

Context

The observations were conducted at the university gym, Cepsum, on three different evenings between October 7 and October 9, 2024. The observations happened each day around 10 P.M., 8 PM, 7:45 PM and continued for an hour or till it closed. The gym is a multi-level facility that includes an entrance with student ID scanning, locker rooms, a hallway with water fountains, squash courts, a gym salon, including: a stretching area with fake grass, cycles, treadmills, and weightlifting stations. These field observations focused on documenting the behaviors, interactions, and use of space within the gym environment during peak hours. The observation setting provided a mix of individual workouts and group activities, and included the use of shared spaces, equipment usage, and interactions among gym-goers and staff.

Findings

1. Navigating Crowded Spaces: Maintaining Flow and Order

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the observations was how people managed to navigate the crowded gym environment without significant disruption. Despite the space being filled with people and machines in use, gym-goers appeared to have an unspoken awareness of how to move between equipment and maintain a steady flow without bumping into others. This spatial awareness allowed individuals to focus on their workouts without waiting in long lines or causing traffic jams in high-use areas. For example, *"All the machines are full and it's hard to pass the hallway without bumping into people,"* yet, people managed to avoid collisions and maintained order. This demonstrated a level of adaptability and implicit social rules in crowded public spaces, which enabled the gym to function efficiently even during peak hours.

2. Gender and Group Dynamics in the Gym

The distribution of men and women within the gym revealed some interesting patterns in how individuals and groups used the space. While there was a noticeable gender imbalance in certain areas, such as the weightlifting stations being predominantly used by men, some spaces like the stretching area or specific corners were more evenly split or used predominantly by women. Additionally, group dynamics were significant, with small groups frequently seen working out together. For instance, a group of four men encouraged each other loudly as they worked out, cheering and motivating their peers. *"The one working out making some noise and the rest shouting."* This kind of group support contrasted with the mostly individual workouts observed in other areas, where people kept to themselves, used their phones, or focused on their reflections in the mirror. Gendered spaces within the gym and the presence of workout groups created distinct social zones that affected how people engaged with both the space and each other.

3. Interactions with Gym Crew and Minimal Supervision

Throughout the observations, it became clear that interactions between gym-goers and the gym crew were minimal, except for brief greetings when entering or exiting the gym. The crew played a largely background role, organizing equipment and ensuring cleanliness, but didn't frequently engage with users unless necessary. However, on October 9, the gym crew's presence increased, and their role shifted slightly when they were observed giving a tour to two newcomers. The crew's involvement was more hands-on, providing direct instruction and staying with the members throughout their workout. *"The number of crews is unusual. There are more gym crew present in the gym tonight."* These observations revealed how the crew's engagement was mostly functional rather than supervisory, yet they could offer direct support when needed, especially for newer members unfamiliar with the space.

Next Steps

If given more time for follow-up observations or research, I would like to explore several avenues further. First, it would be valuable to compare the dynamics observed during peak hours with off-peak hours to understand how the flow of movement, equipment usage, and interactions change when the gym is less crowded. A more longitudinal observation could reveal how unspoken social rules around spatial navigation form and whether they shift when fewer people are present.

Second, I would focus on the gendered use of gym spaces and equipment to better understand the role of group dynamics in shaping how people engage with the gym environment. Are these spaces gendered simply by chance, or are there underlying social norms that influence who uses what equipment and where? Additionally, following up with interviews or questionnaires with gym members could shed light on their preferences for workout spaces and how they perceive the gender divide within the gym.

Finally, a deeper exploration of the gym crew's role in managing the gym's environment could reveal more about how structured versus informal guidance affects member engagement. Using an ethnographic method, I would conduct interviews with gym crew members to gain insight into their daily routines, responsibilities, and their perception of their role in the gym, particularly on busy nights. Alternatively, I could employ a participatory observation method by spending time shadowing the gym crew, to better understand their behind-the-scenes work and interactions with gym-goers. This follow-up would clarify whether their current low-interaction role is a deliberate policy or simply a result of gym-goers' preferences for autonomy during workouts.