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Gender Dynamics in the Elon College Fitness Center

As soon as you walk into the fitness center, the most immediately obvious gender dynamic is that members of each gender tend to keep to one floor. The upper floor (consisting mainly of cardio machines and an area of padded mats for sitting exercises) is the domain almost exclusively of girls, with few exceptions. The opposite is true for the fitness center’s lower floor, which is home to most of its strength-training equipment: bench press machines, squat cages, Olympic lifting platforms, etc., as well as most of the center’s male population at any given time. My hypothesis on this dynamic, as a long time gym-goer myself, is as follows: most guys who go to the gym are looking to gain muscle, at least according to my highly unscientific anecdotal experiences talking to other guys in the gym. Meanwhile, girls, generally speaking, aren’t looking to pack on muscle; their motivation is usually the opposite— to lose weight. I’d also guess that there’s a positive feedback loop at play: once the lower floor hits a critical ratio of guys to girls, the lower floor becomes an uncomfortable space for girls, who then tend to avoid it, and so the ratio skews further. I’d wager that this kind of feedback loop is also partially accountable for the lack of guys on the first floor: most guys aren’t comfortable being the only one an elliptical with a dozen or so girls, so they stick to the downstairs. And while I don’t have data to back up my theory about feedback loops, I’m not totally pulling it out of thin air: I’ve been told by one of my female friends that she avoids the lower floor of the gym for the exact reason I’ve described— she just doesn’t feel as comfortable on the lower floor.

I also noticed a distinct difference in body language among girls depending on where in the fitness center they were working out. The girls I saw in the fitness center were the most open in terms of body language – heads up, making eye contact, talking, not looking at phones – in the padded/ab workout area of the upper floor. That was noticeably different from girls’ body language in the rest of the gym, which tended to be more closed off. As for the guys’ body language, I didn’t notice a huge difference anywhere in the gym. The few guys who were upstairs (on the stationary bike or rowing machine, never the elliptical, naturally) didn’t display different body language from the guys lifting downstairs. I’m not sure, but my best guess is that guys don’t display differences in body language the way girls do in the gym because the gym is traditionally a male-dominated space and so guys feel equally comfortable wherever they move within it.

Although I’ve elaborated thus far on what sets the young men and women of the fitness center apart, some things appear constant across both genders, at least as far as I could tell from my observations. For one, there appears to exist what I’d call a “gym uniform,” that members of both genders adhere to. Although the specifics of the uniform are different for each gender (guys’ shorts are looser and longer, for example, while girls are more likely to wear tank tops), what’s constant across both genders is that everyone sticks closely to the uniform for their gender. There’s almost no intra-gender variation in style. Again pulling on anecdotal experience, I’d argue that that this suggests a presentational element to gym attire in addition to a functional one. In essence, everyone is showing off for everyone else, both of their own gender and the opposite, and so everyone skews towards the same type of clothes: branded, relatively tight, and relatively revealing. On a different note, I didn’t see a huge difference between the genders when it came to working out with others. As far as I could tell, the majority of people in the fitness center were either there solo or with a partner, and there didn’t seem to be much of a difference between guys and girls. My expectation going in would be that girls would be more likely to work out in groups or with a partner, but that wasn’t the case according to my observations.