

Gender stereotypes in the University of Sussex Gyms

Introduction

The gym, which stems from the ancient Greek word “gymnasium” is usually an indoor facility which patrons visit to partake in various physical fitness activities. The gym is considered a semi-public leisure space. While some gyms might be open to the public, certain gyms might only allow access to patrons who are members, making it a semi-public leisure space. ‘There is no dichotomized, gendered separation of public and private spaces in relation to leisure – it is far more diverse and complex’. (Scruton and Watson 1998, p. 123) A space should be gender neutral for the sake of equality; spaces are however, gendered based on the activities that are accomplished within. The gym is a leisure space where individuals are able to socialise and where gender identities are formed. "There is no disagreement that in whatever guise it has appeared through the centuries, the focus of its existence has been on the body, its appearance, and also its utility: be that militaristic or more recently metropolitan” (Galligan 2015, p. 1501) “Modern ‘metro male and female’ have a much broader ulterior motive in utilizing their leisure time in order to look good” (Galligan 2015, p. 1502)

My argument will be based around the University of Sussex’s two gymnasiums - Falmer Sports Complex and the Sports Centre. Analysing the differences in both gyms by comparing the location of the gyms, the layout of the space, the placement of equipment, and the mix of patrons, I will demonstrate how even though both spaces serve the same purpose, Falmer Sports Complex might tend to make women feel more intimidated and also promote gender stereotypes.

Weightlifting and muscular strength is usually associated with masculinity. The ideal activities for a woman to partake in, in the gym, would be things that revolved around aerobic activities, which gave rise to the term “cardio bunny” used more on women specifically. However, women are taking a stance and have taken rise to delving into body building activities. For example, in Korea, a female body builder by the name of Yeon Woo Jhi has risen to fame for her demure looking facial features, but very intimidating muscular body. Despite being a body builder for a while, she was only recently made famous because female body building is in the mainstream. Furthermore, it is unusual for an Asian female to partake in such masculine activities due to the stereotypical “soft” feminine characteristics.

Methodology:

I chose this space based on personal experiences and how they shaped the way I perceived the gym. Growing up, I was always an outcast due to my figure being too large for the average Asian female, and over the years that sparked my inspiration to start working on my body. Sussex University offers two gyms and I have spent a good amount of time in both to cultivate a strong observation and feel, as a woman, a clear distinction in both the gyms. I ensured that I went at peak timings in the gym, and timings I was not used to just to be sure that the following theories were not biased only to the times that I went. I made sure to take wide angle shots so I could capture the gym layout and the patrons working out in the gym, but I made sure not to take close up shots so as to protect the anonymity and assure confidentiality. Should I have taken any pictures with recognizable faces, I made sure to blur them out before inserting them into the essay.

I usually visit the gym around 10:30am and stay till 12:00pm, however, Falmer was closing at 12:30pm and I had only gotten there by 12:00pm. Due to the change in closing times, the photos I took might not have been an exact representation of the space because of the lack of patrons. Also, it was not easy trying to take photos in the strength and conditioning rooms or in male dominated areas. Firstly, whenever I entered the space, their eyes would automatically be diverted to me, making it hard to snap a photo quickly. Secondly, most of the photos that I took were too blur because I felt nervous and awkward being in a male gendered space; so I tried to take them as fast as I could and leave.

In my personal experience, I go to the gym with a partner and he usually goes into the strength and conditioning room while I do cardio. However, he takes a longer time than I do and I usually end up waiting for him in the strength and conditioning room. Whenever I step into the room, as mentioned above, I receive stares and a few people have chuckled to their buddies before. My arguments might therefore be shaped on the fact that I have felt awkward and embarrassed in that space before. Nonetheless, I have tried my best to back my arguments up with as much academic theory as possible.

Sports Centre:



Figure 1: exterior of Sport Centre



Figure 1.3: Overall layout of gym in the Sports Centre



Figure 1.4: Only women in the gym.

Observation on Sports Centre:

Looking at the photos from Sports Centre, not only is it easily accessible, with the bus stop right opposite and the train station behind it, I would say that the area it is situated at is very open. The gym itself has a very open concept, where equipment is placed in full view of the entrance. On the day I visited the gym, despite the early closing time, there were still people exercising; they were all female, with the occasional gym staff coming in for maintenance checks. From figure 1.4, we can observe how only women are occupying the space and majority are doing cardio while only one was doing a body-toning exercise. There was also diverse range of other ethnicities when I was there, such as, two Asian girls and a Middle-Eastern lady. They were dressed in casual sports attire and kept to themselves as they worked out. The equipment was all placed not too far away from each other and was confined in one space, making it very convenient to move from one activity to the other, for example moving from the elliptical trainer to the bike. It was a very peaceful environment to be in.

Falmer Sports Complex:



Figure 2: Hill leading to Falmer Sports Complex



Figure 2.1: Main entrance to Falmer Sports Complex



Figure 3: Pavilion Fitness Room



Figure 3.1: Machines in Pavilion Fitness Room



Figure 3.2: Aerobics mats next to body toning machines



Figure 3.3: Cardio Room on second floor of Pavilion Fitness Room



Figure 3.4: other half of cardio room



Figure 4: 2 Strength & Conditioning Rooms



Figure 4.1: Smaller Strength & Conditioning Room



Figure 4.2: Bigger Strength & Conditioning Room

Observation on Falmer Sports Complex:

Judging as how the walk to Falmer Sports Complex is uphill, in the middle of a wooded area with no proper sidewalk, one can only assume that it is inconvenient to access and rather dangerous due to its seclusion from public areas. From most of the figures, one can observe that the men are the ones dominating the body conditioning machines or free weights areas and almost all the women are on the aerobics mats or doing cardio on the second level of the pavilion fitness room. Unlike the Sports Centre, Falmer Sports Complex has three different rooms that cater to different specialties; two strength and conditioning rooms and the pavilion fitness room which has two floors with body conditioning machines downstairs and cardio machines on the second level.

Analysis - Comparing the Sports Centre and Falmer Sports Complex

From the observations, there are a few key points to bring forth. It is seen in most images that males dominate areas with regards to more strenuous activities such as the squat racks or body conditioning machines. They are also unashamed of practicing the 'male gaze' or giving one intimidating looks should a female tread into a 'male territory'. This might be due to the history of the gym. Galligan (2015) states that before the gym became a space where both genders were accepted, only males were allowed to work on their physique before the 19th century. Seeing as how women were more domesticated and docile, the Greek ideology of masculine beauty thus remained the foundation of Western male fitness and attractiveness. Another reason for the unintentional exclusion of females in body building activities could be a sense of fear and intimidation. Johansson mentions "the observed tendency - that women to a higher degree than men are open for transformations of their gender identities - supports the idea that some changes are taking place concerning gender positions." He also briefly notes that power relations regarding gender are shifting. Women are seen to be more susceptible to trying masculine activities and this might threaten 'male territories'.

Secondly, Knapp (2014) points out that the reason why men might feel the right to monopolise the space or why certain areas of the gym are gendered is with regards to sports in general. Sports has been a site for gender differentiation to be "naturalised' due to its perceived ability to demonstrate the physical superiority of all males over all females" (Knapp 2014, p. 689)

"Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as an ideal form of masculinity that many males attempt to achieve. Furthermore, most males are complicit in its support due to the benefits they derive from the patriarchal system hegemonic masculinity supports."

(Knapp 2014, p. 689)

While Falmer Sports Complex offers different rooms with different purposes, it's less open concept emanates a sense of exclusivity, spurs gendered spaces and gender stereotypes.

“Sport plays a key role in the reproduction and affirmation of hegemonic masculinity.

Although numerous forms of masculinity exist, hegemonic masculinity resides at the top of the social order over subordinated masculinities and over women” (Knapp 2014, p. 689) With a more open concept, the Sports Centre allows individuals to feel more connected with other individuals sharing the space and less isolated and the space is less exclusive.

Lastly, another reason for men to be so predominantly found in exclusive spaces is because men fear spaces that might threaten their masculinity. “Masculinism promotes the qualities of control, competition, aggression, and physical strength. For many men, public spaces and situations that challenge this gender identity may generate fear.” (Carreron 2003, p. 320)

When in the gym, most men take part in body-building activities, making it a common activity, thus allowing them to feel comfortable. As Carreron (2003) mentions as well, men avoid spaces that would result in making them “vulnerable to loss of control or to confrontation.” (Carreron 2003, p. 320) This might explain why strength training equipment's or rooms are generally male dominated and that men might proceed to give women 'looks' when they enter into the space men feel promote the male gender identity.

Another observation would be that even though there were more women in the Sports Complex as compared to the Sports Centre, all of them were still seen to be either doing cardio or exercises on the aerobics mats.

“Emphasised femininity is constructed around women's embodiment of their subordinate societal position and the parallel accommodation of men's desires.

Whereas the male body is supposed to represent power and dominance through its physical size and muscularity, the female body is thought to represent subservience and weakness through its diminutive physical size and underdeveloped musculature”

(Knapp 2014, p. 689)

Knapp (2014) continues by saying that scholars affirm that such "normative bodily expectations" are articulated through "gender specific fitness goals" and activities which consigns most ladies to the cardiovascular room while restricting their access to the weight room.

In the Sports Centre, the women there were dressed in casual gym attire, but in the Sports Complex, most of the women dressed in outfits that were sleeveless or skin-tight. One reason for them to feel such a need to dress in casual gym attire would be because of the level of comfort the Sports Centre offered, whereas in the Sports Complex, there was a competitive edge to it, making them feel the need to dress much more professionally. Another reason why women feel the need to dress in such professional gym attire could be the influence of the media. Sports advertisements show beautifully toned women in skin tight sports attire. Women are exposed to such images and “focus on a model’s idealized appearance in terms of both thinness and attractiveness” (Phillips and Mcquarrie 2011, p. 100) Moreover, most of the women in the Sports Complex were slim and sporty white westerners, while there was a more diverse mix in terms of size and ethnicity in the Sports Centre.

Conclusion:

"The gym offers people an opportunity to change and manipulate their bodies in different directions, and to maintain or change their way of looking at the relationship between the body and gender identity." (Johansson 1996, p. 34) The gym, as a leisure space, showcases the coexisting of two genders' body culture – the body-building culture and aerobics culture. However, the gym also prove that men might unknowingly feel the right to occupy the space and practice the male gaze, making women uncomfortable and fearful. “Fear restricts women’s freedom and enjoyment in public space and limits their opportunities and convenience” (Carreron 2003, p. 311) The Sports Centre, despite its size, serves to provide a safe space for a diverse range of individuals and administers an all-accepting atmosphere with its open concept, where women are allowed to be on the elliptical trainer and allowed to use the body-building machines without having to worry about the male-gaze or the judgmental looks. The segregation of rooms in the Sport Centre sparks exclusivity to others but creates a safe space for men to work out in. Even in todays revolutionized world where things that once were taboos have now become norms, it is still difficult to gravitate towards change in certain situations such as this. “The traditional binary definition of gender roles and more limited way of looking at our possibilities of constructing different types of identities still have a great influence on the maintenance of boundaries between what is regarded as normal and deviant when it comes to gender and the body" (Johansson 1996, p. 43) I do hope, considering the rise of female body builders and the slow surge in more males participating in aerobics, that the gym will soon be a gender neutral space. “Similar to sport, the media are a social institution which often works to construct and promote gender norms that reinforce the patriarchal gender hierarchy” (Knapp 2014, p. 689) With the use of content

control, framing and dispersion, the media will be able to proliferate and spread awareness and acceptance to “reinforce hegemonic social stratification” (Knapp 2014, p. 690)

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