

Voices from the Gym: Students' Experiences in Using University Fitness Centers

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Abstract: The lived experiences of college students using university fitness centers were investigated in this qualitative phenomenological study. Purposive sampling was used to choose fifteen college students who had previously used the university fitness center. Semi-structured individual interviews were used to gather data, and Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis was used for analysis. The results showed that going to the gym had a number of positive effects on students' physical, mental, and social well-being, including increased strength, stamina, physical activity, stress reduction, confidence, and social interaction. As they used the gym more frequently, students also reported feeling more at ease and self-assured. However, issues like a lack of equipment, crowding, waiting times, inadequate ventilation, cleanliness issues, equipment unfamiliarity, and trouble juggling gym activities with academic obligations were noted. The availability of equipment, facility comfort, cleanliness, ventilation, and advancements in individual health and fitness all had a major impact on students' satisfaction. Participants suggested increasing the number of weights and equipment, maintaining cleanliness, enhancing ventilation and facility conditions, and offering beginner-friendly instruction. Overall, the study emphasizes how crucial easily accessible, cozy, hygienic, and well-equipped university fitness facilities are to promoting students' social, mental, and physical wellbeing.

Keywords: university fitness center, students' experiences, physical activity, fitness, well-being, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Physical activity is an essential component of students' overall health and well-being. Regular participation in physical activity improves physical fitness, supports mental health, reduces stress, and lowers the risk of chronic diseases. It also promotes healthy lifestyle habits that can be maintained throughout adulthood. Because of these benefits, higher education institutions encourage students to participate in regular exercise and wellness programs that support their physical and psychological well-being.

University fitness centers play an important role in promoting physical activity by providing students with accessible spaces to exercise and engage in various fitness-related activities. These facilities offer exercise equipment, structured workout environments, and opportunities for social interaction that contribute to students' overall wellness. Aside from improving physical health, university fitness centers help reduce stress, improve mental well-being, and encourage lifelong healthy habits. The quality of recreational facilities, including the facility's ambience, operations, equipment, and staff competency, also influences students' participation in physical activities and their continued use of campus fitness services (Abdullah & Mohamad, 2016; Santos, 2024).

Despite the availability of university fitness centers, students differ in how they utilize these facilities. While some students regularly use the fitness center to maintain their health and fitness, others experience barriers such as limited time, lack of confidence, unfamiliarity with exercise equipment, or concerns about the gym environment. Students' perceptions of the cleanliness, accessibility, equipment availability, safety, and overall atmosphere of university fitness centers may influence their satisfaction and willingness to continue using these facilities. Understanding students' experiences is important because their feedback can provide valuable insights for improving campus fitness services and creating more supportive environments for physical activity. Previous studies have examined different factors influencing students' use of university fitness centers. Glasgow et al. (2022) found that exercise motivation and commitment were stronger predictors of students' use of university fitness facilities than environmental factors alone, highlighting the importance of psychological influences on exercise participation. Watson et al. (2006) reported that students who regularly used campus recreation centers demonstrated higher levels of exercise motivation, self-confidence, and positive psychosocial outcomes than non-users. Similarly, Snyder et al. (2017) identified health improvement, stress reduction, physical appearance, and social interaction as the primary reasons college students participate in exercise. Rapport et al. (2018) further revealed that students' experiences in university gyms are influenced by communication, accessibility, social interaction, and the overall atmosphere of the fitness center. Moreover, Strande and Fry (2022) found that students who perceived a supportive and welcoming recreation center environment experienced greater enjoyment, motivation, and well-being, whereas Pfingsten (2026) reported that gym anxiety, lack of confidence, limited knowledge of equipment, and feelings of intimidation contributed to the underutilization of campus fitness facilities. Although these studies provide valuable information about motivation, facility quality, satisfaction, and recreation participation, they primarily rely on quantitative approaches and focus on the factors associated with fitness center use. There remains limited qualitative research exploring the firsthand experiences and perspectives of students who regularly use university fitness centers, particularly within Philippine higher education institutions. This research gap highlights the need to explore students' lived experiences to better understand the challenges they encounter, the benefits they perceive, and their recommendations for improving university fitness centers.

Guided by this research gap, the present qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of students in utilizing university fitness centers. Specifically, it seeks to understand how students describe their experiences, identify the factors that influence their satisfaction with available fitness facilities, and examine how their experiences and feedback can contribute to improving campus fitness services. By giving students the opportunity to share their lived experiences, this study is expected to provide valuable insights that can assist university administrators, professors, and campus recreation personnel in developing more accessible, responsive, and student-centered fitness facilities and wellness programs.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of students in utilizing university fitness centers. Phenomenology seeks to examine how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to capture students' personal experiences, perceptions, motivations, challenges, and satisfaction in using university fitness centers.

Participants

The study involved fifteen (15) college students from a higher education institution who had prior experience using the university fitness center. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that each individual could provide meaningful information relevant to the study.

To be included in the study, participants had to be currently enrolled at the university, have used the campus fitness center within the current academic year, and voluntarily agree to participate in the interview.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. An interview guide containing open-ended questions was developed to explore participants' experiences regarding their reasons for using the university fitness center, perceived benefits, challenges encountered, satisfaction with the facilities and services, and suggestions for improving campus fitness centers.

With the participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data collection. Follow-up probing questions were used whenever necessary to obtain deeper insights and clarify participants' responses.

Data Analysis

The study employed Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to identify meaningful patterns and recurring concepts. Codes were grouped into categories and eventually organized into overarching themes that represented the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. A consent form was provided to and signed by each participant before the interview. Participant anonymity was protected through the use of codes such as P1, P2, and so on. All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researchers. The study respected the privacy, dignity, and welfare of all participants.

3. Results and Discussion

Students' Experiences in using Fitness Center

Theme 1: Physical and Mental Benefits of Gym Participation

The participants described the gym as helpful in improving their physical health and mental well-being. They reported becoming stronger, more active, healthier, and less stressed.

"The gym helped me become stronger and more active." P12

"I became more physically active, improved my stamina, and felt more relaxed and motivated." P9

"It helps me forget my worries." P4

The findings suggest that gym participation provides benefits beyond physical fitness. It also helps students manage stress and improve their daily well-being. This supports Abdullah and Mohamad (2016) and Glasgow et al. (2022), who emphasized the physical and psychological benefits of physical activity.

Theme 2: Developing Comfort and Confidence Through Experience

Some participants experienced shyness or awkwardness when they first started using the gym. However, continued participation helped them become more comfortable and confident.

"At first, I was shy to go to the gym because it was my first time, but as time passed, I started enjoying it and became comfortable." P8

"I felt shy." P12

"I was shy and embarrassed at first, but eventually I became stronger and more confident." P11

These responses show that unfamiliarity can make beginners feel uncomfortable, but regular participation and seeing personal progress can help build confidence. A supportive gym environment may also encourage students to continue participating.

Theme 3: Social Interaction and Support

Social interaction was another important part of the participants' gym experience. Some were influenced by friends to start going to the gym, while others developed friendships and received support from gym members.

"I started because my friends influenced me, and I continued until I enjoyed it." P6

"I made unexpected friends, and members helped each other." P11

"Yes, because I made new friends and I can see progress in my body." P12

The findings suggest that friendships and support from others can make the gym experience more positive. The gym can therefore serve as both a place for exercise and social interaction. This is related to the literature discussed by Watson et al. (2006), which highlights the social aspects of exercise environments.

Theme 4: Challenges in Equipment, Crowding, and Time

Despite their positive experiences, participants also reported challenges such as limited equipment, crowding, waiting time, and difficulty balancing gym activities with school responsibilities.

"The main problem is the lack of equipment. Some equipment is available, but it is not enough." P1

"Sometimes it is crowded, so I have to wait for the equipment." P5

"The lack of equipment makes it difficult to do some exercises." P7

"Finding enough time because of schoolwork and responsibilities can be difficult." P9

These responses show that facility limitations and academic responsibilities can affect students' gym participation. This supports Glasgow et al. (2022), which identified accessibility and facility-related factors as important in students' experiences with fitness facilities.

Factors Influencing Students' Satisfaction

Theme 1: Equipment Availability Influences Satisfaction

Equipment availability was one of the main factors affecting satisfaction. Students were more satisfied when they had access to the equipment needed for their workouts.

"I am not satisfied because the equipment is very limited." P1

"I am satisfied because the gym has complete basic equipment." P9

"Yes, because the equipment in the gym is complete." P8

These responses indicate that having enough equipment allows students to perform different exercises and achieve their fitness goals. Limited equipment, on the other hand, may cause waiting and restrict students' workouts.

Theme 2: Cleanliness, Ventilation, and Facility Comfort

Participants also mentioned cleanliness, temperature, ventilation, and space as factors affecting their satisfaction.

"The gym can sometimes be dusty, and when there are too many people, it feels suffocating." P2

"I think they should add more fans." P5

"I would suggest adding more fans because the gym is enclosed and hot." P8

These findings suggest that a clean, spacious, and well-ventilated gym can make students more comfortable. Poor airflow, heat, and cleanliness concerns may negatively affect their experience.

Theme 3: Personal Progress and Health Benefits

Students also associated their satisfaction with the improvements they experienced from using the gym.

"I became more energetic compared to before, and I do not get tired easily now." P8

"I became physically stronger and more confident." P11

"The gym helped me become stronger and more active." P12

The findings show that visible progress and health benefits encourage students to continue using the gym. When students notice improvements in their strength, stamina, energy, and confidence, they tend to have a more positive experience.

Students' Suggestions for Improving Fitness Services

Theme 1: Adding More Equipment and Weights

The most common recommendation was to add more equipment and weights.

"They should add more equipment." P1

"More weights and equipment should be added to reduce waiting time." P10

"I would like the gym to add more equipment." P12

These responses show that additional equipment could provide more exercise options and reduce waiting time, especially during busy hours.

Theme 2: Improving Ventilation and Facility Conditions

Participants also recommended improving ventilation, airflow, lighting, and space.

"Add more fans." P5

"The lighting and airflow need improvement." P7

"Improve the ventilation or provide air conditioning." P10

The findings suggest that improving the physical condition of the gym can make the environment more comfortable and suitable for exercise.

Theme 3: Improving Cleanliness and Maintenance

Cleanliness was also identified as an area that needs attention.

"The main improvement is sanitation or cleanliness of the equipment." P2

"Improve cleanliness and provide more space for comfortable exercise." P9

These responses show that regular cleaning and maintenance are important in providing a comfortable and satisfactory gym experience.

4. Conclusion

The results show that students' experiences using fitness centers are generally positive because these facilities enhance their physical strength, endurance, degree of activity, and general health. Additionally, the gym offers social and mental advantages like lowering stress, boosting self-esteem, forming new friendships, and getting support from other gym patrons. Students' experiences also demonstrate how getting to know the gym and its equipment make them feel more at ease and confident when working out. Students are further motivated to keep up their fitness activities by their personal development and health improvements.

However, students also experience challenges that may affect their gym participation and satisfaction. These include limited equipment, crowded areas, waiting for equipment, poor ventilation, cleanliness concerns, unfamiliarity with some equipment, and difficulty managing gym time with school responsibilities. Despite these challenges, most students remain satisfied because they can see positive changes in their bodies, health, strength, and daily lives. The findings highlight the importance of providing accessible, comfortable, clean, and well-equipped fitness facilities that can support students in maintaining regular physical activity.

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings, fitness gym administrators should consider adding more equipment and weights to reduce waiting time and allow students to perform a wider range of exercises. Improving ventilation by adding more fans, improving airflow, and maintaining a comfortable gym environment can also help students have a better workout experience. Regular cleaning and proper maintenance of the gym and its equipment should also be prioritized to ensure a safe and comfortable space for students.

Furthermore, beginner-friendly instructions or guides can be provided to help students who are unfamiliar with gym equipment feel more confident when exercising. Gym staff and instructors should continue creating a friendly and supportive environment where students can ask for help and encourage one another. Schools

and fitness facilities may also consider students' schedules when planning gym services to make them more accessible. Future researchers are encouraged to explore students' experiences with fitness centers using a larger and more diverse group of participants to gain a broader understanding of the factors that influence gym participation and satisfaction.

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How to cite/reference this article: **Frances Joyce A. Adolfo, Jerwin P. Carani, James Gabriel B. Ferrer, Joselito Jr. B. Graganza, Rojan Benedict E. Natividad, Jade Nicole M. Pangan, Voices from the Gym: Students' Experiences in Using University Fitness Centers, Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech. 2026; 8(5): 129-134.**

