Gym Stigma

Kaitlin Jones
Carroll College, Helena, MT

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Gym Stigma

Kaitlin Jones
Department of Sociology
Carroll College
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Abstract:
Uses Goffman’s theory of social stigma, this study sociologically examines whether or not there is a stigma at gyms based on bodily appearance or fitness level. The findings suggest there is a perceived “norm” for body type at the gym, and this does affect whether or not people feel judged at the gym. This research was conducted to better understand obesity, and more specifically why people are not getting enough physical activity. This study found that judgment is affecting gym attendance, as the majority of participants not only said they felt judged at the gym--and that the judgment was based solely on bodily appearance or fitness level--but also that the judgment actually affected their attendance. Through this, both males and females reported feelings of judgment; however the findings suggest that females’ attendance is more likely to be affected than that of their male counterparts. This contributes to our understanding of why females have a higher likelihood of being overweight or obese. Overall, this study provides evidence in support of better understanding and addressing body stigma as an essential piece in solving the obesity epidemic in the United States.
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Sociology.

Director

Date

Reader

Date

Reader

Date
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**Introduction:**

Obesity, as we know, is a major problem in the United States, as “more than 2 in 3 adults are considered to be overweight or obese” (NIH 2016). According to the European Association for the Study of Obesity, “overweight and obesity are the fifth leading risk factors for global deaths. At least 2.8 million adults die each year as a result of being overweight or obese” (EASO 2017). While there is a variety of reasons that contribute to obesity, such as genetics, family lifestyle, unhealthy diet, medical problems, social and economic issues, lack of sleep and more, we do know that lack of exercise or inactivity is one of the main contributors (Mayo Clinic 2017). There could be multiple explanations as to why people do not exercise, particularly at a gym: for example accessibility, financial constraints, time constraints, and more (Springen 2017). Gyms are still one of the most popular locales for exercise. Therefore, we might expect to see that overweight and obese people are the ones we are more likely to see at the gym. However, the majority of the population at gyms seems to be or is thought to be people who might already appear to be “fit.” Consequently, this study was designed to understand whether or not there is a bodily norm at the gym and whether or not that norm creates a stigma for anyone who does not fit that norm, ultimately seeing if this “gym stigma” affects whether or not people go to the gym.

This research project examines the relationship between perceived stigma at gyms, perceived fitness at gyms, and gym attendance rates. The research
question is as follows: is there stigma based on perceived appearance in gyms, and if so, does this stigma affect the likelihood that people will use gyms because of fear of this perceived stigma? The hypothesis is that there is a relationship between perceptions of “gym goers” and “fit people,” thus creating a stigma against the “unfit,” and that in turn, this stigma drives people away from gyms if they do not already fit the social construction of a “gym goer.” This study also hypothesizes that women will be more likely to feel judged in gyms, and this is more likely to have an effect on whether or not they go to a gym. According to the Obesity Society, women have a 2.8% higher obesity rate than do men (Obesity Society 2017).
Theory and Literature Review:

The theory that guides this research is Erving Goffman’s theory of social stigma. He stated, “A stigma is an attribute, behavior, or reputation which is socially discrediting in a particular way: it causes an individual to be mentally classified by others in an undesirable, rejected stereotype rather than in an accepted, normal one” (Goffman 1963:3-4). This is significant relating to the research, as the conducted study defines stigma as a sort of judgment, which from Goffman’s theory relates to the socially discrediting and undesirable stereotype that differs from the “norm” body type. Goffman highlighted stigma responses and how there are multiple ways for people to react to stigma. Some people use it to make efforts to compensate for their stigma, as others can hide, and further isolate themselves from the “norm.” Goffman argued that stigmatized individuals can also turn to other stigmatized people for support and coping, and that together they can raise their morale (Goffman 1963). This is also important when looking at the implications on how to fix or approach the stigma in gyms and make it so everyone is comfortable working out there, ultimately increasing physical activity and lowering obesity.

Looking specifically at weight stigma, Saguy and Ward examined theories about social change, stigma, stigma resistance, and social mobilization, as they studied woman that “came out as fat” through social movement spillover theory (Saguy and Ward 2011:53). Saguy and Ward’s research helps us understand that stigma can be based off of bodily appearance. Much like Saguy and Ward’s
study, Thomas et al (2010) analyzed people who identified themselves, or were defined as obese or “fat” by examining and exploring different opinions and attitudes of obese individuals towards interventions. However, Thomas et al. focused more on how to do something about it, and examined the attitudes on intervening and a call to change. Approaching any obesity intervention is and always will be complex and should be according to Thomas et al. (Thomas et al. 2010). Gyms are supposed to be able to provide tools and resources to help people to make healthier decisions, yet this study examines the negative feelings associated with gyms, and why people do not utilize them as much for physical activity.

Vartanian and Novak (2010) studied experiences with weight stigma and found that it affects both the mind as well as behaviors like dieting and exercise. They stated, “weight stigma can negatively influence motivation to exercise, particularly among individuals who have internalized societal attitudes about weight. Reducing internalization might be a means of minimizing the negative impact of weight stigma and of facilitating healthy weight management efforts” (Vartanian and Novak 2010:760). While this research looks at the avoidance of exercise, a sociological approach to addressing stigma, and understanding the norm at gyms will help to understand this public health problem a little more in depth. Relating to the other studies, it is clear that there is a stigma around weight that it does affect one’s likelihood of exercising, and that addressing this issue is very complex.
Not only does being fit affect your overall health, but research also suggests there is a degree of value generated from appearance, attractiveness, and physical ability (Hutson 2013). Bodily capital is shown to affect one’s life in a more professional way. While it affects people differently in the different careers they hold and the different roles they have throughout the community, there is overall evidence that bodily appearance can get you farther in your career, or hold you back, creating even more of a degree of value on fitness level and bodily appearance (Hutson 2013). This plays into how there are certain norms or a certain expectations for appearance based on the value it has in this culture.

This expectation in the literature is referred to as obesity bias (Cardinal et al. 2014), or what this research project is defining more specifically as “gym stigma.” With this certain expectation, it may be really difficult to be a part of a gym when one is not already “a part of the group,” the group being gym-goers who generally already fit in. Cardinal et al.’s (2014) research on obesity bias in the gym, found evidence of a need to “create a more welcoming and safe physical activity environment,” if we as a society do not want people to feel uncomfortable or belittled”(5). Their research addresses a need, which is “...helping all people be physically active--because it benefits not only their body, but also their mind and spirit” (Cardinal at el. 2014:6). Their research provides evidence that there is already an unwelcoming environment at gyms. In Hunger et al.’s research, they discovered that Stigma around weight does contribute to more weight gain and poor health. This weight-based social
identity, affects people’s health, which contributes to the theory that stigma can have very negative effects on an individual, and weight stigma and poor health go hand in hand (Hunger et al. 2015).

In conclusion, there is much research showing the importance of lack of exercise, and obesity, as well as the connection to bodily appearance and ultimately a stigma that can affect one’s attitudes about exercise. This study analyzes the stigma in gyms and the effects on attendance.
Data and Methods:

This study was quantitative, and data were collected via a survey. The unit of analysis was individuals, and the survey was administered to individuals in a medium-sized community in the Rocky Mountain west. The sample from the population of this medium-sized town was aimed to represent the community of both non-gym goers and gym goers. The survey was administered in a variety of locations, including gyms as well as other public (non-gym) spaces. Through a variety of questions regarding stigma, gym attendance, body image, and feelings towards judgment, the survey aimed to be able to understand peoples’ feelings and experiences regarding gyms and stigma (see survey in appendix). This research set out hoping to determine the extent of stigma at the gym and whether or not stigma has any impact on gym attendance. If there really is stigma at the gym, and it does affect gym attendance, then this research can help to better understand, and consequently contribute to decreasing, obesity in the United States.

Key variables that were measured were gym attendance, operationalized by how often someone goes to the gym; perceived fitness, with respondents rating their fitness level, their own body type, and body types most commonly seen at the gym; and perceived gym stigma described by whether or not one felt judged at the gym and how often. Additionally, demographic variables were also measured. See the appendix for the full survey instrument.
Results and Analysis:

Data were collected in three places: a college student center, a college activities center, and a local grocery store. Ninety-two subjects participated in the survey, and 59% of the participants were female, while 41% were male. Of those 92 participants, 41% reported not having a membership at a gym. This means the majority of the participants at least had a gym membership, even if some respondents with memberships reported they did not go to the gym. The most common frequency (32% of all respondents) reported going to the gym 1-3 times a week, demonstrating that of the 41% that went to the gym, the mode of the respondents reported a consistent frequency attending the gym.

The survey brought many trends to light. Below is the response chart (Figure 1) for the different body types for both male and females (See diagram in the appendix for body type image number references).

*Figure 1: Most Commonly Perceived Male and Female Body Types Seen at The Gym*
As expected, there is a norm for appearance at gyms. Among both male and female respondents, the most common body type perceived in gyms for male gym-goers was a 5 with 44.6% of respondents identifying this body type. Among all respondents, the most commonly perceived body for female gym-goers was a 4, with 37% of respondents choosing this option. The complete mean average of all responses for the norm for males at the gym is a 5.36, while the females are slightly smaller at 4.74. Even though both of the means are slightly greater than the modes, the norm range will be 5-6 for males, and 4-5 for females. For both the mean and the mode, females were perceived to be smaller than males.

As to whether or not having a “normal” body type creates stigma, 70% of the respondents said they had felt judged at the gym at least a couple of times if not more often, while only 28% said they never had felt judged at the gym. Additionally, 2% reported they never had been to a gym because of fear that they would be judged. See the pie chart in Figure 2 below which represents these findings. The stacked bar chart in Figure 2 indicates, among the 70% that has experienced some stigma at the gym, how often they experienced that stigma. This means that there is a stigma at the gym and the majority of respondents experienced stigma, at one time or another.
Since there is evidence to suggest that the majority of people feel judged at least occasionally at gyms, next this study will analyze whether or not they feel judged based on perceived bodily appearance or fitness level.

Out of the 70% that felt judged, 78% said they felt the judgment was based on bodily appearance or fitness level, meaning that the majority of the judgment people feel is thought to be based solely on appearance or “fitness level.” Moreover of the 78% that felt judged on bodily appearance or fitness level, 51.9% said that this judgment actually affected their attendance, or their likelihood of attending a gym. All together the data provide evidence that gym stigma is a reality for many people and that it can affect the likelihood that some will attend a gym. Figure 3 below shows that of the 70% who said they felt judged at one time or another, 78% felt they were judged solely on bodily appearance or
fitness level, meaning that people are feeling judged based on appearance or perceived fitness levels, creating a stigma on appearance in gyms.

**Figure 3: Whether the Judgment is on Bodily Appearance or Fitness Level**

![Stigma on Bodily Appearance or Fitness Level Pie Chart](image)

Figure 4 below shows that of the 78% of the people who said the judgment was on their appearance, the majority (51%) of the respondents said this judgment on appearance actually affected their attendance at a gym.

**Figure 4: Whether or not the Judgment Affects Gym Attendance**

![Judgement and Attendance Pie Chart](image)
Overall these findings indicate that people not only are feeling judged at the gym, but that this judgment is based off of appearance alone, and it is affecting their attendance at the gym. The data support the hypothesis of the research; next we will examine the findings by sex of respondents.

Below are the female and male responses for the perceived “norm” body types at gyms. Figure 5 shows that the male respondents most commonly rated the norm for males at the gym a number 5 on the scale, and the most common male rating for females was also a 5, but closely followed by 4. This means, among males, there is a slightly thinner expectation for women at the gym than for men, even though the most common norm for both was a 5.

*Figure 5: Male Responses for the Normal Body Type Found at the Gym*

Figure 6 below shows that females most commonly rated the norm at the gym for males a number 5 on the scale, and they most commonly rated females a 4. Again you can see a slightly thinner expectation for women at the gym. It is
really interesting that females reported and expect to see smaller women and men at the gym than their male counterparts, as the mode for male responses for both male and females is a five, while the mode for female response for both male and females is four for females and a five for males, but closely followed with four for males. See Figure 6 below.

*Figure 6: Female Responses for the Normal Body Type Found at the Gym*

Next, the study will look at the separation between sex on who feels judged and how much. Figure 7 shows that 64% of male respondents reported feeling judged a couple times or more, with 33% of the male respondents reporting they had never felt judged, and only 3% of the male respondents reporting that they have never been to the gym because of fear of judgment. The stacked bar chart in Figure 7 illustrates how often men felt judged, with 42% indicating a couple of times, followed by 19% who indicated sometimes, a small minority feeling judged often, and no men feeling always judged.
Figure 7: Male Responses on Whether or Not They Feel Judged at The Gym

Figure 8 below illustrates that of the 64% of male respondents who feel judged, a majority, 73%, felt that the judgment was because of bodily appearance or fitness level.

Figure 8: Male Respondents on Whether the Judgment was on Appearance or Fitness Level.

So if 73% of males who feel judged feel it is based on appearance, does this actually affect their likelihood of attending a gym? Below Figure 9 shows that the
majority (58%) of the male respondents say that this judgment does not affect their likelihood of attending a gym.

Figure 9: Male Respondents on Whether Judgment Affected Their Gym Attendance.

Figure 10 provides the comparable findings for female respondents. What is interesting between the genders is while we saw that 64% of all male respondents even felt judged, 10% more female respondents feel judged at the gym for a total of 74% of women who felt judged at least a couple times at the gym.

Figure 10: Female Responses on Whether or Not They Feel Judged at The Gym
Of the 74% of female respondents who feel judged, an astounding 81% feel that this judgement is based on bodily appearance or fitness level (versus the males’ 73%).

*Figure 11: Female Respondents on Whether the Judgment was on Appearance or Fitness Level*

Of the 81% of the female respondents who feel that this judgment is on bodily appearance or fitness level the majority (57%) of female respondents say it actually affects their likelihood of going to the gym. See Figure 12 below.

*Figure 12: Female Respondents on Whether Judgment Affected Their Gym Attendance*
Overall the majority of both genders feel judged at the gym in general, even though females reported feeling judged more often than males, and the majority of both sexes feel that this judgment is because of bodily appearance or fitness level.

Below are four charts that show the female respondents’ and the male respondents’ self-reported body types and fitness levels. The majority of females who took the survey fell within the range identified as the “norm” (4-5) for the gym among all respondents, and yet most (53.7%) of the females reported being only “somewhat fit.” In contrast their male counterparts also mainly fell into the “norm” range (5-6) that was perceived to be at the gym; however the majority of males reported that they were “fit.” The majority of respondents felt either “somewhat fit” or “fit”, and the majority also felt they were between the “normal ranges” per sex that were seen at the gym, yet still the majority felt judged based on appearance or fitness level at the gym. This might play into why females are more likely to have their attendance affected by judgment verses males, as it seems that the males are just a little more confident than their female counterparts, which research suggests. (See Figure 13-16 on the next two pages.)
Figure 13: Female Respondents’ Own Reported Fitness Level

![Bar chart showing female respondents' own reported fitness level.](image-url)

Figure 14: Female Respondents’ Own Reported Body Type

![Bar chart showing female respondents' own reported body type.](image-url)
Figure 15: Male Respondents’ Own Reported Fitness Level

Figure 16: Male Respondents’ Own Reported Body Type
Discussion and Conclusion:

It has been shown that there is a perceived “norm” body type at gyms. The normal body type for males is around a five (5.36), and for females it is slightly smaller (4.74). The data suggest that people are feeling judged at the gym, as around 70% have felt judged at one point or another. Goffman’s theory of social stigma relates to this judgment, as the socially discrediting and undesirable stereotype that differs from the “norm” body type (Goffman 1963:3). Of the 70% that recognizes this “gym stigma,” around 78% of them feel the judgment is based solely on bodily appearance or fitness level. This means that the hypothesis is supported as people do recognize an “in” group as identified as the fit or norm at the gym, and that is creating a stigma. Out of the 78% that felt the judgment was based on bodily appearance or fitness level, over half (51%) said that this “stigma” actually affected their likelihood of attending a gym.

Referring to Figure 7 and Figure 10, there were 10% more females than males reported feeling judged. Looking then at Figure 8 and Figure 11, 8% more females than males reported that they felt this judgment was based on bodily appearance or fitness level. Lastly looking at Figure 9 and Figure 12, 15% more females than males reported that this judgment actually affected their likelihood of attending a gym. With this it is interesting to note that while the majority of people overall feel judged at the gym at one time or another. This stigma is affecting respondents even if they see themselves as “somewhat fit” to “fit,” and even if they fit the “norm” silhouette, which calls for more research on this topic.
It is also interesting to see the difference between judgment verses sex as the data suggest females not only feel judged more, but that this actually translates into something very potentially negative such as affecting their likelihood of attending a gym.

Future extensions of this study will include a larger sample size of a wider variety of ages among respondents in order to examine whether different generations are more susceptible to the stigma. As this study collected data at three locations, future research should go to numerous grocery stores or public locations, as well as other gyms around town and administer this survey.

There was a lot of great insight into gym stigma and attendance gained from this study. Obesity is a major problem, and the factors that contribute to it are numerous and complex. Lack of exercise still is one of the leading causes of obesity, and this study helped focus on some of the social stigmas that can exist around weight in the gym setting, which could contribute to this public health problem. This research would be interesting to continue as Goffman’s theory of social stigma shows itself in many different ways throughout time and place.

In conclusion the data collected in this study suggests that there is a stigma or a type of judgment at gyms based solely on body type or fitness level, and that the stigma actually affects whether or not people go to the gym. It also is important to highlight that females were more likely to have their attendance affected because of this stigma than their male counterparts, which could be a
contributor to why females have a higher percentage of obese and overweight individuals.
References:


Appendix:

Gym Stigma Survey

Do you have a membership at a gym?

Yes → if so, what gym do you attend? _____________

No

How often do you go to the gym? (Circle the one that best describe your gym attendance.)

0 times in a month
1-3 times in a month
1-3 times a week
4-5 times a week
Every day
Multiple times a day

Which silhouette best depicts the most common body type for males you see (or think are) at the gym. (Circle the number)

![Male Silhouettes]

Which silhouette best depicts the most common body type for females you see (or think are) at the gym. (Circle the number)

![Female Silhouettes]
Have you ever felt judged at the gym?

- I’ve never been to a gym.
- I’ve never been to a gym - because of fear of judgment.
- I’ve never felt judged at the gym
- I’ve felt judged a couple times
- I’ve felt judged sometimes
- I’ve felt judged often
- I have always felt judged

Do you feel this judgment is because of your bodily appearance or fitness level?

- No
- Yes

If you answered yes to the question directly above: Do you feel this judgment has affected your attendance at the gym, or your likelihood of going to the gym?

- No
- Yes

I did not answer yes to the question above.

Please select the silhouette that best represents your body type. (Circle the number)

How would you classify your fitness level?

- Not fit at all
- Somewhat fit
- Fit
- Really fit
Do you work out at home?

No

Yes

How old are you (write age in years): __________

Please select your sex:

Male

Female

Figure used in survey: