

## Article

# Exploring Women's Embodied Experiences of 'The Gaze' in a Mix-Gendered UK Gym

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**Abstract:** Feminist and gaze researchers have conducted ongoing discussions surrounding issues relating to the gaze and its impact on female experience. Women have the 'to-be-looked-atness' characteristic, with the gaze being directed at the female body, commonly by a male. To date, the focus of feminist research surrounding men looking at women and the analysis how women make sense of looks between women remains limited and scattered. Drawing upon ethnographic data obtained from a PhD research project, this paper delves into the embodied experiences of female exercisers within a UK 'working-class' gym. By exploring the women's own accounts of their living, breathing and sensing bodies as they exercise, I attempt to understand how they make sense of this physical culture, their embodied selves as well as broader constructions of the gendered body. Utilising a feminist phenomenological approach, I explore the social-structural position of women in a patriarchal system of gender relations, whilst simultaneously acknowledging and analysing the structural, cultural and historical forces and location, upon individual lived body experiences and gendered embodiment. Discussion is provided on how women make sense and interpret specific 'gazes' encountered within the gym culture from both men and women.

**Keywords:** women; gyms; embodiment; feminism; gender; phenomenology; gazes

## 1. Introduction

To date, the focus of feminist research surrounding men looking at women, with the analysis of how women interpret looks between women, remains partial and scattered. Evidence suggests that looking contributes to a critical role in the formation of female subjectivity, as being looked at constructs a 'heightened sense of self-awareness' that is contextualised within gender relations in which the looking exists [1]. Feminist and gaze researchers have conducted ongoing discussions relating to the issues surrounding gazes and its impact on female experience [2]. According to the Gaze Theory—as described by Mulvey—women have the 'to-be-looked-atness' characteristic. The gaze is directed at the female body, commonly by a male and it actively projects the man's fantasy upon the women's body. Within this relationship, women are both an object to be gazed at and a showpiece to be displayed [3]. The 'gaze' can be defined as 'the act of observation on the one hand and internalisation on the other' [4] (p. 232). The 'male gaze' is frequently used among feminists who argue that the role of a female is purely for the sexual objectification of a male spectator [5]. For Mulvey [3], gazes can be determined as rational, voyeuristic, sadistic, controlling and controlled. The application of Mulvey's work to the current context of gyms becomes possible due to the influence of gazes in our everyday lives. Within gyms, the gaze has been studied in a variety of ways, for example—how female bodybuilders become erotically constructed by the gaze [6], the embodiment of 'gym bodies' that are put on display in gay spaces in attempt to attract the male gaze [7,8]; and the application of beauty and bodywork encouraged through hyper feminine forms of consumption [9]. Despite this, it can be argued that there is a relative lack of 'fleshy' perspectives on the body, particularly in relation to how everyday women who immerse themselves in fitness cultures embody the gaze.

Berger [10] (p. 47), suggests that ‘men act while women appear’ and women internalise a surveyor concept which brings them to a point of surveying themselves on their own. Women for a long time have had to deal with the long predicament of thinking about themselves as objects to be viewed, judged and interpreted, like works of art; Berger suggests women are born within a narrow space containing the male gaze that allows them to appear as only partial [10]. It has been suggested that women are taught that their bodies are always visible and available for judgement by an unknown male watcher and this surveillance is a reflection of sexist social power structures which aim to control and subordinate women [11–13]. An adaptation of the gaze theory suggests that there are distinctions between overarching and structuring powers of the gaze, due to such distinguishes, the gaze can be considered as not only an individualised possession, but something deeply rooted within symbolic and patriarchal structures [14].

The research detailed within this paper endeavours to examine further the women’s experiences of the gaze in order to reveal in more depth, the varying ways that they engage with their bodies and develop (or learn) ways to enjoy participation and interact within the gym culture; these are often presented in forms that are interpreted insufficiently through simplistic narration which suggests ‘weight loss’ or body image as sole motivations [15]. Within the context of gyms or fitness centres, individuals can regenerate and improve their body without complying with the requirements of competition or imposed goals and even manage to have fun [16]. Due this this, the gym can be viewed as a site that promotes the construction of the body and an important space to explore issues surrounding embodiment and the gendered self.

Physical cultural studies represent health and fitness movements that materialised from Europe and the United states in the late-19 century and early 20 centuries. Physical culture is experienced and palpable in different forms, ranging from sport, exercise, dance, health and movement related practices [17,18]. In relation to gym cultures, the emergence of commercial health clubs in the 1970s and the representation of fitness in the 1980s and 1990s through the aerobics revolution brought millions of women into the gym [19]; this changed the space and social relations of contemporary gyms and somewhat reflected the change in attitudes towards the body [20]. Bolitho and Conway [21] suggest that following the growth of classes and the birth of aerobics instructor, the modern gym also evolved from boxing gyms in the 1930s to spit and sawdust or bodybuilding gyms in the mid-1960s [22]. Modern fitness facilities started to spring up in the 1950s and 1990s, then to the range of larger chains that proliferate today. This recent development of physical cultural studies therefore presents the gym as “dedicated to the contextually based understanding of the corporeal practices, discourses and subjectivities through which active bodies become organized, represented and experienced in relation to the operations of social power” [23] (p. 54). In relation to the body, various forms of research have examined closely the body within sport and exercise, such as—specific body types required in sport, exercise and physical activities [24,25], the maturing sporting body [26,27], the impaired sporting body [28] and the gendered sporting body [29,30]. However, in spite of this, it can be contended that there is still a paucity of research that acknowledges the broader embodied aspects of women’s experiences of physical activity and the body and, undoubtedly, the ‘enfleshed’ features of the body that create a powerful aspect of engaging in a gym, or any sporting inquiry [31].

Whilst this paper acknowledges the above discussions in relation to body and gender through broader disciplines and theories; the analysis of the material has been influenced by feminism, phenomenology and, more specifically, an embodied approach to understanding how individual bodies can experience fitness pursuits in ways that are not fully explained through descriptions relying upon simplistic gendered stereotypes within sport and fitness [32]. By revealing the versatile ways the women in this study embody different gazes within the gym culture; the intention of this paper is to continue challenging heteronormative conjecture surrounding the female body and conceivably propose a response to popular narrow descriptions of what an active woman’s body can do and embody, such as—conforming to a slim, toned, athletic body [33] and performing a strict range of bodily gestures, postures and movements that emphasises grace and a “certain eroticism restrained

by modesty” [11] (p. 68). Additionally, by exploring the notion of multiple gazes found in the gym culture, this can help to identify the mechanisms through (and spaces within) which women’s bodies are policed by other bodies (both men and women) and by doing so, develop a liberation of embodied consciousness where women (and, indeed, men) question the limits of current thinking about the moving body.

## 2. Methodology

This paper draws upon material generated from a larger PhD study which delves into the embodied experiences of women in fitness cultures. In conjunction with ethnography, as a methodology, feminist phenomenology is well suited for illustrating the lived experiences of the female exercisers. Feminist phenomenology captures the voices and experiences from the female lived body. As noted by Hesse-Biber [34], there is no correct specific means of conducting feminist research. The implication between the inquiry of feminism and phenomenology has only relatively recently begun to be explored within sport and physical cultures [35]. When feminists utilise the analysis of their own or other women’s experiences, either in the form of consciousness raising or as formal research, it is with the decisive aim of understanding further how and why women are oppressed [36].

Through feminist phenomenology, this research delves into the social-structural location of women in a patriarchal system of gender relations, where women as a social group are frequently disadvantaged in relation to men as a social group. Phenomenologists who work from a feminist perspective acknowledge and analyse the structurally, culturally and historically located nature of gendered embodiment [37]. Notable research [38,39] provides early examples of how feminist phenomenology can be used to explore the lived female experience. Simone de Beauvoir’s significant early research encompassing feminism and phenomenology illuminates existential phenomenology through a gender-sensitive analysis to highlight the issues surrounding the notion of the feminine *dasein* (being-in-the-world) [39]. De Beauvoir’s research commenced a whole generation of feminist scholars to focus on eliminating the belief surrounding ‘natural’ difference and the distinctness between sexes as socially rather than biologically constructed. However, on occasions the feeling of the female *dasein* somehow contrasts conflictingly with its male counterpart [36]. Due to this problematic association, a plethora of feminist-phenomenological thinkers deconstructed the biological notions of sexual or ‘racial’ difference within their studies. Young argues that the dissimulation of gender norms compromise women’s free movement within a patriarchal social structure, therefore producing certain kinds of feminine bodily behaviour [40,41].

The understanding of the body has constructed recent knowledge surrounding feminist phenomenology and a form of embodied ‘sociologised’ phenomenology [42,43]. This paper employs the sociological-phenomenology tradition, rather than a philosophical base, in order to provide a rigorous, insightful and grounded analyses of female sporting embodiment, which can efficiently display the complexities of sporting experiences—both corporeal and cognitively [23,26]. Traditional philosophical phenomenology has often overlooked biological sex and gender within other forms of social-structural ‘situatedness.’ One reasoning for this omission is that it has tended to focus on the exploration of specific ‘essences’ of fundamental lived experience structures. Feminist phenomenology addresses this deficit by including a gendered lens when considering these powerful influences and pressures of social structures upon the lived experience and the particular corporeality of bodies placed within certain cultural spaces and times (in this case the gym culture), therefore undertaking such philosophical claims head on [37,41].

Thirteen women were recruited for this research based upon ‘criterion based sampling’ [44], where criteria for the selection of a place, site, or case is predetermined. The participants were chosen based on particular features, attributes, characteristics and possessing specific experiences. In this case, identifying as a woman and working out at the site where the phenomenon was being researched (the gym) was the main criteria based on the sample chosen. Ethnographic fieldwork included

semi-structured interviews and observations, these occurred at the research location (gym) based in the South East of England.

The author had been working in the fitness sector for over 7 years, this ‘insider’ role allowed for excellent access into the variety of fitness spaces and enabled further opportunities for conversation with the women. For the purposes of this research, it was considered advantageous to adopt semi-structured interviews with a sample of women who regularly engaged within the physical culture. The loosely structured style of questions allowed for the identification of individualism for each woman, which also enabled new and interesting topics to arise [45].

Participant observations enabled the author to examine gym life as it happened in ‘real time’ [46]. These facilitated the recording of mundane, mediocre and taken for granted aspects of an individuals’ everyday life that interviewees may feel not worthy of commenting on. The author had previous knowledge of the gym environment which enabled an enhanced understanding of the research location. Fieldwork took place for roughly three years with, on average, the author spending around 16 h per week observing the gym environment, exercising and instructing classes. This was mostly in the peak hours of the gym (between 8–11 a.m. and 4–7 p.m.). The ages of the women within this research ranged from 22 to 54 years. All women are dedicated to the gym and consistently attend either group exercise classes, work out in the main gym, or participate within both. All of the women are white British and employed within the public sector. The majority of women are in heterosexual relationships and six of the women have children. All of the women have spent their entire life, or the majority of it, living within the local area of the gym and this was their overall reasoning for choosing to attend those particular premises.

Informal and spontaneous conversations were further initiated during times such as passing through the gym, waiting between sets or whilst finishing a group exercise class. Due to the phenomenological nature of this research, the thirteen women were selected for interviewing and participation due to acquiring lived experience within the gym environment, they were willing to talk about their experiences and were diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and exclusive stories of the specific experience within the physical culture [47,48]. The majority of interviews lasted around one hour, some 45 min and others were conducted for up to two hours. The exact duration of the interview was determined upon how much information and experiences the women were willing to reveal. Due to the authors’ long employment at the gym, trust and respect with the interviewees had been gained and a greater rapport already existed.

Field notes were documented in a diary and interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews and field notes were then coded into reoccurring themes, consequently the most pertinent themes formed the main basis of discussion, with the application of relevant literature surrounding gender and embodiment incorporated. A reflexive approach was incorporated through the use of field-notes and diary entries. Feminist scholars argue for a self-reflexive approach in order to theorise the foreground of how relations of power may be shaping the production of knowledge in differing contexts [49]. Therefore, reflexivity was a necessary part of the research in that it assimilated awareness of practical methodological considerations as well as the personal and emotional elements of ‘doing’ research in the field [50–52]. All interviewees gave their informed consent before participating within the study. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at (the author’s university) and was assigned the following code: 15/SAS/235C. The original names of the women have been changed in order to comply with anonymity, privacy and confidentiality [53].

### *The Research Location and Gym Space*

The research location was chosen due to the particularly masculine characteristics it embodies; the central ethos of the gym contains elements such as bodybuilding, powerlifting and strongman oriented training. This environment provided a rich insight into exploring the gendered tensions within this physical culture. The figure below outlines a map of the open-planned gym floor, the red

lines imitate the location of mirrors placed on the walls and surrounding location. The use of the gym space within these specific areas can be viewed as discursive, due to the particular gendered spaces that become apparent when immersed within the environment.

Research surrounding the gendered nature of spatial segregation has received little attention, with early feminist geographers recognising that within the nineteenth and twentieth century the development of western cities led to spatial segregation of commerce, industry and political power within the public sphere and domain of men. Women were originally represented from the private realm of the home and social reproduction [54–56]. The gym can be viewed as a gendered space where certain techniques of the body and locations are related to the female body and where other spaces are attributed to the male body [57]. Dworkin [58] suggests that women face a glass ceiling not only in male-dominated occupations, but also in fitness too. Within the gym, the use of space is highly structured along gendered lines, also evident within Johnston's [59] study surrounding the experience of female bodybuilders. Men dominate the weights area and gym and women the classes, with limited mixing of other areas such as CrossFit. As shown in Figure 1, the weights area or 'male space' is considerably larger than the rest of the gym space available. Women interviewees described how their freedom to use the space of the gym was restricted by the behaviour of male gym members, which is explored further on within this paper. Women of all ages recounted in particular being subject to the normalisation of male judgement from gazes within the context of heteronormativity, this disciplinary effect consequently caused them to self-regulate their bodies and use of space [59–61]. The diverse spaces from Figure 1 are highlighted throughout the discussion below and consequently delve into the distinct gazes that are heightened and interpreted within the different gym spaces.

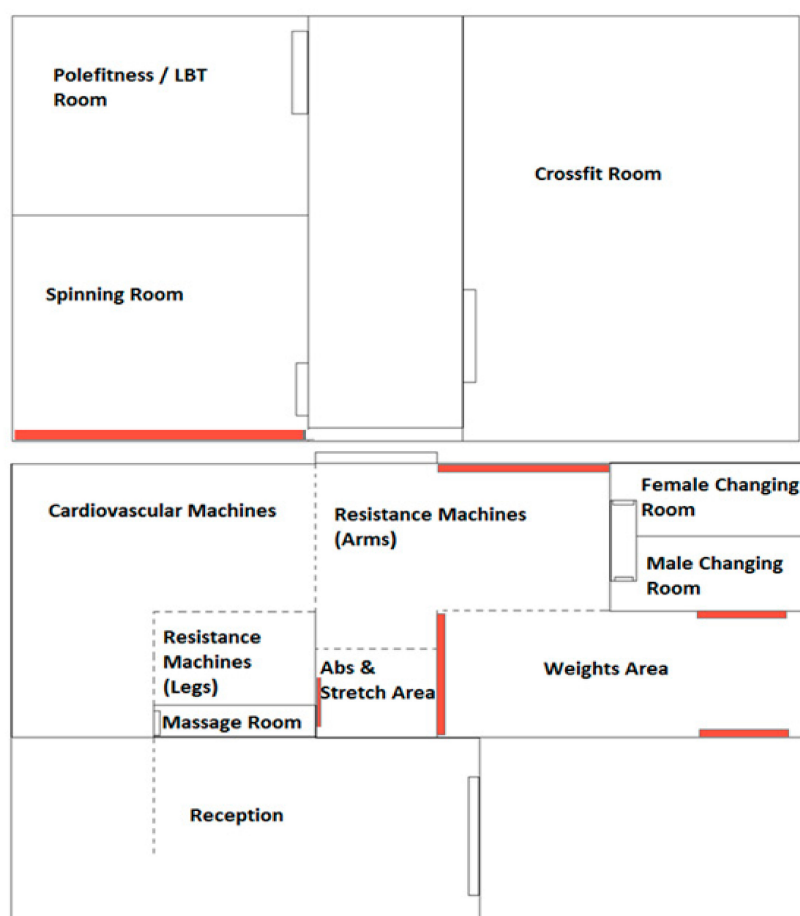


Figure 1. The research location (gym) layout [62].



### 3. Discussion

The discussion below captures the embodied experiences of female exercisers within a mix-gendered UK gym; more precisely, how women within this research embodied and interpreted alternative gazes. Utilising a feminist phenomenological lens captured their lived corporeal experiences within the physical culture through specific social-structural locations and analysed the structurally, culturally and historically located nature of gendered embodiment [37]. The concept of feminist phenomenology, as identified above, has undeniably been of meaningful importance in how women's embodiment has been understood, explored and re-considered. Although feminist phenomenology is employed as a lens to focus on the females lived experiences; alternative theoretical positions which also emerged and supported a suitable approach to analyse the corporeal aspects of the lived body, are detailed and analysed further where relevant.

Descriptions of how particular gym spaces heighten sensory phenomenon experienced are also included, such as the 'inter-corporeality' of embodiment within the spinning room and the women's own understandings of their experiences as both physical sensations and metaphors for personal, confident sense of self. Consequently in this paper, the aim is to not only develop a meaningful insight into the experiences these women faced, as lived and felt in the flesh within the gym culture [38], but to furthermore contribute to a small but developing body of research that utilises a feminist phenomenological approach to explore the 'embodiedness' experienced by women within a fitness environment and how their lived gym experiences enhance the understanding of their gendered embodied selves.

#### 3.1. Revealing Clothing and Presentation of the Body

Young's [63] research surrounding feminist phenomenological approaches to embodiment claims that the female body is not experienced as a straightforward communication with the active self, rather it is also experienced as an object. Young suggests that particular manners of behaviour and movement are associated with women. These different approaches in relation to sport, are attributed firstly to the social spaces which women learn to conform themselves, the restriction of space and acting repeatedly in less assertive and aggressive ways than men. Secondly, Young notes that women are encouraged to see themselves through the gaze of others including the 'male gaze' [3], whereby women become more aware of themselves as objects of the scrutiny of others [63,64].

*'When I first started coming to the gym, I wore makeup because I didn't like to think people would look at me and I had no makeup on and my hair was a mess. But as times gone on, I've realised I really don't care anymore so now I come down with no makeup on. But I have noticed other girls come down with makeup on, hair all done, hair extensions in, tiny little crop tops and shorts. I don't know if they do it hoping that men will look at them while they're working out. Whereas it's got to the point where I don't care, I've come down because I want to get my body how I want it, so I don't really care about what my appearance is at that time, as long as I look good on a night out!'—(Georgina)*

Georgina's description of when she first entered the gym and started working out suitably attributes towards the self-objectification theory. This theory provides a useful framework for understanding female experiences within sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body [65]. This theory postulates that many women are objectified and treated as objects to be valued and used by others. It occurs when the body, or parts of it, are singled out and separated from the women as a person and she is viewed predominantly as the physical object of male sexual desire [61]. In Georgina's description, she initially describes how she applied makeup and made her hair presentable before she worked out, her reasons for this made her feel more confident as she knew at the gym her appearance would be the initial object of viewing. This suggests that not only has she self-objectified, but she continues to also objectify other women who work out too, by stating that she

assumes those who wear a crop top and shorts maybe perceived within the gym environment as being singled out for male sexual desire.

*'in my eyes if you come in, in a sports bra, be prepared to be perved on, or put clothes on, so I don't have no sympathy for it [ . . . ] they're showing off and they've all for their crop tops on with their tits hanging out. See you don't see like all the ones in crop tops and like short shorts and things like that. They're the ones that all show off, whereas you've got all the other people that will have their bodies covered coz they're embarrassed and they just wanna get on and train.'*—(Hayley)

Within this extract, Hayley recognises the naked or scantily clad female body as always being in danger, or being re-appropriated by dominant masculine discourse, that is, 'assimilated by a male audience, to those images she is seeking to undermine' [66] (p. 118). It is a struggle to reclaim the stronger meanings of bodywork and the body, this underlies the determined efforts of women in the gym to police themselves, or at least distance themselves from a predatory gaze [67].

Self-objectification can increase anxiety within women surrounding their physical appearance (e.g., the fear of how and when the body will be viewed or evaluated). It can also reduce peak motivational states or flow and diminish the awareness of internal bodily sensations (e.g., stomach contractions, sexual arousal and hunger). Body shame may increase (e.g., emotions that result from comparing oneself against cultural standards and not reaching these) and an increased anxiety about physical safety (e.g., rape fears), can lead to eating disorders, depression and sexual dysfunction [65].

*'I always wear makeup wherever I go because it's like putting on my knickers, it's me. I wouldn't go out coz I wouldn't feel confident, erm, coz I think I'd look horrible and people, I just wanna feel confident, I just, I'm so used to wearing makeup, it wouldn't feel right to go out without it on.'*—(Victoria)

Similar to Georgina, Victoria's self-objectification and anxiety vastly increases when she compares herself to the cultural standards of beauty on women. Bartky [11] (p. 71) suggests that 'a woman's face must be made-up, that is to say, made-over and so must her body; she is ten pounds overweight, her lips must be made more kissable, her complexion dewier, her eyes more mysterious. The 'art' of makeup is the art of disguise, but this presupposes that a woman's face, unpainted, is defective.' The emphasis of shame has also been associated with this view of the body being deficient. The likelihood of achieving this perfect body and the accompanying requirements to engage within these practices, even as concerns surrounding women's bodies are trivialised, contribute to the sense of shame women bare in relation to their bodies [13].

Victoria suggests she will look 'horrible' and unconfident without makeup on, even whilst she is working out at the gym. Wolf [68] proposes that women who join the 'cult of beauty' direct their consciousness to new body practises, which indicates an internalisation of a surveyor discourse, suggesting that the female gaze is 'subordinate' and the male gaze is 'superior.' Victoria displays this by constantly assessing her body and wearing makeup in order for her to believe that the gaze from others would not be similar to her own negative views and reflections she has imposed on herself. She also demonstrates she is conscious of her own body practises by suggesting that for her, the routine of wearing and applying makeup is the same as putting her knickers on. In accordance to the self-objectification theory, Victoria views her body from a third person perspective instead of a first-person perspective in order to avoid judgments that may be negative. This objectification also moulds the belief about women needing to be attractive in order for acceptance to occur [41].

### 3.2. Women Looking at Women

A relatively neglected aspect of female subject formation is the gazing of women between women. The male gaze theory did not originally theorise a female viewer, but consequently analysts did, it was therefore largely accepted that there was no female gaze within patriarchal structures [1]. Accordingly, women are commonly theorised as overly identifying with a female character or taking up the male

gaze within a masquerade form [69–73]. Therefore, the male gaze theory cannot be theorised as a homosocial gaze between women, without women understanding themselves as primarily the object of male desire, this male desire is evident within the reflection below:

*‘probably as a girl, probably look at her, looking about her features and what’s good and what I’m jealous of, or what, that sort of thing. Whereas the men are looking at her thinking, well that’s a bit of meat, I wanna shag it (laughs) and in a man’s gym, it’s quite a man’s gym.’—(Lily)*

Due to the theoretical discussion of the gaze more commonly considered in terms of a male gazing upon a female body, this propels readers into a heterosexual position as a non-heterosexual desire, which is normally dismissed. Women as a subject of desire and/or through an erotic gaze is rarely seen in relation to other women [74]. These theories remain largely ‘male-centric,’ with a male usually doing the looking. In comparison to this, Skeggs [75] considers a framework that captivates females looking through the concept of misrecognition, which is ‘to be denied the status of full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life’ [74] (p. 280). Skeggs [75] argues that the meaning and value of a women’s appearance is precarious and the achievement of a successful feminine appearance is dependent upon being legitimised (or recognised) by others. Therefore, women look and evaluate each other, with a dialogical process occurring where women communicate the symbolic value of their appearance and validate their ability to be recognised as women, as demonstrated within Lily’s experience above [76]. The importance of the ‘visual economy’ [77] (p. 300) of looks focuses on how the subjectivity of women is predicated to others, including other women. Becky demonstrates in her reflection how she had to legitimise her gaze through the dialogical process of being caught looking at another woman in the gym:

A: *‘so you’ve previously said that if a woman was just staring at you, you would find that intimidating too?’*

Becky: *‘yeah I think so, definitely, because, because I’ve seen myself do it and it’s not only that I’m just thinking, sometimes it could be ‘oh I like their trainers’ or I like. But women could perceive that as you looking them up and down and you’re not sometimes and sometimes I’ve even said to people ‘oh I really like your bag! Because I’m thinking oh maybe I’ve looked at them too, but um, sometimes women can be a bit paranoid as well, thinking oh a woman is looking at them up and down and it’s not they are actually liking what they are wearing.’*

During this encounter, Becky was guided in the process of analysing bodies and she found through this her perceptual abilities. Becky developed a new kind of critical gaze and distanced bodily perspective (gaze) she had learnt to objectify herself as well as others. This gaze develops clearly during her meeting with other women she found herself gazing at. Using this critical gaze, Becky eyes over her own body and ‘interrogates’ bodies within the environment she is in, this can suddenly be seen to be scanned through a new perceptual filter [76,77]. Johansson [57] (p. 83) refers to a ‘logic of discontent’ and suggests that a continuous reflection on the efforts needed to achieve certain ideals, are often lead to an overly critical attitude towards the body. Women look at others in judgemental ways that assess and compare their appearance, also termed as a ‘postfeminist gaze.’ This is consumption orientated, where women evaluate and reproduce hyper-feminine femininity according to their ability [1]. Such looks are normative and almost inescapable, Joanna and Lily’s reflection below problematize women’s judgemental looking:

*‘Erm, I don’t think men look down on you, they just, I dunno, I don’t really notice anything from men just the girls, they just sit there and you just, you can hear them laughing and you think they are obviously laughing about me, so you turn around and they’re just ooo.’—(Joanna)*

*‘Women think differently to men, women, from my own experience, that’s why I found it really hard at the beginning [starting the gym], coz I was so bothered. Like this girl’s doing better than me*



*and I couldn't keep up with her like, it's hard, mentally it's hard when you first start, coz women are more emotional, emotionally attached to things. Erm, men don't they just go train, go home, if it shit, it's shit, if it's not, it's not. Whereas we beat ourselves up about it for ages [ . . . ] I think they [women] think comments are made, but I don't think, unless a guy is chatting up a woman. I don't think comments are made to them. And girls are bitchy so they do it behind their backs [ . . . ], unless it's really bitchy and they're making it obvious or they don't like each other or, something like that.'*—(Lily)

Joanna and Lily both describe the deeply relational, evaluative dynamic of looking and account this as a women's desire to compare and judge the appearance of other women. They both foreground 'women looking rather than men' [4] and construct this as problematic by highlighting the ubiquity of judgmental looks coming from women, but rather men. Joanna articulates a preference for a man looking at her, as she perceives this as being less judgemental and accounts for her understanding of women's judgemental looking in terms of her own behaviour. Interestingly, Lily's experience is similar to Joanna's in that she initially found it hard going to the gym, as she was aware of her performance being judged compared to other women, similarly aligning with Butler's notion of performativity causing 'gender trouble' [78]. She also explains that she feels women are more 'emotionally attached to things,' reinforcing the stereotypical assumption that women are more emotional than men, this view is pervasive across several different cultures [79]. This gender-emotion stereotype not only matters surrounding how an individual thinks about themselves and others, but is also deeply implicated in how gender itself is understood [80,81].

It has been additionally suggested that stereotypes are also emotion-specific, in that emotions such as happiness, embarrassment, guilt, shame and fear occur more in women and anger, pride and contempt occur more in men [8]. Shields [80] mentions that 'masculine' emotions are described as a passionate force to strive for achievement and domination, whereas 'feminine' emotions are portrayed as comparatively ineffectual emotionality and a by-product of female reproduction and an evolutionary need to attract males. These stereotypes are implicitly reinforced by Lily's comments that men 'just go home if it's shit' and women 'are emotionally attached to things and beat themselves up about it for ages.' Shields [80] also notes that culturally situated beliefs about emotion encompass accepted insights into the value of emotion, the beliefs about emotion and the body and these expectations are developed surrounding when, where and how emotions should occur, as well as the significance of the emotion. Lily attaches these emotions and demonstrates how the heightened gazes she determines in the gym, particularly by women in this instance, may potentially create the stereotypical emotions that women are portrayed to have due to self-objectifying and worrying about the representation of their bodies.

### 3.3. The Passing of Gazes

The historical legacy of gym cultures and sports has remained as a male preserve [82]. Although the gym within this research is open to both sexes, there is evidence still of gender divisions. Due to this, there continues to be territorial gendered spaces as previously discussed within this paper. The gym can be viewed as a semi-private space and is subject to different territorialising and de-territorialising processes, whereby control over this is fixed, challenged, claimed, privatised and forfeited [83]. As demonstrated in Figure 1 [62], the women have to pass through the main gym or what could be termed the 'male territory' [84], in order to arrive at the spin room and other classes within the gym. Whilst many women walked through this 'male space,' they are bombarded with gazes from the men, this lead to different reactions:

*'I come in here with my head up like yeah, does anyone wanna take me on! So I come in glaring at everyone then everyone says how aggressive I look then I think, that's because of how it feels like when you enter a weights room. Like the first time I came in with [her friend] she said I'll meet you in reception as I had described where it was and then I said I'll take you to the spin room.'*

*She, I hadn't told her we walk through the weights room bit and she went (freezes body) so she immediately froze and I was like shit sorry I didn't tell you did I. I didn't warn you, but it's coz men, they come in but they actually do any exercise sometimes coz a lot of the time they are just pruning themselves, strutting about showing their biceps and they are so much more vain than women are I find!'—(Alex)*

It is evident within this reflection that Alex is aware of the gendered spaces that are present in the gym. She has illuminated the tensions that she is aware of whilst walking through the 'male space' and how although she is not personally intimidated or put off from entering, her friend needed to be made aware of this beforehand so she would be comfortable walking through to the spin room. Before the spinning room had moved location within the gym premises, the initial room was very near to reception and did not require individuals to walk through the main gym in order to get to their destination, rather they were able to 'sneak in' and participate in a class, this was originally located where the 'resistance machines for legs' area is in Figure 1. Penny and Alice highlight the change in their feelings whilst initially having to walk through this physical culture before participating within a spin class:

*'it was nice, because you didn't have to walk past any of the men doing the weights [ . . . ] they look down on women so we'd just come in this room you could quickly sneak in and not have to face any of that [ . . . ] I was conscious of it, erm, I think coz I've got quite a erm, a bold personality it didn't bother me that much, but you would see like the men would turn and look at you.'—(Penny)*

*'it didn't sort of put me off, you sort of have a look don't you and you see all the beefcakes there and all the men but I just think you know they are all alright, I don't easily get intimidated by people.'—(Alice)*

The experiences above highlight their awareness of the gendered space that is present within the gym. They also express how they do not feel intimidated or necessarily conscious of using this space, but attribute this to being confident or having a 'bold personality,' similarly aligned with the display of particularly 'masculine' emotions [80]. In these particular cases, although the men remained silent, the situation could still be understood in terms of a more general gender order. Even within different contexts that are similar in time and place 'masculinity differs and changes' [84]. However, men's relative authority, power and status compared to women is equally clear and seems to stay the same whatever the masculine diversity. Men are able to change in some respects without apparently undermining the power relations of gender.

The male gaze expresses desire to dominate, the different strategies by the women may be interpreted as a resistance against the men attempting to subordinate them. This aligns with the suggestion that space is subject to different territorialising and de-territorialising processes [83]. These spaces may socially progress in the result of a safe base being provided (a site of resistance), where previously disempowered groups may become empowered. The space where the individuals transition through the main gym into the spin room can ultimately be acknowledged as a safe base, or a site of resistance, due to walking through the male territory and feeling empowered by doing so. The women are aware of the presence of the male gaze, as demonstrated in Penny's comment 'they look down on women,' this almost assumes that the gym culture is a space for men and therefore women are inferior whilst in it. This is simply one example of a number of situations where gender identities are formed throughout the process of domination, subordination and resistance [85].

### 3.4. Reflective Gazes

Fitness centres or health clubs are laid out as a large field of visibility, multiple others can observe anything that an individual is accomplishing and these observers are mostly fellow exercisers [85]. An individual never knows who is observing or what they are observing, but they are definitely exposed to constant, yet visible observations. The inclusion of mirrors typically found adds a further

opportunity to gaze and to be gazed upon by others. Within men's weight training, the role of mirrors can be described by Aycock [86] (p. 349) 'The arrangement of machines, weights and mirrors demands a supervision of oneself and that of others, as actions are monitored continuously by users. Individuals are not only the objects of gaze, but the subjects of incessant surveillance that constitutes the body as a figure of discipline.' This surveillance can result in rather unusual situations where 'one must see oneself in the mirrors, see others looking at oneself and not see others who are themselves not being seen, all this while constantly appraising performances even to the extent of imitating the persons who are presumptively invisible' [86] (p. 354).

Furthermore, it has been suggested that women within the gym can distinguish two alternative ways of looking at their body as a landscape—where the body is realised through a 'step-by-step achievement as the accomplishment of an undertaking' [44] (p. 156). A contemplative gaze views the terrain as a scenery, or the object of beauty. The other, the privileged one, is a gaze of rationality, which views the terrain as an opportunity for personal achievement and work, the role of mirrors within the gym has invariably brought forth the distinction between these two gazes [44]. The rational gaze is encouraged by bringing the body as a worksite into view and enables the other to be suppressed, such as inappropriate gazes (sadistic, erotic, vain, or curious) [3,85]. Unlike the open spaces within the weight training area, fitness studios are usually confined from the larger gym floor. It can also be suggested that within the aerobics room (or the spin room in this case) participants exercise effectively alone within a group [85] (p. 75). This semi-private room is often seen as a room for individual endeavours and improvement of the self to occur [83]. It could therefore be argued that within this physical culture, group exercise classes are exposed to a lesser degree of inspecting gazes from other gym users. As displayed within Figure 1 [62], this particular physical culture where some of the women workout, has glass windows overlooking the main corridor where other gym users can observe. The windows do not have privacy screens or blinds to limit outsiders from seeing in, therefore regardless of the promise of invisibility, the exercisers are unveiled to a further gaze from the other exercisers. They are not only from outsiders looking in, but they are also visible from the reflection that is given from the windows to the internal spin room.

Penny a frequent spinner, describes how she felt when the spin room changed location within the gym and how the spin bikes were once facing the mirrors instead of being on the side of the wall whilst she exercised:

*'There wasn't like the horrible lighting, the windows, there wasn't the big mirrors, don't like to look at yourself. I don't look at the mirrors so, I'm glad we are not facing them anymore! At one time we were which I don't think anyone liked that, erm, except maybe the person that put it that way, erm but no one else did. I don't think anyone wants to be facing a huge set of mirrors . . . but yeah this room [old spin room] was a lot more cosy and erm, private I suppose and like you didn't have the open windows.'*—(Penny)

During this extract, Penny describes how she and the other participants hated seeing their own reflection during the spin class. This demonstrates a subtle 'inter-corporeality,' where 'the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies' [87] (p. 5). Inter-corporeality at the same time foregrounds the social nature of the body and the bodily nature of social relationships. It also emphasizes the social interactions surrounding the construction of bodily behaviours. Through bodies we are able to extend and share our 'bodily experiences' [88]. When the spinning bikes had moved to face the mirrors, many expressed their distain towards seeing themselves and others work out. This shows that inter-corporeality here is contained within a perception-loop between self and other; whereby other people's actions prompt the same actions within oneself (i.e., the disgust of facing the mirrors, as demonstrated within Penny's reflection). It also shows that conversely, the self's action prompts the same action, or its possibility, in another's body [88,89].

Penny's reflection also similarly aligns with 'peculiar intimacies.' Within a semi-private space (the spin room in this instance) individuals have a shared intimacy different from that of a lover or

sibling [90]. The spin room is an open, or 'public space' where strangers inevitably interact, but it is also exclusive with obvious constraints to those who enter. Additionally, due to the timing and schedule of classes, it is a constrained environment for protocols and timings for the exercisers to adhere to. Yet the commonality of the exercisers who share this space is at best partial due to its semi-private nature, thus creating a 'peculiar intimacy' [90].

During the spin sessions, each exerciser is exposed to the controlling gaze of his/her fellow exercisers as well as their own gaze reflected from the windows, along with the mirrors that are situated on one wall to the side of them. In a similar way to weight training sessions, the mirrors and windows in the spin room facilitates the unidentifiable gaze that at the same time, possesses every exerciser. Penny expresses her disdain for the heightened gaze which is enhanced dramatically by facing the mirrors, but also suggests that after this initial embodied experience many people felt similar to her. Penny demonstrates this awareness through her own inter-corporeality by recognising the disgust from the other spinners whilst they face the mirrors, without this even being verbalised. Consequently, the spin bikes were changed and the mirrors remained to the side, somewhat suppressing the mirrored gazes. In the presence of a mirror, there is no need for external, outside supervision. Being subjected to such visibility whilst engaging within spinning means that the exercisers have cast the ever-seeing controlling eye upon themselves. They therefore take on the role of both supervising invisibly outside and internally supervising, similar to the concept of 'panopticism,' whereby power is exercised within closed spaces [91,92].

### 3.5. Acknowledging and Interpreting Different 'Stares'

Female bodybuilders emphasise the contradictory demands of contemporary femininity. Achieving a muscular physique yet remaining feminine notably displays a double bind, demanding a high level of body maintenance. The systems of surveillance in the gym culture (such as the gaze, reflections from mirrors and comments) provide an atmosphere which (self) regulates women and their forms of femininity. Powerful panoptic technologies produce self-monitored 'docile' bodies [59] (p. 135). Feminist theorists have argued that a disciplinary gaze signatures the female body as deficient and serves to control the behaviour of women [11,12]. Within this physical culture, women actively seek and are constituted by bio power and discourses that are related to the sexed spaces of the gym. As a female who lifts heavy weights, Charlie uses power through the medium of her body, but certain contradictions emerge. Females who lift heavy weights could be seen as possessing docile feminine bodies, but at the same time, they could also be read as having a transgressive body [59]. Charlie can be partly understood within each regime, she reinforces this double bind where her female body, even if admired, always is subjected to a voyeuristic 'gaze,' where the gaze is controlling and oppressive [3]:

*'In here you kind of get left alone a little bit more, especially being a girl lifting the heavier weights, men don't tend to, they just stay away [ . . . ] there is definitely stares and you do like. The guys I've known since being in here will like come over and say oh well done and you'll just get the other guys that just kind of look and stare, which if I was a bit younger it would have bothered me but, not really bothered anymore, just kind of get on with it ...'—(Charlie)*

Charlie exemplifies the ambiguity of being a female who lifts heavy weights. The debate of feminine/masculine weakness and muscle is consistently play out, through and on her corporeality. What's interesting here is that Charlie acknowledges the different stares given to her by the men and describes what they mean to her and how she feels receiving them. She explains that the men she has known for years will gaze or stare upon her lifting weights with a somewhat appreciative gaze and because she is familiar with knowing them, this is accepted. The men within the gym who do not know her seem to look at Charlie with a somewhat oppressive gaze and this is seen as threatening. The look of appreciation can also be seen within Katie's experience of being a woman and squatting a heavy weight:

*'I did 120kg squat, er and I was, there was literally a few guys watching as well and they was like wow good on you!'*

Similarly, Alex also acknowledges that a stare or gaze given by a man whom she has a rapport with, will be interpreted differently than a gaze from a stranger:

*'you notice times when they are looking at your arse or something, so I just stare back, it's that sort of look (pfft, raises eyebrow) yeah come on then, haha they normally back off [ . . . ] It's knowing the person but when it's a stranger you definitely have to be very assertive so they know where they stand'*

It could be suggested that Charlie's continuous lifting of heavy weights and Alex's challenging of the gaze resists a compliance that women face to produce a docile body. According to Foucault [93] where there is power, there is resistance. The resistance displayed here is important because it challenges the construction that women are passive and elucidates the nature of power structures [94], it is also compelling for a productive resistance to occur [58]. They are aware of particular gazes surrounding them and have determined what they mean, but they have also challenged distinctions of their gender by not conforming to overly supervising their bodies and reducing their actions within the gym to comply with the different gazes.

Alternatively, Georgina demonstrates in her reflection the obvious discourses attached to the sexed spaces within the gym and the emphasis on her corporeality of retaining her femininity by staying in a particular gendered area of the physical culture (specifically the cardiovascular area) of the gym:

Georgina: *'I remember the first time I walked in the weights room I realised actually how many more men were here than when I used to go to the sports centre.'*

A: *'How did you feel about that?'*

Georgina: *'I wasn't too bad, because the men are obviously on the other side of the gym, if the weights were mixed in amongst the gym equipment I don't think I would have liked it.'*

A: *'mm so you think there is quite a separation between the use of space in the gym?'*

Georgina: *'Yeah even now if I wanted to use weights I have to look over at how many people are there before I go over. Because I don't like going over there with the men [ . . . ] I get a bit funny with the weights because I always think like. I'm trying to lift a weight and I'm only lifting like 10 kg and then I look at the blokes who are lifting like 50 and they sort of look and sort of make like a little bit of a giggle. It might not be anything towards me, but it feels like they are laughing at me because I'm not lifting a heavy weight.'*

Georgina's experience of entering the weights area and feeling conscious of only being able to lift a lighter weight compared to a man, can be attributed towards the suggestion that women who seek muscular strength within the weights room, may find their bodily agency limited, not by biology, but the ideologies which are emphasised by femininity [77]. Georgina has negotiated uniquely the 'glass ceiling' due to avoiding, adjusting or holding back on her weight workouts, by checking firstly whether men are in the area before she attempts to lift a weight.

Georgina suggests that the gazes encountered from the men in the weights area are not only surrounding her corporeality as a woman and her femininity, but they are also gazing upon her performativity in the weights area because of being female. Charlie and Katie's performance of lifting weights has disrupted the norm where women are seen as passive and weak in relation to men [95], therefore causing 'gender trouble' [78]. The acts are how social agents constitute social reality, in this case, lifting weights can be seen as a masculine cultural prescription on sex. Georgina enacts sex



through her body but has complied with the heterosexual norms surrounding being a woman and lifting weights, her performativity due to being a woman lifting small weights is therefore analysed.

Staring can be viewed as a dismemberment that reveals a hidden but seemingly obvious gesture. It is proposed that staring is 'an intense visual exchange that makes meaning' [96] (p. 9). It is more than looking and is distinctive from the gaze, defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking which subordinates its victim. There are several variations of intense looking that a starrer can be engaged in and determine, for example—blank stares, have been suggested as an empty stare which demands no response, initiates no interchange and produces no knowledge [97,98]. Baroque staring is a blatant announcement of being confounded or wonderstruck [99]. Engaged stares are looks that are enlivened with interest. Engaged stares draw the viewer towards the object of stare, rather than fixating or repelling the starrer [100]. Finally, dominating stares are nonverbal behaviours that can be used to enforce social hierarchies and regulate access to resources. A stare can also communicate social status, conferring subordinations on a stare and domination on a starrer. Staring as a manifestation of dominance often disguises aggression with a restraint that is enabled by a stare of a hierarchy, this is similarly attributed to the male gaze [96]. Becky shares her experiences of how she interprets different stares within the gym, specifically if she catches a man looking at her:

Becky: *'Really uncomfortable, that's intimidating, yeah definitely, because surely, erm, even a woman doing that to you would be intimidating, but it would be even more intimidating if a bloke did it. Because you'd be thinking 'what are they thinking' that would be my thing 'what are they thinking' [ . . . ] they could be thinking 'oh she's doing that wrong' oh you know, or erm, yeah I don't know, it would depend on the look of their stare, sometimes you can see by people's body language their stare. Do you know what I mean so, you could see if it was a disapproving stare, or if it was an inappropriate stare.'*

A: *'so what's an inappropriate stare?'*

Becky: *'just erm, I think the body language would show an inappropriate stare if it was more towards looking at you, rather than looking at what you're doing. So but, with body language I think if you were doing something wrong or something there'd be like 'mmm' but I think there are, I think women have got a good um, instinct on stares, do you know what I mean, I do think women do have, yeah, they do have a good instinct on stares.'*

Interestingly within this reflection, Becky details how she recognises different stares that are constructed within the gym. The different variations of stares described previously can be attributed to her experience. Becky acknowledges that a dominating stare from a man is more intimidating to her, but on the other hand, she also doubts her interpretation of what a specific stare means by questioning two different types of 'looks', (specifically an inappropriate and disapproving) she encounters. Within this reflection, an engaged stare also emerges; Becky suggests that if the stare is not dominant, the man staring is drawn into her alternatively as an interesting object, this is through her performance within the gym. Similar to Charlie's reflection, this also suggests that certain stares within the gym can be considered either as appreciative, or oppressive. Gender trouble can also be identified through Katie's reflection as she suggests when a man looking at her, they are only viewing her performativity as a woman at the gym, this in turn makes her question whether she is conducting an exercise or movement properly [77]:

Katie: *'I now realise now, that blokes do watch women down here, they are probably sick of the sight of me so they don't worry about me, but certainly when anyone new comes they look and, that person's probably, where I train people, they are not aware there is blokes actually looking at them, erm and I'm glad they are not aware they are, but that's human nature. I think in a place where you've got regulars, people notice a strange face as such and they are going to sort of look and erm, so I just get on with whatever I've got to do now, I don't really take any notice if anyone is watching me or not to be honest, so yeah.'*

A: 'did you initially?'

Katie: 'yeah very self-conscious, which only really put me off I think, but again it was partly, I wonder if I'm doing this properly.'

Within Katie's experience, she acknowledges that a new female member or a 'strange face' will receive certain looks from the male members. Similar to Becky, a dominating stare is seen to appear by the male gym members, but also in this situation, a possible baroque stare is acknowledged. The male members of the gym blatantly announce within their looks that they are confounded or wonderstruck when they see a new female member working out and also show engagement whilst looking at women when they enter the gym. This collision of interest and confoundment could possibly be acknowledged as an appreciative stare on a woman's performativity.

#### 4. Conclusive Thoughts

This paper explored women's embodied experiences of the gaze within a UK mix-gendered gym. Employing feminist phenomenology provided both a theoretical and methodological approach to explore the sensuousness of the gazes experienced through the lived, moving body within the gym physical culture. Additionally, utilising this framework in conjunction with ethnography suitably contributes towards the existing literature, emphasising that bodies are also lived through cultures, times, locations and hold social meanings. Furthermore, it can be seen that certain gazes and stares are embodied and experienced within multiple gym spaces and reflections reveal that individual gazes and stares can be measured and embodied differently, depending upon particular temporal and spatial aspects of the physical culture. It also importantly shows that the way gazes are interpreted encompass a variety of sensualities and experiences relating to the body. A valuable point to make here is that all of the experiences discussed within this paper have occurred within a different social context, time and space and the descriptions of the embodied experiences relate to specific activities and spaces within the gym. These activities and the specific skills learnt are not only performative [78], but they also demonstrate a range of physical and emotional sensations that are intermixed with the individual body as well the social context, time and space in which the experiences occur, demonstrating the suitability of employing a feminist phenomenology framework.

Finally, it can be suggested that the experiences of women in gym and fitness cultures are not adequately explained through confining heteronormative discourses. Embodied approaches that assimilate feminist phenomenological readings offer the opportunity to think further and contest the limits placed upon women's bodies (and bodies in general).

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