The Perceived and Experienced Social Implications of the Gender Divide in Recreational Gyms on College Campuses

Olivia Brimacomb

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Stella Oh

LMU Department of Women’s and Gender Studies

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Abstract

Lifting weights is one method of working out that is physically and mentally beneficial for both men and women, with advantages such as increasing muscular strength and metabolism, decreasing body fat percentage, and increasing confidence, self-esteem and body image. Despite these benefits, lifting weights is often avoided by women. This comes from the social stereotype of what is means to be in shape for each gender- masculine ideal body images include being muscular, and feminine ideals include being thin and lean. This stigma has resulted in a gender divide in workout habits between people of different genders- men often choose to lift weights and women often choose to use the cardio equipment. This research will delve into the perceived and experienced implications of the gender divide of workout habits at Loyola Marymount University by comparing the number of women and men working out lifting weights to the number of women and men working out on the cardio equipment at the Burns Recreation Center. This research will also examine the effects of the gender divide at LMU through surveys and interviews with people utilizing the gym, asking questions to determine workout habits between the genders and experiences with the gender divide.

Introduction

In today’s era, masculine body ideal images include strength while feminine body ideals include thinness. To achieve this standard, men work to build muscle while women work to burn calories and fat to be seen as in shape, healthy or fit (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). These contrasting body ideals stimulate and drive the divided workout habits between genders. I noticed this stereotype in action while working out at the Burns Recreation Center (BRC) on LMU’s campus – men often use left half of the gym to lift weights, while women often utilize the right half of the gym and workout on the cardio machines. Although this topic of the gender divide between gym workout habits has mostly been discussed in recent years, subjects of a similar nature have been researched for decades.

Weight lifting is beneficial to the physical and mental health states of both men and women. Physical benefits include increasing muscular strength and lean body mass and decreasing body fat percentage (Harne & Bixby, 2005). Toned muscles contribute to overall fitness by increasing metabolism, protecting the body from the effects of illness and slowing the negative physical consequences that come with aging. Weight lifting also has mental health benefits, such as diminishing body dissatisfaction, and increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-concept, body image and improving state anxiety (Harne & Bixby, 2005; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Despite these benefits, women often choose to avoid lifting weights, and my research is going to delve into the perceived and experienced implications of the gender divide that stems from the stereotype that men need to be muscular and women need to be lean in order to be fit, which has resulted in the gender divide between guys and girls working out at the gym.

Background, Related Work and Motivation

One perspective of looking at this topic is through the social role theory. The social role theory suggests that all gender-binding stereotypes in society today stem from the different social roles played by men and women when society first evolved, especially regarding the division of labor. The social role theory has been applied to the gender role orientation of athletes, and people participating in stereotypically male or stereotypically female sports. Stereotypically masculine sports include high contact and forceful athletics such as football, whereas stereotypically female sports include graceful athletics such as cheerleading, which notably plays a supporting role towards the stereotypically masculine sports such as football (Harrison & Lynch, 2005). The social role theory could play a part in the gender divide in recreational gyms, where strength is seen as necessary for these highly brute and “masculine” sports, which can be supported by weight lifting, and thinness is necessary for the grace and agility of “feminine” sports such as cheerleading which is supported by cardio-driven workouts.

Other research has explored why women are less likely than their male counterparts to lift weights at the gym, despite the health benefits that it brings. The stereotype that women need to be thin in order to be in shape has resulted in a cultural dissociation between women and strength-related fitness goals, as opposed to aerobic-related goals. Concerns about evaluation and judgement from others was presented as a deterrent for females lifting weights. This stems from reported phycological discomfort that many women experience while working out at the gym. Another deterrent is the gender-differentiated habits of use of gym equipment, and the fear that comes from not knowing how to use the free weights and bench presses correctly (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010).

Additional research has examined the perceived benefits and barriers to weight lifting in college-aged women. In one study, between two groups classified as Strength Trainers and Non-Strength Trainers, there were no differences between the reported perceived benefits to weight lifting, however the Non-Strength Trainer group reported higher scores on the barrier factors. This shows that most college-aged women are aware of the physical and psychological benefits of weightlifting, but some show more apprehension towards it because they have not overcome these perceived barriers, with time/effort ranking as the most influential barrier (Harne & Bixby, 2005).

With all of this in mind, I would like to examine the perceived and experienced social implications of the gender divide in recreational gyms on college campuses, specially at the Burns Recreation Center at Loyola Marymount University. The questions I am going to be researching are as follows: will the number of people working out in BRC be significantly divided by gender when comparing the use of weight equipment to cardio equipment, and, will these numbers reflect the feelings and experiences of both genders working out on either side of the perceived gender divide?

Methods

To examine both the perceived and experienced implications of the gender divide at the Burns Recreation Center, my research is going to take place in two parts. The first part will be quantitative and will include comparing the numbers of men compared to women working out lifting weights versus working out using the cardio machines, such as treadmills and ellipticals. This will exclude anyone working out via different methods in the gym, including people working out on the mats in front of the long mirrors, using the spin bikes on the second floor, or utilizing the fitness classes. I am going to record the numbers of men and women using free weights and the men and women using cardio machines uniformly, at specific times during specific days. This will include multiple days during the week and one weekend day in an attempt to broaden the pool of people “participating” in this research. The second part of the research will be qualitative and include a mixed-method approach – I will hand out surveys to both men and women who are leaving the BRC, asking them questions about their typical workout routines and if they have noticed or experienced any implications of the gender divide. On the survey, I will ask if they would like to participate in an interview. If the answer is yes, I will ask additional questions about their experiences regarding the gender divide. Finally, I will make conclusions in a research paper that will be composed of the results and findings from the study.

Expected Results

For the first part of the research, I expect to find that there are more men than women working out lifting weights and using the bench presses. I also expect to find that there are more women than men working out using the cardio machines such as the treadmills, ellipticals and stationary bikes. This prediction is based on personal experience and what I have seen at the Burns Recreation Center in the past. Often, if I am lifting weights on the left side of the gym, I am the only one or one of very few women in comparison to the multitude of men. The opposite is true if I am using the cardio machines – I am usually one of a multitude of women compared to fewer men. For the second part of the research, I expect to see that women who work out on the cardio machines do so for the majority of their workouts, and the women who choose to lift weights do that in a combination with other methods such as cardio workouts. This result could stem from the multitude of deterrent factors that influence women to choose cardio workouts over lifting weights- such as the evaluation from others, the social discomfort, and the fear of not knowing how to lift weights. I also expect women to be more cognizant and aware of the gender divide in workout habits in recreational gyms. All of the results from this research will be compiled in a research paper that will report my findings.

Conclusion

My research is going to evaluate the perceived and experienced effects of the gender divide that is present in the Burns Recreation Center that originates from social stereotypes that women need to be thin and men need to be muscular in order to be healthy or in shape. This social stigma has influenced the workout habits of people of different genders- with men focusing on strength training by lifting weights and women focusing on burning calories by using cardio machines. My research is going to include recording how many men and women are working out at the gym using the free weights and how many are using the cardio machines at multiple times a day during multiple days a week. The second part of my research will include conducting surveys and interviews with people who are leaving the BRC after a workout, asking questions to determine their workout habits and if they have experienced or noticed the gender divide between people utilizing different workout methods at the gym. I will be taking account of any perceived benefits or barriers that people and especially women feel towards lifting weights as a workout method.

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Budget

This research project will include 30 hours of preliminary research and preparation to conduct the experiment. The data collection will include 9 hours of the quantitative research work (recording the numbers of men and women working out lifting weights and using the cardio machines) and 18 hours of the qualitative research work (handing out surveys and performing interviews) spread out over a three-week time period. Finally, the analyzation of the data and the creation of the research article will include another 40 hours of work. At an hourly wage of $13.25, the budget will come out to be roughly $1300.