

The Lived Experiences of Gym Rats in Pursuit of their Ideal Physique

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Date received: May 25, 2025
Date revised: July 22, 2025
Date accepted: August 12, 2025

Originality: 99%
Grammarly Score: 99%
Similarity: 1%

Recommended citation:

Hibanada, P. F., Dee, P., Limosnero, R., Jr., Baje, Z. K., & Ignacio, D. (2025). The lived experiences of gym rats in pursuit of their ideal physique. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 3(9), 220–233.
<https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2025.448>

Abstract. Gym rats are dedicated to enhancing their physique and overall health. As they are motivated by various inspirations, they also face challenges that may hinder their progress. To explore their lived experiences in pursuing an ideal physique, this study aimed to investigate the motivations, challenges, and coping strategies they employ through a qualitative phenomenological approach. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted among 10 participants, using purposive sampling. Furthermore, the data collected were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. Results revealed that gym rats pursue fitness for reasons like self-image, health, social influence, and peer conformity. However, they also face challenges that hinder their fitness journey, such as financial constraints, time management issues, daily responsibilities, and intrapersonal conflicts. The study further revealed the coping strategies gym rats use to overcome these challenges, including time management, adapting to circumstances, building a support network, and reinforcing their drives. From the collected data, the researchers concluded that gym rats are driven to pursue an ideal physique by specific motivating factors. Despite these motivations, they still encounter obstacles that often hinder their progress and may decrease their workout motivation. Nevertheless, gym rats actively combat these challenges through coping strategies that help them stay on track and committed to their fitness goals. The findings of this study may serve as a foundation for gaining insights into developing interventions to address these challenges, ultimately supporting gym rats in their pursuit of an ideal physique.

Keywords: Challenges; Coping strategies; Gym rats; Ideal physique; Motivations.

1.0 Introduction

A gym rat technically means the same as fitness enthusiast and gym-goer. They are individuals who spend excessive time in the gym and are more body-conscious and preoccupied with their appearance (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). However, the term "Gym Rats" often carries a negative reputation associated with its title (Gasser & Kowalski, 2022), particularly the term "rat," which evokes negative connotations (McDaniel, 2022). According to Anne (2017), people often think that gym rats are simply going to the gym for fun, to reap the benefits, to look good, and to cause envy. However, according to Issa (2022), there is another story beyond this stereotype. The researchers aim to explore and better understand the behaviors and experiences of individuals who regularly attend the gym.

A gym rat's desire to pursue an ideal physique comes with various reasons. Young adults, often referred to as Generation Active, prioritize staying fit and view exercise as an enjoyable activity with friends rather than a chore

(Les Mills, n.d.). Feeling excessively skinny and underweight can cause individuals to experience dissatisfaction with their body image (Thompson, 2018). Similarly, studies show that people who are obese and overweight are more likely to feel unhappy with their bodies than those who are at a healthy weight (Weinberger et al., 2016). Most notably, gym rats utilize gym equipment to achieve their health and fitness objectives, including specific goals such as losing a particular amount of weight or gaining muscle definition (James, 2023). These goals often lead individuals to frequent gyms, ultimately identifying as gym rats.

Gym rats persevere because their motivations drive them to continue striving, even in the face of challenging circumstances. In the context of gym-goers, fitness is not just about pushing oneself hard in the gym but a journey (Rivas, 2023). Gym-goers aim to maintain their ability to function well, establish identities associated with fitness, and lose weight (Bombak, 2015). As they achieve their ideal physique, peers or coaches offer them appreciation and encouragement to persevere, ultimately aiding in the development of their identity (Thomson & McAdoo, 2015). However, throughout this journey driven by motivation, gym rats also encounter struggles.

Having an obstacle or two is to be expected when pursuing a specific goal, and this is also true for gym rats in their quest for an ideal physique. One of the most significant challenges a gym-goer faces lies within their mentality, as it holds one's perspective, desired goal, plan, and commitment to pursue their journey (Goss, n.d.). As they persist, they also experience pressure to consistently advance toward weight and fitness goals (Bombak, 2015). In addition, other limitations, such as financial constraints and restricted access to exercise resources, including gym memberships and fees for using local facilities and equipment, hindered regular physical activity for many individuals (Kinney, 2024). Thus, the challenges that gym rats encounter significantly affect their fitness journey, as they disrupt not only their consistency but also their motivation to attend the gym.

Coping strategies enable individuals to bounce back from challenges and continue pursuing their desired objectives, which is considered a resilient approach. In facing hardships, male gym-goers are more capable of coping with stress compared to females (Atamturka & Ece, 2018). In terms of coping with life's challenges, gym-goers employ several mechanisms, including overactivity, relaxation, emotional release, cognitive reappraisal, social support, problem-solving, religiosity, tolerance, and substance use, to address the stress they experience in their environment (Gonzales et al., 2021). In understanding the experiences of the gym rats, identifying coping strategies to overcome challenges while striving for their ideal physique was crucial.

Like gym-goers in other cities and countries, those in the Philippines also frequent gyms for various reasons. The Philippines is facing major health issues with alarming increases in the prevalence of hypertension, obesity, and physical inactivity (FNRIDOST, 2008, as cited in Cagas et al., 2014). A study conducted in the Philippines found that other people have a significant influence on individuals' behavior and adaptation to physical activities. The influenced individuals begin to adopt a healthier lifestyle, which then serves as a guide in understanding the behavior of Filipinos when it comes to developing physical fitness and an improved lifestyle (Kurata et al., 2023). With individuals considered gym rats and the fact that some were influenced by societal expectations, knowing their experiences specific to their locality provided a glimpse into their fitness journey, especially in achieving the ideal physique.

The researchers identified a gap in studies focusing on the experiences of gym rats, as most existing research studies other aspects, such as gym-goers' safety and facility preferences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ong et al., 2021; Perrino & Reno, 2024; Rada & Szabó, 2022) or quantifiable factors that highlight differences among gym-goers. Achieving a desired physique is challenging, but understanding the psychological factors influencing gym routines can promote more effective and sustainable fitness approaches. Ola and Singh (2016) emphasize the importance of addressing body image concerns across all body types and genders to prevent mental health issues. Promoting gym attendance can improve both mental and physical well-being. This study offers insights into the experiences of gym rats, shedding light on their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies as they navigate the journey from being overweight or underweight to achieving a fit physique, thereby challenging stereotypes and negative perceptions.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative-phenomenological research design to understand the experiences of individuals pursuing their ideal physique in the gym. A qualitative approach was employed to collect detailed

information about personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences that cannot be quantified (Tenny et al., 2022). The phenomenological method recognizes recurring themes within the shared experiences of individuals' lives to characterize and explain a particular phenomenon (McKoy, 2023), which, in this case, is the lived experiences of gym rats in their pursuit of an ideal physique. These themes provided answers to the research question and helped achieve the study's goals.

2.2 Research Participants

The study focused on two major gyms in General Santos City: Anytime Fitness SM Gensan and Pacquiao Fitness Gym. Through checklists that asked for their age, weight before going to the gym, current weight, height, how often they go to the gym, for what reasons they are going to the gym, and their contact information, researchers selected 10 participants using purposive sampling technique with an equal number for overweight and underweight gym rats who are regular gym-goers with at least three months of consistent attendance, precisely two sessions, each lasting at least 45 minutes per week, aged 18 to 30 (Gym Gear UK, 2023). Participants' BMIs were measured using the BMI calculator on The Filipino Doctor's website (n.d.) to confirm their weight category. While the sample size of 10 participants is acceptable for phenomenological studies, it might limit the transferability of findings, as the small and specific group may not adequately represent the broader population of gym rats, particularly those from different age groups, regions, or gym environments. Thus, caution must be taken when applying these findings to other studies.

2.3 Research Instrument

The study employed a semi-structured interview method, which enabled researchers to stay focused on the topic while allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of their experiences (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview guide included eight open-ended questions exploring the motivations, challenges, and coping strategies of gym rats in achieving their ideal body. These questions were reviewed by a psychologist, a fitness instructor, and a psychometrician to ensure clarity and relevance to the study. A pilot interview with four gym rats was conducted to refine the questions, ultimately helping the researchers gather clear, detailed insights into the participants' fitness journeys.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers observed an organized research approach that adheres to the necessary steps for conducting this study effectively. A formal letter, signed by the research adviser and the college dean, was sent to selected fitness centers to seek permission for distributing checklists. These checklists collected essential demographic and fitness-related data, such as age, weight, height, frequency of gym attendance, and reasons for attending the gym. The data ensured that participants met the study's inclusion criteria, maintained confidentiality, and fostered rapport between researchers and participants. BMI classification was standardized using an online tool by The Filipino Doctor - Doctor Information, Health Articles, Drug Knowledge (n.d.) to ensure accurate participant profiling. Based on the checklist responses, a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide was developed, focusing on participants' motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. A psychologist, a fitness instructor, and a psychometrician validated the interview guide questions. A pilot interview with four gym rats was conducted after securing approval from the college dean, which helped refine the interview process and identify potential language barriers. As a result, the researchers translated the interview questions into Tagalog and Bisaya for clarity and inclusivity. Following revisions, 10 participants were selected and invited for face-to-face interviews after securing informed consent, ensuring adherence to ethical protocols. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase Thematic Analysis approach. Transcripts were then returned to participants for verification, and signed certificates of transcript approval were collected. All digital files were stored in Google Drive, with access limited to the researchers, and physical files were retained solely by the researchers to ensure data integrity and confidentiality.

2.5 Data Analysis

The study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to explore the experiences of gym rats striving for an ideal physique, following a structured six-step process. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by transcribing and thoroughly reading participants' audio-recorded responses. Next, they identified recurring information and created codes to represent key meanings and patterns in the data. In the third step, these codes were grouped into themes aligned with the study's research questions. The researchers then reviewed these themes to ensure they accurately represented participants' experiences and were supported by sufficient data. After that, each theme was clearly defined and labeled to reflect its specific content and patterns. Finally, the

researchers produced a report that interpreted the findings, focusing on the motivations, challenges, and coping strategies of gym rats classified as overweight or underweight. All collected data, including recordings and files, were securely stored in a Google Drive folder accessible only to the researchers, while physical files were kept in their possession.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

One crucial aspect of research is the consideration of ethical issues, particularly regarding the safety of participants and maintaining a high standard of professionalism among all parties involved. Anonymity was maintained by using code names for all responses and audio recordings, and no identifiable information was collected, according to Burkell (2006). Informed consent was obtained, with participants fully briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time, by the ethical standards outlined by Nnebue (2010). Transparency and voluntariness were emphasized to uphold participant autonomy. To preserve confidentiality, data were securely stored and accessible only to the researchers, ensuring the participants' right to privacy and trust (Kaiser, 2012). Upon completion of the study, the researchers securely stored the data. By doing so, there is protection and no disclosure of any information about the chosen participants.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This research examined the lived experiences of individuals pursuing their ideal physique in the gym, focusing on their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. Additionally, by applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the study identified key themes related to their motivations for pursuing an ideal body, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they employed to cope.

3.1 Motivations of Gym Rats in Pursuit of their Ideal Physique

The pursuit of an ideal physique has become a central focus for many gym enthusiasts, often referred to as "gym rats." This commitment is driven by a diverse range of motivations, reflecting both personal and societal influences. These factors play a significant role in shaping the determination and consistency required to achieve fitness goals. In the following paragraphs, these themes were explored, revealing how they inspire gym rats to strive relentlessly toward their ideal physique.

Building a Positive Self-image

Many gym-goers embark on their fitness journeys to boost self-confidence, aspiring to achieve an attractive physique and improve their body image. Body image dissatisfaction is prevalent among this group. For instance, a study revealed that 67.4% of gym users were dissatisfied with their body image, with 64.8% aspiring to be slimmer (Rossi & Tirapegui, 2018). Thus, achieving an attractive physique and managing weight are key motivators, particularly among women (Soekmawati et al., 2022). For instance, Participant 1 emphasizes the desire to have an attractive physique:

"Most people nowadays also want to become, well, physically attractive." (P1)

Along with the desire to have a good physique is the fostering of one's self-confidence, as stated by Participant 6:

"Because before, it felt embarrassing, like, you know, being chubby and all, you would have that sense of... like, no confidence at all. But by going to the gym, I think it helped me too." (P6)

On the underweight side, Participant 2 mentioned that their insecurity about being too skinny had motivated them to pursue their ideal physique, which was rooted in their desire to add mass to their body:

"Due to my insecurity and being too skinny, that is what pushed me to pursue my ideal physique, so I could also add some mass to my body." (2)

By achieving these goals, individuals become more satisfied with their bodies, which enhances self-esteem and highlights how improved body perception significantly boosts confidence (Taniady & Murti, 2024). Regular exercisers, in particular, report a more positive body image compared to non-exercisers, as working out fosters body satisfaction, increases physical strength, and enhances body awareness (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2005; Bradley, 2023). These aspirations emphasize the role of exercise in promoting not only physical transformation but also

psychological well-being (Stewart et al., 2013). This result also supports the findings of Wright et al. (2006) and Davis and Cowles (1991), which suggest that both men and women engage in working out to improve their self-image. Men often do so to enhance function and gain physical presence, whereas women do so to conform to appearance-based standards. Exercise improves self-perceptions of body fatness and strength, which, in turn, mediates its positive effects on body image. Overall, these findings highlight that working out is not solely about achieving an ideal physique, but also about cultivating greater self-confidence and self-worth.

Improvement of Health and Wellness

Gym-goers also aspire to maintain their overall well-being, encompassing both physical and mental health. According to Aceijas et al. (2016), gym-goers often struggle with poor mental health, imbalanced diets, and inadequate physical activity:

"Like, my lifestyle before was not that good either. Then, I was not careful with my food, with the calories I was taking in."

Additionally, exercise enhances emotional well-being by helping individuals feel more in control and productive in their daily lives, as they can move more efficiently (Doğan, 2015). Regular exercise also improves energy levels, elevates mood, and promotes better sleep, all of which contribute to a healthier lifestyle (Semeco, 2023). Among the interviewed gym rats, Participant 1 particularly expressed that they would like to be healthy so that their body would be lighter:

"One of the instances that pushed me is to be healthier and move better because, you know, when you are healthy, it is much easier to move, and your body feels lighter." (P1)

Other gym rats like Participant 6 also have some realizations about their health:

"I think there is a need to help myself because... seeing others who are around the same weight as me, it looks like they are having health issues and problems. Moreover, I do not want to end up like them. I am not saying it is bad to be like them, but I want to avoid the idea of being sick because of my weight or being overweight." (P6)

To address these challenges, many turn to the gym as a setting that promotes overall health improvement and disease prevention (Von Tokarski et al., 2023). The benefits of regular exercise extend beyond physical appearance, playing a key role in preventing chronic diseases and improving overall health. Physical activity reduces the risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and obesity, making it essential for long-term health maintenance (Kruk, 2007). Additionally, exercise enhances emotional well-being by helping individuals feel more in control and productive in their daily lives, as they can move more efficiently (Doğan, 2015). Regular exercise also improves energy levels, elevates mood, and promotes better sleep, all of which contribute to a healthier lifestyle (Semeco, 2023). By committing to their routines, gym-goers experience both immediate benefits and long-term rewards for their physical and mental health.

To Dress in Style

With current trends, gym-goers view wearing fashionable clothing as not only boosting self-esteem but also serving as a strong motivator, turning each workout into an opportunity to achieve their ideal physique. Attire can shape an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, enhancing self-esteem and self-assurance (Mehta, 2023). However, fashion can also emphasize the wearers' physiques, potentially reinforcing the pursuit of thin-fit ideals, which in turn pushes them to work out (Lipson et al., 2019). According to research, individuals who effectively manage their appearance and feel confident about their body shape tend to report higher satisfaction with ready-to-wear clothing and are more likely to engage in weight management behaviors (Kim & Im, 2010). Gym rats such as Participant 6 are motivated to enhance their body shape in order to wear the desired clothes:

"I also want to consider wearing good clothes. It is one of the reasons why I have been going to the gym. I want to wear better clothes because, if my body is not in good shape, I cannot wear the things I want. Moreover, it inspires me to show up more in public and be confident with how I look." (P6)

Moreover, they would also want to post their outfits on social media:

"Because I also want to post nice pictures, like OOTD (Outfit of the Day), since I like fashion. Before, I used to feel shy about

posting pictures and stuff, especially for the camera, because I did not like how my body looked."

In line with the participants' statements above, dressing well has a significant influence on both men's and women's commitment to fitness and body positivity. According to Frith and Gleeson (2004), men often strive for a lean, muscular build to align with traditional masculine ideals and utilize clothing to accentuate or modify their appearance accordingly. Women, meanwhile, associate well-fitting clothes with increased body confidence, often aiming for a slim hourglass figure to feel more secure in their appearance, which in turn motivates continued fitness efforts (Grogan et al., 2013).

Social Factors

Oftentimes, gym-goers are motivated to pursue an ideal physique due to societal influences, such as the desire to conform to their peers. This social conformity is a key motivator driving gym-goers to adopt fitness routines. As Babcock and Hartman (2010) stated, peer networks amplify this influence, as individuals with incentivized friends are more likely to increase their gym usage. Young adults, in particular, are highly susceptible to social conformity in fitness environments (Fonteno, 2024). According to Participant 8, they are forced to go to the gym because of the expectations of their peers:

"Uh... I value their opinion, so when I promised to go, I did not want to disregard that promise. I did not want them to feel bad about me, and I did not want to let them down. So, I just pushed myself to go to the gym, even though I did not feel like it. I just kept on going." (P8)

Another significant social factor is the influence of social media. Platforms like Instagram have become primary sources of inspiration, showcasing fitness influencers who motivate individuals through their expertise, attractiveness, and knowledge (Durau et al., 2022). These influencers frequently share "fitspiration" content, which enhances self-efficacy and boosts motivation to exercise (Peng et al., 2019). Gym-goers often engage in upward comparisons with fitness models on social media, which can elevate their self-esteem and encourage them to strive for improvement (Kim, 2022). This cycle of exposure to fitness-related content reinforces gym-goers' commitment to their goals, with social media serving as a powerful tool for fostering inspiration and self-improvement:

"Whenever I mindlessly scroll through Pinterest boards, there are mood boards there with guys who have good physiques, and it motivates me to work on my own."

Fitness influencers and their content thus play a significant role in motivating individuals to achieve their ideal physique. Social interactions between individuals with varying activity levels can also significantly shape exercise habits. Moderately active individuals often motivate sedentary populations to adopt and maintain physical activity (Mema et al., 2022). Paired with inspiration is Participant 10's curiosity about what makes these influencers pursue their fitness journey:

"I am always scrolling through social media, like Facebook or YouTube, and I see champions from Mr. Olympia or gym rat vloggers. When I see them, I get inspired by what they do. It makes me wonder, why are they so passionate about something that causes pain to their bodies? What is it about that thing that keeps them going?" (P10)

Family support is also crucial for gym-goers striving to attain their fitness goals. Studies have shown that social support from family members is instrumental in maintaining consistency in training and overcoming challenges (Gabay & Oravitan, 2022). This support often includes emotional reinforcement, fostering accountability, and creating a positive environment that encourages persistence (Amber, 2017). Parental encouragement during childhood also plays a role, increasing participation in sports-related activities and fitness programs (Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Hence, a supportive family can significantly influence one's fitness journey, particularly during moments of doubt or difficulty (Murphy, 2023). To support this, Participant 2 has shared their family's role in their fitness journey:

"It motivates me by looking at my family, especially for them. They have always cheered me on and motivated me to do more because they have seen the progress, especially in my physique. Moreover, as I see it, they love the changes they are seeing in me, which inspires me even more." (P2)

Such family involvement not only inspires gym-goers but also cultivates a long-term commitment to health and

fitness.

3.2 Challenges of Gym Rats in Pursuit of their Ideal Physique

Embarking on a fitness journey is an endeavor that often presents many challenges. Gym rats committed to achieving their ideal physique frequently encountered various obstacles that impeded their progress. From the data collected, six (6) themes emerged as prevalent challenges these gym rats faced. The following paragraphs delve into these identified challenges, providing a comprehensive discussion of how they affected gym rats in their pursuit of fitness goals:

Personal Constraints

Navigating a fitness journey can be particularly challenging for gym rats, especially if they struggle with working out alone and maintaining motivation. Harada et al. (2019) stated that exercising alone can be less effective in enhancing mental health compared to exercising with others, as social engagement during workouts offers emotional benefits that solitary exercise lacks. This struggle is compounded for individuals living independently, who often face difficulties sustaining healthy exercise and dietary habits due to a lack of social support (Choi & Bae, 2022). These factors ultimately lead to a lack of motivation, which is a common barrier identified as one of the most frequent reasons for discontinuing exercise (Ebben & Brudzynski, 2008). The absence of social engagement and support impacts the motivation and consistency of gym-goers, emphasizing the challenges faced by those who exercise alone, which is precisely the case of Participant 5:

"I do not have anyone for me to say, 'Hey, join me with this or that,' and even at home, we do not have anything like, not even simple activities like Zumba or something like that. So, it feels like I am always alone. For example, yesterday, I did not go to the gym, but I still exercised at home. I was by myself, so sometimes it feels boring." (P5)

Participant 6 also shared that there are times they feel unmotivated.

"Sometimes I feel like my energy is low, or I just do not have any energy at all. Other times, I am unmotivated and just show up for the sake of it, without really being into it." (P6)

Balancing Responsibilities

Balancing daily responsibilities can significantly decrease workout motivation, making it a common challenge for gym rats striving to maintain their fitness routines. The competing pressures of daily life make it difficult for people to dedicate the time needed for a regular gym routine, as many feel overwhelmed by the challenge of fitting in a workout amidst their various obligations (Harris, n.d.). Additionally, a study by Morgan et al. (2016) stated that gym-goers perceived the inconvenient timing of sessions as a significant barrier to attendance, especially when these schedules conflicted with their work commitments. Tulloch et al. (2013) reported that many individuals report feeling overwhelmed by managing their workout routines and professional or personal commitments, leading to difficulty sustaining regular exercise, even with the convenience of home workouts. Ultimately, due to a gym-goer's various responsibilities, time constraints are one of the primary reasons gym-goers struggle to maintain consistent workout routines, with research showing that thirty-two percent (32%) of gym users quit after only one to two (1-2) visits, often citing a lack of time as a critical factor in their decision to stop (Radhakrishnan et al., 2020). Participant 1 has expressed that they are challenged in balancing daily errands and working out:

"One of the challenges is time management. Because we are not always free, or there are times when we do not have the time to go to the gym, because there are days when we are swamped, with a lot of errands, or other activities to attend to." (P1)

Another participant also shared that they are busy with work:

"My challenge in achieving my ideal physique is being busy! I am busy focusing on helping others with their bodies. By the time I am done, I am too tired to focus on myself. I cannot work out, so I tend to neglect my own needs because, of course, I prioritize my clients over myself."

Balancing the fitness goals of a gym rat with competing priorities often leads to inconsistent workout routines, as limited time and shifting commitments make it challenging to maintain a regular exercise schedule.

Limited Resources

Accessing gym memberships and the resources necessary to maintain an ideal physique also poses a significant obstacle for many fitness enthusiasts. This is due to the overall cost of gym memberships, which can be prohibitive for many individuals, highlighting the challenge of sustaining a long-term commitment to fitness. Bandara (2021) noted that adolescents, in particular, frequently lack the financial resources necessary to secure a gym membership, often relying on parental support to gain access to fitness facilities. This dependence can hinder their ability to engage consistently in exercise routines. Aside from this, Gabriels et al. (2020) noted that the nutritional supplements used by gym-goers are usually expensive, further complicating their challenges due to cost and risk considerations. To maintain a good physique, supplements and specific foods, which can be pretty expensive, prove to be a challenge for gym rats:

"One of the issues is the proper... lack of money. It is also a factor because when you are trying to get a good body, food and supplements are important. I lacked money. I was a student back then, so I did not have much, and that was one of the challenges I had to face."

Participant 4 also added that these supplements are indeed expensive:

"Ah, it is supplements, because it is quite expensive." (P4)

Limited resources pose a significant challenge for gym-goers, as the high costs of gym memberships and nutritional supplements often deter long-term commitment, particularly for young gym rats relying on external support, hindering their ability to maintain consistency and achieve a balanced fitness regimen.

Traveling to Gym Facility

Traveling to a gym poses a significant challenge for gym rats, as the time and effort required for travel often compete with other responsibilities, disrupting consistency and potentially leading to irregular workout habits. In line with this, over half of the participants in one study agreed that the distance to gyms and fitness centers hindered their ability to exercise, making it a common barrier (Bandara, 2021). In addition to this, balancing jobs and other responsibilities added to the challenge, making transportation a critical factor in determining whether individuals can exercise regularly (Patay et al., 2015). Consequently, the environment in which individuals live, including traffic, access to public transportation, and distance to fitness facilities, plays a crucial role in shaping their physical activity levels:

*"It affects me because traveling takes up time. For example, going to c*****g or u**w, there is traffic there... and also in a*****e near h*****s, there is traffic too. So, I end up spending about thirty to forty-five minutes just for travel. My work or school finishes at five-thirty in the afternoon, and adding forty-five minutes, it is already six. Sometimes, if I take too long, I miss my coach, so I cannot work out anymore."*

Having to commute to the gym facility is a challenge according to participant 7, in a way that it can be used as an excuse to skip working out:

"Commuting is one of the challenges. However, I have come to accept that it is just part of the process. Sometimes I use it as an excuse, telling myself I am too tired to work out because of the commute, but in reality, it is not the issue." (P7)

These transportation issues can directly impact gym rats' commitment to their fitness routines, making it harder for them to stay consistent.

Utilizing Gym Equipment

Utilizing gym facilities can present significant challenges, particularly in terms of equipment availability and access to structured fitness environments. Sharma and Chaudhary (2020) highlight that limited access to exercise equipment, often characterized by a low ratio of equipment to users, poses a significant barrier to effective workouts. This scarcity can lead to frustration and inefficiency for gym-goers, particularly during peak hours when demand for equipment is at its highest. According to Participant 4, some gym facilities do not have the appropriate equipment for one's fitness goal:

"One issue with the gym is that the equipment is often lacking and not well-maintained. If you are trying to target a specific

muscle group, you may not be able to achieve your goals because they do not have the necessary equipment available.” (P4)

Meanwhile, Participant 6 shared that some equipment could not be used either due to the number of gym-goers or because of a lack of equipment:

“In the gym, it can feel like a battle due to the large number of attendees. One of the challenges is finding time to work on yourself because there is often competition for equipment. Typically, the equipment is either lacking or constantly in use.” (P6)

These challenges underscore the importance of addressing resource limitations to support consistent and effective exercise habits.

Gym Hygiene Concerns

Gym facilities are one of the prominent places known to have hygiene concerns and are thus perceived as a health risk for gym rats, hindering their desire to maintain a fitness journey. Research has identified notable deficiencies in hygiene and safety practices, particularly within franchised gyms, underscoring the urgent need for improved regulatory measures (Aulicino et al., 2020). Truthfully, according to Mukherjee et al. (2014), microbiological investigations have revealed the presence of diverse bacterial communities on gym surfaces, including potentially pathogenic genera such as *Staphylococcus* and *Salmonella*, which emphasize the critical importance of enhanced personal hygiene and sanitation practices. Recent studies have highlighted that gym facility maintenance and design flaws can severely compromise user health and safety (Gola et al., 2019). Similarly, Participant 1 shared that some gym facilities do not practice hygiene:

“Maybe when the gym is not very clean or not well-maintained. Because there are some “iron gyms” that are, you know, not that careful with hygiene.” (P1)

Participant 2 also stated that some people may carry illnesses into the gym, eventually causing other gym-goers to get infected:

“Different people have different body types, so... some people carry diseases or sickness, and then it gets passed around, which is very challenging both in the environment and in the gym.” (P2)

For some, like Participant 9, poor hygiene is highly distracting and disrupts their focus during workouts:

“I do not like going to the gym when the topic or discussion about hygiene comes up, because I do not like it when other gym-goers are smelly. Even though that is unavoidable, you should still take the time to check your body, even if you are sweating. Check your hygiene, because it distracts me when there are very unhygienic things, like sweat or body odor, or anything else related to rigorous activities that can distract me.” (P9)

The differing hygiene practices observed between male and female gym rats may contribute to growing concerns about gym cleanliness among both groups (Cooper et al., 2021). It was noted that while female gym rats tend to be more consistent with hand hygiene and wiping equipment before use, male gym rats are generally more diligent in cleaning equipment after use, particularly in light of heightened sensitivity to infection risks in the post-COVID context. These inconsistencies in hygiene routines may spark concern and increased awareness among gym-goers, as reflected in the statements of Participants 1 and 9 (male gym rats) and Participant 2 (a female gym rat). The interplay between inadequate hygiene standards and the pursuit of fitness goals can deter gym-goers from fully committing to their fitness journeys, as concerns about health risks may overshadow their motivation to exercise.

3.3 Coping Strategies of Gym Rats in Pursuit of their Ideal Physique

To combat the various challenges that arose while pursuing an ideal physique, gym rats employed specific coping strategies tailored to address the obstacles that may have hindered their progress. These strategies are essential for maintaining motivation, enhancing resilience, and ensuring consistency in their fitness journeys. From the gathered data, five (5) coping strategies were identified:

Self-management

Managing oneself in fitness revolves around cultivating self-discipline and setting realistic expectations, both of which are essential for long-term adherence to workout routines. Sassatelli (2020) emphasized that fitness gyms encourage individuals to develop self-discipline and body control through consistent physical effort, promoting a mindset where achieving one's ideal physique requires dedication and perseverance. This self-discipline is often fostered through self-regulation, where individuals set personal standards, monitor their progress, and reward themselves upon meeting specific goals, as described by Bandura (1976). Truthfully, gym rats such as Participant 5 disciplined themselves to stick to their workout schedules each week:

"I have slowly built my discipline, including workouts in my routine about three to four times a week. That is my goal for at least three sessions, and at most, I am okay with whatever, as long as it is three gym sessions a week." (P5)

Additionally, Jones et al. (2005) highlighted the importance of setting realistic expectations to enhance adherence to exercise programs and mitigate the adverse effects of unmet goals. The researchers further noted that unrealistic or overly optimistic expectations can lead to disappointment, decrease motivation, and increase the likelihood of abandoning fitness efforts. Participant 10 particularly applies practicality and being realistic in setting their expected outcomes:

"The factors I consider are... it should be realistic, right? In terms of practicality, for example, money. You have to be realistic, knowing that there could be emergencies where I might need to spend money, so you should consider that – being realistic is important. Additionally, as time passes, you must be realistic and consider the various tasks that could consume your time throughout the day. Being realistic also makes it easier to achieve your goals because you are closer to reality, meaning the results you get will be closer to your expectations." (P10)

Together, self-discipline and the establishment of achievable objectives form the foundation of effective self-management, enabling individuals to sustain their commitment and progress in their fitness journeys.

Social Network

Gym rats often surround themselves with people who push them to persevere through difficulties, benefiting from the motivation and encouragement of their social circles. This is due to the significant role social networks play in influencing exercise self-efficacy, where individuals in fitness communities experience greater motivation and commitment through shared support (Patterson et al., 2021). Working out with a companion is beneficial for promoting both emotional and instrumental social support. In turn, emotional support promotes exercise by enabling better self-regulation, particularly in terms of self-efficacy (Rackow et al., 2015). Furthermore, group exercise programs, in particular, foster a sense of mutual support and accountability, helping participants stay consistent with their routines (Patterson et al., 2023). For Participant 5, having someone to work out with lessens the feeling of being alone in one's fitness journey:

"When I did not have anyone to work out with, I did not have anyone in my family who is into fitness. So, I was pushing my friends, and now I have a friend who is also my gym buddy." (P5)

Participant 4 also stated that having someone to work out with creates a supportive environment:

"Like, you feel more supported when they are with you, and that is why you are trying to push your limits, even when you think you cannot do it because they are right there with you." (P4)

This collaborative environment fosters personal resilience and cultivates a sense of belonging, which is essential for sustaining long-term fitness efforts.

Exploring Food Substitutes

Exploring food substitutions serves as an effective coping strategy for fitness enthusiasts, particularly when seeking healthier or more affordable dietary options. Achananuparp and Weber (2016) suggest that identifying food substitutes based on consumption patterns can aid in recommending alternatives that align with both nutritional needs and preferences. For instance, while supplements are popular for their convenience and psychological benefits, whole foods like fruits, cereals, and chocolate milk offer comparable performance benefits more healthily and cost-effectively (De Almeida Jackix, 2019). Additionally, Starck et al. (2021) emphasize that

nutrient-dense whole foods not only enhance diet quality but also provide an affordable solution for those managing dietary expenses. To address the lack of financial resources, Participant 5 looks for cheaper alternatives that still satisfy their nutritional needs:

"But there are alternatives, so I look for cheaper versions of healthier food." (P5)

Similarly, when supplements or the ingredients for the diet are unavailable, Participant 4 resorts to alternative methods to get the needed nutrients or carbs:

"There are alternative methods to hit the nutrients or the carbs that you can get from... you can also eat eggs, boiled eggs, or like to eat a lot." (P4)

By incorporating these alternatives, fitness enthusiasts can sustain their nutritional needs without compromising their financial resources or health goals.

Employing Alternative Workouts

Gym rats often resort to alternative workouts, such as home exercises and modified routines, to maintain consistency amidst the uncertainties of daily life. By flexibly constructing their schedules, they allow for intentional adjustments that enable them to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. This proactive approach, as Witt (2022) highlights, acknowledges that trade-offs are an inevitable part of life and can serve as a foundation for building resilience. Additionally, home workouts provide a practical alternative to gym sessions, offering nearly comparable benefits. Habib et al. (2021) found that while gym workouts showed slightly better results in reducing body fat and controlling blood pressure, both home and gym exercises yielded similar effects in shaping an individual's physique. This adaptability in workout routines ensures that fitness goals remain achievable, regardless of external challenges. Thus, in times when gym equipment is unavailable, Participant 6 would opt to modify their workout routine:

"When it comes to the availability of equipment, if it is not available, sometimes I just wait. However, if it is not available, especially if it is not a common thing or not widely used, even if I planned to do leg day, I change to chest day instead. There is no other option, and those are usually the available ones." (P6)

Furthermore, they would also choose to work out at home instead of going to the gym for greater convenience:

"Another thing is working out at home because when you are at home, it is easier to pick up the equipment since it is just right there next to you. You do not have to travel, so that is already a check for time management. Plus, you do not need to spend time traveling, and you do not have to spend money to go to the gym because everything is right at home."

Time Management

Effective time management serves as a coping strategy, enabling gym rats to pursue their ideal physique while balancing fitness with other responsibilities. Research suggests that individuals with solid time management practices tend to engage in higher physical activity levels, as these skills help them plan and allocate time for exercise more efficiently (Dincay, 2010). Similarly, a study by Hall and Fong (2015) also stated that gym-goers who set specific, time-bound goals are more likely to maintain consistent workout routines, reinforcing the importance of structured time planning. Thus, effective time management enhances the ability to reach fitness goals and improves overall quality of life by reducing stress and promoting balance (Covey, 1994, as cited in Dincay, 2010). Effective time management not only supports gym rats in achieving their fitness goals but also fosters a healthier and more balanced lifestyle by reducing stress and enabling them to meet their responsibilities alongside their fitness pursuits. Some gym rats who are still students, like Participant 10, manage their time by fitting in their workout before or immediately after their classes:

"First is managing my time. Sometimes I do not wait until it is time to go home before going to the gym. If I have time in the morning, like if my class is at seven thirty or eight, I go to the gym before class." (P10)

According to Participant 8, time management for gym rats also includes choosing the best time to work out when there are fewer people:

"I go to the gym around one to three because there are not many people, since it is lunchtime and people are busy. So, yeah, I go between one and three, late." (P8)

Lastly, for gym rats who are working, like Participant 3, allocate time for themselves and achieve their fitness goals while still handling their job:

*"I just manage my time for working out. *inaudible* so that I can still achieve my body while still working. Time management is really how I cope. Hmm. To insert myself, I schedule a specific or desired time for my clients so I can allocate time for myself." (P3)*

The findings of this study are a testament to the authenticity and richness of the lived experiences of gym rats in their pursuit of an ideal physique. By exploring their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies, the research provides a comprehensive report that resonates deeply with the realities faced by gym enthusiasts. Through rigorous thematic analysis, the results illuminated the intricate balance of personal and societal influences driving their fitness journeys, the obstacles that test their commitment, and the resilience embodied in their coping mechanisms. This alignment between the study's findings and the lived experiences of gym rats underscores the credibility of the results, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of fitness culture and its impact on individuals striving to achieve their goals.

4.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed an in-depth understanding of the experiences of gym rats in their pursuit of an ideal physique. Motivationally, gym rats are primarily driven by intrinsic factors, such as the desire to improve physical appearance, enhance self-esteem, and achieve better overall health and wellness. These motivations suggest that intrinsic goals, focused on personal growth and self-improvement, offer greater satisfaction and fulfillment. However, the study also uncovered the role of extrinsic motivations, notably the desire to dress in style and seek social validation, where gym rats are driven by external pressures and the need for ego boosts by showcasing their aesthetics or the avoidance of feelings of shame due to their body insecurities. In addition to personal motivations, societal influences play a significant role in shaping the behaviors of gym rats, where social rewards and punishments influence behavior. Positive reinforcement from society, such as receiving praise or admiration, alongside the fear of negative judgment, has a significant influence on gym rats' pursuit of an ideal physique, as external rewards and punishments guide their behavior. Ultimately, gym rats are driven by a desire to meet societal beauty standards or fit in with social groups, and avoid being viewed negatively regarding their physique.

Gym rats also face a variety of physical, emotional, social, and psychological challenges, creating a complex environment where they struggle to achieve their fitness goals, highlighting the multifaceted nature of pursuing an ideal physique. Based on how they perceived these challenges, gym rats employ a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Problem-focused coping helps gym rats address the controllable aspects of their fitness journey. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, involves managing emotional responses and providing the resilience needed to stay motivated despite setbacks. By adopting these coping mechanisms, gym rats demonstrate their ability to be adaptive in overcoming obstacles and continuing their pursuit of fitness goals.

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to various fields within psychology. In sports psychology, the study provides valuable insights into how psychological factors can either motivate or challenge athletes. Additionally, the study's focus on coping strategies, such as managing stress, time, and motivation, aligns with the broader objectives of sports psychology, which aim to help individuals achieve their physical goals, improve performance, and navigate the mental and emotional challenges of regular physical activity. In the realm of social psychology, the study provides insight into how societal expectations of beauty and fitness shape the motivations of gym enthusiasts, highlighting themes of conformity, social norms, and the pursuit of social approval. Gym rats' engagement in fitness behaviors is often driven by societal pressures such as beauty standards, trends, and feedback from peers or family. Understanding these social forces sheds light on how individuals align their actions with group expectations in the pursuit of fitness. In the domain of behavioral psychology, the study integrates theories of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, such as Ryan and Deci's Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Organismic Integration Theory, to explain how different types of motivation influence behavior. The study highlights how both intrinsic goals and extrinsic rewards influence the actions of gym rats,

underscoring the importance of motivation in shaping fitness-related behavior.

Overall, the study highlights the intricate interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, societal influences, and the numerous challenges faced by gym rats. It underscores the importance of both intrinsic fulfillment and external influences in shaping their behaviors, while also illustrating how coping strategies enable them to navigate the complexities of their fitness journeys. The findings provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of gym rats, offering a broader understanding of the motivations and challenges that shape their path toward achieving an ideal physique.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors distributed the work equally to develop this research. Paula, Pinky, RR, and Zy contributed to the editing of the entire study, searching for related literature to support the arguments and findings, and assisting in the conduct of interviews with the participants. Sir Darwin, as the research adviser, imparted his knowledge on conceptualization and provided feedback to improve the study's write-up.

6.0 Funding

The research does not receive any funding for its entire conduct from any organization.

7.0 Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interest in the conduct of the study.

8.0 Acknowledgment

Acknowledge only those who contributed to the study, such as funders, statisticians, experts, and advisers.

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