further suggests that aerobicizers privately question these prescribed body and exercise requirements.

Dworkin and Messner (2002) suggest that this intense focus on bodily management is a modern representation of Foucault's "docile body" (p. 23), in that women learn to be complicit to the limiting and oppressive physical standards. The female body is represented as never being perfect, and much of women's leisure time is spent on attempts to improve their bodies (Wearing, 1998). Women then compare their bodies against other on their abilities to uphold these standards. Foucault (1977) refers to this process of normalized judgement, in that women will compare, separate, measure, conform, and define differences amongst other women. Although many women will not be aware of the normalizing judgment, it has become standard for women to informally judge and measure themselves/others based upon these cultural norms and expectations (Berbary, 2012). This constant self-monitoring can result in an endless endeavour wherein women are never fully successful. Thus, women are made to feel inferior and unsatisfied with their bodies (Wearing, 1998).

Markula (1995) argues that women are exposed to a 'male gaze' that dictates the standards of the ideal female body. The gaze prescribes the socially acceptable female form, and women then must work to please this gaze (Markula, 1995). Fitness spaces are arenas that enable the male gaze, as they are environments where women work to tone their bodies to become desirable to the opposite sex (Manfeild, 2011).

This gaze, although masculine, is not only enacted by males gazing upon females, but rather is "ubiquitously societal" (Markula, 1995, p. 437). For instance, in Dworkin's (2003)

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study of women gym motivations, several women participants indicated a desire to exercise as a means of looking good in the eyes of both men, and women onlookers (Dworkin, 2003). It was found that even if a male partner expressed a desire for their female partners to reject the thin, weak feminine ideal, the female partners themselves would still strive for the more dominate body ideology. This would suggest that the gaze of society is a strong and influential force for many women.

It should be noted that there might be different notions of femininity and ideal beauty across cultures and race. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2004) suggested that the current North American ideal notions of beauty are not only sexist, but also racist and ablest. The white, heterosexual, thin woman is held to the highest standards of beauty, while women of colour or non-heterosexuality rarely get recognized in images of mainstream beauty (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2004; Mansfield, 2011). Our patriarchal society thus oppresses non-mainstream forms of beauty, and we as individuals within this society tend to accept, identify with, and participate in it (Johnson, 2004). This projection of the ideal standard of white, heterosexual, and thin then acts to silence the potential ‘sexual threats’ that the bodies of both women of colour and the LGBTQ community provide to the presumed normality of white heterosexuality (McDonald , 2002, p. 382). These bodies are sexual threats in that if the normalcy of the white, heterosexual is troubled with other ideals of beauty, the governing societal ideals of patriarchy are then questioned. Thus, the very nature of how we as a society are governed is then called into question.

Similarly, the ideal body is one that is youthful. Middle-aged women are taught to conceal their age, and to feel flattered to be told they look younger than they are (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2004). Media rarely shows images of fit, older women, as “flabless, firm muscles” do not have the same appeal on “old, wrinkly, bent, grey-haired” women (Markula,

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1995, p. 442). As a result, women are forced to continually monitor their aging bodies against an unrealistic societal male gaze, in order remain as legitimate sexual objects within society—a position that women are often disciplined into maintaining as a goal of self-worth within a patriarchal society.

As previously discussed, while the ideal body ranges from thin to toned, all aspects of the spectrum result in a constant self-monitoring and self-improvement for women. Although many women are not aware of certain forms of discursive discipline, it has become standard for women to informally judge and measure themselves/others based upon these cultural norms and expectations (Berbary, 2012). As a result of this constant minoring, women are left feeling inferior and unsatisfied with their bodies (Wearing, 1998).

These issues of cultural bodily ideals are important when exploring the lived experiences of women within a mixed gender gym, in that many women view exercise is a means of achieving these ideals, and will participate in these exercises to bring their bodies closer to what the male gaze dictates is the standards for the ideal female body (Markula, 1995). Also of interest is the idea that the society male gaze has shifted to be more accepting of a muscular physique, as opposed to the super thin non-body that has historically dominated (Bolin, 1992). This raises the question, if muscles on women are more acceptable, why are more women not motivated to lift weights? The answer may lie in that, while a toned athletic look is more culturally acceptable/appealing, a sculpted/muscular physique on women is not, and can result in social stigma as “female” bodies become more “masculine” and therefore potentially more threatening to the “submissive female” expectations of patriarchy.

### *Motivation and Gym Participation - Muscle Stigma*

Research has demonstrated that women are able to identify feelings of strength,



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independence, and power as beneficial outcomes of weight training. However, their knowledge of these benefits does not translate into women's weightlifting participation (Dworkin, 2003; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). This lack of interest in weight training is facilitated by the fear of becoming too muscular, and thus, too far removed from the cultural ideals of how a woman should look (Dworkin, 2003; Markula, 1995). Dworkin and Messner (2002) describe women's physicality as having a "glass ceiling" (p. 24) in that women are very aware of what is an acceptable womanly figure. They explain:

There appears to be a glass ceiling on women's musculature that constrains the development of women's muscular strength. Defined according to the latest commodified eroticization of heterosexual femininity, most women (with differences by race, class, sexuality, age) remain acutely aware of how much muscle is "allowed", how much is "still" attractive (p. 24)

For many women, it is not just a general dislike of having too much muscle, but also, an actual fear. Media representations of women have played a crucial role in creating this fear and have even prescribed exercises to avoid too much muscle. That is, media prescriptions are heavily focused on cardiovascular fat burning, as well as light toning work (Mansfield, 2011; Markula, 1995; Sassatelli, 1999). In a four-year study of Internet image representation of exercise terms, Salvatore and Marecek (2012) found that the exercise terms *burn fat* was consistently associated with women, and *build muscle* consistently associated with men. They suggest that this strong link between gender and exercise goals creates a psychological barrier against participating publicly in exercises associated with the opposite gender. Thus, if women participate publicly in weight lifting (an exercise prescribed for men) they risk negative social evaluation (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010).

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Fitness professionals may aim to reduce women's fears of becoming too muscular by emphasizing research that clearly demonstrates that female hormones prevent women from gaining big muscles (Dworkin, 2003; Markula, 1995). Although this may help to reduce women's fear of lifting weights, it may also act to isolate women with more muscular builds. By stressing the impossibility of large muscle mass, an idea is created that if a woman does obtain this physique there must be something unnatural or wrong with her (Brace-Govan, 2002; Dworkin, 2003; Sassatelli, 1999).

Bolin's (1992) extensive research into the lives of female bodybuilders, indicate that women with extremely muscular physiques are often seen as unnatural, and are viewed with disgust. Within their own profession, female body builders are evaluated, not just on their muscular bodies, but also on their femininity. Female bodybuilders are compelled to employ tactics such as fake tans and bleached blond hair to appeal to the judges (Bolin, 1992, Johansson, 1996; Shea, 2001). Female bodybuilders are challenged to advance in their sport by achieving a muscular body that is lean and hard, yet also maintain feminine objectives that demand a smaller, less muscular body to maintain their sex appeal and beauty. This balancing act causes distress for many female bodybuilders, as becoming too muscular may threaten their sense of self-worth as women, and their inability to be sexually desirable to men (Shea, 2001).

However, it is not only bodybuilding and muscular strength that is seen to threaten the idea of feminine delicacy and fragility, but also females' participation in activities that are not considered lady-like (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000). Gender socialization by parents, teachers and peers encourage young women to avoid sport/exercises because they are seen as unfeminine (Kwan, 2009). Coverage of sports media reinforces the gender typing of exercise through an emphasis on athleticism as depicted by toughness and

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dominance (Hardin & Greer, 2009). Being feminine or ‘girlie’ seems to be the opposite of being ‘sporty’ (Craike, Symons, & Zimmermann, 2009). This gender stereotyping of sport creates constructs of what is, and is not appropriate for female exercise (Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000). As lifting weights is seen as a male dominated activity, a woman who participates in this exercise may be intimidated and/or viewed as unfeminine and/or deviant (Johansson, 1996). Thus, many women will be deterred from participating in this activity.

The everyday woman is not a bodybuilder, and the fear of becoming too muscular may discourage her participation in weight training. When adding the additional fears of being seen as unfeminine and challenging gender norms, muscle stigma has the potential to be a very limiting factor for women’s gym activity participation/experiences. The cultural environment of the gym may also exacerbate these issues.

### **The Cultural Context of the Gym**

Gyms can offer women an important context in which to pursue their fitness goals and be physically active. However, research on gym environments presents a complex picture of women’s involvement. That is, although gyms can be an important context in which women become physically active, gyms can also be arenas where women experience body dissatisfaction. For example, Slater and Tiggemann (2011) studied gender differences among adolescent participation in sports and physical activity. Their research demonstrated that young females were more likely than young males to exercise at a gym. Those female participants who exercised at a gym also expressed higher levels of body shame and disordered eating than those who did not exercise at the gym. This suggests that perhaps the cultural environment of the gym might elevate concerns over body dissatisfaction.

The gym environment consists of “multiple full-length mirrors, posters that idealize the

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female body, the opportunity for direct comparison with other women, scanty and revealingly aerobic clothing, and the presence of men observing women exercising” (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005, p. 20). All these features may contribute to women’s feelings of bodily inadequacy and self-objectification. It is also important to note that for many women these constraints may not affect their quantity of gym participation. Rather, for many women their exercise enjoyment is constrained. This lack of exercise enjoyment can manifest in feelings of competitiveness over physical appearance and body comparisons amongst women (Frederick & Shaw, 1995).

Gyms further encourage women to self-objectify through the promotion of weight loss as opposed to the health benefits of exercise (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005). In a review of a women-only gym, Craig and Liberti (2007) described the process by which women are introduced and oriented into the fitness club space:

If she decides to join the club, a member of the staff weighs her, measures eight parts of her body using a tape measure, calculates her body fat composition using an electronic device, and asks her to set goals. Customers are encouraged to repeat the series of measurements monthly...Increases in body or muscle size were neither encouraged as goals nor celebrated; increases in strength or endurance were not measured. Most respondents accepted, for themselves, the goals of weight and size reduction. (p.686)

Gyms tend to promote the young and beautiful ideal, to the exclusion of many of their gym patrons (Johansson, 1996). Although gyms aim at attracting individuals of all ages, many gyms fail to attract middle age, overweight participants. As a result youthful and beautiful populations dominate the gym space. Johansson (1996) describes this youth culture of the gym:

The expressive atmosphere characterizing the gym – that is the music played in the

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loudspeakers, the clothes and the tempo – is obviously related to popular youth culture. The music is collected from the hit lists and may be described as mainstream... There are often pictures of young beautiful bodies on the walls in the gym: the ideal body is a young and healthy body. Consequently, most of the instructors are young and well-trained and even though some of them are in their thirties, they often look much younger... The young, dynamic and expressive body is in focus. So although there are not restrictions regarding who may become a part of the clientele in the gym, there are certainly invisible and normative barriers, making it difficult for middle-aged people to participate in this culture. (p.33)

Apart from the gym clientele, the physical structures/layout of the gym also contribute to the intimidating and sometimes oppressing gym culture. The physical layout of most gyms is divided into functional areas. There are areas for aerobic classes, cardiovascular machines, weight training machines and a free weight area (Sassatelli, 1999). Gyms may also be divided by gendered spaces. From the early ages of adolescence, the majority of males report participating in weight training exercise, while the majority of females utilize cardiovascular machines and aerobic classes (Slater & Tiggermann, 2011). This is consistent with literature on adult gym use. Dworkin (2003) found that while males dominated the weight rooms, women predominately utilized the cardiovascular rooms, and almost exclusively attended the aerobics classes. Similarly, Robinson and Godbye (1993) found that women's participation in aerobics was almost four times higher than males.

These findings should not suggest, however, that women do not utilize the weight room or otherwise male dominated spaces in the gym. Many women do weight train, but do so in a restrictive manner. More specifically, unlike men who utilize the entire weight room, women

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tend to concentrate their weight training to the resistance machines and weight circuit training areas (Johansson, 1996).

Although gyms are spaces in which many adults can increase their physical health, they are also sites of gender segregation and exclusion. Gyms attract a young/fit population, to the exclusion of others (Johansson, 1996). This unrepresentative population, along with the tight fitting normative gym attire exposes women to feelings of self-objectification and bodily comparisons (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005). Women are then further constrained through the gender division of exercise spaces (Dworkin, 2003). Although some women are able to push past these constraints and claim space within weight training areas, many do so in a restrictive manner (i.e. resistance machines) (Johansson, 1996). This suggests that although women may be open to weight training exercises, something may be constraining them from utilizing the entirety of the weight lifting area. Perhaps it is not due to lack of interest or motivation in participation, but rather a lack of confidence in their skills and abilities.

### **Gym Knowledge and Skill**

One must acquire the skills needed to be proficient in the gym, and more specifically in the weight room. Dworkin (2003) found that for many women, these skills are first introduced through organized sport. If organized sport is the predecessor for weight training knowledge and skill development, then it is not a surprise that women are disadvantaged, as women have not always had the same opportunities as men when it comes to sports and physical activity (Kaestner & Xin Xu, 2010).

Although there are many opportunities for women in sport, they are faced with issues of lack of respect and legitimization. In a review of media sports casting Messner, Duncan, and Cooky (2003) highlighted the limited coverage of women's sports. Male anchors gatekeep the

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public messaging. As a result, media reinforces the ideal that sports are very much a man's world. The lack of women's sports coverage serve to show women they do not have a place in the masculine arena of sport. As Messner, Duncan, and Cooky (2003) suggest, "we live in a media-driven society. Despite the actual proliferation of women's sports, if it is not covered in the mass media, we can conclude that in a very real way, it simply did not happen" (p. 49).

As females are much less likely to join, or maintain participation in organized sport (Glenmark, Hedberg, & Jansson, 1994; Hardin & Greer, 2009; Kaestner & Xin Xu, 2010; Robinson & Godbey, 1993; Slater & Tiggemann, 2001; Vihjalmsson & Krisjansdottir, 2003), a gender knowledge gap develops. This knowledge gap leads women to enter the weight room later in life. As a result, women are forced to quickly learn and adjust to using the weight room in the presence of much more experienced males (Dworkin, 2003).

Salvatore and Marecek (2010) found that women do not feel as confident in their abilities to weight train, as they do in their abilities for cardiovascular exercise. In the presence of others, participants indicated they would rather reduce their time weight training or avoid the weight training exercise all together. It was further suggested that there is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Women's evaluation concerns lead to infrequent use of weight training, which in turn leads to a lack of competence. This low proficiency produces additional evaluation concerns, which leads to greater participation declines. This cycle not only constrains women, but also strengthens the gender typing of weight training exercises (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010).

Women experience many unique barriers to participate freely within the gym environment. As discussed, many women face self-objectification and bodily comparisons, but also feel embarrassed due to their lack of knowledge of how to utilize the weight training areas. These

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barriers not only affect exercise participation, but also impact exercise motivations and enjoyment.

### **Constraints Framework**

Women's gym-based exercise barriers align within the context of a leisure constraints literature. Constraints are factors "that reduce opportunities for leisure. These factors may prevent, reduce, or modify participation, or may adversely affect the quality or enjoyment of the leisure activities" (Shaw, 1999, p. 274). The literature previously discussed suggests several themes that are constraining to women's quality and quantity of gym participation. These themes are: gender norms/male intimidation, body image and evaluation concerns, lack of skill/gym knowledge, as well as the overall physical gym environment.

The leisure constraints literature has evolved over the years to include various participation effects. It was previously thought that there were only two outcomes to constraints: participation or non-participation (Frederick & Shaw, 1995). However, it has been suggested that participation outcomes may be affected by the extent of one's ability to negotiate through constraints (Jackson, Crawford & Godbey, 1993), as well as self-confidence in one's abilities to address constraints (Loucks-Atkinson & Mannell, 2011). Motivation also plays into this concept, as individuals who are more motivated to participate in a constrained activity will expend more effort to employ negotiation strategies.

Frederick and Shaw (1995) further expanded on the traditional theory of constraints to include the unique gender experiences of how women's participation in activities may in turn be constraining. According to Frederick and Shaw:

This notion of activities as being constraining can include pressure to participate in socially approved activities (i.e., constraint into participation), the reinforcement of



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traditional gender roles through participation (constraint through participation), and the reduction of enjoyment owing to particular aspects of the activity itself or its social context (constraints on the experience of participation) (p. 59).

James' (2000) study of adolescent females' swimming participation demonstrated that public spaces present a unique set of constraints for young women. James explained, "the meanings associated with public spaces are not the same for males and females" (p. 264) and suggests a conceptual constraints framework that incorporates the unique challenges of place and audience as it relates to females' participation. This framework aligns well with the issues that women face within a gym context, as the gym is both public, and gendered.

James (2000) suggests that there are two major factors at play in determining females' participation outcomes: situational body image and desire to participate. Situational body image is a combination of females' overall body image and the audience/space in which participation takes place. This is similar to the gym where a woman's body image tends to be negatively affected by the physical environment of the gym, as well as the feelings of being evaluated by an audience (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Similarly, desire to participate aligns itself with women's gym motivation as a driving force behind exercise behaviours and use of gym space. James (2000) further suggests that participation outcomes are dependant on the negotiation strategies that females employ. Participation results when one is either oblivious to the constraint in the first place or chooses to compromise and work within the constrained situation. Those who do not participate remain on the fringe of participation or avoid participation altogether.

Women within the gym participate at varying levels and carry out many different choices of exercise (weight training, cardio, aerobics). As such, it would suggest that women have

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different levels of situational body image and desire to partake in certain activities. Further, how women negotiate around the gym will depend on if, and how they choose to negotiate their gym participation. This is of particular relevance to this study because by understanding how women negotiate their gym constraints, one can not only learn more about the constraints themselves, but also how to create an environment that helps facilitate these negotiation strategies.

### **Negotiating the Gym**

The gym environment can be very disempowering and constraining for many women. As a result, women are forced to find negotiation strategies to participate. A popular trend is *women-only* facilities. These facilities allow women to feel more comfortable and avoid the judgment of traditional gyms (Craig & Liberti, 2007). This negotiation strategy changes the space and the audience by creating a feminized gym space (Craig & Liberti, 2007). Wearing (1998) suggests that women-only environments allow women to experience exercise more freely than in mixed gendered settings. This may be due to a number of reasons, such as males' tendency to take over spaces, or through women feeling less role-restriction when the male presence is removed. Although creating women-only exercise spaces removes the immediate intimidation of the male presence, it is argued that these spaces exacerbate male and female gym segregation. Moreover, James (2000) argues that *women-only* facilities cannot completely remove the male presence, as women will evaluate others based on their bodies' ability to appeal to the opposite sex.

The issue of gaze becomes even greater when considering the effect of not just the direct gaze of both males and females, but also the gaze of society. As previously mentioned, for many women, even when their partners encouraged the rejection of the ideal body, many still wanted to achieve the ideal body (Dworkin, 2003). This would suggest that even without feelings of

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others direct evaluations; women will still evaluate themselves in comparison to the idealized feminine body. Thus, the male gaze is never truly removed.

A second means in which women may negotiate their constraints of body image and self-objectification is through their gym clothing. Prichard and Tiggermann (2005) suggest that women who wear tight fitting, fashionable gym clothes are at risk of feeling insecure and objectified within the fitness centre. These feelings were reduced when women wear looser fitting gym clothes and did not put as much emphasis in their ability to look fashionable.

The use of sarcasm is another negotiation strategy that women may use to reduce feelings of perceived evaluation by others. Sassatelli (1999) found women employ the use of irony, or make self-deprecating jokes. In doing so, women hope to lower the expectations of their bodies and/or abilities, thus neutralizing their flaws and inadequacies. By removing the potential for embarrassment or ridicule, women can then increase their desire to participate (James, 2000).

The above negotiation strategies allow some women to participate within the gym space through the use of exercising in women-only facilities, wearing looser clothing, as well as down playing their abilities around others. That being said, several issues still remain. Negotiation strategies may work for some, but not all women. Also, negotiation strategies may allow for participation, but do not ensure participation enjoyment. Lastly, negotiating a constraint does not necessarily remove the barriers that women face, thus the disempowering issues still remain for many women. Samdahl (2013) argued in order to create change, one must understand negotiation strategies that will change the obstacles themselves, rather than “simply the ways by which people avoid them” (p. 119).

Although the constraints framework is well utilized in leisure studies, apart from James (2000), little attention has been given to how constraints in a public leisure setting may differ in

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relation to the gender of the participant (Henderson, 1994; Shaw & Henderson, 2005; Son, Mowen & Kerstetter, 2008), and scant research has addressed women's constraints to weight rooms and/or use of gym space within a mixed-gendered gym setting. As such, an approach that seeks to understand women's gendered gym-based experiences is valuable.

Due to the gaps in the literature on women's gendered exercise barriers, and specifically their gendered barriers within the gym context, the purpose of this thesis is to illuminate the female, gendered experience within a traditional, mixed gendered gym context. Through the use of life story interviews, this research will explore the dominant expectations of femininity within gyms, expose how those expectations play out within women's gym experiences, and suggest changes to be made in order to enhance women's experiences within mixed-gender space.

### **Methodology**

The gym is one of the most accessible physical activity resources for adult exercise (Craike, Symons & Zimmermann, 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), yet the gym environment remains a particularly underdeveloped area of study (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Women's gym experiences in particular is an area of research that needs a greater focus, as currently the gym literature tends to focus on women's gym experiences in extreme or isolated contexts.

Understanding women's gym experiences is important, as women face unique gendered challenges due to the governing ideals of our current patriarchal society. Within this patriarchal culture, masculinity become associated with the norm, thus leaving womanhood and femininity marginalized to the position of "other" (Johnson, 2004, p. 29). Through this marginalization women become socialized to adhere to the cultural bodily ideals of the male gaze. Thus, many women will work to manage their bodily appearance to align with the heteronormative ideals of being thin, toned, and delicate.

For many, the gym is a tool to help them achieve this bodily ideal (Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012). Yet, this idealized body is not easily achieved. As a result many women feel inadequate, and also constrained to exercise choices that they feel will help them achieve said look (Dworkin, 2003; Sassatelli, 1999).

The gym culture may intensify these issues of bodily management and male gaze through the "multiple full-length mirrors, posters that idealize the female body, the opportunity for direct comparison with other women, scanty and revealingly aerobic clothing, and the presence of men observing women exercising" (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005, p. 20). Although some women are able to negotiate around these barriers, the issues themselves still remain. As such, a greater

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understanding of the complexity of women's lived experiences within this context is needed. This is what this research sought to undertake.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Using the feminist concepts of male gaze and gender socialization, I sought to illuminate the stories and understandings of my female participants, as they relate to their experiences within the traditional, mixed gendered gym setting. To do so I sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant gendered expectations that women perceive within traditional, mixed-gendered gym space?
2. How do these dominant expectations interact with/in women's gym experiences?
3. What changes to the dominant gym expectations do women feel would benefit their gendered gym use?

### **Methodology**

As a feminist researcher, I am committed to bringing women's voices to the forefront, and value their voices as legitimate sources of knowledge (DeVault & Gross, 2007). As such, I have chosen to conduct my research using a methodology that allows me to hear these women's stories, and in turn give voice to their experiences. For this reason I have chosen the methodology of narrative inquiry. In the following chapter I will discuss my feminist theoretical orientation as well as the chosen methodology of narrative inquiry. I will then discuss in detail the research process that was conducted utilizing this approach.

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### **Theoretical Orientation: Feminism**

Feminists believe that our current patriarchal world is capable of being changed, and that we, as a society, are all capable of this change (Parry, Johnson, & Stewart, 2013). As a feminist researcher it is my role to create research that is more socially just by placing women's lives at the centre of inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Traditionally, research has benefited dominant societal groups, and as a result women's lived experiences have not been captured (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). However, mainstream methods should not be corrected by simply adding more women to research, but instead research should be conducted that pays "attention to the specificity and uniqueness of women's lives and experiences" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 8). Feminist research thus seeks to legitimize women's lived experiences as a source of knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

It is widely accepted amongst feminists that feminism implies a distinctive approach to inquiry (Hammersly, 1992). There is no one correct means of conducting feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2007), however feminist researchers are rooted in the belief that the research process must "reflect an ethic of respect, collaboration, and caring" (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 775). Research must not be done *on* women, but instead *for* women (Thompson, 1992). For this reason I have chosen the methodology of narrative inquiry – a methodology that illuminates voices and personal narratives, as focused through a feminist lens.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Chase (2005) defines narrative inquiry as "an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (p. 651). As such, narrative inquiry does not focus on trying to understand patterns across all

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individuals, but rather values of the uniqueness of each individual and how they construct their storied experiences (Daly, 2007). Thus, narrative legitimizes an individual's story as a source of knowledge.

These narratives may be oral or written, may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, in an interview or in a naturally occurring conversation (Chase, 2005). They may capture a short story about an event, or a longer story dealing with one's life. Although all of these aspects range in regards to content and source, each narrative is important in itself, and can contribute to understanding the larger culture.

Narrative inquiry aligns well with my feminist research, because similar to the feminist efforts of giving voice, it is focused on putting the participant's voice and experience front and center. This means that women are seen as participants rather than objects of study, and that knowledge is constructed through participation and collaboration (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

Traditionally, narratives have been utilized to gather information on historical events, cultural changes and/or the impact of social structures on the lives of individuals (Chase, 2005). This notion that there is a societal narrative then creates a dominant meta-narrative that aims at capturing the story that speaks for society as a whole. As a feminist I question these traditional meta-narratives, as one voice cannot speak for a society, and the voices of non-dominating social groups are often not heard.

Therefore, by applying a feminist lens to the more traditional narrative inquiry I hope to illuminate the voices of women, a non-dominant voice that is often left out of the overarching cultural meta-narratives (Chase, 2005). By creating a counter-narrative to that of the dominating meta-narrative, it illuminates the silenced voices of society. In doing so these narratives work to



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reflect the diversity of the human experience and start to broaden our understandings of the world we live in.

Thus, when applying a feminist lens to narrative inquiry, it will allow the research to move away from the traditional methods, and instead explore the marginalized perspectives, which are often lost (Estrella & Forinash, 2007). As a narrator, researchers can then utilize these counter-narratives to, “explain, entertain, inform, defend, complain and confirm or challenge the status quo” (Chase, 2005, p. 257), thus giving voice to previously oppressed groups. As a feminist, I believe that women are a source of knowledge, and will work to give voice to this population. Thus, through the use of narrative inquiry I will work to illuminate the voices of my participants, and allow for their unique experiences to be legitimized.

### **Subjectivity/ Role of the Researcher**

An important consideration in the research process was the role that I played as the researcher. As Hesse-Biber (2007) point out, a “[r]esearcher and participants will be both similar and different in different contexts” (p. 179). I am a personal trainer, active gym member, and can be perceived as falling under the *young and fit* category. That being said, I am also a woman, deal with body image issues, and struggle to claim space within the mixed-gendered weight room. In this sense, I am both similar to my participants, yet am different because of my fitness background.

In order to level the hierarchical relationship of researcher-researched, one must move away from the notions of neutrality, and distanced objectivity (DeVault & Gross, 2007). I believe that it is both impossible and detrimental to remove myself from my research, as all researchers are “intertwined with what we study and how we study it, but it is the active incorporation of their personal viewpoints into the research process that makes the research

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feminist” (Hesse-Biber & Brooks, 2007, p. 420). Thus, the goal of my research was to not eliminate my personal subjectivity, but to embrace it and recognize its contributions.

Keeping this in mind, I worked to build a strong rapport with my participants and chose to be completely upfront about my background. By disclosing my own background and history with the gym, as well as my research interests and concerns, it allowed the interview process to become more of a discussion and collaboration. I believe that both myself, and my research participants are sources of knowledge. As such, it is my hope to give voice to *all* parties, myself included. Thus my role as the researcher was to work *with* my participants, not *for* them.

Over the years, I have developed my own personal understanding of the female experience within a mixed-gendered gym facility. As a result, at times it was difficult to understand other women’s experiences outside of my own understandings. To remain open to the emerging data, it was important that I acknowledged my prior experiences, and remained reflexive through the analysis process. To remain reflexive throughout the research process, I employed the use of reflexive journaling and frequent self-assessments. In the end, all preconceived ideas had to earn their way into my analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Participant Recruitment**

I had originally hoped to gain access to a local gym and recruit participants from amongst its members. I was successful in utilizing my connections with a local charity to gain access to a gym in a neighbouring community. Unfortunately upon meeting with the gym owner it became apparent that this was not an ideal location for recruitment. The gym was unique in the sense that it was very “bare bones/warehouse” style. It mainly functioned as a class-based weight training facility with limited options outside of those classes. As such, it attracted a very unique section

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of the fitness market. As I was aiming to understand the experiences of the everyday women within a traditional gym setting, it became apparent that I would have to recruit elsewhere.

Next I reached out to a popular chain of health centres. I knew it would be a challenge to gain access to such a well-established organization, yet it would allow contact to the largest cross section of my participants. Unfortunately I was denied access with no explanation as to why. As such, I then broadened my search to other local gym facilities and again was met with access denial.

Luckily on my last attempt one gym did allow partial access. Although I was not able to recruit members physically within the gym, I was able to leave information for them if they wished to participate. This was the access I needed to get my foot in the door and start making connections.

Using my connections at the new gym location, as well as the original “barebones” location, I began to recruit. To get around not being able to physically connect with my potential participants I instead recruited using multiple other methods. Posters (Appendix A) asking for female participants were placed in the female change room, as well as on various communication boards throughout both of these gyms. In addition, a Facebook posting (Appendix B) was placed on the gyms’ social media pages. I also recruited participants at my current gym by making an announcement prior to the start of a morning weight training aerobics class.

Lastly, the majority of my participants were recruited using snowball sampling. Using my social networks I reached out to several women with whom I knew had acquaintances who met my research criteria. Once I had interviewed these participants I asked if they knew of others who would like to share their stories. If they knew of other participants I left them with my business card and a copy of my recruitment poster.

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### **Participants**

The criterion for participant selection was that the individuals must identify as female, must possess a current gym membership, and have spent time within a community accessed, mixed-gendered gym setting. As such, the women that I interviewed were different fitness levels, body shapes, had different social positions/class, as well as ethnicities. With the exception of one participant, all participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-thirties.

Participants attended various gyms. Several participants attended a popular chain of gym that can be found Canada wide. Others attended smaller, locally owned and operated gyms. One participant attended a gym in the basement of a local hotel, and another attended the “barebones” facility previously discussed. In addition, the majority of participants had previously attended a gym at their college/university. On average the women indicated that they had been going to the gym on/off for approximately 5-10 years.

Participants also ranged in regards to education and background. The majority of participants had previously attended university, and one participant was currently pursuing her Master’s degree. Several women were currently employed full time, while three participants were employed part time. Of the eight participants, four were married, while three were also working mothers.

Although all participants ranged with regards to physical appearance, none would be considered overweight/obese. This is not surprising; as the gym has traditionally been unsuccessful at attracting middle age, overweight participants (Johansson, 1996). As such, my participants tended to reflect those of the traditional “gym-goer” (Appendix C).

### **Data Collection: Unstructured Life Story Interviews**

The method of unstructured life story interviews was utilized to help facilitate participants in expressing their stories and experiences within the gendered gym environment. Chase (2003) explains life stories as “narratives about some life experience that is of deep and abiding interest to the interviewee” (p. 274). Often, researchers will speak *for* participants by reporting what he/she feels were the essence of what the participants were trying to express. Instead, life stories were chosen as this research’s method of inquiry as it allowed for participants to take control of their own voice. As Chase (2003) explains, “If we want to hear stories rather than reports then our task as interviewers is to invite others to tell their stories, to encourage them to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk” (p. 274).

In the case of this research, unstructured, life story interviews focused around hearing participant’s stories on their gendered gym-based experiences. Although I chose to conduct unstructured interviews, all interviews still required a degree of direction and organization. Thus, prior to conducting the interviews I first constructed an interview guide. The interview guide did not act as a rigid outline, but rather served as a *conversational agenda* in which to navigate the narrative exchange (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). I constructed my interview guide by first identifying several main themes. These themes were selected based upon both my own personal experiences, as well as the current literature surrounding gender, the gym and their interactions. Under each theme I then placed several open-ended questions that would allow me to prompt the reader if needed (Appendix D).

Prior to conducting the interviews I also began to journal my own stories around each theme. By journaling it not only let me reflect on my own experiences, beliefs and biases, but also allowed me to bring these stories to the interview. By sharing these stories with participants

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it enabled me to provide examples, as well as provided a ground for mutual sharing and data co-creation.

### **The Interview**

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private setting of the participants choosing. These locations included coffee shops, offices, as well as at the participant's home. All interviews ranged in regards to time of day, and all lasted approximately an hour to an hour and a half in length.

At the beginning of each interview I provided the participant with a brief overview of my study and had her read and sign the ethical consent form (Appendix E). Once the consent form was signed I ask her permission to digitally record our interview, and explained that at any time it could be turned off. In addition, I also explained that at any point she could request that the interview be stopped, and/or remove anything she did not wish to be transcribed. After gaining permission from participants, all interviews were then recorded using an audio-recorder so that the interview could remain conversational, as well as for ease of transcription.

Since the interview was unstructured I did not have a set of specific question in which to ask my participants. As such, I began each interview by asking, "Tell me what a typical day at the gym is for you. You walk through the front doors and..." I would then allow the participant to lead the interview in the direction that she felt was important to her.

During the interview I took note of anything said that I would want to come back and re-address/explore further. This helped to not interrupt her stories/experiences, as well as ensure that there was flow to the conversation. As such, it allowed me to probe ideas further that touched upon my pre-determined research topics, while still allowing her stories to be expressed.

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Thus, my interviews were guided both by my pre-determined research topics, as well as the topics generated by my participants.

Determining the size of a qualitative sample was a balancing act. Too small of a group of participants may not yield enough information; while too large of a group creates issues of in-depth analysis (Bailey, 2007). In order to help know when to stop interviewing, I transcribed and reviewed my interviews on an ongoing basis. In doing so it allowed an understanding of the quality of the stories that I was collecting. Upon reaching eight participants I had begun hearing similar experiences and underlying issues. At this point I felt that strong patterns were emerging across all of the participants, and I was able to answer all of my research questions. Thus, upon reaching eight participants I decided to end data collection and commence analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

To prepare the data for analysis I personally transcribed the audio recordings into word documents utilizing Microsoft word processor. In order to help organize my data I also created an electronic spreadsheet of all interview details. This document included specifics such as participant's name/contact information, transcript and audio links, as well as participant-specific codes that would later be utilized for analysis purposes.

During transcription I utilized an analytic journal. Using this journal I was able to take note of lines of data that were of interest during the transcription, rather than going back after transcribing to relocate the data. In doing so I was able to pull out sections of data such as repetitive themes across transcripts, unique stories, as well as data that was supportive/contrasting with previous literature.

Once all of the interview data was transcribed I then printed out each individual transcript. All transcripts were then colour coded to represent each individual participant. I then

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went back through each transcript and made notes in the margins based upon those previously identified in my analytic journal. As I recorded my notes in the margins I also noted any re-occurring themes throughout the current transcript and between transcripts (Appendix F).

I then reviewed the re-occurring themes in relation to my research questions and condensed them into 4 general themes: The Gym, Judgment, How women learn the gym and Masculinity/Femininity. I then went through each transcript and physically cut out the lines of the transcript that fell into these themes. Often there were segments of transcript that could fall under several of the larger thematic groupings. In this case the transcript section was re-copied, given the transcript colour code and line number, then placed under both themes. Any sections of the transcript that were of interest, yet did not work to answer my research questions were also cut out and placed into a separate pile (Appendix F).

Data was then further organized by creating sub-themes within each of the larger themes. These sub-themes were pieces of transcripts that made note of similar experiences or ideas that could be grouped together to help tell a piece of the larger theme's story (Appendix F). To help keep track of where the transcript pieces originated from I numbered all subgroups, as well as all the pieces of transcript within that subgroup. It should be noted that the aim of this sorting method was not to create distinct, segregated thematic groupings, but rather help to organize the data to help facilitate understanding.

Next I used *A priori* theories and concepts to help review my data in relation to the current thinking within the literature. To do this I took my major themes and matched them back to the past literature. In doing, so I was able to compare my data and see, a) what was lining up with current literature, b) what was contrasting with the literature, and c) what was emerging as



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new ideas not yet discussed in the literature. This helped me to contextualize and understand what my narratives wanted to express, as well as created initial ideas for interpretations.

It should be noted, that the aim of this process was not to attempt to match the plot of these narratives with the actual expressed events. The aim of narratives is not to try to retell a reality, or a “truth” in the hopes of generalizing the data across different situations (Daly, 2007). Instead, the aim was to capture the complexities of the individuals narratives, and to attempt to crystalize the concepts, rather than to reduce my data to some notion of “real” or “truth” (Berbary, 2011). Thus, the next step was an attempt to destabilize this more post-positivist categorizing analysis by deconstructing each theme to contextualize the data within more complex narratives.

### **Data Representation**

After gathering guidance and ideas from the literature, I then began to compile the narratives. I used several means to determine what narratives to utilize. Firstly, a narrative to provide the reader with context was needed, as the gym has its own unique culture and atmosphere.

Next, the themes of judgment on both body and skill were consistent across all participants. Similarly, suggestions for change were also expressed across all transcripts. As such, due to the sheer amount of data on these themes it was apparent that these stories each needed to be told.

Lastly, it was important to create a narrative that occurred outside of the gym. This narrative expresses how even outside of the walls of the gym there are dominating gendered expectations that participants encounter. As such, a narrative was also formed to reflect the

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research question based around the dominating gendered expectations that women experience in relation to the gym.

### **Story Construction**

To keep the stories close to my data I physically pulled pieces of transcripts together and lined them up in a logical order that a story could be told. As these stories are complex I pulled pieces of transcripts from across all of the original thematic groupings. Once I felt that I had exhausted all of the transcript sections that could fall under the narrative's header, I began pasting them onto poster board. The end result resembled that of a storyboard (Appendix E).

Using my storyboard, I then began to outline my narrative. To do so I typed up the key words/ideas of each transcript piece, along with the colour code and line number. In doing so I was able to trace each section of my narrative back to the transcript it had originated from. As I went through each piece of transcript I also inserted my own narrative voice to help frame the story that was going to be drafted (Appendix G). This process was inspired by McCormack's (2004) idea of creating the "middle story" where by one takes the major story titles, lays them out in a manner that flows for storytelling, then goes through and adds in the text to form the single narrative story (McCormack, 2004, p. 222).

Lastly, I began to restory the segments of the outline to create one, flowing narrative (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). As direct quotes and sections were often used, the resulting narrative remained very close to the data. In keeping the stories so closely linked to the data it not only allowed for a useful representation of my participants' individual narratives, but also increases the trustworthiness of my research.

When restorying my data, I began to create different characters for each of the narratives. Although the characters within the stories had specific names, these names were chosen at

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random. Thus, the characters were not comprised of one particular participant. Instead, the characters within the stories were created based upon the voices and stories expressed across all participants.

Within the stories that had multiple characters, instead of pulling character traits from individual participants I instead created characters around their battling inner voices. For instance, it seemed that at times many of my participants expressed the voice/ideas of society, voices of their parents, friends and loved ones, as well as the voice of their younger selves. To capture these different voices I went through the outlined storyboard, and when there was a grappling or tension between the ideas I utilized a change in character.

Although the narratives deal with characters that vary from having only one character to three characters, these characters do not exist in isolation from the others. These narratives are comprised of the different individual stories of all participants. Thus, although these characters are different in each narrative, their essence is the same throughout all.

In the end it resulted in five narratives that I felt best encompassed my participant's key experiences within a mixed-gendered gym. Within each story I attempted to bring in multiple perspectives in order to show the messiness of the data. This was purposefully done in order to show how one does not experience these issues within a vacuum, but rather experiences are overlapping and interrelated (Berbary, 2011). It should also be noted that although I tried to encompass as many experiences and stories into these narratives, not all stories could be told.

Lastly, it should be noted, that while the stories were comprised of a collection of all of my participants individual narratives, the resulting stories are a co-construction. When an individual re-tells a story/narrative they will always construct it differently depending on the audience in which it is being told too. As Daly (2007) points out, when a story is told within the

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context of an interview setting it results in a “ jointly constructed narrative. While the story essentially belongs to the participant, the researcher plays an important role through gestures, prompts, and questions in shaping the form and structure of the narrative” (p. 114). As such, the narrative that results is a construction of both the participant and researcher’s subjectivities.

## **Representation and Interpretation**

In this section several narratives will be presented on the lived experiences of women within the mixed gendered gym space. Following each narrative, my voice as the researcher, will then come back into play to discuss my interpretations of the narrative based upon my current understandings as they connect to both current thinking in the literature, as well as my own experiences. Although these narratives are presented in a linear order, they do not stand in isolation from each other. Women's lived experiences are complex and as such each narrative must reflect this complexity. Women's gendered expectations exist outside the gym, but they also shape how women view the gym, how they utilize the gym space, and often relate to those aspects of a gym that women would like to see changed. As such, each narrative constantly addresses the complex relationship of the total gym experience, addressing not only the major "themes," but also bringing in the social, personal, and at times contradictory messiness of the women's lived experiences.

### **Narrative: Friendly Advice**

Miranda leans back into the soft booth behind her. "I could not eat another bite if you paid me." Sunday brunch was her favourite time of the week; a tradition her friends Trisha and Kellie have been doing since she moved to the same city two years ago. With a contented sigh, her mind starts to trail to the busy workweek ahead of her, "Can you guys believe it is Sunday already? Where did the weekend go?"

"Speak for yourself," Kellie says sarcastically. "Some of us have to work on weekends." "Oh, I forgot! How is the new job anyway?" Miranda asks apologetically.

Kellie put on her best pouty face. Miranda had seen this face many times before. It was the same face that had got her whatever she had wanted from her past string of boyfriends. "I hate it," she whimpers. "They make me wear this hideous blue and orange uniform. I look like everyone else. And you guys know how much I like to stand out. Plus, the uniform is so unflattering and manly. I am a princess type of a girl. I like nice dresses, high heels and pretty stuff."

Miranda laughs. It is true. Kellie likes to be girly all the time. She can still remember when Kellie worked for her father at his construction site one summer. She would go to work in short skirts and tank tops. The men at the site would do pretty much anything for her. Her dad

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would tell her to cover up, but she would always complain that she was a girl and wanted to look like one. Why was he trying to make her into a man doing a manly job?

Trisha was on the same page piping up with, "It's not like you are working for your Dad anymore, Kellie. Plus, it can't be that bad."

"You know what ladies? I think it is unfair of my boss to make me wear such ugly things. It is human nature to want to look attractive when so many men are around. It is what we strive for in life, right?"

"You are just upset because you can't look good around that hot guy from work, Jason." Trisha makes a kissy face as she mocks Kellie.

Kellie goes bright with excitement, "Oh God guys, he is too hot! He is so tall, athletic and strong. Like, he is literally rippling with muscle. He is the kind of guy that if you took him to the movies you would never see him cry. You know, like a true man's man."

Miranda is confused. "Kellie, isn't he dating that girl, Vanessa?"

Trisha sits upright, "What? Really? Why is he dating her? She is nothing special. You know it is probably because she has huge boobs."

Kellie nods her head in agreement. "I was shocked, too. I am surprised he would go for her. Guys like Jason like thin, pretty girls. She is kind of chubby."

Trisha places her hand on her stomach and looks back across the table. "Speaking of chubby, I am so fat these days. I literally gained like 10lbs from my holiday binge eating!"

Kellie joins in. "You are chubby? Have you seen my butt lately? I need to hit the gym BIG TIME."

Miranda shakes her head. She loves her friends but once they start in on this kind of talk, she starts to lose patience quickly. "Guys, cut it out you are both perfectly fine. You know I hate it when you talk like that."

They both roll their eyes. "Please Miranda, you don't know what it is like. It must be so nice to be thin." Kellie says dismissively, "I actually don't know why you bother going to the gym. You are already skinny. I would kill to be able to eat whatever I liked and not kill myself at the gym."

"Ok first of all guys, we wear the same size pants. And secondly, if I didn't go to the gym I would look the same but I wouldn't be healthy. The gym isn't for sculpting the perfect body; it is about being healthy." She feels preachy, but Miranda is tired of justifying herself to her friends. It's not like she minds looking this way, she just wishes her friends would stop comparing themselves to her and saying one way is better than the other.

"Whatever, Miranda." Kellie flicks her hand into the air, as if to dismiss the idea altogether. "Speaking of holiday weight gain, have you guys read the article in the new *herfitness* magazine. It is all about putting your New Year's resolutions into action and has a good 'Fat blast for Summer Abs' workout in it."

"Oh I saw that workout!" exclaims Trisha, "That is the one that you can do in the gym, or at home using a chair for squats and soup cans for weights. It is really good for toning because it has high reps and light weights. You do the all the exercise one after another like a circuit. So you do the circuit twice and then finish with an hour of cardio for slimming."

Miranda has not seen this article, but it sounds weird to her. "Why are you using soup cans? Don't those only weigh like 2lb? Shouldn't you lift something heavier than that?"

"Well, you don't want to lift really heavy weights because then you may get too bulky. This way you only get toned, lean muscles" explains Trisha.

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“Yah, lifting heavy weights makes your muscles bigger. What you need to do is only lift lighter weights, but for longer” agrees Kellie. “I don’t know if I will try this workout though because I am really only interested in losing this and this.” Kellie motions to her stomach and thighs. “I really only need to do exercises that are going to target those areas. I like doing the crunches on the abs machine and that inner and outer thigh machine.”

“Oh I like that one too. I agree with you, Kellie, I don’t need to be doing things like lifting bars over my head and crazy stuff like that. That is not what I need health wise,” says Trisha, “Actually that is what I said to my instructor the other day in my fitness class. She was saying to the class to challenge themselves and put on more weight and stuff. And I was like, ‘Ummm no! I don’t want to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger!’”

Mariana can’t help but laugh at the thought of Trisha looking like that. Her thought is cut short by Kellie as she plants her hands down on the table in excitement. “Oh my gosh, speaking of that, I haven’t told you guys about the girl that started work the same day as me, have I? She looks like a man. No joke. Like she is in good shape, but I would never want to look like that. Like for me, I wouldn’t want to be unattractively big. I am a girly girl and I have seen those types of women in dresses, and it doesn’t look right.”

“It is one thing to have toned arms that don’t jiggle, but having super sculpted arms are pretty unattractive,” agrees Miranda as she pictures a hulk-like woman in an evening gown.

“Seeing a muscled woman turns me off. They honestly look like lesbians. I wouldn’t want to look like that. I like men. I know this is going to sound bad, but I would rather be overweight than look butchy,” Trisha sheepishly admits. Her friends shake their heads in agreement. “Being strong is one thing. Like, it is ok for a woman to lift heavy weights, but the end result of how you look is what sets it apart. You don’t want to look manly.”

Kellie pipes in, “Well, it’s ok to lift weights, but you don’t want to be too strong either. Just strong enough, you know? Like, for men, they want to be the man and be able to lift things and stuff. Could you imagine being stronger than your boyfriend?” Kellie laughs at the thought.

Miranda is a little thrown by that. She has always prided herself on being strong enough to take care of stuff on her own. In her opinion, women probably think they are weaker than they actually are. “Kellie, doesn’t it bother you that men think women are weak? I know for me, I can’t stand it when men say ‘Oh let me lift that for you: it is probably too heavy’.”

“I think it is nice,” replies Kellie. “I think men are supposed to be strong and manly.” She stops suddenly and looks up at the clock, “Speaking of manly, Ladies, I have got to get to work. I can’t keep Jason waiting can I?” she says with a wink. She swoops down and grabs her pink Gucci purse and her navy work duffel bag. Through the handles of the duffel bag, Kellie has slung her steeled toed boots. The contrast is such a funny sight that Miranda can’t help but shake her head. That’s Kellie for you.

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Kellie’s desire to wear short skirts and stand out to men is the result of a society governed by the male gaze. Many of the female participants expressed a need to feel validated by men’s affections. As a result, these women held themselves to the standards of what they felt was considered the culturally defined womanly ideal.

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Yet, it was also expressed that often times it is women who enact this male gaze, through their evaluation of others women's abilities to meet the societal standards. Many of the women interviewed, indicated that they feel that women, more so than men, are harsher judges of other women. In many cases, these women felt sanctioned by others by picking out their flaws and reducing their worth to their bodily appearance.

Participants also sanctioned themselves through a similar lens. Many of the women interviewed expressed distaste for their bodies and a need to constantly evaluate and ridicule themselves on their physical appearance. They agreed that unlike men, it is socially acceptable for women to openly express their bodily flaws. One participant in particular indicated that it was a "natural part" of female conversation to take turns sharing their self-consciousness and discussing their distaste for their bodies.

It would seem that the gym plays a large role in the management of the female body. Many participants alluded to the gym as a tool for fixing their bodily flaws. As such, for many of these women instead of being viewed for the purposes of health, the gym seems to have become a place to create perfection. As such, the line between being healthy and being skinny becomes blurred. Many participants considered being thin the ultimate goal of exercise.

All participants thought that to please this societal gaze meant having a body that is curvy in the right areas (breasts and bottom), and thin in all the others. It is also apparent that for participants, the ability to please this gaze also relied on their being lean and toned. It was not enough to be thin; they needed to be tight/non-jiggly.

Finding a balance between toned, yet not too masculine seemed to be important to my participants. Although it was important to be toned, for these women a more muscular physique was considered in contrast to the heteronormative ideal of feminine appearance. As such, these



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women tended to utilize the gym in very specific ways. They do not use the heavy weights or the bars. Nor do they use all of the different weight training machines. Instead participants typically exercised using large amounts of cardio and small amounts, if any weight training.

All women that I interviewed expressed weight training in a more restrictive manner. Their weight training was restrictive in that participants that indicated using free weights tended to lift only lighter weights for higher repetitions. In addition, many of the women who expressed utilizing the weight training machines tended to only target specific “problem areas” such as abdominals and legs. Thus instead of utilizing all forms of weights, women tended to restrict their use to certain types of weight training. This leads me to question whether there is a gendered exercise prescription. For the women interviewed it would seem that there is an exercise prescription that they feel will help them achieve their desired body, and many of them follow it religiously without question. This prescription included toning work (high repetitions with light weights) for butt/thighs, core, and arms.

For many of the women, the male gaze is not subject only to one’s physical body, but also in one’s expressions of masculinity and femininity. Thus, men must be strong, athletic and unemotional. In contrast, females must be delicate, fragile and sexually appealing. For a few of the participants, a way in which they enacted this gendered expectation was through their career. In Kellie’s case, she has a job that is stereotypically male dominated. To make up for this she displays her emphasized femininity through her dress and her outward appearance.

Also expressed was that this gendered ideal is enacted through the idea that women are to be weaker than men. For many participants weight training was seen only as a means to tone their body. Very rarely did participants indicate a desire for strength or power. It would appear that for these women power and strength were not desirable traits for women. Perhaps if they

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were to become too strong, they would then threaten the gendered expectations. As such, they would then become unappealing to the male gaze.

### **Narrative: The Gym**

Taylor walks through the big front doors to the gym. She is filled with nervous energy as she approaches the front desk. She hasn't been to a gym since university, and that was a while ago. There is a woman behind the desk, but she appears busy with something else. She doesn't see Taylor right away. Taylor stands awkwardly, not sure what to do. The woman turns, sees her, greets her with a big smile and motions her through.

Taylor finds the change room and quickly puts on her new workout clothes. Looking in the mirror she is happy with what she sees. She had just bought a new Lululemon workout outfit. The pants are black to hide what she sees as her big butt. In the past she had worn sweatpants but her friend assured her black yoga pants are more slimming. *She was so right! My butt actually looks ok in this.* She also traded in her curve hiding baggy t-shirt for a new workout top. The top is close fitting and looks really good. She had tried on lots of tops at the store till she found the right one. It needed to be close fitting, but not too tight. She didn't want it clinging to her and showing her chubby stomach. She was careful to pick out a colour that was girly, but not too bright. Everyone knows that if you wear bright colours you draw too much attention. Her friend had tried to get her to buy the bright pink top. But the way she saw it the worst thing you could do was wear a bright pink top. There are a lot of men at a gym, and men like to check out women. Obviously, if you wear pink they are going to look at you more, because men like women who wear pink.

Taylor emerges from the change room into the main area of the gym. The gym is very busy and bursting with energy. Over the stereo she can hear the peppy beat of a new dance song that is all over the radio. The sound of the music is muddled with the clang of weights and the hum of the machines. Looking around she is glad that she has her new workout clothes. All the other women are dressed similarly. No one looks frumpy.

The gym is laid out in sections. In the center of the gym, is a big open section with various weight equipment. Taylor can see people working out on the equipment, but she has no idea what they are doing. From the middle of the gym, Taylor can see the treadmills and cardio equipment at the front, and the exercise studios in the back. Looking through the window at the aerobic class, she can see that they are doing some sort of dance. The room is wall to wall mirrors and the faces she sees reflected back are all those of women. *That kind of makes sense. It wouldn't be very manly to see a guy in there shaking his rear to the music.* To the side there is another upper level. Taylor glances up the stairs. From below she can see different benches with big bars over them, and some heavy looking weights. BANG! She is startled as she hears the slam of weights hitting the floor. *I am not going up there!*

Taylor walks to the front of the gym to get on the treadmill. Once on the treadmill she notices how open the whole area is. *We are all facing each other! It's like I am being put on stage.* She begins to jog and finds her rhythm. Looking around she notices she is in a sea of women. *Where are all the men?* She does spot a few older men on the nearby stationary bikes, but none of the men looks under the age of 50.

Taylor looks out the window at the far end of the gym. *Snow again. I wish I could be outside running.* Taylor looks down at her machine. *Has it really only been 5 minutes! God this*

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*is so boring. I should stop... no I ate that piece of cake for lunch I need to keep going!* Determined to get a good workout in she forces her feet to keep moving. Her eyes begin to drift to the woman beside her. Taylor wonders if she should spark up a conversation to help pass the time. She smiles at the woman, but the woman does not look up from her magazine. The woman is literally an arm's reach from her, yet she feels as though there is an invisible wall between them. *I guess there is no talking at the gym.* She scans over the rest of the cardio machines. Everyone is keeping to themselves and is either listening to music or watching the TV screens. They are in their own world. *Robots.*

Just then a group of men walk by. They are young and fit. They remind Taylor of the young guys on this reality TV show where they are all obsessed with going to the gym and tanning. *Who are they trying to impress?* Taylor thinks back to an episode of the TV show where the ladies had joined a gym in order to meet men. *I wonder if that actually happens.* Looking around at the women on the treadmill, she sees that it was definitely a possibility. Many of the women were in tight fitting clothes, have nice hair and a full face of makeup. Taylor knew to wear the right gym clothes, but she had not known about the make-up and hair. *Maybe I should have done myself up a bit more.* She watches as the men strut to the back and disappear into the weight training section.

Taylor looks back down at her machine. *30 minutes. Ok that's good enough.* Getting off the machine, Taylor scans the room for the stretching area. The gym is so big it is hard to find everything. *Maybe I should just ask someone for help.* She looks around for someone close by. Most people have headphones in so she would have to try to catch someone's eye instead. Taylor smiles at people as they are passing. See is met with blank stares. *Did they even see me? It's as if they are looking right through me.* There are lots of people around her, yet Taylor feels alone. She could see groups of people chatting by the juice bar and sitting on the couches in the front section. It seemed very cliquey. Taylor usually prided herself on her ability to talk to anyone, yet here she felt she couldn't. *Everyone looks so busy with his or her own thing. I would probably just be bothering them by asking.* She could see personal trainers nearby but they too looked busy. *Where is all the other staff?* Taylor began to grow frustrated. She decides to try on the female only side.

The female only section was smaller than the main, mixed-gendered section on the gym. Looking around, Taylor can see that there is some of the same equipment, but definitely not as much. There is some cardio equipment, a few weight machines and some areas with mats. *Wow this is so much less intense than the other side. I should have just come here in the first place.* The other side had been so intimidating with all of the equipment, and the men dropping weights. *I could actually try out how to do the equipment over here, and become more comfortable with it before going back to the other side.*

She walks over to the wall of mirrors. *It is nice I can actually use this space. On the other side the men are all lined up by the mirrors.* She looks at her reflection in the mirror. *Not great.* She looks back at the other women around her. Some were a little bit fitter than her, but some were a little less fit, too. *We are mostly all on the same level here.* Although none of the women look up at her, she feels as though there is a sense of camaraderie amongst these women. *We are all in the same boat. We are all here for the same reasons. We want to get healthier, stronger, look better. We feel the same way about our bodies. We are in this section because we are choosing not to be in that other section with the guys and the super fit, confident people. We are here, and we are all in this together!*

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Taylor feels a sense of relief. *Why would I go ever go back on the other side? I can come in here, try things without feeling like I am being judged, and I don't have to manoeuvre my way through a huge gym space.* Feeling confident and relaxed, Taylor settles into her stretches.

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Each gym has its own unique layout, systems and personnel. Yet, what was interesting to find was that for all the women I interviewed, they expressed that they felt that there was a specific gym culture that extends across most gyms. Many of them recognized that a common aspect of the gyms they attended was the relevance of “dress.” One common characteristic of their gym experience was the type of dress. Participants indicated that for women, there is a particular style of gym clothing that is culturally acceptable. The staples are dark coloured yoga pants, along with close fitting sport shirt. Although they also indicated that women sometimes wear baggier clothing such as sweatpants and T-shirts, participants mostly considered these frumpy and undesirable. The colour of the clothing is also important. Participants indicated that some women who wanted attention and/or was comfortable with their bodies may wear a top that is brightly coloured. However, many of the women indicated that the majority of the women within their gyms would wear all black, or a more subdued colour. However, It would appear that these standards are only for women, as participants indicated that men typically wear sweatpants or shorts and any t-shirt.

As the space is occupied with both men and women, the male gaze comes directly and indirectly into play. Participants enact the gaze indirectly by looking at other women and comparing their appearance to women around them. They will take their cues from others and try to fit in with, or exceed the expectation. Similarly, many of the women felt the need to please the direct gaze of the males in the gym space. This resulted in things such as the wearing of makeup, ensuring one's hair is in place, as well as ensuring one's body looks physically appealing by concealing any imperfections.

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Many of the women felt that the gym can be a very isolating place. At many of their gyms, most gym members will wear headphones to listen to music, or plug into the TV screens that are provided. This creates a culture that is very individualized. By creating this culture it promoted less camaraderie among members. Many of the women noted that this results in members feeling like they cannot speak to other gym members, and at times even gym staff. The end result is the feeling of there being invisible barriers between individuals.

These invisible barriers are also seen throughout the gym in regard to gendered spaces. Participants indicated that many women utilize the cardio and aerobic classes, while the majority of men dominate the weight training sections. As discussed, for many of the participants lifting heavy weights were not a priority, as they do not feel it will help them achieve their ideal body. Thus, many of these women will choose mostly cardio-based exercises and/or more restive resistance training. Conversely, most of the women felt that it is culturally desirable for men to have strong muscles, and in order to achieve this they will solely use the gym's weight training sections.

Several women indicated that it would not be masculine for a man to be in aerobic classes, and they would question why he couldn't do it on his own. Thus, for a man to cross over into a more feminine space such as aerobic classes, his masculinity might be called into question. As such, it would suggest that this separation acts to reinforce the cultural bodily ideals for both women and men.

For many participants, a means by which they negotiated the constraining atmosphere of the gym was through the use of a women's only section. Although participants indicated that the women's space does not have as much equipment and space, most expressed a preference to exercise in this area. For many it has to do with intimidation. The women felt that the other

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women that use the women's only section are more on par with their physical appearances, and abilities. As such, the space becomes a safe haven where they are free from judgment by both men, and more fit women.

### **Narrative: Judgment of Abilities**

Carrie had never been to the gym in the evening before. For Carrie, a mom of three, it was always easier for her to come to the gym during her lunch break. Today was different, as she had gotten tied up in meetings. Not wanting to miss her workout, she decided to pop into the gym on her way home from work.

When Carrie had signed up for the gym she had been taught how to do a circuit workout on the weight machines. She liked that she didn't have to think about what to do, she just had the five machines that she would do 12 repetitions for 3 times. She had been doing the same workout every time since. Although it tended to get boring, she knew it well and was comfortable with it. Yet, looking around the busy gym floor nothing seemed familiar. Nothing seemed comfortable. The evening gym crowd all seemed to be young, fit and abundant.

She felt a bit of panic as her eyes scanned the room for her circuit machines. The ones she knew how to use were occupied with people! *Maybe they will be finished soon. I'll just wait it out.* Not wanting to just stand there not looking like she knew what to do, she busies herself with her iPod. Slowly she begins to pick through her song list, all the while sneaking glances at the nearby machines.

*Oh thank god!* Carrie finally spots an open machine and quickly walks towards it. She can see another woman coming towards the machine from the opposite side. *Back off lady!* The woman has her headphones in and doesn't even look up to see her. Just like that, her machine is gone. *Great. Now what.*

She hesitantly begins walking through the gym floor in search of another option. She finally spots a machine she recognizes. She has never done the machine before, but she has seen others using it. She slowly makes her way towards the machine. While approaching, she strains her eyes to try to read the instructional pictures displayed along the side. Upon reaching the machine, she still isn't certain how to use it. *Why do they make these so confusing?* She takes a moment and tries to decipher what the pictures are telling her. She can feel the burning of eyes on the back of her head. *People are watching me do this.* She pulls out her hair ponytail and began raking her fingers through her hair; all the while trying to take sideways glances at the pictures. She slowly ties her hair back into a ponytail and smoothed it with her hands. *Ok enough just get on the machine and figure it out.*

Hesitantly she slides into the machine. She clasps the bar with two hands and begins to curl her arms upwards. Immediately her muscles begin to buzz with the effort. *Wow! This is heavier than it looks.* She curls her arms up again. *Is this where I am supposed to be feeling it? What if I am doing this wrong and I end up hurting myself.* With that thought she glances up from her hands. Her eyes meet those of a middle-aged man on the machine directly across from her. *Is he looking at me funny?* She quickly looks back down at her hands. *What if he is looking at me thinking I am doing this totally wrong?* She sneaks a peek back at the man. Just then he gets off his machine. *Oh my god. I bet he is coming over here to tell me I am doing it wrong.* The

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thought of be humiliated like that is too much. She jumps up from the machine and quickly turns her back to the man.

*Oh my god! What is that?* She looks down horrified at the seat of her machine. Staring back up at her was the sweaty outline of her rear-end. *Why is my butt sweating so much? I don't want anyone to see this!* Panicked she grabs for the spray cleaner and quickly doses the evidence. *Well that was humiliating.*

She puts the spray bottle back and turns to face the gym. She scans the machines and is pleasantly surprised to see a few that are empty. Before she could move towards them she notices that a few of the men are jumping from machine to machine. *Are they using this one, or all of them?* She hesitates. *What if I get on a machine and a man comes up and says 'Move! I'm using that'.* Not wanting to take that risk she decides to not even try.

Just then, Carrie remembers a workout she had read about in her fitness magazine that uses free weights. She scans her memory trying to remember the exercises they suggested. At the time she was reading the magazine she had thought about writing the exercises down, but she decided walking around the weight room with a notebook would just look silly. It would make her look like she didn't know what she was doing. *I don't know what I am doing. I should have just written it down.*

As she walks towards the weight room, she spots the free weights lined up along the back wall in front of the wall of mirrors. Her eyes begin to trail up from the weights to the men all standing in front of them. Even from across the room, she can see the definition in their muscles. They are all by themselves and you can tell they are all working hard. Upon reaching the weight room, she passes through a section of benches and big bars. She can see men lifting the heavy bars with weights over their heads. *I would look ridiculous trying to do that. I couldn't even lift the bar let alone put weights on it.*

Tentatively, she walks towards the free weights. Not knowing what to do, she begins to pick up weights and put them back down. *Wow! 10lbs is a lot heavier than I thought. Nope, not doing 7.5's either.* She selects a pair of 5lbs weights and moves off to the side. The space is small and she feels like everyone is very close to her. She begins to do the arm curl exercise she had seen in the magazine. *I wonder if this is right?* She glances up to the mirror to see what she looks like. Her eyes instead trail to the guy in the mirror beside her. *Wow! He is lifting huge weights!* Her eyes move back to her own reflection. *I look so scrawny next to him! It's not like anyone would expect me to lift that much weight, but still.*

She looks away from the mirror and tries to focus. With each curl, her arms begin to weaken. The weights feel like they have tripled in size. Her body begins to radiate with heat and her hands begin to become clammy with sweat. She looks back to the mirror at the rest of the weight room. *They all probably thinking I look pathetic sweating like this and only lifting 5 lbs.* Her breathing starts to become strained with the effort of the exercise. She can hear men grunting and making all sorts of noises around her. *I will not grunt. Not matter how hard this is.* She struggles to keep her breathing even. *It is ok for men to grunt. That is what men do, they sweat, they work hard, and they grunt. Men will be men.* There was no way she was grunting. Sweaty and exhausted, she decides to take a break.

While catching her breath she looks around the room. Everyone seems to have their own set routine. They all are confident and look like they know what they are doing. They all look like they are athletes, not people that just happen to go to the gym. Carrie looks back to her own image in the mirror. Not unfit, but not super fit. Definitely not an athlete like the rest of these people.

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Although the room is mostly men she does see a woman not far from her. She too is fit. Carrie watches her with admiration as she moves effortlessly through her exercise routine. Unsure of what to do next, Carrie picks up her weights and attempts to mimic the exercise that the other woman is doing. The other woman's form is fluid and smooth; nothing like hers. Carrie struggles to maintain her balance while taking sideways glances through the mirror at the woman. A horrible thought pops into her mind. *If I am watching her, could others be watching me?* She looks around nervously wondering if people are looking at her. *I am not good enough to be watched. I am just a beginner. I am not worthy.* She tries to focus on the exercise, but she can't shake the feeling that others are watching her. *I don't know enough to be here. I don't deserve to be in this space. I belong in the circuit area and these people belong here.* The feelings begin to overwhelm her as she becomes increasingly aware of everyone in the room. *I am just in the way.* She puts her weights back in the holder. *Move!* She hears them say. And she does.

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Many of the participants indicated that they felt like beginners at the gym. As such, the gym space often created an atmosphere of self-doubt and intimidation. As many of the women were unsure of how to use the gym, once they found exercises they were comfortable with, they tended not to change their routine. Although they were happy to have a set routine, many of the participants expressed issues of lack of motivation due to boredom, as well as intimidation of other gym spaces.

Stepping outside what they know and trying new things at the gym was difficult for many of the participants, as they are beginners in what feels like an atmosphere of more knowledgeable individuals. This alone can create anxiety of looking unsure or having others see them doing exercises incorrectly. As many of the women are less confident in their abilities to weight train, this anxiety increases due to the fact that most of these skilled individuals are men.

When women are starting out, it is unrealistic to think that they can lift heavy weights right away. Thus, for many women they are then forced to exercise in a space where others are lifting much heavier weight. As weights are an objective measure of strength, this allows individuals to compare their skill and ability directly to those around them. This was the case for many of the participants, and most expressed feelings of weakness and shame over their ability



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to directly compare with others. For many of the women, the end result was often avoidance of the exercise or utilizing resistance machines outside of the weight room area.

Lastly, issues around femininity and masculinity also come into play in the weight room. When individuals exercise they push their bodies physically. This results in things such as sweating, heavy breathing and generally looking dishevelled. As a result, many of the participants viewed themselves as having a feminine deficit due to the cultural standards of femininity while at the gym. Participants believe that it is ok for men to grunt, sweat, and express their strength. However, these things are seen as them showing off their masculinity. Participants felt that for women this would be seen as unfeminine, and therefore inappropriate. This then becomes a greater issue when these women are subject to the direct gaze of males; which often is the case in the weight room.

### **Narrative: Judgment of Body**

The car ride home from the club was tense. Faith and her boyfriend, Tim had become entangled in the same fight they got into every time they went out. She had worn her typical outfit of tights and a loose fitting shirt. All she wanted was to wear shorts. That's what everyone else was wearing. She used to be in better shape back when she had played sports, but now that she had gained weight she felt insecure and unhappy with her body. It bothered her that she couldn't wear the things that she wanted to. At the club, instead of dancing she had spent the whole time looking around the room wondering if anyone was looking at her and judging her. As usual, Tim grew frustrated with her insecurities and eventually they left, both feeling annoyed.

Once home, Tim heated up a Pizza. *That is so typical of Tim! He wants me to lose weight but then he still goes and eats whatever he wants.* Faith knows she shouldn't eat the pizza, but how is she supposed to sit there while he eats that in front of her. *God it smells too good...maybe just one piece.* Caving in, she eats a couple slices. *God why did I do that? Ok, I am going to the gym tomorrow so I will just have to make up for this by working extra hard.*

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Faith fights back a yawn as she picks up her weights to start in on another set of lunges. It is 6:30 am and the gym is mostly quiet, except for a few older, retirees. Although Faith isn't a morning person, it is much better to work out in the morning than in the evening when the gym is full of all younger, fit people. Instead of comparing herself to the 16-year-old skinny girls, she can focus on her workout.

Faith notices an overweight woman on the treadmill behind her. A thought creeps into her mind. *Maybe she is looking at me thinking, 'oh gosh. That person is so good at what they are*

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*doing, and they are so fit, and they are so slim*'. The thought boosts her ego. Feeling more empowered, Faith lunges forward and starts in on her next set. Her legs are burning from the lunges, but a sense of pride is welling up inside her. She feels good. She feels strong!

Faith looks up to check her form in the mirror, but instead comes face to face with her reality. The vision of the strong, slim woman is not the same as the image staring back at her. She scans her body. Suddenly she becomes aware of how tight everything feels. *Why did I wear this?* She attempts to pull up her pants and pull down her shirt. She lunges for another rep, feeling her tummy jiggle as her foot plants down. *Oh my god, I am so gross!* Looking down at her legs, her insecurities grow. Although her black yoga pants are acting like camouflage, holding her in, she knows what the reality is. She lunges into another rep. *Thunder thighs.*

Looking back into the mirror she noticed the gym has become busier, and the attendees, increasingly more fit. *Where did the old, overweight people go?* Horrified, she sees a couple of young, attractive guys walking up to the bench beside her. She looks back at herself in the mirror. Her thoughts run a mile a minute. *What a disgusting, sweaty, sloppy mess. This is not what a girl should look like. I look like an animal!* She locks eyes through the mirror at one of the guys. *What are you looking at?! Is he checking me out? He is probably checking me out. Guys like to look at girls. God, why did I not put on makeup? He probably thinks I look like a crazy person all sweaty and ugly.*

Faith looks around at the women in the gym. *Why is everyone so fit? Where are the rest of the normal people?* A sad thought pops into her mind. *Am I largest one in this room?* Faith begins to slow her pace to avoid any further movement and jiggling of her body. *I don't want to be here with these skinny hot babes and have my rolls bouncing all over the place!* Faith notices a slender, pretty girl on the inner/outer thigh machine behind her. *She isn't even breaking a sweat!* The frustration builds. *Why do I have to work so hard and literally torture myself to try to look the way I want and she gets to look like that without even trying?*

Her eyes begin to blur with the threat of tears. *Why can't I just be thin?* The fight she had had with Tim the night before, flashes through her mind. *He is naturally lean. He doesn't get it!* When they met she was younger and she too was thin, but recently her body had been changing. Cellulite has begun popping up on her body and losing weight has become harder and harder. Her boyfriend's voice cuts through her like a knife, *"I have never dated a girl with cellulite". Must be nice!* She tried to shrug it off, but the words cling to her. The pressure put upon her by her boyfriend seems to almost pull her down. With each lunge her body becomes heavier and heavier. Her eyes well with tears but she does not stop lunging. She will lose this weight.

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Negative body image is a problem that many of my participants face daily. As previously discussed, pressure to please the male gaze is prevalent in our society. For women like Taylor, this constant self-evaluation creates emotional baggage that she carries with her daily. When placed within a gym atmosphere, an emotional response to one's body image becomes increasingly worse. It appears that for my participants, the gym is a space where the focus is put

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directly on using and moving one's body. Thus, there is added attention for observing, as well as evaluating, how one looks. Additionally, for many of the women, the gym has also become a place where they can 'fix' their bodies. Thus, many of my participants indicated already being in a negative headspace upon entering into the gym.

At the participant's gyms there are many mirrors. Although these mirrors are viewed as helpful for participants to check their form etc., for many of these women they are also a cause for anxiety. When participants do not have to see themselves in the mirror they are able to better focus on their exercises. However, once mirrors are present, the focus shifts away from the exercise and onto how their body looks when performing the exercise.

It appears that mirrors also act as a tool of perceived surveillance. If participants were able to see themselves in the mirror, they are then provided an image of how others are viewing them. This anxiety of evaluation can then worsen when men, especially "attractive" men, are in the same vicinity. When men are present most of the women feel the need to look appealing to their gaze. This image is one that is routed in what it means to be feminine and have the ideal female shape. Things such as sweating, not wearing makeup, and looking overweight and/or unkempt are considered to be unfeminine, thus unpleasing to the male gaze.

Although the presence of males creates issues of judgment and bodily evolution, for many of the women the presence of other females can also enact these feeling. At the gym, participants are able to look at other women and directly compare their bodies and their actions against those of other women. This comparison can sometimes leave these women feeling more empowered, as with the case of the Taylor's comparison to the overweight woman. However, more times than not, it can make these women feel worse about their bodies and their attractiveness.

### Narrative: Changes

Kacey sips at her Americano as she waits for Beth's latte to be called. The lineup today is longer than usual so they decide to sit on the tall stools near the counter. They meet here for a mid-afternoon coffee break every day. This is a ritual to which Kacey always looks forward. Beth looks up from her day planner with a quizzical look. "You go to the gym right?" Kacey nods. "Ok, maybe you can help me out with something. I am tired of my current gym and am thinking of changing. Do you have any suggestions of one I should try?"

Kacey thinks for a moment then laughs. "Well I know which one I wouldn't go to. I was on the bus the other day and I saw an advertisement for this new gym opening up downtown. It had all these pictures of glistening muscular bodies in these very suggestive positions. Like they literally looked like they could be having sex, but they were doing gym stuff."

"Oh yeah, I know the one you are thinking of. They are the ones with the slogan 'harder is better.' It actually makes me so annoyed. Like the fitness culture has gone beyond health and is now move towards this ideal image. I really find that gyms create a fuzzy line between health and being perfect." Beth shakes her head, "like I get that it is important to take care of your body, but I think there is a lot of scary stuff going on where people are being fed this idea that they have to have a perfect body. The way to get that perfect body is being at the gym all the time."

Kacey has always been self-conscious about her body and feels a pang of sadness at the truth of Beth's words. "Yeah, it does make us women feel pretty inferior. Like I wish I could have the perfect curvy body – you know the big boobs and butt, but the small waist and thighs. Gyms make me feel worse about that. I don't think it will ever change though..."

"Well it won't change unless gyms and the media stop showing us only one type of body. It makes everyone else who doesn't have that body want to hide," Beth interjects. "Well I personally would not go to that gym because I found them really 'sales like'. I actually called to get more information on that gym. And get this; they wouldn't give me a price over the phone! It was the most brutal experience. They kept saying stuff like 'Well it really depends on each personal circumstance'. I was like, 'what do you mean? Like how much money I have?' I am guessing they were probably going to try to sell me personal training. Like they just kept saying I would need to come into the gym to be assessed and to goal set."

Kacey had heard this before. By 'goal set' they mean they are going to try to tell you that you what you need to do in order to change your body to look like this one fitness ideal. Kacey hated the idea of someone who she doesn't know, telling her what her body needs. Yet, thinking back, she wished she had sat down with someone to at least get to know the gym better. "You know, Beth, it may be worthwhile to go in and meet with them. I wish I had had a better orientation because I still don't really know how to use the stuff at my current gym. It's not like we are men and we're brought up knowing how to use the gym. We need more help, you know?"

Beth's face twisted with thought. It was as if you could see the wheels turning. "That is true," she admits. "You know I never really learned how to use the gym growing up. I blame the school system. Think back to your high school. They separated you, right? I remember in my school we had the unofficial girls' classes like yoga and dance, and all the boys went to do the sport and weight training gym classes."

"Well, I actually was one of the few girls who took the co-ed gym class back in high school" Kacey piped in. "Although thinking back it was still pretty separate even within that class. I remember it was always all about the guys. The girls were always the 'bad players' on

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the teams that no one really wanted. Even the teachers had different expectations for boys and girls. Like they always expected the boys to do better at all the sports and the girls were just kind of there.”

Beth looked shocked that Kacey had done the co-ed class. “Well even if I had done the co-ed class, I don’t think I would have done the weightlifting unit anyways. I think maybe it is because it was not something I felt I needed to do. You know, now that I think of it, I think this is bigger issue then even the school system.” Beth looks quizzically, “I think it goes back to even the idea of how boys were taught to be strong, and to be able to fix things around the house and stuff. As women we weren’t taught to be interested in those things. We kind of get left behind with that.”

Growing up with two brothers Kacey can attest to that. “We were raised differently. I think that in order for us to be comfortable using a gym and the weight training areas in particular, we need more from the gym then guys do. Like, for men, as long as a gym had weights it wouldn’t matter. But for us, we need more support. This is why I think a good orientation is important. Like when I signed up my gym, I had no idea what I was doing. It was my first experience with weights and resistance machines. I found the whole thing intimidating. Plus, all I saw were these hulk-like men and women lifting weights. I never ended up using the weight section. I wish that they had toured me around and shown me how to use all of the sections of the gym and the equipment. You know, told me ‘this is how you do it’, and ‘this is what this does’. I think it would have made me much more comfortable. Maybe then I wouldn’t have been so intimidated looking at all those guys and thinking ‘I don’t know about that!’ Kacey laughs.

“Well that is why I am switching gyms. I feel like at my current gym, when I first signed up they were all like ‘Bravo! Let’s get you started’ and it was really encouraging. But now that I have been there for a while it seems like they don’t care. It’s almost as if they think they I am there so I am probably not going to leave. But I feel like there is nothing new from there. I wish there was more ongoing support! You know? Like I wish they would find ways to re-motivate you. So, say you have been there for a while, why not offer a free personal training trial? Or do like a yearly check-in to make sure you are happy and working toward your health goals?”

Kacey nods in agreement. She has been feeling so unmotivated lately, and really would benefit from something like that. *It feels like the way gyms operate now is that you pay your membership, you go, and you work out. That it is.* “Yeah, I do wish they had more support for you. If you have money you can get extra support with personal trainers. But not everyone can afford personal training! I know I can’t. I think instead they should have staff designated to walking around and helping members. You know, like showing them new ways to use the gym. I think that would maybe help me to try things outside my comfort level.”

“That is so true, Kacey! I find I can never find someone when I have a question or need help. My last gym was so big. I think gyms could learn from the way schools set up classrooms. My friend Lisa – you know Lisa right? Well Lisa is a teacher and she says that at her school there is a ratio of so many kids per staff member. I think that should be the same with the gym. There should be a certain ratio of gym staff so that people can watch over and see that everyone is ok; to make sure things are working for you. To me that is what a gym should be. I think that would maybe help change the culture of the gym, too. Like there needs to be more interaction. I need to feel like I belong. That is why I don’t work out at home, right? I am not just looking for a place to work out; I am looking for a community of support. Not just from the few friends that I have to encourage me, but from others too. I need a gym space that is welcoming.”

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Kacey thinks about her gym and its current culture. Beth has a good point. Her gym doesn't feel welcoming. "You know what? I think if gyms were more welcoming it would also encourage a more diverse clientele, too. I am tired of going to the gym and seeing people who all look the same: good looking, young and fit. I wish I could see people of all ages, shapes and sizes. I think by seeing others all participating in one activity it would help to enforce the idea that there isn't only one way to be fit. You wouldn't feel like you have to be striving for just one ideal."

They are interrupted by the barista calling out Beth's no foam, skinny latte. Kacey looks at Beth as she stands to get her coffee, "You know if you ever find that kind of gym you let me know." They both smile at the thought.

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As previously discussed, the line between health and perfection is one that has become blurred. Participants expressed that they are bombarded with images of models with flat stomachs and perfect bodies; all with the message that dieting and exercise is the way of achieving this ideal look. The gym has become an icon as the space in which these women (and men) can go to work on their bodies in order to move them closer to this ideal. Although many of their gyms send the message of health, the underlying messages perceived by many of the participants was that weight loss and a fit body is what you want.

By only seeing one type of body promoting messages of 'health,' it makes these women feel that if their bodies don't look like that ideal they should be ashamed to show them. Many participants expressed that in order for them to feel more comfortable with their bodies, they first need to see more images of real bodies, not just the ones that are in perfect shape. Health is a state of being, not a body shape, and participants want the messaging to distinguish between that.

A few participants also indicated a perception of gyms as corporations that are aimed at selling them health. These participants feel that gyms tend to have an undertone of sales behaviours that creates feeling of distrust between individuals and the facility. Not only did these women feel that gyms were trying to sell them on upgrades and higher priced packages, they also felt that gyms were trying to sell their ideals of health. Health is a very individual thing for

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many of the participants. Having gym staff tell these women what they should and should not want for their bodies can be very off putting for them. Instead, participants want to see gyms create a more open, less sales driven environment that is focused on the individual's needs, rather than the gym's ideas of what health looks like.

Many of these women expressed feeling disadvantage in regard to knowledge on how to utilize all areas of the gym, in particular the weight training sections. Their solution for gyms was to create a safe space for beginners where they learn how to use all areas of the gym. Participants indicated that when they avoid certain areas in the gym, it then creates barriers that are often impossible for them to cross. Participants feel that by creating an open space right from the orientation, gyms can help lessen these invisible barriers.

For many participants, these issues of knowledge extend beyond the gym to childhood development. Participants felt that as women they were socialized differently from men. They feel that men are taught to be strong, athletic and to take an interest in 'manly things', which includes lifting weights. These participants feel that unlike men, women are socialized to take an interest in more feminine things, and are often separated from the boys for being less-athletically inclined. As previously expressed, this then becomes an issue in the gym later in life, as many of these women do not perceive that they belong in more male dominated gym spaces.

Not only do gyms need to have a thorough orientation, for many of these women this support needs to be felt on an ongoing basis. Participants want a sense of community and belonging. They want staff to show that they care by having staff members visibly present on the gym floor to show them how to utilize the space, allow for ongoing training, as well as provide access to information. By changing the culture of the gym to one that is supportive and inclusive, many of the participants hope that this will then encourage others to join that are not the typical

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young, fit gym-goer. By increasing the diversity of the space it will then in turn begin to broaden the definition of what a healthy body looks like.



### **Discussion**

The gym has the potential to be a valuable resource for adult physical activity (Craike, Symons & Zimmermann, 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Yet, despite this, the gym environment remains a particularly underdeveloped area of study (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Women's gym experiences in particular is an area of research that needs a greater focus, as currently the literature tends to focus on women's gym experiences in extreme or isolated contexts. Thus, this research sought to illuminate the female, gendered experience within a traditional, mixed gendered gym context. Through the use of unstructured life story interviews, this research illuminated the dominant gendered expectations that women perceive within the gym space and how these expectations interact with/in women's gym use. Through this exploration this research also discussed what women perceived could be changed in order to benefit their gendered gym use.

#### **Gym Participation Motivation**

For many participants, the gym space is an arena of constant evaluation, not just on their physical abilities, but also on their appearance and their abilities to adhere to the societal expectations of being female. For many of these women, going to the gym was isolating, and at times boring. Yet these women still exercise within the gym space. This supports the findings of Pridgeon and Grogan (2012) who suggest that although women do not enjoy working out at the gym, they view it as a necessary means of obtaining the ideal body.

The majority of participants indicated that although they exercised to be healthy, their main motivation was weight loss/bodily management. As Dworkin (2003) would suggest, many women will express a mantra of health, yet still exercise to bring their bodies closer to the

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desired ideal. Participants describe this ideal body as being thin, yet curvy, and toned but not bulky. They also indicated that they felt that their bodies were not aligned with this ideal, and as such felt the desire to “fix themselves.” Similarly, Wearing (1989) suggested, that women will constantly self-monitor their bodies to a point where they will never be satisfied.

This ideal body may govern not only the use of the gym, but also the types of exercises in which women will participate. Many participants indicated workout preferences with a heavy focus on cardio, mixed with light toning exercises. This is consistent with the literature on women’s gym use in that women will use cardio to burn calories (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010), and will lift weights in a restrictive manner (Johansson, 1996).

Mansfield (2011) further suggested that this desire to achieve the ideal body will subconsciously force women to choose only exercises that will help them achieve their ideal body, thereby ignore other forms of exercises. This research was found to be supportive of this, in that many participants expressed that they would only do certain weight training exercises to target their “problem areas” and suggested that lifting heavy weight was not something they were interested in “health wise.” Both Dworkin (2003) and Markula (1995) suggest this lack of interest in weight training is facilitated by a woman’s fear of becoming too muscular, and thus, too far removed from the cultural ideals of how a woman should look. As previously mentioned, the “ideal” feminine body is one that is thin, and yet toned. All participants expressed a desire for lean muscles, but a strong distaste for looking too muscular. This glass ceiling for women (Dworkin & Messner, 2002) creates a fine line that women must walk, as they cannot be ‘jiggly’ but they must not also be bulky.

Apart from not looking too manly, women must not also act like men. This can become an issue at the gym because exercise is synonymous with sweating, heavy breathing, and at times

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grunting. Cockburn and Clark (2000) suggested that when women are forced to exercise publically they are faced with a feminine deficit where they are unable to measure up to the socially constructed ideals of femininity. To be feminine one has to look and act in ways that are pleasing to the heteronormative male gaze. Although it is socially acceptable for men to sweat and grunt, it was seen as unfeminine for a woman to do so. As such, women are left with feelings of undesirability when they appear to display these conditions, even when such performance is a natural reaction to “difficult” work. These issues may potentially become elevated within the weight room, as being one of the few females within a typically male space may attract unwanted male attention. This attention then puts the woman’s worth as a sexual object into question - the object that a woman is “called” to be within the patriarchal male gaze (Markula, 1995).

Due to the potential for having their sexuality and femininity called to question, it was previously thought that women would avoid exercises that were socially seen as unfeminine to the gaze (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Wiley, Shaw & Havitz, 2000). As lifting heavy weights has been traditionally viewed as masculine, it was suggested that women would avoid participation in this activity (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). This research showed that although many participants could not picture themselves lifting heavy weights, the actual participation in weight lifting was not seen as unfeminine. That being said, although the act of weight lifting was not seen as unfeminine, the end result of looking too muscular was. This suggests that although women feel that they can participate in weight training, they must be cognizant of their resulting physical appearance. This refers back to the idea that a woman’s lack of interest in weight training is facilitated by the fear of becoming too muscular, and thus, too far removed from the cultural ideals of how a woman should look (Dworkin, 2003; Markula, 1995).

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Another issue that arises is that although participants felt that it was not seen as unfeminine to participate in heavy weight training, they themselves did not feel that was something they needed “health wise”. This idea that heavy weight training is not interesting for women goes back to the issue in that, although women are able to identify feelings of strength, independence, and power as beneficial outcomes of weight training, their knowledge of these benefits does not translate into women’s weightlifting participation (Dworkin, 2003; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Perhaps this lack of interest stems from the gendered ideal that women are to be weaker than men (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For many participants weight training was seen only as a means to tone their body. Very rarely did participants indicate a desire for strength or power. It would appear that for these women power and strength were not desirable traits for women. Recall that men are typically socialized to be seen as being “bigger, stronger and wiser”, while women are often taught to be fragile, weak, and requiring of men’s help (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 138). Perhaps if participants were to become too strong, they would then threaten these gendered expectations. As such, they would then become unappealing to society’s heterosexual male gaze.

The role that exercise plays in women’s lives are thus rooted in the ideals of what it is to be female within a gendered society. As such, due to this gendered socialization, women may begin to view exercise as a means of managing their femininity and their appearance (Dworkin, 2003). Yet, women’s heavy focus on weight loss as the main gym motivation can be problematic. Motivation plays a key role in women’s ability to participate in physical activity and overcome the gendered barriers that were previously discussed above. As shown by Crossley (2006), when motivations are extrinsic in nature, such as weight loss, the chances of adherence to the exercise program lessen. If women do not maintain their participation in physical activities,

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such as gym participation, the rate women's inactivity and health concerns will continue to be an issue.

### **Exercise Knowledge and Gender Norms**

Although participants indicated that they did not see weight lifting as masculine, many indicated that they were not confident in their abilities to participate in the activity. As a result they either avoid weight training altogether, or weight train in a more restrictive manner, such as utilizing resistance machines. This supports the findings of Salvatore and Marecek (2010), who suggest that since women are not confident in their abilities to weight train they tend to feel concerned over having their skills evaluated by others. These evaluation concerns then cause women to limit their use of weight training. This lack of use leads to a greater issue of weight training incompetence and in turn, greater evaluation concerns. As such, a self-fulfilling prophecy exists.

For many women this lack of confidence in weight training abilities may be a result of gender socialization. Growing up, men are encouraged to play sports, lift weights, and be strong. For many women this is not the case. As a result, many women are coming into the weight room later in life. As suggested by Dworkin (2003), women then must learn how to weight train in the presence of much more advanced individuals, thus resulting in feelings of evaluation on their abilities and on their strength.

It is unrealistic that a woman who is beginning to weight train can lift as much weight as a more advanced male or female. Yet, lifting small weights in direct proximity to someone lifting much heavier makes women feel weak, and unworthy of the weight training space. This again may go back to the gendered socialization within the school system. Van Daalen (2005) suggests, during physical education class young women begin to equate exercising publicly to

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feelings of proving one's abilities, rather than exercising for enjoyment and health. This then can translate into feelings of judgment later in life.

Similarly, many of this study's participants alluded to their highschool gym class as a space where they internalized feelings of weakness and inferiority to their male classmates. They equated this to things such as uneven gendered grading standards, as well as being made to feel like the 'bad players' on the team. As Larson, Fagrell and Redelius (2009) suggested, when female students are taught they should not perform as well as males, they then internalize feelings of being weaker and less athletic than men. As such, perhaps for the participants in this study this early gender socialization has led them to now feel weaker, and less able than their male counterparts as adults.

### **Negotiating The Gym**

At the gym, issues of body image, and evaluation on skills/abilities by others, and by oneself, created anxiety for participants. Similar to Prichard and Tiggemann (2005), this study found that women feel that the gym is a space that encourages this evaluation due to its full length mirrors, opportunity for direct comparison with other women, tight fitting gym clothing, as well as the presence of men gazing directly upon them. As such, the gym environment itself was perceived as a constraining factor.

For many of the participants, gyms are perceived to promote the idea of weight loss and bodily perfection. When gyms focus their messaging on weight loss rather than on health, they then work to further encourage women to self-objectify (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005). This messaging then further attracts a certain kind of clientele; women who are young, thin, and fit. As such, most participants expressed issues with lack of diversity, and voiced a need for more individuals of differing ages, shapes and fitness levels. Johansson (1996) found similar results, in

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that gyms failed to attract middle aged, overweight participants. As such, a youthful and beautiful population then dominate the gym. This is problematic for many women, as those individuals who do not match the ideal body are left feeling self-conscious and inferior.

When placed within this setting women become increasingly self conscious. This is perhaps due to what James (2000) refers to as situation body image. As many participants expressed issues of poor body image prior to entering the gym, these issues became elevated within the gym context. When these women tried participating in an activity that had a higher potential for embarrassment or ridicule by others, such as weight training, it often led to non-participation.

For the women in this study, a means of negotiating these barriers was to lessen the chance of being embarrassed/ ridiculed. How they did this was to exercise in gym spaces that were occupied by non-threatening individuals. For some, this meant exercising in the morning when only the older members were in the gym space. For others, it meant exercising at times/in spaces where fewer individuals might be. For most, this also meant that they would exercise in the women's only sections. Here they felt that individuals were either less than, or on par with their physical appearance and abilities.

When women avoid gym spaces that elevate situational body image, they may also create gender divided spaces within the gym. It has been previously thought that the gym is divided not only into functional areas (Sassatelli, 1999), but also gendered spaces (Dworkin, 2003). This study supports these ideas, in that all participants expressed that within the mixed-gendered sections of the gym the men dominated the weight training areas, while the women dominated the cardiovascular and aerobics class areas. In addition, some women referred to the mixed-

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gendered sections of the gym as the “men’s section”, as many of the participants chose to opt out of the intimidating space, and exercise in the designated women’s only section.

### *Negotiating the Gym - Women-only Sections*

As discussed above, a unique insight that this study provides is the role that the women’s only section plays within the mixed-gendered gym setting. For many participants, the women’s only side was a “safe haven” where they could avoid evaluation by both men, and more fit women. As such, for these women, exercising in the women’s only section works to lessen the male gaze, both from males and females gazing directly upon them.

That being said, although the creation of the women’s only section has lessened the direct feelings of evaluation for many women, this research shows the issues still remain. When women exclusively use the women’s only section it creates a larger divide within the gym. The mixed-gendered section becomes essentially a mens-only section, and only those women that are confident and fit enough have access to it.

Additionally, by creating a women-only section the institutional issues that created the gendered barriers remain, and perhaps will never become addressed. As Markula (1995) suggested, the gaze is “ubiquitously societal” (p. 437). As such, although gyms can create spaces that remove the male presence, they cannot create spaces free of the male gaze. Thus, women-only sections may lessen the direct physical gaze, yet the issues of the societal male gaze are always present.

As Mansfield (2011) suggests, “female fitness spaces are heterosexual spaces constituted through the practices of exercise (p. 240). Society governs what is acceptable feminine behavior and appearance, and the gym is an avenue where women can work to achieve/maintain it. Even without the presence of others gazing directly upon them, many women will still enact what



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Foucault (1977) refers to as normalized judgement, in that women will judge/ compare their bodies' ability to meet the societal standards of what it is to be female. This judgment becomes normalized, as many women are not aware of how they informally judge and measure themselves/others based upon these cultural norms and expectations (Berbary, 2012). Thus, although creating a women's only section may help women to participate within the gym space, the larger issues of dominating gendered expectations remain.

Although this thesis supports the previous notions that women-only spaces cannot remove issues of the male gaze (James, 2000), this research would also suggest that women-only spaces may alleviate pressures of both the direct, and indirect male gaze. Participants indicated that although they felt that women-only spaces create even larger gendered divides within gym space, they still felt that they were essential. As mentioned, participants felt that women-only spaces are areas that are utilized by women who do not meet the societal ideals of bodily perfection. Although many of these women are working towards these ideals, within the women-only spaces, they do not feel the negative effects of having to directly compare themselves to fitter individuals. Thus, the women-only spaces allowed for these females to participate, where they would not likely have done so without the designated section.

### *Negotiating the Gym – Clothing*

It was also thought that women would employ the use of clothing as a negotiation strategy. According to Prichard and Tiggemann (2005) women who wear fashionable, tight fitting gym clothing are at risk for feeling insecure and objectified. As such, they suggest that women will negotiate this barrier by wearing loose fitting clothing, that does not put as much emphasis on their ability to be fashionable. Although this research does support the idea that gym clothes play a role in negotiating barriers of self objectification, it does not support that it is done

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through wearing baggy clothing. In contrast, participants indicated that they do not like wearing baggy gym clothing because it looks frumpy and unfeminine. Instead many indicated they had specific “gym outfits” that followed the close fitting, normative dress of many other women within the gym. That being said, how women did negotiate the constraints were through the colours of their clothing. All participants indicated they wore black yoga pants. Black is considered slimming, and the tightness of the yoga pant material help to hold everything in and camoflaue their flaws. In addition, many indicated they wore close fitted gym t-shirts and tanktops. These were in colours that did not draw unwanted attanetion, yet would still be flattering and fashionable.

Again, although gym clothing can be utilized as a negotiation tool for feelings of insecurity and self consciousness, the issue of why women feel that way remains. In order for women to feel comfortable and free to participate within the gym space, attention must be given to the barriers themselves. As Samdal (2013) points out, in order to create meaningful change, attention must be given to the obstacles themselves, not simply the means by which individuals negotiate to avoid them.

### **Gym-based Implicaions**

This research illuminated the issues that many women face in regard to their gendered gym use. Although several of these issues stemmed from societal ideals of masculinity and femininity, there are direct takeaways that gyms can currently implement to help lessen the effects of these barriers. The key areas that this research suggests that gyms need to focus on are: education, support, and changing the gym culture to focus on health.

Gyms need to create a stronger support system for members, where information is easily accessible. Many of the participants expressed feeling disadvantaged in regard to knowledge

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about how to utilize all areas of the gym, in particular the weight training sections. As a result, participants indicated that when they avoid certain areas in the gym, which then created barriers that are often impossible for them to cross.

According to these women, gyms need to create a safe space for beginners where they learn how to use all areas of the gym. By creating an open space introduced at orientation, gyms can help lessen these invisible gym space barriers. Thus, the first stage of education/support is a thorough gym orientation where members are shown all aspects of the gym and provided with education on how each of the spaces can be utilized.

Not only do gyms need to have a thorough orientation, for many of these women this support needs to be felt on an ongoing basis. Participants expressed wanting a gym that created a sense of community and belonging, where gyms show that they care about the member's wellbeing. According to participants, gyms can begin to foster this culture by having gym staff visibly present on the gym floor. These staff members can then show members how to utilize the gym spaces, allow for ongoing training, as well as provide access to information. Thus, instead of feeling isolated and alone at the gym, members can then feel that they are part of something and are cared for as individuals with/in the gym community.

Participants also expressed feeling that once they had signed up, if they did not purchase personal training packages the gyms no longer cared for them. Many expressed feeling excited and happy once joining the gym, yet felt gyms did little to re-motivate or re-educate as time passed. Apart from having the gym staff available for support, many participants felt that gyms should have annual check-ins with their members. This check-in should allow members to voice any concerns, ask questions, as well as see how they are progressing health wise. Thus, members want gyms to provide a service for all members, not just those who can pay extra for it.

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Additionally, this study would suggest that gyms are sometimes viewed as corporations that sell the ideals of bodily perfection. Through this promotion of weight loss as opposed to the health benefits of exercise, gyms encourage women to self-objectify (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005). Additionally, although it is not the intention of gyms, many gyms fail to attract middle age, overweight participants (Johansson, 1996). As a result youthful and beautiful populations dominate the gym space. This then reinforces the idea that the gym is a space for only those that meet the societal standards of the feminine ideal.

Instead, gyms need to encourage that health and bodily appearance are not one and the same. By promoting health, and showing healthy bodies of all ages, shapes, and backgrounds gyms can work to reinforce that health is a state of being, not a particular body type. By changing the culture of the gym to one that is supportive and inclusive, it has the potential to encourage others to join a gym that are not the typical young, fit, gym-goer. By increasing the diversity of the gym space it may then, in turn, begin to broaden the definition of what a healthy body looks like.

### **Futher Thoughts**

Upon conducting this research it became apparent that other issues needed to be addressed. For instance, I chose to focus this research on women within a mixed-gendered gym space. As such, my criterion for participant selection was that the individuals must identify as female. Although it was not specifically indicated as criteria, all of my participants were heterosexual females. As such, what my study did not touch upon were the experiences of individuals that do not necessarily identify solely with this criterion. Individuals that identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer are a population that potentially have very different experiences within a traditional mixed-gender gym setting. As discussed, the gym is a

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space where gender role expectations are governed through the direct, indirect, and societal male gaze. But what if an individual does not want to please this gaze? What if someone is both the subject and producer of the male gaze? How does this impact gym experiences? In order to address this question, greater attention is needed to understand how LGBTQ experience the gym space. Through further research we can then start to understand how gyms can be changed to become a safer, and more equal space for all.

Another population that was not addressed through this study, yet are equally important, are males. Upon conducting this research it became apparent that, although gyms have attempted to help lessen women's evaluation concerns by the creation of a women-only side, there was no space for men who feel uncomfortable in the gym. This research suggests that although women are not socialized to be strong, athletic and muscular, men are.

The ideal male is strong, athletic and muscular. Thus, there is a societal ideal that lifting weights is more "appropriate" than elliptical trainer or aerobic classes. According to participants, for a man to be a "manly" he must have muscles, as muscles indicate strength and power. How one achieves these idealized muscles is not through aerobic classes, but through heavy weight training. Thus, for a man it would seem that he too is limited to a prescribed form of exercise: weight lifting.

But what if a man does not want to lift weights, but would rather attend aerobic classes? Recall that several participants indicated that it would not be masculine for a man to be in aerobic classes, and they would question why he could not do this type of exercise on his own. This may be due to the idea that by participating in a traditionally feminine activity, it would be seen as going against the culturally and historically prescribed societal norms of what it is to be a man (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As such, society then sanctions this individual's behaviours

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and questions his sexuality (Lorber, 2004). This may be why so few men are found within the aerobic classes, as many men voluntarily accept societally prescribed norms, as they become deeply embedded in their sense of self-worth and identity (Lorber, 2001). Further research is needed on this idea.

It would seem that the issues of appropriate masculine gym behaviours become a larger issue when the male is a beginner gym member. Unlike women who can exercise on the women-only side, if a man does not know how to lift weights and/or needs to lift lighter weights, he must do so not only in the presence of other more advanced males, but also potentially more advanced females. As such, gendered gym-based expectations, although prevalent for females, exists for males as well. As such, further research is needed in how to create a more equal and safe space for all genders.

Another area that needs further attention is understanding those individuals who choose not to participate at the gym. The participants in this study currently exercise at a gym, thus they are able to negotiate and overcome the gendered barriers that exist. For many women, and men, exercising at a gym may be so constraining that they chose to drop their memberships or perhaps never join at all. Hearing their stories is thus imperative to changing the landscape of adult fitness.

Lastly, I would like to touch upon my stance as a researcher. In undertaking this research I approached this study through the feminist lens of championing women and bring their voices to the forefront. That being said, after conducting this research my views on feminism have shifted to exploring gender through a broader feminist lens. Today's patriarchal society is oppressive to all genders, and as individuals that are socialized within this society we tend to accept, identify with, and participate in this oppression (Johnson, 2004). Thus, greater attention as to how society

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as a whole is affected by the cultural gendered expectations of masculinity and femininity is needed in order to help breakdown these ideals and create a more inclusive and accepting society.

### **My Story Continued**

*I walk out of the change room into the gym. I come here everyday, yet recognize very few faces. I walk directly towards the weight room. On my way I clip my iPod to my tank top and stick the ear buds into my ears. The song pumping through the ear buds tells me it is time to work.*

*I scan the weight room. Who is using what? There are a few empty benches, and one racked weight bar where I do my squats. I walk to the squat rack, cautiously approaching trying to determine if someone else is using it. It doesn't appear to be taken so I place my water bottle down to claim it as mine.*

*I adjust the bar to my height and place the weights on either side: thirty-five pounds on each side. It is not as heavy as I could go, but it is a respectable amount. If someone were watching they would not question my strength.*

*I slide my shoulders under the bar and lift up to bear the weight. Slowly I begin to lower my body into a squat. I glance forward into the mirror in front of me to check my form. Instead I stare back at my face. No makeup, but I look all right. At least my ponytail is smooth and perky.*

*With the next squat I scan over my body. Good form with my shoulders. But look at my arms! They are big, pasty and soft. I make a mental note to do some extra arm exercise after I am done with my squats.*

*I squat again. This time I look to the side mirror to check my form. I am getting good depth in my squat. Good. Can you see my tummy rolling over my pant's waistband? I push through the squat to standing position. I put the bar back in its holder and take a break. I glance back to the side mirror. My butt looks flat in these pants.*



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*I turn to glance at the mirror to see how long I have been resting. While my back is turned to the mirror I sneak a look at the backs of my thighs. Can I see my cellulite through these pants? I have always had big thighs, but I had learned to embrace them. They were strong and muscular and looked good in my mini jean skirt. Yet in the last few years I started to see dimpling across the backs of my thighs. The once strong and muscular, now looks expansive and fat. Being a trainer it was not ok to look fat. Who would take me seriously if I had cellulite? I started wearing only carpi pants and training extra hard on my legs. Nothing seemed to make it go away.*

*I look around the room. There is one other female in the gym. She looks really fit. Is she a trainer or just naturally like that? She seems to know what she is doing so I reassure myself that she has worked hard to look that good. She is wearing a tank top and tiny spandex shorts. I can't help but glance at the back of her legs when she turns to pick up her weights. No cellulite. God damn it!*

*The others in the gym are all men. Mostly young guys, but you can tell a few of them are older from their faces. No one is overweight. As I look around I meet most of their eyes. It's not like they are staring at me, but they notice me. I wonder what they are thinking. I am pretty, blond, and somewhat slender. The thought that they have all at least checked me out once does not escape me. It probably wouldn't be so bad if there were other women around, but it is just me and that other woman. Part of me is proud that I am in here; part of me is annoyed. Why aren't more women here? Why am I here?*

*I hear the beats and chants of the women in the dance aerobic class behind me. I wish I could dance instead of kill myself lifting these heavy weights. That would be more fun. But what would be the point? Dancing won't help me lose my cellulite. Dancing won't make my arms*

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*smaller. No, this is what I have to do. I have an hour a day for my fitness so I am not going to waste it dancing.*

*Wow, I sound like my sisters the way I'm hating on my body like this. I am not that girl. If I want to dance I shouldn't see it as a waste of time. I exercise to be healthy, right? Not to look a certain way. And dancing counts as exercise too.*

*Yah, but at the same time it is almost summer. I don't want to feel like crap at the beach in my bathing suit. Plus I have gained a few pounds over the winter that I need to get off. Maybe I will try dancing in the fall once bathing suit season is over. I just need to lose this weight first and then I can try to broaden my exercise routine.*

*I look back into the mirror at my reflection. This time I look right into my eyes. Who are you? What do you stand for? I want to be a person that doesn't follow the societal ideals of what is is to be a woman; I use to think I was because I weightlifted. But here I am, avoiding other forms of exercise just so that I can look a certain way. I know I shouldn't think this way, but it is so hard. People think of me as a fit person. If I show up in my bathing suit all lumpy then what will they think?*

*My head is now dizzy from all the back and forth. These questions seem impossible to answer. For now weightlifting will have to be enough. I turn my attention back to the weights in front of me. I need to focus on getting this workout done so I can get out of here. Back to work.*

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## **Appendix A**

### **Recruitment Poster**

#### **WOMAN PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN EXPLORING WOMEN'S GYM EXPERIENCE**

I am looking for women volunteers to take part in a study of the lived experiences of women within a co-gendered gym environment.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in a confidential, one-on-one interview.

Your participation would involve one interview session of which is approximately 60 minutes.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive a \$10.00 Starbucks gift card.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:  
Mary James Fisher

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies  
at  
226-988-3063 or  
Email: [mjfisher@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mjfisher@uwaterloo.ca)

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee.**

## **Appendix B**

### **Suggested Facebook Posting**

#### **WOMAN PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN EXPLORING WOMEN'S GYM EXPERIENCE**

I am looking for women volunteers to take part in a study of the lived experiences of women within a co-gendered gym environment.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in a confidential, one-on-one interview.

Your participation would involve one interview session of which is approximately 60 minutes.

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Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies  
at  
226-988-3063 or  
Email: [mjfisher@uwaterloo.c](mailto:mjfisher@uwaterloo.c)

## Appendix C

### Participant Profile

Participant	Age	Description
Tracy	30	Works part time at a local knitting store. Has attended multiple gyms in the past, including her university gym. Currently attends a large, Canada-wide chain of gyms. Recently married. Approximate years at the gym: 12 Years
Beth	27	Currently volunteering at a local community centre. Has attended multiple gyms in the past, including her university gym. Currently attends the gym at the community centre. Has recently found out she is expecting her first child. Approximate years at the gym: 8 Years
Catherine	24	Currently pursuing her Master's Degree at her local university. Recently graduated from her undergraduate degree. Has spent time in many different types of gyms. Currently attends a large Canada-wide chain of gyms. Approximate years at the gym: 5 Years
Stephanie	35	Recently employed with a large car manufacturer. Has spent time at many gyms. Currently attends a small, locally owned and operated gym. Is married and has three children. Approximate years at the gym: 16 Years
Tessa	29	Works full time as an elementary school teacher. Has previously worked as a customer service representative within a local gym. Is an avid runner. Has spent time within many different types of gyms, including her university gym. Currently attends a large Canada-wide chain of gyms. Approximate years at the gym: 10 Years
Barb	64	Recently retired. Only started attending the gym upon turning 50, but spent her early years playing many sports. Very active in her downtime (hiking, biking, running). Has spent time at multiple different types of gyms. Currently attends a "barebone" class-based gym. Married with two children, and one grandchild. Approximate years at the gym: 14 Years
Tiffany	28	Works part time with a local, community charity. Has not spent much time in the gym since graduating university. Currently attends a gym in the basement of a local hotel. Approximate years at the gym: 3 Years
Joanna	33	Works as a personal trainer at her father's gym. Has spent most of her life in and out of the gym. Currently attends her father's gym. Recently married. Approximate years at the gym: 20+ Years

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide

#### Lead off Questions

- Tell me about your first experience with the gym
- Tell me about a typical day at the gym for you. You walk through the gym doors and...

#### Ending Questions:

- Tell me what you would like to be different at the gym
- What changes could the gym make to make it a better space of women

#### Probing:

##### Gender

Probe:

1. How men vs. women differ in their uses of the gym
2. How women / men interact at the gym
3. Are there exercises that are unfeminine
4. Are there gender spaces in the gym
5. What do you think about women only sections
6. What it means to be feminine

##### Body Image

Probe:

1. How you feel about your body
2. Describe your body
3. How the gym plays a role in your body image
4. How you feel about you body when utilizing the gym
5. How do you feel about your body in relation to other gym goes
6. What do you wear to the gym. Why?

##### Knowledge and Skill

Probe:

1. How you learned how to use the gym equipment
2. The “rules of the gym” (written vs. unwritten)
3. The gym etiquette
4. How you know how to act that the gym?
5. Times you felt sure/unsure of yourself at the gym

##### Gym Space

Probe:

1. The lay out of the gym
2. Who uses what areas of the gym?
3. How you use the gym

##### Self-confidence

Probe:

1. How you feel in relation to the other gym patrons
2. Times you felt sure/unsure of yourself at the gym
3. Who you feel comfortable/uncomfortable exercising around
4. How confident are you in your workout abilities
5. Are there exercises you wouldn't do in front of others
6. Are there exercises that you feel more/less comfortable doing at the gym

## Appendix E

### Consent of Participant

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

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I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Mary James Fisher of the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo, under the supervision of Dr. Lisbeth Berbary. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I am aware that I may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time by advising the researchers of this decision.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics at 519-888-4567 ext. 36005.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

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Print Name

---

Signature of Participant

---

Dated at Waterloo, Ontario

---

Witnessed

Appendix F

Photo 1: Organizing the Transcripts

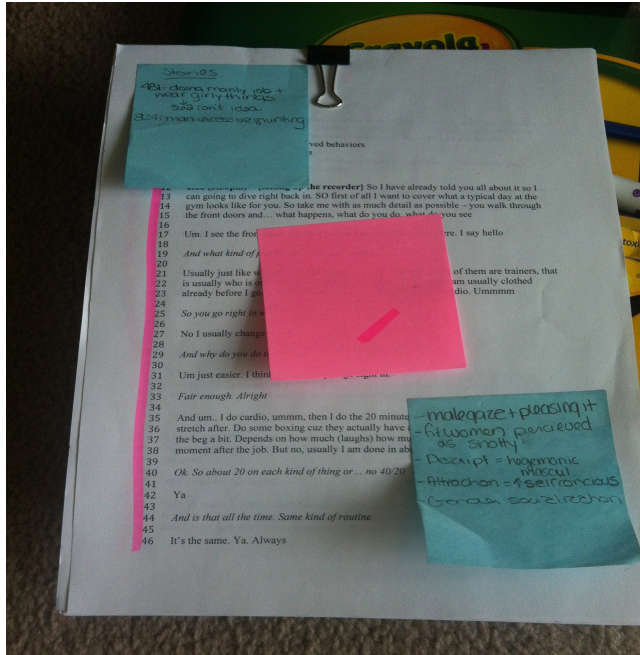
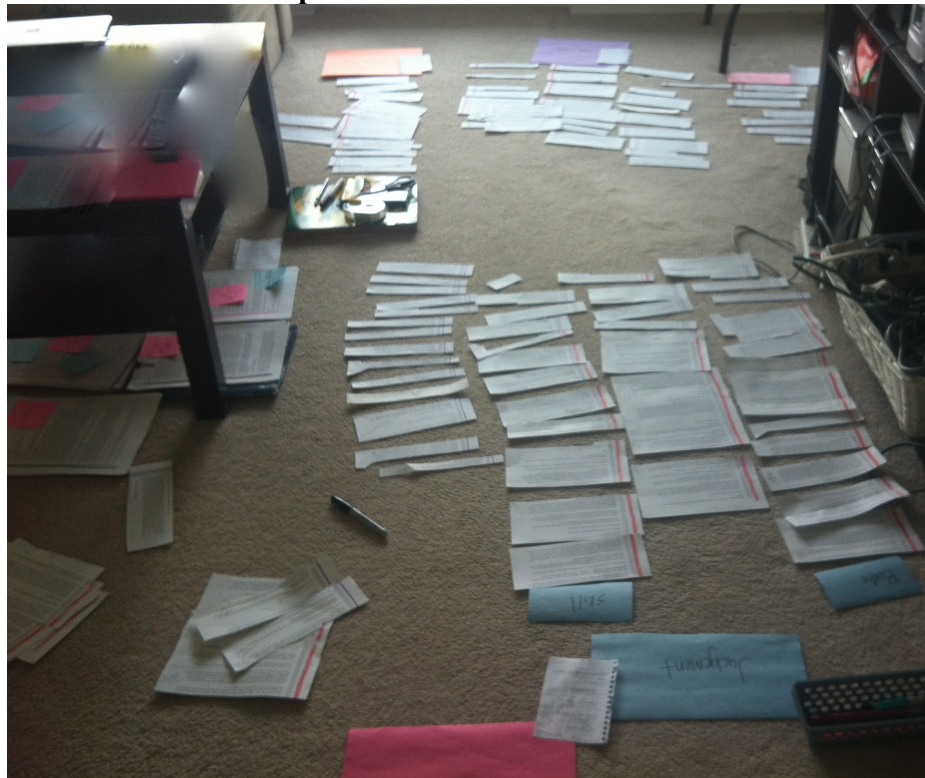


Photo 2: Cut transcript and Created Themes and Sub-themes





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Photo 3: Creating the Narratives

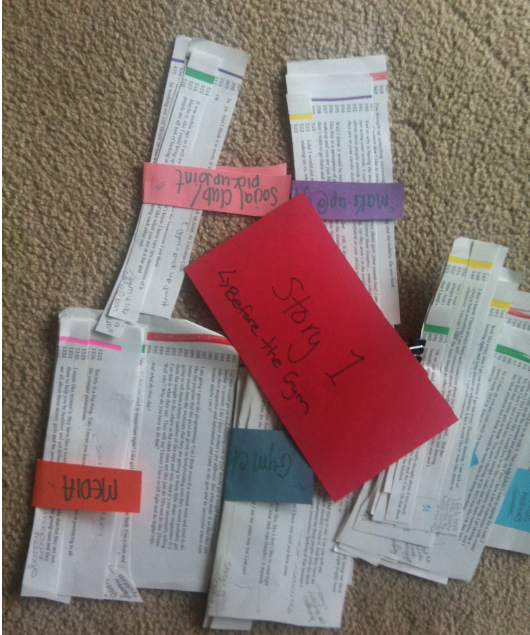
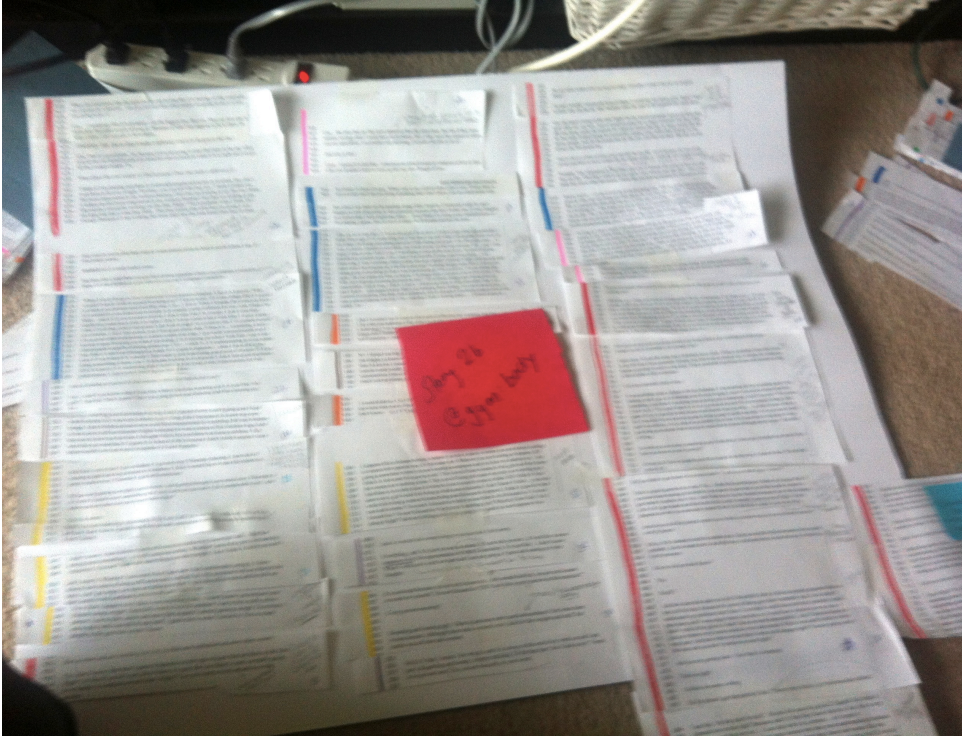


Photo 4: Narrative Storyboard



## Appendix G

### Drafting the Outline of the Narrative – Example of Narrative on Judgment of Body

- Thinking about how summer is coming and how she wants to wear shorts. All her friends do, but she just can't – yellow, 562, 549, 160
- Boyfriend not supportive – Red 706
- Naturally lean and eats whatever – Red 668
- Came in early so she would could workout with the retirees – red- 626 and 632
- Feeling empowered- red 634
- Starting to get into the zone, Feeling proud that she has pushed herself –blue 529
- Catches a look at herself in mirror. “God I look so gross” – purple 606, orange 1032
- Starts to scan over her body.
- Her clothes too tight. – Red 586, Blue 563
- Readjusting – Red 612
- Belly jiggle – Purple, 960 and red 599
- ~~Her belly is bigger since last season – orange –1031~~
- Thinks back to being teased and called “thunder thighs”- brown- 278
- Notices other in the mirror.
- Younger, attractive people - pink 917, red 934,
- They can see her like this – don't want to mess up how they view her- pink 923
- Feels watched/judged. – Blue 966, yellow 512
- Are they going to think I look like a crazy person? Her face has no makeup and is sweaty. – Yellow 197, 202
- Looks like an animal – purple 612
- Disgusting, Sweaty, Sloppy, red mess – purple257
- Why isn't everyone else as sweaty as me? – Blue 564
- The smell of sweat suddenly wafts over her. Is that me?? – Pink 991
- Looking around the gym. Seeing all the thin, younger girls.
- Thinks she is larger then everyone in the room – blue 563, orange 937,
- “skinny hot babe and her rolls are bouncing” – pink 1094
- Gets angry. – red 229
- Why are they even here? They already look good – red 289-292
- Mad she has to work to hard and still looks like this – red 289, 752
- Fighting the tears from welling up as she thinks back to the fight she had with her husband. Met him when she was younger. In the last few years her body has been changing - red 649-693
- No cellulite, must be nice – Red 648
- Crying but won't stop working out – Red 706, Red 732