

5-1-2022

Women's Use of the Gym Space: How Physical Activity Spaces Communicate Inclusion and Exclusion to Women

Rachel Glaze

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Glaze, Rachel, "Women's Use of the Gym Space: How Physical Activity Spaces Communicate Inclusion and Exclusion to Women" (2022). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 4401. <http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/31813282>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

WOMEN'S USE OF THE GYM SPACE: HOW PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SPACES
COMMUNICATE INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION TO WOMEN

By

Rachel Glaze

Bachelor of Arts—Communication Studies
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts—Communication Studies

Department of Communication Studies
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2022



Thesis Approval

The Graduate College
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 5, 2022

This thesis prepared by

Rachel Glaze

entitled

Women's Use of the Gym Space: How Physical Activity Spaces Communicate Inclusion
and Exclusion to Women

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts—Communication Studies
Department of Communication Studies

Rebecca Rice, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Chair

Natalie Pennington, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Tara McManus, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Jennifer Pharr, Ph.D.
Graduate College Faculty Representative

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D.
*Vice Provost for Graduate Education &
Dean of the Graduate College*

Abstract

Women are less likely than men to participate in recommended levels of physical activity. As gyms are built around exercise, this research sought to understand if women's gym participation is limited, due to the space communicating messages of exclusion. Semi-structured interviews with seven women participants led to the discovery of three themes surrounding women's experiences in the gym setting: Comfort and confidence in the space stem from self-perceived levels of attractiveness, women treat the space as communal to better understand how to navigate it, and organizational spaces can communicate messages of class and socioeconomic differences. Recommendations for future research included minimizing feelings of intimidation and polarization in recreational spaces, particularly in terms of gender and class.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
Chapter 3: Methods	23
Chapter 4: Results.....	27
Chapters 5: Discussion	49
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	57
Appendix A.....	60
Appendix B	61
References	63
Curriculum Vitae.....	68

Chapter 1: Introduction

Women feeling discomfort and uneasiness in the gym is a pressing problem, especially as rates of obesity and preventable, obesity-related illness and deaths are on the rise (Hales et al., 2020). In addition to its well-known physical benefits, exercise aids in better mental health outcomes for individuals (Levy & Ebbeck, 2005). In fact, a link was discovered between women with a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or greater and the mental health disorders generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and major depressive disorder (MDD) (Kasen, 2008). The divide in the physical activity levels of men and women begins at a young age (The Lancet Public Health, 2019), and childhood inactivity or a sedentary lifestyle influences negative exercise behaviors into adulthood. Due to the array of benefits an active lifestyle provides, as well as the recommendations that adults engage in 150 minutes of physical activity a week at a minimum (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), it is important to understand the underlying causes of women's inactivity.

Outdoor recreational activity has led, in recent years, to reports of women being assaulted and murdered (Bernabe & Yeo, 2020). Therefore, indoor gyms should—theoretically—provide indoor, public spaces for women to exercise. Understanding that, despite the availability of indoor gyms, there is a level of exclusion and intimidation for women within these spaces, I believe it is important to learn how it is detrimental to women's physical, mental, and emotional health.

A Gendered History of Physical Activity

In the years before the late nineteenth century, physical activity was exclusionary to women. Liberti (2017) wrote, “The belief that the female body was not only different from but also less (strong, capable, etc.) than the male body formed a cornerstone of traditional ‘wisdom’

among scientists and medical professionals during the latter decades of the [nineteenth] century” (p. 154). Fears surrounding the impacts physical education and exercise would have on a woman’s body, mind, and reproductive system barred their participation. Although the twentieth century brought about advancements to women’s physical education, it remained largely separated and differentiated from boys’ and mens’ activities (Liberti, 2017). Despite the 1972 passage of Title IX, which purportedly leveled male and female physical education in federally funded institutions, the ramifications of hegemonic masculinity and cultural constructions of gender in physical activity, sports, and exercise remain.

In 2019, it was reported that, globally, women are still more physically inactive than men (The Lancet Public Health, 2019); this disparity transfers to gym use as well. In much of the literature on gyms and gender, women reportedly engage in traditional strength-training gym spaces less frequently than men and tend to opt for social spaces such as local parks and outdoor gyms if they want to engage in exercise (Bergmann et al., 2020). Xiong (2019) attributed this choice, in part, to women’s move from the private, domestic sphere to the public sphere where physical activity has been primarily associated with men. Neighborhood parks or group gym spaces allow for women to engage in exercise and socialize, simultaneously, while experiencing life outside of the home. While these settings are popular for some—and can contribute to the increased popularity of group-workout spaces such as SoulCycle, TruFusion, Orange Theory, and more, women have started entering the more traditional, male-dominated gym setting. Women’s increased participation in these particular spaces has reportedly created some problematic experiences for them.

With women’s presence in the gym and strength-training facilities increasing, feelings of the male gaze, intimidation, and unease have been reported by them (Clark, 2017). Women have

also shared feelings of anxiety about how their bodies look (particularly if they do not align with ideal body types advertised and promoted by the gym), greater levels of body dissatisfaction, and beliefs about a strict gender binary in the gym space (Coen et al., 2019). The permanence of a gender binary, as well as women's feelings of exclusion, are at the center of the present study, for they can ultimately lead to women's continued physical inactivity, despite inactivity's known negative health impacts.

In what follows, I explain the communicative constitution of organizations and how it relates to the gym space.

Communicative Constitution of the Gym Space

In gym spaces, individuals participate in activities like aerobic exercise on cardio machines, strength training, swimming, and more, as gyms often have a variety of exercise options for members. The goal of this thesis is to learn how women interact with and experience these spaces' physical structures differently than men, and how the space impacts their ability to engage in physical activity effectively. To do this, I use a communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) lens, which argues that physical and materialized space communicate messages about gender and power to influence behaviors. In other words, messages are being sent to organizational members, both purposely and unintentionally, by physical spaces and materialized aspects of the gym. While the physical space refers to the built structure and environment of the gym, materialized forms of the gym are messages actualized through material means other than the physical building (e.g. commercials, advertisements, posters, and merchandise). Through this study, I seek to understand how the physical and materialized aspects of a gym communicate exclusionary and polarizing messages to women.

Considering organizational space through the lens of CCO is beneficial to this particular study. Due to the gym's male-dominated history, messages surrounding gender and power are at play in the space. A CCO lens can help us understand how the physical and materialized gym space can communicate gender and power differentials to members. Wilhoit (2018) stated, "following CCO, a constitutive approach takes seriously both the social and the material aspects of space" (p. 315). In other words, CCO contends it is not only the members of a gym communicating with one another, rather, the gym's physical and material aspects communicate, too. This constant communication is what constitutes the reality of space, an organization, and reality, more broadly. According to CCO, humans act on their environment and the environment acts on them, too. This lens perpetuates the importance of understanding whether messages being sent by an organization's physical and materialized environments are beneficial or harmful to its members.

This thesis focuses on how the gym space communicates existing beliefs of hegemonic masculinity and constructions of gender standards to women and how women behave in the space because of the presence of these standard. Studying gender and power in gyms is relatively new to communication studies research, and a CCO lens is a valuable way to uncover how physical and material space communicates these conditions. Ashcraft et al. (2008) claimed that CCO highlights and "generates defining realities of organizational life, such as culture, power, networks, and the structure-agency relation..." (p. 1). Although outside disciplines have researched women in gym spaces, this study primarily focuses on space and communication as a source of inclusion or exclusion that invites only certain people to feel welcome and participate. Here, how the organizational space of the gym communicates is the foundation of this study.

This study sought to understand how the physical, material, and social elements of an organization's space communicated inclusion and exclusion to members, particularly women. Concerns regarding intimidation within the gym space arose from interviews conducted with seven women. Interestingly, results of this study indicated that class and socioeconomic disparity can be communicated through space, adding a new point of consideration for organizational communication studies.

Site of Study

O'Hare Fitness¹ (O'Hare) is a luxury gym in the United States, and I am familiar with a particular southwest location, as well as its physical and material features. For this reason, I recruited women members from O'Hare to be interview participants in the current study. I utilized a snowball-sampling method to garner seven interviewees, most of whom played on my women's tennis league through O'Hare. In addition to answering open-ended questions as part of semi-structured interviews, I asked each participant to illustrate how they felt about themselves in O'Hare. An interview question allowing participants to illustrate themselves was inspired by Coen et al.'s (2018) study on women's physical activity choices in the gym. My open-ended interview questions and the illustrations provided by participants were coded thematically to help answer this study's research question:

RQ1: As organizations, how do women perceive that gym spaces communicate in ways that encourage or discourage their participation?

Preview of Chapters

¹ All organization names and participant names are pseudonyms.

In the following chapter, I review literature surrounding organizational communication and organizational space, CCO theory and how it has been utilized, and outside-area research on gyms and gender. In chapter three, I elaborate further on methods for the present study.

Through this research, I hoped to learn how women felt about themselves concerning the gym space. I sought to address wider global issues surrounding rates of overweight and obesity through an approach that considered organizational space, communication, and structures that perpetuate issues of gender and power. If gym spaces were felt by women to be exclusionary, women were at a disadvantage in the fight against physical and mental health issues associated with a lack of physical activity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

What is organizational communication?

Since its inception, the subdiscipline of organizational communication has been difficult to define, considering it initially relied heavily on its relation to other fields—specifically communication, sociology, and management studies. Past organizational research has focused on studying traditional workplaces, where finding solutions for managerial issues was the ultimate goal. In this segment of scholarship, communication has been viewed, primarily, as a phenomenon happening within an organization or as a variable of an organization. With time, and with a shift to more interpretive and critical research lenses, organizational communication has gained its footing as a subfield focusing on communication as dynamic. Communication is now often seen as a constitutive force that builds and maintains organizations; it is not only a variable found within organizations. Although organizational communication research can still be conducted as a pragmatic means of solving managerial and workplace questions, the interpretive and critical shift has challenged these business-centric roots, and instead, turns to less traditional organizations.

Organizational communication scholarship was defined by Mumby and Stohl (1996), not by pinpointing famous research findings or citing a journal dedicated to the subdiscipline, but by what scholars in the field can achieve through their knowledge of how organizations and communication are interrelated. The belief of interrelatedness between organizing and communicating stems from what the authors deem a “gestalt switch” in the field, or a “shift from viewing communication as relatively peripheral to organizational life (where it is marginalized in favor of a focus on structure) to a perspective that privileges communication, situating it as the principal constitutive element in the process of organizing” (p. 67). Thus, the field views

communication as a fundamental tool in building and constituting organizations; it is not merely a phenomenon happening within designated organizational structures and physical sites, a phenomenon that has been deemed a “container metaphor” (Ashcraft et al., 2009).

Communication does not happen within an unchanging environment; communication is actively defining the environment in which it is happening. More on the constitutive nature of communication will be discussed in the following section.

First, to understand the communication practices commonly being analyzed in the field, I take Mumby and Stohl’s (1996) four criteria that organizational communication scholars tend to investigate in their work. These four “problematics”—or tensions—facing scholars in the field are the problematic of voice, the problematic of rationality, the problematic of organization, and the problematic of the organization-society relationship, and these tensions make current organizational communication scholarship more easily discernible. While it is not necessary to focus in-depth on each of the problematics, it is significant to understand that thinking about the discipline as a way to address these tensions helps draw boundaries around what organizational communication research does. The four problematics can be understood as an analytical approach to how organizations are shaped through communication interactions. The problematics assume that for organizational communication scholars: voices of all participants matter; the experiences of participants within a given organization matters more than economic outcomes; communication is not solely a transmission of messages, but a way to build, break down, and rebuild organizations; and finally, the organization is not and cannot be entirely separated from society as a whole. The four problematics acknowledge that organizations are not static, they are changing and these changes happen through communication interactions; in fact, it is through communication that the four tensions come to be. Because of this idea, it is essential

for organizational communication to shed a critical light on how communication shapes organizations, in addition to pinpointing where tensions arise. In what follows, I move on to further define how communication constitutes organizations, by looking at CCO.

Communicative Constitution of Organizations

CCO is a framework that considers communication interactions as responsible for producing organizations. This approach argues communication is fundamental in building, maintaining, and even breaking down organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009). As members of an organization communicate, they are either perpetuating aspects of the organization, and allowing it to continue existing, or revising aspects of the organization, making room for it to break down and be reestablished in different ways. An example of this concept is employees abiding by a dress code at work: If employees are required to wear business attire while in front of customers, more likely than not, the organization is hoping to communicate a sense of professionalism. By abiding by the dress code, employees allow the organization to continue being viewed as professional. However, if the employees opted to wear casual attire in place of their business wear, the company potentially communicates that the leisure and comfort of its employees are more important than professionalism. Here, the important point is that what is communicated constitutes and creates the organization itself.

As this CCO framework becomes an increasingly popular way to theorize about organizational communication, it is important to note the different approaches underpinning CCO that have been developed. The three main approaches CCO researchers tend to cite are McPhee's Four Flows Model, the Montréal School approach, and the Luhmannian Systems approach. Schoeneborn et al. (2014) engaged scholars of each approach in an active dialogue about the foundations that ground their particular CCO approaches. While they acknowledge the

underlying similarity of the three, that communication constitutes our realities, they are slightly nuanced. The authors note, for example, that all approaches share their baseline assumption of communication as constitutive, but they diverge on issues such as the role of human and non-human agents in that constitution. For the present study, I will utilize the Montréal School perspective, which has been the most published within CCO.

The Montréal School approach to CCO is spearheaded by communication studies scholar Francois Cooren. Cooren says of the Montréal approach, “communication should not be considered an activity that only concerns human beings. Many other things get communicated through what people say, write, or do: emotions, ideas, beliefs, values, positions...situations, facts, realities, and so on” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 290). The idea that non-human aspects of our world engage in, create, and communicate the world and reality around us is a main tenet to the present study. Despite the physical and materialized aspects of the gym space being non-human, they do communicate messages and meaning to us. The messages they deliver impact how people interact and behave in the world around them. Non-human facilities and humans alike are all acting agents in CCO. Next, I will work to further define what exactly agency and agents are within an organizational communication context.

To define agency and “agentification”, or the acknowledgment of the agency of non-human agents in the field (e.g., texts, documents, webpages, material spaces, etc.), Brummans (2015) makes clear that there have been a variety of perspectives put forth by scholars in the field. Agency, according to Cooren and Fairhurst (2008), is simply “the capacity to make a difference” (p. 136). Any person (social) or thing (physical and material) can make a difference in a situation and impact the outcome of social interactions. In what follows, I showcase examples of CCO that evoke physical and material agentification in practice.

Researchers have started to employ a CCO approach to study organizational space and, in doing so, exemplified how both the social and material world communicate. Wilhoit (2018) makes clear that CCO is a sociomaterial approach, “sociomateriality does not mean choosing between the social or material, but recognizing that everything has both social and material aspects” (p. 313). It is important to note that while non-human, physical, and material aspects of organizations have agency, it does not take away from or replace the agency of human organizational members. Cooren and Fairhurst (2008) exemplified this notion: What happens when you replace a factory supervisor with a camera? The camera is a non-human agent with agency because it makes a difference in how the employees work. However, the camera does not take away the employees’ agency and capacity to make a difference in the organization. If the employees chose to ignore the camera and stop working altogether, that would make a difference to the organization. Cooren and Fairhurst (2008) went on to note, “it is...through people’s own agencies and sensemaking activities that other non-human or human agents can be said to make them do things” (p. 137). Again, our example of an organization’s dress code is also fitting. Sure, the clothing employees wear can communicate, but it is humans that make the conscious choice of what to wear.

This is all to say that, although non-human aspects of organizations can be agentified or influenced, human agents, ideally, will always have the opportunity to resist, using our own agency. In my current study, this notion of resistance to power, as well as the cultivation of one’s agency in a space, will be significant. Now that we have a more firm understanding of sociomateriality through CCO, we can move to a more in-depth discussion of how organizational spaces communicate and influence.

Organizational Space

As CCO posits, organizations allow for co-construction of social realities through communication, meaning organizations are constantly changing. It follows, then, that the “container” metaphor of organizations is left behind, along with the idea that organizational space is fixed and static. Instead, Massey (2005) acknowledged that space is “always in the process of being made” (p. 9), while Wilhoit (2018) noted, “although space has often been seen as static, humanistic and critical geography theory has overturned this notion, redefining space as active, shifting, and performative” (p. 314). The notion of spaces being performative considers them as a medium through which something is being communicated. In other words, spaces do communicate meaning, and that meaning can shift and be altered through resistance and change. Below, I draw on five examples of empirical research studies that focus on organizational space as a construct that is shifting and active. The below studies represent organizational space as an emerging area of research and demonstrate some recent contributions in this area.

Empirical Research

Space communicates meaning about an organization to its members. Wilhoit et al. (2016) discovered how significant space can be to organizational members and found that, oftentimes, it is individuals placing value and giving agency to the spaces. In this study, the authors sought to understand how the material and social aspects of space influence the way university faculty feel about their on-campus offices. They discovered that faculty members valued their workspaces so much, they would likely leave their current positions if they were required to relinquish their space. The faculty members who were interviewed in this study found that their spaces allowed for privacy, productivity, and access to necessary resources. The researchers noted, “space still matters for [these faculty members’] work because of the meanings employees ascribe to it”

(2016, p. 812). Ultimately, this study exemplified how spaces can communicate certain messages to organizational members—messages of privacy, productivity, and convenience.

Research by Cnossen and Bencherki (2016), as well as Branton and Compton (2021), led to a better understanding of how organizational spaces lead to certain practices within those spaces. Practices, in this context, refer to the actions, behaviors, and discourses amongst human agents in a given organizational space (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). In an ethnographic piece on two freelance workspaces in Amsterdam, researchers Cnossen and Bencherki (2016) found that practice and space are reflexive. A clear example of this was noted in the study when a trailer within one of the freelance workspaces was converted into a coffee shop. It was here that the freelancers in the warehouse would meet up: “the café trailer was at once made possible by its central position and made meaningful as a café by the practices that took place there: making coffee, playing music, meeting with others, and so forth” (2019, p. 1071). Because the café took up space in the center of the workspace, it influenced the practices, or daily activities, that happened there.

Similar to Cnossen and Bencherki (2016), Branton and Compton (2021) found that space influenced practices, and those practices, in turn, influenced what people thought about the space. The authors studied how branding (marketing), behaviors, and discourse within two midwestern college-town “gay bars” altered community understanding of who “gay bars” are meant for. They discovered three tensions developing in these spaces. First, there was a tension between whether or not this space is for everyone or for strictly the LGBTQIA+ community. Second, they critiqued whether these spaces are “safe” for everyone (gay, straight, men, women) to be themselves or simply “safe” for gay and straight men to display their sexuality. Finally, they asked if the gay bar is welcoming to the community because the goal of the organization is

to be inclusive or if it is commodifying the experience for people outside of the LGBTQIA+ community to stay profitable. This study allows readers the opportunity to see ways practices are continually altering how space is viewed socially and politically.

An interesting piece, still focusing on human behaviors but removing discourse from the equation, is Wilhoit and Kisselburgh's (2015) study on bike-commuter practices and space, which more broadly introduces the notion of organizations being developed through communication and action. The researchers discovered that a collective of bike commuters constitute an organization through the physical and spatial aspects of consistently used bike paths, despite its members not defining or associating themselves as members of an organization. Although the bikers did not utilize a traditional brick and mortar building, and do not view themselves as part of a bike-commuter organization, the authors found organizational space is created through the commuters' practices, nonetheless. The authors note, "spatial movement and presence manifest this collective" (p. 588). In other words, although social discourse amongst the organizational members was nonexistent, organizational membership was created for these bikers through their use of the same spaces.

Finally, Zhang and Spicer's (2014) ethnographic study of "the Bureau," a Chinese governmental organization, lends to the literature on space and power relations. This study exemplified how spaces can perpetuate power differentials. The authors found that a space's physical and material structures, as well as the non-resistant behaviors and discourse of the employees, perpetuated hierarchical behaviors and practices at the Bureau. Aspects of hierarchical space within the Bureau were acknowledged and maintained by everyday actions and discourses (talk) of employees, due to these hierarchical behaviors and standards being familiar and routine for the many employees within the organization. The social hierarchy within

the Bureau, and the material space in which it was housed, were reflexive of one another. This work illustrated how organizational space is constantly being changed and maintained through the action—or inaction—of its members. Zhang and Spicer's (2014) findings are particularly valuable to this thesis, considering sports, fitness, and exercise are historically gendered and expressive of power differentials.

As this brief overview of past CCO empirical research has shown, organizational space provides a rich foundation for studying how traditional gym spaces are communicative. Spaces inform practices and understandings of organizational membership, but they can also be sites where resistance, change, and power inequality are carried out. Using a CCO approach is essential for my study of gender and power within traditional gyms—a type of community organization that has not been thoroughly studied through a communication lens (Tyler & Cohen, 2010). Understanding the traditional gym space as being constituted through communication lends us an opportunity for critical analysis.

Gyms and Gender

The importance of physical activity on an individual's mental and physical health cannot be overstated. As previously mentioned, globally, women are less physically active than men with regard to both aerobic and strength training exercises (Coen et al., 2018; Wilson & Bopp, 2021). Although there are multiple spaces for people to partake in physical exercise, the current study focuses on traditional gyms and how these physical and materialized spaces make room for women's participation. According to feminist spatial theory, bodies, exercise, gender, and power are interrelated in social spaces; these variables all apply when analyzing gym spaces (McDowell, 1993).

To recognize how communication plays a role in gender challenges within the gym, I turn to Sassatelli (1999), who uses a Goffmanesque approach to highlight the importance of local interactions in creating gym spaces. In other words, Sassatelli claims it is the micro, face-to-face interactions between gym members that create the space. Much like our communicative constitution of organization (CCO) theory puts forth, it is precisely the discourses communicated within organizations that make up the socio-material environment.

Individuals from the outside world enter the gym with personalized fitness and health goals in mind, and these organizations are marketed as places that empower members to reach those goals. Research has been done on the dynamic between gyms and gender, but it has primarily focused on feelings women experience within the gym and while exercising, despite women and other historically underserved groups frequently facing social barriers and feelings of discomfort within these spaces (Newhall, 2013; Coen et al., 2019; Harjunen, 2019; Úbeda-Colomer et al., 2020). While previous work has focused on how women feel and experience gym settings, little work has focused on how physical and materialized aspects of the gym communicate to and impact them in different ways than men. It is important, then, to understand how physical space authorizes or constrains women's participation in gyms.

As discussed previously, social, physical, and materialized aspects of space can communicate and shape individual experiences; this is exemplified in multiple ways: social and cultural discourses surrounding women's bodies and femininity, marketing for gyms, and even in how physical gym structures and areas are constructed. In this section of the literature review, I elaborate on how gender is viewed in the gym context. First, I expand upon what gender performance is and the accepted forms of masculinity and femininity in a patriarchal society. Following this, I explain the dichotomy of public and private spheres that influence women's

participation in physical activity. I conclude by explaining how a feminist organizational theory lens can help us critically examine materialized aspects of gym spaces and how this is unique and valuable to communication studies research.

Performing Gender

Cultural norms of masculinity and femininity in a patriarchal society tend to influence how men and women speak, what they wear, and what they do. In essence, a society's cultural norms influence people's performances of gender. While a person's sex refers to their biological attributes at birth, gender is socially constructed through behaviors and performances. Judith Butler, in her work on gender and gender performance noted, "when one performance of gender is considered real and another false, or when one presentation of gender is considered authentic and another fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is conditioning these judgments..." (2004, p. 214). Butler makes clear, "gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized..." (p. 42). Thus, gender is a social construct. The construct houses standards and norms about acceptable behavior by men and women. Through discourse and action, these norms are created and maintained or broken down and changed. The discourse surrounding the ontology of gender within the culture of gyms and fitness spaces, although progress has been made in recent decades, is still primarily centered on obstinate beliefs in a gender binary and traditional gender performances.

In an old-school, hypermasculine gym environment, resistance to long-standing norms could be difficult. Not remarkably long ago, gyms, fitness centers, and sports were reserved for men. It was believed men were the stronger sex and women were not capable of performing such feats of strength and fitness. Liberti (2017) maintains, "male, white bodies were the norm against

which women's bodies and health were measured, a perspective that, in many ways, persists into the early years of the twenty-first century" (p. 154).

In a space built on men's fitness as the standard and physical differences between the sexes being used as justification for exclusion, it is no surprise parts of these spaces still perpetuate notions of women as physically inferior. Newhall (2013) connected the notion of gender performance in the gym to the cultural discourse around ideal female bodies and attributes, "there is a connection between the types of bodies built through fitness practices and the spaces in which this is accomplished that is more salient for women than for men because of the narrow construction of the ideal female body" (pp. 2-3). For example, women may feel more comfortable working out on a treadmill or other cardio machine, as it is more widely accepted in a patriarchal society for women to be as thin as possible, rather than risk becoming muscular through weightlifting. This comfort may come from the fact that thin female bodies and the thin ideal are admired in the culture. It is also interesting to note, in an ethnographic study featuring focus groups of women between the ages of 16 and 26, Ahern et al. (2011) discovered women believed the ideal female body is thin, but not too thin. Being too thin was seen as masculine or androgynous; the authors concluded, "women only endorsed thinness to the extent that it conforms to a feminine aesthetic" (p. 42). Despite what is healthy or necessary for women to focus on in the gym, they admittedly focus on what society deems necessary for them to be respected.

It is crucial to acknowledge that gender was previously seen only as a variable to analysis in organizational communication studies, limiting the potential of feminist organizational communication theorizing, and although the present study focuses on harmful discourses surrounding gender within gym spaces, masculine hegemonic ideals are problematic for more

than just women. Patriarchal and hypermasculine ideologies in these spaces often make individuals who do not subscribe to them feel excluded. Members of the LGBT+ community, for example, are faced with unique challenges in these spaces (Brittain et al., 2006; Úbeda-Colomer et al., 2020). Úbeda-Colomer et al. (2020), in their groundbreaking work developing a survey (Barriers to Physical Activity and Sport Questionnaire for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (BPASQ-LGBTQ+)), gauged the barriers to physical activity facing members of this community. They discovered five organizational-environmental barriers LGBTQ+ members noted in gym spaces, including lack of physical activity and sports offered, lack of LGBTQ+ sports associations, and lack of LGBTQ+ advertising. It is valuable to consider how aspects of physical spaces can potentially add to or alleviate these feelings of exclusivity.

In her argument of organizations being inherently gendered, Acker (1990) wrote, “Since men in organizations take their behavior and perspectives to represent the human, organizational structures and processes are theorized as gender-neutral. When it is acknowledged that women and men are affected differently by organizations, it is argued that gendered attitudes and behaviors are brought into (and contaminate) essentially gender-neutral structures” (p. 142). As a woman who frequents a gym, the ethnographic research displaying just how non-gender-neutral elements of these spaces can be, I am sympathetic to the feelings of discomfort, hypersexualization, and exclusion felt in these male-dominated spaces. As Rice (2020) noted, “members [of organizations] engage gendered discourses to enable and constrain their own and others’ actions” (p. 2). In the present study, it is important to think about how the social, material, and physical gym space enables and constrains women. In the following section, I discuss how the dichotomy between public and private spaces impacts women in the gym, potentially adding another layer to how they believe they need to assimilate.

Influence of the Public and Private

The dichotomy of a public and private sphere adds to the conversation surrounding gyms and gender. The idea of the public and private speaks to the differentiation between participating in the community and being isolated to the home. In the past, women were isolated to the private, where their jobs included reproduction, child-rearing, and maintaining the family dynamic; the public was reserved almost exclusively for men (Kovács, 2018). In a discussion of how these spheres relate to gyms and physical activity Newhall (2013) noted,

The concept of the public/private divide in cultural geography has long been used by scholars both within and outside the field to categorize space and explain its construction and access to it. Though some have complicated the too easy overlay of this binary to the gender binary, women's access to public spaces remains more limited than men's access (p. 48)

Women's entrance into the gym space is an act of entering the male-dominated public. Undoubtedly, women's access to public gyms has been more limited and challenging than men's, and—perhaps more so than any other segment of the public sphere—sports, gyms, and fitness are still grappling with gender inclusivity. Therefore, this concept adds an intriguing element to this discussion.

Newhall (2013) moved to define the gym space as one that is semi-private, meaning it is unique in how the public space is used for private, individualized activities, but remains public, “the activities that occur in semi-private space are often seen as individual endeavors, in the case of the gym...aimed at the improvement of the self. But they occur outside the home making them somewhat public” (p. 50). Because embodied practices within the gym are personal and intimate

challenges one creates for themselves—running, sweating, straining—defining the gym space as semi-private makes sense.

Understanding women's movement to physical activity in the public sphere leads to an opportunity for gyms to market a specific type of workout to this segment of the population: group fitness classes (Xiong, 2019). Xiong's (2019) study on Chinese women moving away from their designated private sphere and entering public spaces for physical activity led to the conclusion that gym market group exercise experiences to women because it is an opportunity for more socializing outside of the private home. Whether it is in their neighborhood, the local park, or a designated workout room in the gym, women feel obligated to exercise in groups and with instructors, because exercise is seen as a way for them to build a community for themselves outside of the home. Xiong noted the development of spaces for women to engage in physical activity (including the gym space) happened with gender spatial differences in mind. In short, the spaces "function as links between the private and public spheres, thus integrating the domestic and social dimensions of women's lives and deconstructing the dual structure of gendered spaces" (2019, p. 1422). Classes and group fitness activities are popular with women, as they become spaces where women can build social groups and friendly communities outside of their home, engaging in physical activity, and keeping separate from men's fitness spaces. As more women enter the workforce, community organizations, and the public sphere more broadly, it is important to understand how the spaces they interact with authorize or deny them membership.

Conclusion

A bulk of organizational communication research has focused primarily on the relationship between communication, power, and organizing concerning the hierarchical structure of workplaces and acknowledges the burgeoning interest in CCO (Mumby, 2015).

However, this thesis seeks to understand, through a CCO lens, the relationship between communication and power in non-traditional organizations, the spaces we enter for leisure purposes, and which guide our everyday lives outside of the workplace.

Although exercise within traditional gyms is not often collaborative, the organizational space itself can communicate gender and power tensions to its members. Understanding how we can learn about exercise, gender, power, and bodies in the gym setting as organizations is valuable to the organizational communication subdiscipline. While outside-area scholarship has considered women and minority experiences within gym settings, communication research has been lacking in this area.

Understanding how discourses can encourage and discourage certain members from participating in organizations, especially those centered on something as crucial as health, is important, applicable, and relatively untapped by communication scholars. Fortunately, as the CCO school of thought posits, it is participants within an organization who can preserve or abandon harmful discourses and cultures. By acting and performing in manners consistent with patriarchal ideologies surrounding gender norms, members within a gym space can be contributing to a masculine hegemonic culture. Conversely, by combatting the discourses in these spaces and performing aspects of femininity and masculinity that resist gender norms, gym members can alter fitness institutions more broadly and dismantle their damaging effects.

Chapter 3: Methods

Site of Study and Participants

The site of this study, O'Hare Fitness, has locations in areas all over the country, and each location promotes itself as a luxury health club. The O'Hare location at the center of this study boasts 162,000 square feet of facility; the facility provides twelve tennis courts and a retail pro-shop, two basketball courts, group fitness studios, a cycling studio, a strength-training and cardio space, a two-pool natatorium, an outdoor resort pool, a café, a spa, a salon, and a chiropractic office.

The standard membership price to join O'Hare is \$179 per month. The standard membership includes access to the physical health club as well as the classes offered digitally through O'Hare's application. This membership gives individuals access to most group fitness classes, but some classes still charge an additional fee of approximately \$20. Fees to activate a standard O'Hare membership are not included in the initial \$179 fee. Members can purchase a membership level above the standard membership, at \$249 a month, which gives them priority access to register for group classes, priority access to infant and child-care services, unlimited group training classes at no additional cost, and access to other O'Hare clubs around the nation. Fees to activate this membership option are not included in the \$249. O'Hare offers a few discounted options for individuals, including memberships for young professionals (age 29 and below), memberships through O'Hare corporate partners, and a purely digital option (for digital group classes), and these membership options vary greatly in price.

For participation in this study, I recruited women who were members at the O'Hare location in question; the gym was located in the southwest United States. I garnered seven participants through snowball sampling and by sending recruitment flyers (see Appendix A) via

text message and email to women on my tennis team through O'Hare (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). To be eligible for this study, participants had to be 18 years old or older, identify as a woman, be members of O'Hare with access to the physical gym space, and visit the physical gym space regularly (approximately three times per week). It was important that all participants be members of O'Hare, because it was essential to compare the womens' discussions of the same gym space in this study. Although all women who participated in this study were members of an all-woman tennis league, I made sure each of them also frequented the gym's other amenities. In total, seven women were interviewed, they all identified as straight women, five women were White and two were Hispanic.

During the time of this study, I was a 25-year-old White woman who was also a member of O'Hare. My membership at the was supplemented by my employer; I was only paying half of the standard membership price to gain access to the space. My position as a young woman allowed me to sympathize and better understand the experiences of respondents, as I have had similar experiences to what they mentioned. Additionally, my workplace allowed me to gain access to a gym of this price-point, putting me at a certain level of socioeconomic privilege.

Data Collection

I conducted seven semi-structured interviews using ten guiding questions (see Appendix B). I conducted each interview in O'Hare, a public space where participants were comfortable speaking about their experiences. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes in length. The questions for this study were developed using Tracy's (2019) qualitative research interview planning and design. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of discussing the gym space and the reasoning behind the participant's engagement in the gym, my goal was to ask questions and conduct the conversation with empathy and genuine curiosity, while working to avoid any

discomfort arising. I began the interview by reminding participants of the expected time requirements, as well as reminding them they can choose to end the interview at any time.

I developed ten interview questions I believe aided in answering this study's research question (RQ1: As organizations, how do women perceive gym spaces communicate in ways that encourage or discourage their participation?). The first few interview questions followed Tracy's (2019) suggestions for generative questions such as a tour question, posing the ideal, and hypothetical questions; an example tour question is: "Walk me through a typical gym session at O'Hare for you." These generative questions worked to set the stage for a conversation about a participant's personal experiences. Then, I moved to directive questions that sought to better understand how participants thought about women in the gym space (e.g. "Based on the literature surrounding gyms, it is my understanding women tend to avoid the weight lifting section of the gym. Do you find that to be true of yourself or other women you see at O'Hare? If so, why do you think that is?"). Near the end of the interview, I provided a pen and piece of paper to participants and asked them to draw how they felt about themselves in the gym space. Wilhoit and Kisselburgh (2015), in their multi-method study on bicycle commuter experiences, had commuters film their rides, noting, "research investigating embodiment and materiality cannot rely exclusively on discursive reports" (p. 577). Having participants draw themselves was a unique method and allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences creatively and emotionally. Finally, I asked whether participants have follow-up questions for me and what their preferred pseudonym was for the study.

Data Analysis

I took a phonetic iterative approach to data analysis and coding. Coding, according to Tracy (2019), seeks to identify a specific "concept, belief, action, theme, cultural practice, or

relationship” (p. 213) noted by participants. After capturing the interviews by recording our voices on Zoom, I had the seven interviews transcribed by a transcription service. When I received the transcription, I began open-level coding, line by line, that worked to identify subjects (codes) participants discussed. After open-level or primary coding, I moved to secondary-level coding, which allowed for the grouping of themes under umbrellas, based on relatedness and frequency. I engaged in a third and final round, which allowed me to find significant patterns in the data and three salient themes. Ultimately, I utilized what was known from the literature and what I found through thematic analysis of participant interviews to better understand how the physical and materialized gym space communicated to women.

Chapter 4: Results

The study's singular research question is as follows: As organizations, how do women perceive that gym spaces communicate in ways that encourage or discourage their participation? Three themes arose from seven semi-structured interviews with women members O'Hare, in response to this question. Based on participant interviews and three rounds of thematic coding, the appearing themes were: 1) Comfortability and confidence in the space stemmed from self-perceived feelings of attractiveness; 2) Women treat the space communally to gain knowledge about how to navigate the space more broadly; and 3) The space accommodates upper-class patrons and inadvertently constrains participation of lower-class patrons. In what follows, I discuss in greater detail the characteristics of each theme and its corresponding subthemes. In the discussion of each, I will also supply ethnographic examples, quotations, and conversations regarding different topics from the participant interviews. Below, I expand on each theme and provide a description and example quotation for each (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Gym Space Responses

Table 4.1 — Gym Space Responses		
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Characteristics of Themes</i>	<i>Example Quote</i>
Comfortability and confidence in the space stems from self-perceived feelings of attractiveness	Women feel discouraged to participate in the space, if they do not fall within patriarchal gender standards of appearance and masculine standards of fitness (attractiveness as a prerequisite).	"There was definitely not different offerings in the women's-only facilities, they were just separate. And so I'm guessing that they did that to try to make women feel more comfortable, whether that was from judgment or insecurity about what they looked like or how much weight they lifted, to not wanting to be harassed at the gym working out." — Etta
	Women report goals aligning with gender standards and norms, more than reporting goals that diverge from these standards (attractiveness as an outcome or goal of working out).	"I was not very active when I was young and I feel like it made it so that working out was a chore instead of just part of life. So that's why I think if you get them [kids] in, like, classes and stuff just make it more...I could have been so much hotter." — Taylor
	Digital advertisements focused on appearance outcomes.	"The things that I found most interesting probably had something else to do with whatever else I was doing in my off time. Like looking into different diet routines, looking at different protein recipes..." — Michelle
Women treat space communally to gain knowledge about how to navigate the space alone	Women utilize the group fitness classes and instruction to navigate a space they do not feel confident navigating alone.	"I would say to get involved in one of the classes here or something. I mean, tennis, whatever, just to ease her way into feeling comfortable maybe. If she's not familiar with how to use machines, what to do properly, stuff like that." — Lux
	Women-only sections provide a space within a larger space to get a different workout experience.	"I definitely used the women's gym because it just felt a little bit less judgemental down there and a little bit less intimidating." — Etta
The space accommodates upper class patrons and inadvertently constrains participation of lower class patrons.	The space's amenities cater toward non-working and upper-class patrons.	"They don't cater a lot to working individuals. I would probably do more...if there were some more options." — LJ

Theme 1: Comfortability and confidence in the space stemmed from self-perceived levels of attractiveness

A prominent theme in the data collection and analysis was the notion of comfort and confidence in the gym space stemming from self-perceived feelings of attractiveness and fitness. Women respondents reported some feelings of inadequacy in the space if their exercise abilities and appearance did not align with hypermasculine standards of fitness and attractiveness. Not only are these standards implicitly marketed as an outcome of participating in the space—through advertisements, company communication channels, and thought surrounding exercise facilities—but also a prerequisite to be welcomed into the space, according to participants. Interestingly, an article that I found during my research sums up theme one in simple terms; Chika Ekemezie, an author with *Vox*, wrote,

It's an age-old conundrum: I felt too insecure about my body to go to the gym and work out, but I probably would have felt better about my body if I went to the gym and worked out. As a middle-schooler in the 2000s, nothing was more embarrassing than being seen exercising in public if you weren't already thin and thought of as 'physically fit'. (2021)

This conundrum succinctly mentioned by Ekemezie explained the feelings of participants in the present study.

Respondents felt their worthiness to occupy the space was based less on their goals of self-betterment and more on how they looked while being in the gym. Their eligibility to work out in the space was based on how closely they followed feminine beauty standards upon entry and how they appeared while utilizing the equipment in the space. The feminine beauty standards referred to under this theme were 1) expecting women to be skinny; 2) retaining

feminine features that are praised societally; and 3) not gaining too much muscle and risking prominent, masculine features. Following these standards makes weightlifting and strength training less popular amongst women and common among men who, under the same standards, are expected to be muscular.

Although gyms are often marketed as places where everyone is welcome, including those unfamiliar with the environment, this is not always felt in practice. In what follows, I share responses that exemplify this first theme: attractiveness as a prerequisite of being in the space. Then, I move on to a second characteristic: attractiveness as an outcome of being in the space. Finally, I discuss how digital advertisements and communications around the space perpetuated the notion that appearance was equivalent to fitness or health.

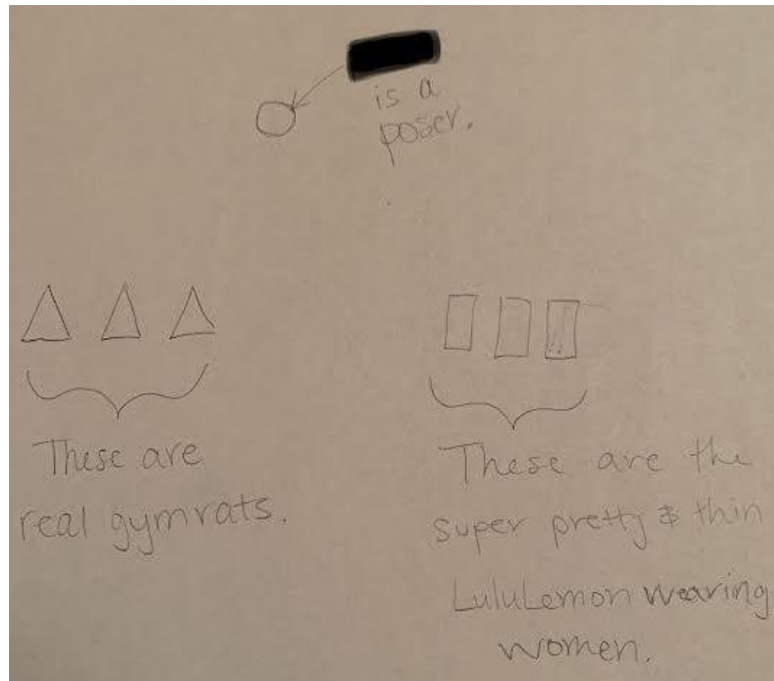
Attractiveness as a Prerequisite

Throughout my conversations with seven women members of O'Hare, it became clear that their comfort and confidence in the space were tied greatly to their self-perceived levels of attractiveness. In some ways, how these women looked became what they were capable of accomplishing in the space. It was evident feminine beauty standards constrained these women.

Michelle, 32, stated about the weight-lifting areas, "Walking around here, it's very clear that a lot of the people who lift, especially the people who lift, are, like, really into lifting. So, they're very fit people." While Michelle mentioned members who lift weights frequently keep to themselves while exercising, she tries to avoid the lifting area of the gym when alone: "I think if I were lifting on my own, I'd be a little bit more insecure. I just remember exactly one time I lifted by myself, and I tried to rush through my workout because I felt uncomfortable." While Michelle admitted her discomfort was, in part, because she is unfamiliar with strength training equipment, she also disclosed she felt inadequate around women who were more in

shape and wore higher-end gym clothing. When asked to draw how she felt about herself in the space, she drew the following and referred to herself as a “poser” in O’Hare (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Michelle’s self-illustration.



I, too, have had similar sentiments as Michelle. I have often drawn comparisons between myself and other women who exercise at O’Hare, finding that while I exercised in oversized t-shirts and running shorts, many women wore extremely form-fitting spandex leggings, shorts, and sports bras. This stark opposition in appearances regularly left me feeling the need to hurry through my workouts, for fear of being judged or laughed at for not looking attractive or skinny to the people exercising around me. Despite trying to accumulate a wardrobe similar to other women at O’Hare, my insecurities about my shape and size led me back to clothing that hides

my body while I work out. For myself and Michelle, wearing certain clothing or accentuating one's skinny body and feminine features felt like an entry ticket into space. As Michelle's drawing shows, there were two ways to successfully navigate the space: You could be a man and be muscular, or you could be a woman and be "super pretty and thin."

Penelope, 35, mentioned finding the members of O'Hare to be particularly good-looking, or objectively attractive: "I think at times [of the day], there are usually more people from the night industry...so, you'll see the sexy women and the buff men." Here, the "night industry" Penelope refers to is the popular and highly sought-after nightlife scene, one that is particularly prominent in the city in which O'Hare is located. Many individuals in this industry, due to the nature of their professions, are required to look a specific way and maintain a certain body type; often, this requires women to adhere to and in many cases excel at femininity and beauty standards. For Penelope, working out in the same space as these individuals led to increased discomfort and insecurity. She elaborated on her personal feelings about exercising alongside these individuals and others who appeared to be more familiar with the area: "I feel like I'm doing it [exercising] wrong, and if they need the place where I'm at, then it is very uncomfortable. They look at me until I'm done, pushing me to hurry up." Here, Penelope equated attractiveness with spatial understanding and perceived that attractive people within the space were judging her on both her appearance and her ability to use the space's offerings effectively.

In an attempt to then participate in more of a solo-exercise space, Penelope chose to swim in O'Hare's lap pool. Throughout her explanation, though, she told me she no longer swims, despite loving it; the reasoning for halting her swims had nothing to do with a dislike of the workout, but rather with her appearance while doing so:

One of the reasons I actually stopped was because the shower caps just got my hair wet. And I don't want to keep getting my hair wet all the time. But I love swimming, though...I've tried. I literally Googled it because I was really into swimming at the beginning.

Here, the impact swimming had on Penelope's appearance took precedence over her love of using the pool. In other words, her self-perceived attractiveness took precedence over participating in an exercise she enjoyed.

Although the above accounts offer implicit examples of insecurity stemming from appearance, explicitly bullying related to gender and appearance did occur. One respondent in the study reflected on an instance her son was explicitly bullied for how he was exercising at O'Hare. LJ, a 51-year-old woman, recalled a situation in which her teenage son was made fun of by other men while doing pushups in the gym. "He said people were making fun of him! He was just trying to do pushups, and these guys were making fun of him. I was so mad," she admitted. When asked about how her son responded to the situation, she explained he canceled his O'Hare membership and now works out alone with a personal trainer: "I didn't really think he'd cared [about the interaction], but there is something about a gym that does make people a little insecure." This bullying incident led LJ's son to consider more deeply what he looked like while participating in the space. Ultimately, he chose to avoid participating altogether, as the situation made him associate how others viewed him with his own inadequacy.

In my interview with Taylor, 34, she provided further insight into the relationship between appearance and the space by discussing a "movie room" that was offered at her former gym. The room tended to be completely dark and housed cardio equipment such as ellipticals, stationary bikes, and treadmills. Taylor noted,

They play a movie on the screen, it would just be a bunch of cardio machines, and the lights were super dark. So, you're working out and, like, nobody could see you. You're watching a movie, but it seemed kind of weird. It was a little bit depressing, but I know some people are self-conscious.

These rooms allow members to exercise inconspicuously, without allowing others to see them. While Taylor was not a fan of these spaces, she did understand the rationale behind them.

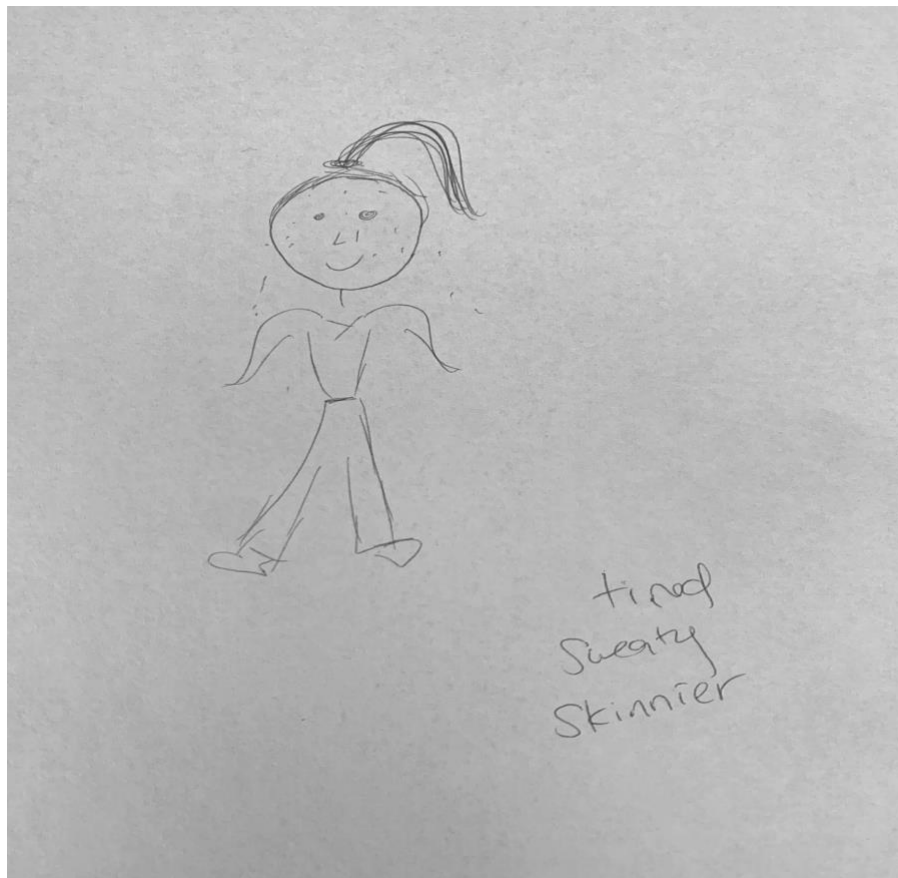
Based on this characteristic of theme one, admission into the space seemed equated with self-perceived levels of attractiveness and fitness. How they dressed, what their hair was like, and how they looked while exercising were all determining factors of whether or not they participated in and engaged with all of the space's offerings. A lack of confidence in one's appearance was a deterrent, and it subsequently determined whether or not participants felt they belonged in the space.

Attractiveness as an Outcome—Goal-Oriented Workouts

Results of using the space were also appearance-oriented. Primarily, responses indicated goals centered around losing weight, toning, growing a butt, and having a flat stomach. Penelope, 35, said, "I wanted to start [exercising in the gym] because I've been noticing that there are parts of my body not losing weight." Teresa, 38, stated plainly she began working out to decrease her fat. Taylor, after being asked to illustrate herself in the gym (see Figure 4.2), drew beads of sweat dripping from her person. She explained that when she sweats while exercising, she feels skinnier. I asked Taylor to elaborate on the types of exercises she tends to do, and she said, "I've done a few, like, the body booty pump, they have." Despite Taylor hyperbolizing the name of the class, her comment did reveal that some names of O'Hare's group fitness classes seem to perpetuate the obsession with feminine features that are deemed valuable

and sought-after in society. The class name “Body Booty Pump”, although a clear exaggeration by Taylor, does capture the fitness industry's tendency to play into the infatuation with women having large buttocks and remaining skinny.

Figure 4.2. Taylor’s self-illustration



Lux, 36, depicted herself similarly to Taylor; she drew herself exercising and wrote adjectives describing how she felt about herself while doing so (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3. Lux's self-illustration.



One particularly interesting adjective she wrote was “light.” Despite drawing herself lifting weights on a barbell, her fascination was with being light, or weighing less, through exercise participation. Additionally, Lux depicted herself as having large bicep muscles but thinking about being “healthy, light, strong, and motivated.” Her creative choice seemed to make these characteristics synonymous with one another.

Not only did appearance and fitness influence whether participants entered the space, but appearance and fitness were goals of engaging with the space, to begin with. In other words, participation in the gym space was both encouraged and discouraged by what respondents wanted out of their bodies and what they thought of their bodies, respectively.

Digital advertisements focused on appearance outcomes

For respondents, gender appearance standards in the gym felt like both a prerequisite and a goal of being in the space. However, based on what was reported about digital communications and advertising at O'Hare, many products, services, and goods associated with the gym were geared toward appearance, too. The material objects in and around the gym perpetuated the idea that increasing one's attractiveness was the goal of being in the space—not increasing fitness or health.

Many respondents reported paying no attention to the televisions and displays around the gym and similarly indicated they do not use O'Hare's digital phone application for reading news articles. However, Taylor admitted she was intrigued by the different products and brands being advertised around the space. While occasionally the advertisements promoted products made for exercise—like running shoes or at-home gym equipment—some displays promoted products meant to alter members' appearances even further. Taylor recalled, for example,

I see a lot of the products like that teeth whitening stuff or the Invisalign...I'm also really interested in that syrup that they're trying to sell. I was reading about it when I was on the treadmill, too. I'm, like, what the heck is that? Where do you even get that? I've never heard of it, but they act like you could use it in everything.

The syrup in question is a brand specializing in plant-based, non-GMO, keto-friendly sugar and syrup brands. Teeth-whitening kits, Invisalign, low-calorie sweetener: Each product was related to bettering one's appearance outside of the space. Despite the goal of a gym being to enhance one's fitness and health, the material objects and messaging the space perpetuated unrelated beauty standards onto members—white, straight teeth and low-calorie foods.

The characteristics of theme one were interrelated. The materialized aspects of O'Hare (advertising, news articles, etc.) imparted the importance of appearance onto members.

Members, in turn, wanted their appearance to be what changed as a result of being in the space, more so than their actual degree of fitness or health. However, if they did not see themselves as already falling within gender appearance standards, they were discouraged from entering the space, to begin with.

Theme 2: Women treat the space communally to gain knowledge about how to navigate the space more broadly

The second theme discovered was women treated the space communally to gain knowledge about how to navigate the space more broadly. There were two distinct ways women used the gym space communally, per responses provided by participants. Firstly, by participating in instructor-led group fitness classes and secondly, by utilizing women-only sections of gyms. To familiarize themselves with the exercise space at O'Hare, many women reported taking group fitness classes, which they enjoyed because of the instructor-led and knowledge-building aspects. Additionally, they reminisced on attending former gyms that offered women-only spaces, which O'Hare did not provide. In what follows, I first discuss theme two's first characteristic: group-fitness classes as an opportunity to gain knowledge about using the gym space. Then, I move to discuss the theme's second characteristic: women-only gym spaces.

Group Fitness Classes

Perhaps one of the most frequently mentioned aspects of the gym space were the group fitness classes and offerings, including yoga, Pilates, a strength training class, and tennis. Women reported opting for group classes, as the instructor-led workouts taught them how to navigate the open-exercise spaces on their own. According to participants, the most beneficial aspect of attending group fitness classes was having an instructor to motivate and explain workouts.

Michelle, a faithful yoga-goer, explained that she enjoyed classes because:

I love the classes, and that was one of the number one reasons I joined this gym—because of the different types of classes that they have. And if you're not necessarily comfortable lifting, or you don't know what would be good for you to maintain working out regularly, they also offer a lot of free workout training sessions that are 30 minutes. They have a kettlebell circuit class where they teach you how to use the kettlebell. So, there are different things that you can take advantage of and are a free way to learn how to properly work out.

The fact O'Hare offers classes specifically geared toward teaching members how to exercise properly, safely, and effectively confirms the demand for these types of amenities.

I sought to understand if the knowledge gained from these classes is transferable to an individual workout in practice, and Michelle confirmed she gained a lot of knowledge about how to create and execute a productive arm workout on her own after taking an upper-body strength training class. LJ shared similar sentiments about a Crossfit-like class O'Hare offers, saying, “Because of the classes, I've felt more comfortable in the gym space. I'll pick out a group of muscles that I'm going to work, and I'll find machines or free weights to do those exercises.” LJ took what she learned from her instructors and group classes and now creates her own exercise

routines. Had she not learned skills from her classes, she admitted she would have needed to find another avenue of exercise, for fear of looking inadequate and not getting a proper workout to achieve her goals.

LJ went on to explain that after a year and a half of attending classes and learning the ropes, she was able to branch away from exercises she noticed did not work for her, even though they were recommended by instructors. To navigate the space solo is an indication of confidence being instilled into oneself through the process of learning, implementing, and adapting. As LJ said, “Listen to yourself. There were a lot of things instructors would tell me, but it didn't always work for me. I just thought, ‘Because some of that resonates, I'm going to try this instead.’ I started finding my own way.”

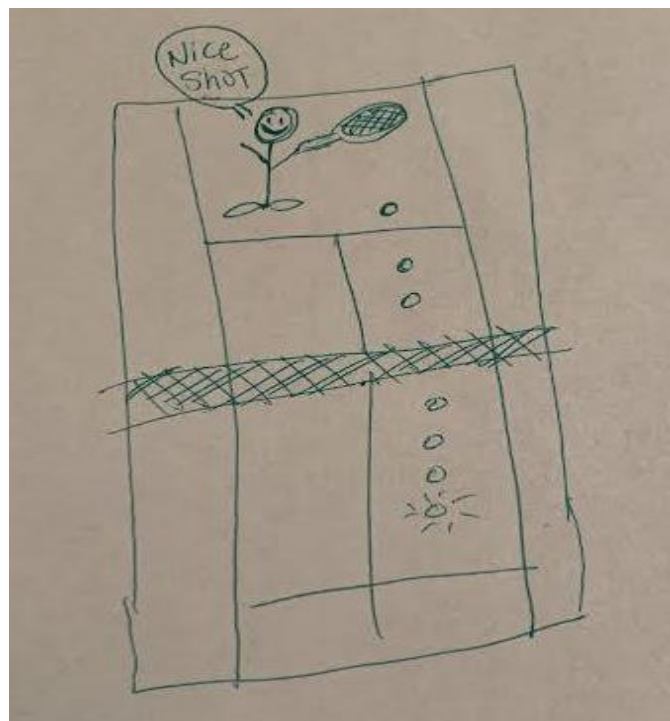
After using the group fitness classes as an opportunity to navigate the gym space solo, another benefit of the classes reported by respondents was the fact they are instructor-led; instructors motivated them to continue using the space, as they gave people the opportunity to be taught and guided step-by-step throughout the workout. Respondents were explicitly asked if they attend group fitness classes for the social aspect of working out with others or if they attend because of the instructors. All respondents answered they attended for the instruction; if there is a social aspect of attending the fitness classes, that came secondarily and was not a consideration before joining.

LJ has spent nearly three years taking a variety of classes, and said, “First, I started going because of the trainer, but the social aspect, I will say, has become a big part of it. We have this group of women who are pretty consistent and have become friends.” For others who have taken group classes, the instruction superseded the social atmosphere. Lux admitted, “For me, I’m in, I get what I need to get done, and I’m out. I don’t like to hang around, you know what I mean?”

Interestingly, Lux felt the social aspect of O'Hare is taken advantage of primarily by men. She stated she feels a lot of the weightlifting floor is taken up by men chatting and socializing with one another.

Teresa, who often goes to the gym after getting off of work, noted, "I usually go after work, and I'm just tired and I want somebody to tell me what I need to do and to keep time. I don't want to do it myself." However, Teresa did admit her most-used part of the gym had become tennis; when asked to draw herself in the space, she drew herself on a tennis course praising her team (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.4. Teresa's self illustration.



Teresa's illustration includes her saying, "nice shot." Presumably, Teresa finds tennis to be a communal activity, one in which she is lifted up and can also lift up others. As a member of Teresa's tennis team, I know she played on two women's leagues. Therefore, her self-illustration led me to conclude her experience on an all-woman tennis league created an uplifting environment and sense of encouragement for her.

Taylor also saw group-class instruction as a source of motivation, admitting if she was working out on her own, she would not push herself, "I like the variety of the classes...If I'm working out on my own, I won't do it. I don't push myself." For many participants, an instructor's encouragement remains a motivating aspect of their exercise routine.

Group fitness classes led by an instructor gave women the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the space and with exercise more broadly. Participants used these areas to create unspoken communities of women, who were hesitant to use mixed-gendered gym spaces, as they left them feeling more susceptible to judgment. In a sense, the group fitness classes were microcosms of the larger space and felt easier to tackle for these women, particularly because of the instructor-led workout routines and the fewer male participants.

Women-Only Gym Sections

Women-only spaces are "single-gender fitness environments" (Ekemezie, 2021), often located within a mixed-gender gym spaces. Although Etta, 36, admitted to using her former gym's women-only section, she felt it was valuable for O'Hare not to have a similar area. She shared her hopes that society is past the need to separate men and women in the gym: "I think we might be past the point where we want a designated, separate space for women, because I don't really buy into the belief that women have to be, like, protected from the men in the gym

anymore.” Elaborating on this, Etta professed frustration with the separate rooms set up at her previous gym, noting they were not the same spaces for different genders—only separate.

I used to use the men’s equipment too because they just had more options... They had more machines, they had more sets of free weights, you could do squats, you could do a lot of other stuff up in the men's gym that you couldn't in the women’s gym... There was definitely not different offerings in the women's facilities.

Despite being preferential to the mixed-gender areas herself, Etta did understand the reasoning behind women-only sections and that they, presumably, were created in an effort to help more hesitant women. “I'm guessing that they did that to try to make women feel more comfortable, whether that was from judgment or insecurity, about what they looked like or how much weight they lifted, to not wanting to be harassed,” she said. Other respondents had personal experiences working out in women-only gym sections and, in contrast to Etta, praised the amenity.

Michelle reflected on her college’s women-only gym space fondly,
It does feel awkward in the weightlifting area, having it be mixed [gender]
because I used to, in college, go to a gym that had a women's lifting room where they had a general gym area where everybody could lift. But if you weren't comfortable, you could go in this separate room, and they had treadmills for women—they had basically a tiny gym for women—and that was kind of cool.
Not necessarily because I felt uncomfortable, but because it was always nice to know that there was a separate room where extra machines were, and I didn't feel like I was being watched. Not to say I think men are watching me, but I just feel like the more people there are, the more likely I'm going to be watched and judged.

Fears of being watched and judged by fellow gym members—not only men—were reported by the other women participants, too. Penelope went as far to say she often felt more judged and intimidated by fellow women than by men at O'Hare.

Participants also shared instances of explicit, unwanted advances while exercising, prompting further recognition for why women-only gym spaces can be beneficial. It is important to note that these cases did not occur at O'Hare but at the participants' former gyms.

When asked if they could recall an instance of feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome in the gym space, Etta, Michelle, and Teresa recalled distinct attempts by male gym members to either provide unsolicited advice about their workouts or strike up an unwanted conversation. Etta shared, "I remember incidents where I was trying to work out and men would come up and give me tips on my form. Ultimately, it was just a ruse to try to get information about me or get my number." By starting conversations with an attempt to fix Etta's form, there seemed to be a precedent that this man knew how to better and more effectively work out. In other words, Etta was seen as a damsel in distress. Michelle shared her own annoyance and discomfort with a similar situation, "A guy I didn't know, just was like, 'You shouldn't be squatting that way,' or something, which I understand how that could be helpful and polite, but also I didn't know him, so it was weird." Unsolicited advice might be intended as polite, but it may come off threatening in this space, where exercising around others is already somewhat daunting.

Teresa shared her own experience, recalling the time she was training for a half marathon. "I was running on a track and this guy was just waiting nearby and staring [at me]," she said. Although he was not attempting to correct Teresa's workout, she still felt uneasy about him lingering and was unsure of his intentions. "Finally, he started talking to me as I was running...There's a rail there and he was just standing there, waiting for me to run by and talking

to me as I did.” Teresa admitted this happened on multiple occasions and would force her to conclude her workout and leave the gym, as she would often feel on edge.

Participants’ experiences indicate cultural constructions of gender at play in the space, creating a double-edged sword for women. Their femininity should be on display, to keep from being too masculine, but their femininity seemingly invited unwanted attention from men. This notion is valuable to remember when thinking about the necessity and demand for women-only gym spaces. In these environments, these constructions of gender are less contrasted, as the space is created for only one gender.

In the following section of the chapter, I detail how the price of an O’Hare membership repeatedly emerged in participant interviews. As mentioned in previous chapters, the cost of an O’Hare membership was, on average, \$179 per month. To gain access to additional amenities, that price ranged much higher. Consequently, the third and final theme was found: The space was built for upper-class patrons and inadvertently constrained the participation of lower-class patrons.

Theme 3: The space was built for upper-class patrons and constrained participation of lower-class patrons

The cost of the O’Hare gym membership was polarizing, and many participants continually found themselves trying to justify paying so much for what O’Hare offered. In what follows, I discuss how the space’s amenities tended to cater toward non-working individuals. Then, I discuss how the gym cost was conceptualized by this study’s participants.

Of the women I interviewed, all of them held at least a college degree. Three of the seven women did not work, but each of them held a bachelor’s degree. The four other women participants worked traditional office jobs; three held an advanced degree and one held a

bachelor's. At the time of this study, O'Hare was open daily from 4 a.m. until 12 p.m. and provided an exercise space for a variety of people. Of the seven women I interviewed, their thoughts and feelings about the cost of O'Hare were split.

Lux and Penelope did not work, and during the interview process, both spoke about the clientele of O'Hare. Lux explained the people she interacted with at O'Hare are more her speed, in comparison to those she exercised with at her former gym, "I don't know how to say this without sounding rude, but it [other gym] was more of a lower, more club and industry people... That's not my scene, you know what I mean?... I don't really relate to those people." The gym Lux formerly attended, in addition to having a more prominent member population from the club and nightlife scene, also had a monthly membership fee of approximately \$24. Penelope, in contrast with what Lux mentioned regarding her experience, does not relate to the people she had interacted with at O'Hare, saying, "This gym... I would consider very preppy. Women here, and men, I think are, like, stuck up." Neither Lux nor Penelope recalled a specific interaction that made them feel these ways but based their feelings on how others looked.

Taylor, a stay-at-home mom, primarily visited the gym during the quiet mornings and afternoons. She recalled coming to O'Hare for a tennis match at 6 o'clock p.m. and being required to park across the street; the parking lot did not have enough space to accommodate the heavy traffic caused by the 9-5, office-working crew. Speaking from personal experience, I, too, have been required to park in nearby business parking lots when attending the gym later in the evening, particularly after 5 o'clock. Therefore, participants who came to the gym after work tended to face issues with class availability and crowding. LJ explicitly mentioned that class times and offerings do not cater to working individuals, "I would probably do more classes if

there were some more options [at different times].” An after-work rush happened to coincide with limited class options after the five o’clock hour.

Teresa worked until five in the evening. Despite enjoying the instruction the classes offered her, she mentioned she also enjoyed creating her own workout routines using machines. Unfortunately, due to the crowds at the time she came, she reported having reservations: “I feel like here [O’Hare], people are always waiting. If you’re doing something, somebody’s waiting for you to get off of it. I think that kind of messes up my workouts. I just feel weird when somebody’s waiting for me.” Generally, the space was not large enough and did not offer enough equipment to cater to the crowds after five o’clock.

In addition, there were an array of viewpoints regarding O’Hare’s costly membership fees and additional fees required to access certain parts of the space. Some participants did not mind the price, and in fact, prefer the cleanliness and many amenities that come along with it. However, it was valuable to learn how working participants considered the cost of the membership. LJ remarked, in reference to the personal training and nutrition counseling she took advantage of, “If I’m going to pay this money, show me what you’re made of.” Teresa, after paying additional fees to take a strength training class offered three times a week, said she felt as though she had to come to each class, because she was paying extra for it, admitting, “I didn’t have an excuse not to come.” Etta, when asked what advice she has for women just joining the gym, bluntly replied, “Save her money—cause this gym is expensive.” Whether it was seen as a motivating factor or a reason to seek membership elsewhere, it is clear LJ, Teresa, and Etta all considered the high price of O’Hare.

For some, the price of the membership was not a motivating component, but rather a nuisance. Penelope, who had transitioned to a primarily tennis-based workout regimen, said she

did not feel she takes advantage of enough amenities to justify the cost of the membership fees any longer. When asked what advice she would give to a girl joining O'Hare, she said, "To be out! Honestly, I'm thinking about leaving this gym. I want to play tennis full-time. I'm going to play at a new club since it's way more affordable and it's down the street."

The space felt inherently classed for some participants, and this made them either love the experience or dislike it. The space's offerings, cleanliness, and clientele seemed to validate the price for some. However, this price also disengaged members who were only able to attend the gym after their working day. While those who exercised during the morning and afternoon did not have to mold their own comfortable space in the gym, members who came during the after-work rush felt increased pressure mentioned in themes one and two from the gym's increased crowd. They reported being unable to get spots in their sought-after classes and felt rushed on the equipment if they opted to do their own workout routine.

A discussion of this study's findings follows below. In this discussion, I expand on the literature that can help us better understand the themes discovered throughout participant interviews.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The present study adds to our knowledge of organizational communication, by answering the research question: As organizations, how do women perceive that gym spaces communicate in ways that encourage or discourage their participation? Women participants found the gym space to communicate cultural constructions of gender, power, and class through social, material, and physical elements of O'Hare. Specifically, women who felt they did not possess favorable characteristics of fitness, femininity, or socioeconomic status were discouraged to participate and take up space within the gym. This study mainly contributes to empirical organizational communication studies research in three ways; it contributes to our understanding of communication as constitutive of organizations, the conversation around gyms and gender performativity, and to organizational space being able to communicate differences in socioeconomic status and class.

Communication as Constitutive of Organizations

As the Montreal School of CCO posits, non-human agents can exert influence, and the physical, social, and material elements of a space can communicate to and impact the behaviors of humans. As Wilhoit's (2016) study showcased, humans can ascribe agency to space; in her study, faculty members at a university subscribed meaning to their office spaces, and attributed messages of privacy, productivity, and convenience made a change in their office space unthinkable. The physical, material, and social elements of the gym space were given meaning by gym members in the present study, too.

It is first important to highlight that the physical elements of O'Hare included the built environment—things such as where exercise rooms and equipment were located or what equipment was available; the material aspects of the space included bodies, clothing, digital

communications, displays, class times, and commercials; and finally, social characteristics included any interactions between human agents in and regarding the gym. For participants of the present study, meanings were ascribed to these three different types of elements in the gym, and subsequently, these different elements were able to elicit feelings about gender, power, and class to members.

Participants in the study primarily shared feeling intimidated by their own perceived lack of knowledge in the space and their self-perceived levels of attractiveness and fitness. Respondents shared feeling daunted by other women in the space who were presumably more knowledgeable about the gym environment and its equipment, were thinner or more fit, and who wore more expensive, revealing athletic clothing. Other women's inferred levels of fitness, bodies, and clothing communicated to respondents that they, themselves, did not fit into the space, and this subsequently influenced their behaviors. For example, these feelings of inadequacy led to participants in the study strictly attending group fitness and trainer-led classes at O'Hare. However, they also reflected on these feelings previously leading them to utilize women-only sections of their former gyms. Here, bodies, material in the space, and spatial design all together influenced human relationships with the gym. This thesis traced interaction across various agents—physical, material, and social—and ultimately demonstrated that different aspects of the built and material world, along with human agents, work together to produce the meaning of space.

Xiong (2019) attributed women's participation in group fitness to a move from the private to the semi-private and viewed group fitness as an opportunity for women to socialize. However, results of the present study contradicted Xiong, as participants in the present study utilized the group fitness classes, women-only spaces, and “movie rooms” as opportunities to

exercise in a more private and less intimidating environment, after ascribing features like privacy, anonymity, and safety to those spaces. In a sense, women viewed the group fitness classes as microcosms of the larger gym space, but as less threatening and void of judgment. In these types of spaces, micro-organizations of women and individuals intimidated by the larger gym space were created.

As stated previously, Wilhoit and Kissleburgh (2015) make clear that, “research investigating embodiment and materiality cannot rely exclusively on discursive reports.” This is a major reason having participants in the current study illustrate themselves gave valuable insight into their experiences in space. Rather than speaking about experiences, allowing participants to draw allowed me to uncover other themes and understand their concepts in different ways.

Gyms and Gender Performativity

Many interview participants explicitly shared their exercise motivations and goals of being in the gym space. Primarily, the women shared that their goals were to remain thin, “skinny” or “light.” These goals were perpetuated by participants being in the space because women who were perceived as welcome and encouraged to participate in it fell within these body types. Similarly, other material elements of the space—including the names and types of classes and advertisements—focused on preserving traditional standards of femininity. This included class names focusing on building ideal female attributes and commercials selling low-calorie sugars and teeth whitening kits. Ultimately, a myriad of different materializations of the gym communicated to participants about idealized standards of beauty and thinness.

Some respondents felt influenced to hurry through their workouts—mostly when the gym was crowded and they felt stares from other members who they perceived as being more fit than they were. Despite this implicit form of intimidation, explicit bullying led some members to

leave the gym entirely. This was the case with LJ's son being made fun of for the way he performed push-ups—an example of him not being masculine enough for the space. Women participants also reflected on instances where men talking to them, correcting their form, or hitting on them led them to cut their workout short and leave the space. Although instances of male intervention did not happen at O'Hare, this gym was representative of women's experiences more broadly in exercise environments. This form of intimidation frequently led to women opting for women-only spaces, as mentioned previously. Previous studies have looked at how women navigate their discomfort within the gym (Clark, 2017; Coen et al., 2018; Harjunen, 2019), but this study also looks at how women change how they fit into the organization to navigate it differently, more comfortably, and more effectively.

Discussions of women-only spaces further contributed to the notion brought forth in Wilhoit and Kisselberg's 2015 study on bike commuters. The researchers added to CCO theory by concluding that organizational structure and behaviors were the same and that day-to-day activities or "collective action" happening within a space constitute an organization. They combat traditional notions of collective action and organizing and instead note, "Newer forms of collective action begin to reconceptualize the concept [collective action] by reducing the coordination between actors and increasing the intrinsic and personal benefits of participating" (p. 575). In the same way bike commuting provides personal benefit, women find a personal benefit from utilizing women-only gym spaces. Therefore, their use of these spaces can be viewed as a creation of an organization through continual use of the space based on their intrinsic gain, not through traditional, often verbal, organizing. Despite whether or not these women speak to one another about their membership in these "organizations", they are all part of the same group; presumably, the camaraderie provided by all utilizing the same space can provide can a

sense of encouragement and safety, particularly in a recreational exercise environment that historically marginalized women. This same theory can be applied to gym goers who opt to engage in exercise within the movie rooms, as they are creating their own organizations through the use of space, too.

Socioeconomic Status and Class

Results of this study supported the notion that physical, social, and material aspects of space can communicate gender differentials, but perhaps the most intriguing finding was that it can also communicate differences involving socioeconomic status and class. Zhang and Spicer (2014) conducted a study of “The Bureau”, a Chinese organization rife with power dynamics; the study indicated that those power differences were perpetuated through the organization’s space. However, there has been little written about class in organizational space research, specifically with regard to recreational organizations, as most of these studies have been conducted in business spaces, which tend to align with upper-middle-class membership.

Communication about gender and power arose from respondents sharing their feelings regarding self-comparison, the thin ideal, and cultural constructs of gender being embodied by fellow gym members. Power also played a part in the social and material communication through space, primarily by who was seen and treated as welcome in the space and who felt they did not belong. However, because the study centered on a high-priced gym, the cost and offerings became a main focus of participant interviews. The gym’s expenses brought forth socioeconomic divisions between working and upper-class participants. Specifically, class times and crowding of the space led to problems for participants who were only available to attend the gym after traditional work-day hours. Individuals who did not work during the day often had access to better, less physically cramped classes and fewer crowds. The crowding of the gym was

particularly problematic for individuals attending after five o'clock in the evening, as the parking lot spaces filled up and members were required to park in nearby commercial building lots.

Conclusively, the results of the study indicated that all social, material, and physical aspects of space can communicate and create organizations and can communicate messages surrounding gender, power, and class. O'Hare provided a rich environment to conduct this research, since the fitness and exercise industry is historically male-dominated. Limitations of this study follow.

I find it valuable to refer back to the four problematics Mumby and Stohl (1996) put forth, with regard to organizational communication. The scholars' problematics, or tensions, essentially posit that voices of all organizational members matter; experiences of organizational members matter more than economic results; communication is more than a transmission of messages, as it creates and breaks down organizations; and organizations cannot fully be separated from society as a whole. Hoping to better understand examples of these organizational tensions, we can look directly at the present study's results regarding women's experiences in the gym space and issues of upper-class versus lower-class participation within O'Hare.

Perhaps most prominently, the experiences of organizational members within O'Hare did not seem to supercede economic results, as upper-class patrons tended to be prioritized and women's discomfort was reported (although this may be a general gym experience, more so than an O'Hare experience). This tension tied greatly to that of voice and whose voices mattered in the organization; the prioritization of certain people over others was reportedly felt by participants. Additionally, experiences and how they related to the physical, material, and social elements of the space were what created, and can theoretically break down, facets of the gym itself. Finally, the gym space—and O'Hare as an organization, generally—did not seem to

escape the issues that we see arise in society more broadly. For example, women have historically been dismissed in sports, fitness, and exercise enterprises, and the experiences of upper-class individuals tend to be privileged over the experiences of the working class; both of these conditions seemed to be true, based on participant reports. While the present study of O'Hare provides just one example in which Mumby and Stohl's problematics can be exemplified, experiences in other organizations—gyms included—may provide alternative insight.

Limitations

The limitations of this research were the number of participants, a female-only participant base, and the price of the gym at the center of the research. First, there were seven interview participants, and to gauge a better understanding of feelings about being a member of O'Hare, the study would have benefited from additional respondents. I believe it was difficult to find participants, for two specific reasons. One, I discovered that women who were willing to participate in the study were not members of O'Hare, and since this was a requirement for participation, it significantly limited the number of people who were knowledgeable about the space and willing to interview. Two, I believe women were hesitant to discuss how they felt in the gyms; this could be due to the fact they had never thought about their personal experiences or because they were not comfortable divulging about their personal experiences. Additionally, a female-only participant base did provide rich data. However, interviewing male members of O'Hare could have potentially provided insight into others' experiences. Understanding mens' experiences in O'Hare could have to our understanding of gender-centric themes or provided insight into additional theme, especially considering one respondent—LJ—reflected on her son's experience at O'Hare. It is important to note that another limitation related to gender is not

having interviewed anyone who identified as nonbinary. A significant part of my findings focused on a gender binary and gender roles and understanding how a nonbinary individual interpreted the space could have been valuable.

The last limitation, although O'Hare provided a large gym space and multiple amenities to discuss, was the price of the gym membership. The high cost of being a member severely limited the individuals who were able to participate in the study. Thus, even as class was discussed in the findings, participants all likely enjoyed at least some level of privilege economically. Future research would benefit from an additional and more versatile participant pool and perhaps a more affordable gym location in which to conduct research.

Despite these limitations, it is important to acknowledge that this qualitative research study is still of high quality (Tracy, 2010). Maintaining that quality research complies with Sarah Tracy's (2010) eight big-tent criteria, the current study conforms to all of them: worthy topic, rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. This topic is relevant and appropriately analyzes data that was collected in an ethical manner by a credible researcher. It "achieves what it purports to be about" (p. 840), and I am reflexive about my own privilege and closeness to the topic at hand. Mostly, I believe this study resonates with people—particularly women—who have ever had to experience these feelings in action.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Although research in the literature has focused on womens' exercise experiences, particularly in relation to emotions, few studies have focused on how the space itself creates and evokes these feelings. The goal of this study was to understand how the social, material, and physical aspects of the gym space communicate to and influence womens' participation. Specifically, this study sought to learn more about the relationship between communication, gender, and power in a non-traditional organization. Seven women members of O'Hare were interviewed, and as a result of the interviews, three themes were discovered.

First, comfortability and confidence in the space stemmed from self-perceived levels of attractiveness. In other words, women felt they needed to be physically attractive, fit, and feminine before entering the space and also as an outcome of having been a member of the space. These feelings were frequently seen as a barrier to exercise by respondents and were perpetuated in the space by O'Hare's digital communications and choices in advertising. Second, women treated the space communally to gain knowledge about how to navigate the space more broadly. Respondents admitted enjoying group-fitness classes because they were instructor-led and easy to follow. In fitness classes, they felt it was less likely they would be doing exercises incorrectly and subsequently embarrassing themselves around others who were more knowledgeable about the space's offerings; this decreased intimidation levels of exercising in an open-gym environment. Finally, the space was built for upper-class patrons and frequently constrained the participation of lower-class patrons. Interestingly, the study brought to light evidence that supported physical and material aspects of space communicating socioeconomic and class differentials.

The discovery of space communicating class was a valuable finding in the present study, as this is a predominately untapped area of organizational communication. Every respondent commented on the price of the gym being either a deterrent to their participation or the reason they felt the need to participate. Within the gym walls, the physical, material, and social elements of the gym environment communicated messages of a classed space. O'Hare seemingly created a contentedly elitist environment. Interestingly, the price and luxurious amenities were less of a selling point and more of a concern for participants.

This study adds to organizational communication literature by identifying ways the gym space communicates messages about gender, power, and class. However, rather than simply acknowledging that gender, power, and class are variables within an organization, I'd propose that these intersections lead to entirely different lived experiences within an organization, both with regard to workspaces and leisure spaces. Power changes the reality of organizational membership. For example, the reality a rich man experiences within an organization will likely be vastly different from the reality experienced by a lower-class woman in the same space, and I would argue this is true both at work and in a recreational space like the gym.

The present study adds to both the knowledge of operating a gym space and being a member within a gym space. In conclusion, gym owners can take advantage of the idea that space communicates ideas about gender and class to members. Digital displays, advertisements, and even the way an area is built or organized can either add to or eliminate feelings of intimidation for members, primarily women. Gym operators can also better gauge what leads clients or members to feel polarized by regarding cost. Gym members who feel intimidated to exercise in a public, recreational space can heed the advice of women in the present study and begin with group-fitness or instructor-led classes to gain knowledge about how to use the space

and equipment. Additionally, they can contemplate which facets of a gym they want to prioritize—including women-only rooms, darkened cardio rooms, and even prices—to determine which spaces they will feel most encouraged and comfortable to be part of.

Ultimately, this study provides an original look at recreational organizations and how they can communicate to members non-verbally through physical, material, and social elements. Future research should look deeper at how to effectively accommodate or mitigate feelings of intimidation in recreational spaces, as these organizations are assets to those trying to build healthier habits. Additionally, it would be valuable for future research to study more spaces that inadvertently polarize or class their environments.

As stated previously, exercise is fundamental to health in both physical and mental capacities, and personal health is not something that should only be reserved for some. In areas made for exercise, comfort and encouragement are essential for all. Particularly regarding organizations which marketing the importance of health and wellness, it is important to remain inclusive. The present study starts the conversation about how and where to focus those inclusive efforts.

UNLV

RESEARCH STUDY

**COMMUNICATION
STUDIES
M.A. THESIS**

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

**A STUDY ON WOMEN
IN THE GYM SPACE**

**INTERVIEWS WILL DISCUSS YOUR
EXPERIENCE AS A WOMAN
WORKING OUT AT THE GYM.**

**INTERVIEWS WILL BE
APPROXIMATELY 45 MINUTES IN
LENGTH, CAN BE CONDUCTED IN
PERSON OR OVER ZOOM, AND WILL
BE AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDED.**

**CONTACT
RACHEL
GLAZE**
rachel.glaze@unlv.edu

**IRB Number:
UNLV-2021-31
PI:
Dr. Rebecca Rice
rebecca.rice@unlv.edu**



Appendix B

1. How long have you been a member at O'Hare, and did you engage in physical activity before becoming a member of this gym?
2. Walk me through a typical gym session at O'Hare for you.
3. What are your most common or least-used parts of the gym space?
 - a. Why?
4. You have a set workout planned for the day, and you go upstairs and find the class you wanted to take is canceled or the machines you plan on using are all taken or under repair. What do you do?
 - a. Why?
5. How do you think the way you participate in the gym is similar or different to male members of O'Hare?
6. What would your ideal gym space look like?
7. Based on the literature surrounding gyms, it is my understanding women tend to avoid the weight lifting section of the gym. Do you find that to be true of yourself or other women you see at O'Hare?
 - a. Why do you think that is?
8. O'Hare is a mixed-gendered gym, and it does not have designated spaces for women like some local gyms do. Do you think there is a benefit to this?
 - a. Why or why not?
9. If possible, can you walk me through an interaction in O'Hare that made you feel like you did not belong in the space.

10. Do you utilize the O'Hare application? If so, what aspect of the application do you most frequently use?
 - a. Why?
11. Do you read any of the O'Hare newsletters that are sent out?
 - a. If so, how do you feel about them?
12. When you see posters and promotional videos for O'Hare being displayed/played in the gym, what messages do you get from them?
13. What advice would you give to a young woman just starting to work out at this gym?
14. I would like you to draw how you feel about yourself when you're in the gym space. You have complete freedom to be as creative or abstract as you'd like!
 - a. Follow-up questions about their illustrations.
15. Do you have any questions for me?
16. What would you like your pseudonym to be for this study?

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4(2), 139-158. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189609>
- Ahern, A. L., Bennett, K. M., Kelly, M. & Hetherington, M. M. (2011). A qualitative exploration of young women's attitudes towards the thin ideal. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 16(1), 70-79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105310367690>
- Ashcraft, K., Cooren, F., & Kuhn, T. (2009). 1 constitutional amendments: "Materializing" organizational communication. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 3(1), 1-64. <http://doi.org/10.1080/19416520903047186>
- Bergmann, G. G., Streb, A. R., Ferrari, M., Alves, D. C. C., Soares, B. A. C., Ferreira, G. D., & Pinheiro, E. S. (2021). The use of outdoor gyms is associated with women and low-income people: a cross-sectional study. *Public Health*, 190, 16-22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.10.024>
- Bernabe, A. J. & Yeo, S. (2020, August 24). Arkansas woman killed while running: What women should know to stay safe on outdoor runs. *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/News/arkansas-woman-killed-running-women-stay-safe-outdoor/story?id=72560802>
- Branton, S. E. & Compton, C. A. (2021) There's no such thing as a gay bar: Co-Sexuality and the neoliberal branding of queer spaces. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 35(1), 69-95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318920972113>
- Brittain, D. R., Baillargeon, T., McElroy, M., Aaron, D. J., & Gyuresik, N. C. (2006). Barriers to moderate physical activity in adult lesbians. *Women & Health*, 43(1), 75-92. https://doi.org/10.1300/J013v43n01_05

- Brummans, B. H. J. M. (2015). Forum introduction: Organizational communication and the question of agency. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 29(3), 458-462.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318915584823>
- Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing gender*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Buzzanell, P. M. (1994). Gaining a voice: Feminist organizational communication theorizing. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7(4), 339-383.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318994007004001>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, October 7). How much physical activity do adults need? <https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/adults/index.htm>
- Clark, A. (2017). Exploring women's embodied experiences of 'the gaze' in a mix-gendered UK gym. *Societies*, 8(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8010002>
- Cnossen, B. & Bencherki, N. (2019). The role of space in the emergence and endurance of organizing: How independent workers and material assemblages constitute organizations. *Human Relations*, 72(6), 1057-1080. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718794265>
- Coen, S. E., Rosenberg, M. W., & Davidson, J. (2018). "It's gym, like g-y-m not J-i-m": Exploring the role of place in the gendering of physical activity. *Social Science & Medicine*, 196, 29-36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.10.036>
- Coen, S. E., Davidson, J., & Rosenberg, M. W. (2019). Towards a critical geography of physical activity: Emotions and the gendered boundary-making of an everyday exercise environment. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45(2), 313-330.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/TRAN.12347>
- Cooren, F. Beyond entanglement: (Socio-) materiality and organization studies. *Organizational Theory*, 1(3), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2631787720954444>

- Cooren, F. & Fairhurst, G. T. (2008). Dislocation and stabilization: How to scale up from interactions to organizations. (Putnam, L. & Nicotera, A. M., Ed.). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Dale, K. (2005). Building a social materiality: Spatial and embodied politics in organizational control. *Organization*, 12(5), 649-678. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508405055940>
- Ekemezie, C. (2021, October 8). The appeal and the shortcomings of women-only gyms. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/22709598/women-only-gyms-curves-gender-trans>
- Feldman, M. S. & Orlikowski, W. J. (2011). Theorizing practice and practicing theory. *Organization Science*, 22(5), 1240-1253. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1100.0612>
- Hales, C. M., Carroll, M. D., Fryar, C. D., Ogden, C. L. *Prevalence of obesity and severe obesity among adults: United States, 2017-2018. NCHS data brief, No. 360*. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2020.
- Harjunen, H. (2019). Exercising exclusions: Space, visibility, and monitoring of the exercising fat female body. *Fat Studies*, 8(2), 173-186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2019.1561101>
- Kasen, S., Cohen, P., Chen, H., Must, A. (2008). Obesity and the psychopathology in women: A three-decade prospective study. *International Journal of Obesity*, 32(3), 558-566. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.ijo.0803736>
- Kovács, G. (2018). Health of public life in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt: The relation of the public and private realms in the centuries of modernity. *Anthropological Researches and Studies*, 8(1), 212-218. <https://doi.org/10.26758/8.1.21>
- Levy, S. S. & Ebbeck, V. (2005). The exercise and self-esteem model in adult women: the inclusion of physical acceptance. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 6, 571-584.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2004.09.003>

Liberti, R. (2017). "Gendering the gym": A history of women in physical education. *Kinesiology Review*, 6(2), 153-166. <https://doi.org/10.1123/kr.2017-0005>

Lindolf, T. R. & Taylor B. C. (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4 edition). Sage.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. Sage.

McDowell, L. (1993). Space, place, and gender relations: Part I. Feminist empiricism and the geography of social relations. *Progress in Human Geography*, 17(2), 157-179.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/030913259301700202>

Mumby, D. K. (2015). Organizing power. *Review of Communication*, 15(1), 19-38.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2015.1015245>

Mumby, D. K. & Stohl, C. (1996). Disciplining organizational communication studies.

Management Communication Quarterly, 10(1), 50-72.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318996010001004>

Newhall, K. (2013). *Is this working out?: A spatial analysis of women in the gym*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa]. <https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.ypf6n7om>

Renato Azevedo, M., Luiza Pavin Araújo, C., Fossati Reichert, F., Vinholes Siqueira, F., Cozzensa da Silva, M., Curi Hallal, P. (2007). Gender differences in leisure-time physical activity. *International Journal of Public Health*, 52, 8-15.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-006-5062-1>

Rice, R. M. (2021). Feminist theory and interorganizational collaboration: An ethnographic study of gendered tension management. *Communication Monographs*, ahead-of-print, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2021.1931703>

- Sassatelli, R. (1999). Interaction order and beyond: A field analysis of body culture within fitness gyms. *Body & Society*, 5(2-3), 227-248.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X99005002013>
- Schoeneborn, D., Blaschke, S. Cooren, F., McPhee, R. D., Seidl, D., & Taylor, J. R. (2014). The three schools of CCO thinking: Interactive dialogue and systematic comparison. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 28(2), 285-316.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318914527000>
- The Lancet Public Health. Time to tackle the physical activity gender gap. (2019). 4(8).
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(19\)30135-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(19)30135-5)
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Tracy, S. J. (2019). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Tyler, M. & Cohen, L. (2010). Spaces that matter: Gender performativity and organizational space. *Organization Studies*, 31(2), 175-198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609357381>
- Úbeda-Colomer, J., Gil-Quintana, J., Pereira-García, S., López-Cañada, E., Pérez-Samaniego, V., & Devís-Devís, J. (2020). Development and validation of the Barriers to Physical Activity and Sport Questionnaire for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning persons. *Public Health*, 185, 202-208.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.05.020>
- Wilhoit, E. D. (2018). Space, place, and the communicative constitution of organizations: A constitutive model of organizational space. *Communication Theory*, 28(3), 311-331.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qty007>

- Wilhoit, E. D., Gettings, P., Malik, P., Hearit, L. B., Buzzanell, P. M., & Ludwig, B. (2016). STEM faculty response to proposed workspace changes. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 29(5), 804-815. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-04-2015-0064>
- Wilhoit, E. D. & Kisselburgh, L. G. (2015). Collective action without organization: The material constitution of bike commuters as collective. *Organization Studies*, 36(5), 573-592. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840614556916>
- Wilson, O. W. A. & Bopp, M. (2021). College student aerobic and muscle-strengthening activity: The intersection of gender and race/ethnicity among United States students. *Journal of American College Health*, ahead-of-print, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1876709>
- Xiong, H. (2019). The construction of women's social spaces through physical exercise in urban China. *Sport in Society*, 22(8), 1415-1432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1614919>
- Zhang, Z. & Spicer, A. (2014). 'Leader, you first': The everyday production of hierarchical space in a Chinese bureaucracy. *Human Relations*, 67(6), 739-762. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713503021>

Curriculum Vitae

Contact Information

4505 S Maryland Pkwy., Las Vegas, NV 89154 | rchlglaze@gmail.com

Research Interests

My research interests include health disparities amongst different segments of the public, primarily regarding physical activity, obesity, and obesity-related illness. Currently, my research focuses on exercise disparities between men and women in the gym space.

Education

Master of Arts, Communication Studies, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

In Progress

- Cumulative GPA: 3.8

Bachelor of Arts, Communication Studies, University of Nevada Las Vegas — Honors College

May 2018

- Cumulative GPA: 3.4

Teaching Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Fall 2020 – Present

Course: Communication Studies 101: Oral Communication,

Sections: 101.1027, 101.1028, 101.1029, 101.1016, 101.1017, 101.1018, 101.1010, 101.1044, 101.1045, 101.1046, 101.1047, 101.1048, 101.1049 (three sections per FA/SP semesters, one section per SU session)

Graduate Teaching Assistant for introductory Communication Studies course: Oral Communication; the course is fully remote and asynchronous through the Canvas/WebCampus platform.

Research Experience

M.A. Thesis

In Progress

Title: “Women’s use of the gym space: How physical activity spaces communicate inclusion and exclusion to women”

Graduate Research Assistant, UNLV Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

Spring 2021

Graduate Research Assistant for Dr. Rebecca Rice; the research study views organizational communication response to the COVID-19 pandemic at a U.S. county’s Office of Emergency Management.

University Publications

Glaze, R. (2018, May 18). *Crossing Over, Academically Speaking*. University of Nevada, Las Vegas: News Center.

<https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/crossing-over-academically-speaking>

Glaze, R. (2018, May 7). *New Face: Edwin Oh*. University of Nevada, Las Vegas: News Center.

<https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/new-face-edwin-oh>

Glaze, R. (2018, April 10). *UNLV Students Push for Women in STEM*. University of Nevada, Las Vegas: News

Center. <https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/unlv-students-push-women-stem>

Glaze, R. (2017, November 8). *Driven to Discover*. University of Nevada, Las Vegas: News Center.

<https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/driven-discover>

Glaze, R. (2017, November 6). *New Faces: Michelle Tomasino*. University of Nevada, Las Vegas: News Center.

<https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/new-faces-michelle-tomasino>

Glaze, R. & Pietrucha, R. (2017, October 13) *Waking Up to Our Community Changed*. University of Nevada, Las

Vegas: News Center. <https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/waking-our-community-changed>

Pietrucha, R., Weeks, C. **Glaze, R. (Ed.)**, Karosas, A. (Ed.). (2017). *UNLV Innovation*, 10(1).

<https://issuu.com/university.of.nevada.las.vegas/docs/innovation-2017>

Certifications

Institutional Review Board (IRB) CITI Training—Human Subjects Research

February 2020

Professional Development

Graduate Rebel Ambassador, UNLV

August 2021 – May 2022

Post-Graduate Career Pathways Program Participant, UNLV

August 2021 – May 2022

Basic Communication Course Redevelopment, UNLV

September 2021 – May 2022

Working closely with the Basic Communication Course Director, I am currently working to develop and reframe existing mid-range assignments for COM 101: Oral Communication, to more effectively teach course outcomes/UULOS.

Online Teaching Essentials (OTE), University of Nevada, Las Vegas *August 2020 – November 2020*

This course provided essential knowledge for online instructors. The course provided training in multiple areas: the current state of online education, developing a teaching philosophy, teaching remotely versus teaching online, launching an online course, increasing presence and engagement with students online.

University Work Experience

University of Nevada, Las Vegas – Office of Media Relations

October 2016 – July 2018

Media Relations Student Writer

- Compile news stories from local, national, and international media outlets through Critical Mention and Google Alerts to create a daily newsletter in Campaign Monitor.

- Connect media with the respective college/unit communicator for interviews.
- Assist the university president, senior VP of Marketing, Media Relations director, and Media Relations specialists on multimedia projects.
- Address logistical needs for high-impact media events on campus (for example, Governor Sandoval's legislation signing).
- Wrote UNLV's on-hold message for incoming calls to the university

University of Nevada, Las Vegas – Division of Research and Economic Development 2017 – 2018
Communications and Editorial Intern

- Conduct face-to-face and over-the-phone interviews with university faculty and staff to produce original articles.
- Wrote copy for and proofread the issue as editorial intern for the university's 2017 research magazine *Innovation*
(<https://issuu.com/university.of.nevada.las.vegas/docs/innovation-2017>).

Relevant Communication Work Experience

Wynn Las Vegas | Encore

July 2018 – February 2022

Human Resources Internal Communications Writer and Coordinator

- Write copy for all internal communication platforms including: employee intranet site, social media platforms, daily employee newsletter, memos, and signage.
- Manage Wynn Employee Instagram account (@wynnemployees, 6.1K followers).
- Write, edit, and develop copy for all back of house signage which communicates employee events, company-wide changes or updates, and pertinent employee information.
- Write, edit, and develop articles for employee intranet site, corporate memorandums, and newsletters.
- Write and edit HTML code for employee intranet site.
- Work closely with employee services and events team to develop, communicate, and conduct internal events.

University Involvement

National Communication Association (NCA)

- 2020 – 2021 Graduate (M.A.) student member

1st Generation Club, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

- 2015 – 2018 member

Community Involvement

NSPCA

- Pet-food bagging and organization, event staffing

The Animal Foundation

- Animal foster, animal foster field trips, clean and maintain facilities, package dry cat/dog food, etc.

Green Our Planet

- Set-up a local community farmers market for Clark County School District (CCSD) students learning financial literacy.