I’m super-setting my life! An ethnographic comparative analysis of the growth of the gym market

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The fitness industry has undergone an explosive growth in recent decades. Some reasons for this are related to the increase in leisure time in the developed world and the importance attached nowadays to having a young-looking fat-free body. This article, based on ethnographic data from Santiago, Chile and Amsterdam, the Netherlands, seeks to add nuanced and complementary explanations to those reasons already mentioned. For example, the importance of moral, personal, social and identity significances that have also contributed to this rise are explained. I complement this with comparative information that emphasizes and clarifies the cultural factors influencing the culture of gyms.

Keywords: Gym/Fitness; Body; Working out; Culture; Consumption.
Nowadays, going to a gym is an act of consumerism. Some researchers have tried to explain what the causes of this are, the importance of this activity in our time and why, and the reasons for the growth of this industry (McCormack, 1999; Sassatelli, 2010; Maguire, 2007; Reverter & Barbany, 2007; Eichberg, 2009; Landa, 2011; Napolitano, 2012; Franco, et al., 2011; Wiest, et al., 2015). In this article I explain the causes from the ground, from the perspective of the people who work out in gyms, based on the data of two ethnographic works, one held in Santiago, Chile and the second in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, which provide more nuanced information and reveal the cultural dynamics of this practice.

Literature tends to discount the fact that not all clients continue training once they have attended the gym (Robinson & Rogers, 1994; Sassatelli, 1999; Crossley, 2006; Elshoult & Velthuis, 2013). The experiences of participants and the training environment are important factors for attending a gym, but those things that can be evaluated as positive may vary between cultures. That is why even though trainers and administrators of gyms stress that clients should consider their gym as a place where they can find their own way of training and using the gym, it is also important to know how different contexts and values indicate what positive and significant activities in the gym are. This article delves into two points. First, it emphasizes the cultural differences between people exercising in the gym whilst being motivated by different cultural contexts. Although they have ideas in common, such as being in the gym in order to achieve a fitter body and be healthy, my goal is to stress in which cities this is more important and why, and how it connects with cultural ideas. Second, it shows how the relationships inside the gym vary depending on the socio economic and cultural variables of its members.

“I’m super-setting my life!” is a quotation from one of my interviewees who works and studies medicine yet finds the time to work out for two hours, five days a week. A superset is when two exercises are done in a row without stopping, i.e. when one set of an exercise is performed immediately after a set of a different exercise without resting between. The benefit of this form of workout is that the process of fatiguing one or more muscle is faster and the training time can also be reduced, but not the intensity. This Dutch informant, who does not speak English as her mother tongue, uttered this phrase in order to let me know that she was doing so many things at the same time without resting. “Super-setting” her life was the solution that she found for having time to attend the gym.

In this article I will explain that to “super-set” is also one of the main reasons why people go to the gym. The gym and the people that go there can achieve several goals at once. Gyms are flexible places where one can consume things that go beyond sport or health. In other words, gyms as spaces do not
vary much from country to country, at least not between the two gyms analyzed here, but the activities, the notions and the interactions inside do vary, allowing different social relationships, which also helps to explain the growing popularity of gyms today.

The article structure is as follows: firstly there is methodology; secondly, some statistical comparisons are made; thirdly, data of both ethnographic pieces of research is considered; and finally a comparative analysis is conducted.

**Methodology**

The methodology is based on two ethnographic locations. The first one is in south-east Santiago, Chile, and comprises two fieldwork sessions: 10 months in 2013, and January to May 2016. South-east Santiago comprises municipalities such as Peñalolén, Macul, La Florida and Puente Alto. These are areas where the majority of its inhabitants are in the C3 level (middle class) or D (lower middle class). The second ethnographic work was conducted in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, from September 2014 to December 2015. For the particular case of this article, I have chosen a gym where I did 4 months of fieldwork (September 2014 to January 2015), which is located in a residential neighborhood in the east of Amsterdam. Both gyms have similar characteristics in terms of the price of the membership in relation to the market, the size of the gym, and its users (mostly middle class people).

The ethnographic work is based on interviews, short chats, fieldwork in the gyms where the subjects work out, participant observation and observation with participation (Wacquant, 2004). My observations were carried out in the fitness area, the changing rooms, in the health bar area and in the studios where classes are held. I have worked out in Chile for 16 years, 3 of which have been in Santiago, and since September 2014 I have been doing ethnographic research in gyms in Amsterdam.

I do not claim that my observations reflect general truths or universal facts. On the contrary, what is intended is through a comparison to understand the everyday world of some people that go to the gym.

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1This following the description of the GSE (Socio Economic Groups) where ABC1 represents the highest segment; C2 medium-high; C3 medium; D medium-low; and E for the lowest segment or extreme poverty.
Chile and the Netherlands

Let us consider Chile and the Netherlands in some figures. The number of inhabitants is quite similar. In 2014, it is estimated that Chile had a population of 17,772,871 while the Netherlands had a population of 16,802,463,\(^2\), with an average age of 33.4 for Chile and 42.1 for the Netherlands.\(^3\) Life expectancy in Chile is 79.3 years, ranking 34th in the world. The Netherlands, by comparison, ranks 20\(^{th}\), with an average lifespan of 81.2 years. Contrasting some causes of death, which can be indicative of certain cultural patterns, the death rate per 100,000 attributed to alcohol places Chile 47\(^{th}\) in the world, while the Netherlands is placed 103\(^{rd}\). For deaths related to drug use, Chile is 62\(^{nd}\), and the Netherlands is 146\(^{th}\), even though the Netherlands has a much less punitive policy in this regard. In socioeconomic aspects, the Gross National Income (GNI) in Chile 2013 was $21,030 and in the Netherlands $43,210,\(^4\) whereas the GINI coefficient, which represents the income distribution of a nation’s residents and is the most commonly used measure of inequality, locates the Netherlands as the 7\(^{th}\) most equal country in the world, and Chile in 141\(^{st}\) place.\(^5\) This inequality in Chile generates a highly segmented educational system (Matear, 2006), with gaps both in the distribution of resources and in the opportunities among the different regions of the country. This situation affects all forms of social relations creating a fragmented society (Moulian, 2002; Bengoa, 2009; Rodríguez, \textit{et al.}, 2012; Contardo, 2013).

The official website of the Government of Chile states that in 2012, 75\% of Chileans did not practice any sporting activity,\(^7\) and in 2014 it was more than 80\% (Sandoval & García, 2014\(^8\)), while 64\% of the population of the Netherlands practice some form of sport (Van Steen & Pellenbarg, 2008). If we look at the amount of money invested in sports, in 2006 Chile invested US $1.5

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\(^2\) 49.5\% male and 50.5\% female (Chile), 49.6\% male and 50.4\% female (the Netherlands).
\(^6\) The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
\(^7\) Retrieved from (2016, January 22): [http://www.gob.cl/programa-de-gobierno/valores-y-calidad-de-vida/deporte](http://www.gob.cl/programa-de-gobierno/valores-y-calidad-de-vida/deporte/)
\(^8\) According to Sandoval & García (2014), sedentary behavior has had a slight decrease over the last years: 87.2\% in 2006, 86.4\% in 2009 and 82.7\% in 2012.
per capita in sports, while France invests $29, Spain $43 and the Netherlands $113 per head of the population (Paredes, 2010: 13). As reported by the OECD 2012, 12% of the Dutch people are obese, while 25.1% of Chileans are. In 2010, the measured level of overweight (including obese) children aged 5-17 was, 26.5% in Chile and 16% in the Netherlands. The capital of Chile is Santiago and it has a population of 6,690,000. The capital of the Netherlands is Amsterdam and it has 820,000 inhabitants. Both capitals are the biggest cities of their countries. Amsterdam is often lauded as the bicycle capital of the world (Pelzer, 2010), and is a center of bicycle culture with good facilities for cyclists such as bike paths and bike racks. There are about 1,200,000 bicycles in Amsterdam, so outnumbering the city’s residents. Bicycles are used by all socio-economic groups in Amsterdam because they are convenient in the small city. Meanwhile, Santiago has 252 km of bike paths, which are unconnected and of variable quality.

Having said that, why do people do sport and/or go to the gym? Is it the same experience for those who go to the gym in Vietnam, Chile or the Netherlands? Do they feel the same and go for the same reasons? What is clear is that in all these countries more and more people go to the gym every year (Leshkowich, 2008, Sossa, 2013; Elshoult & Velthuis, 2013). I have been working out for a long time but it was not until I started researching gyms and when I had the opportunity to visit and read about this activity in other countries that I began to realize that different cultural factors may motivate the same activity. Furthermore, levels of participation, commitment and the importance of the activity vary depending on certain cultural and personal traits.

**Going to the gym in Amsterdam**

For confidentiality I will call this gym, which located in a residential neighborhood in the east of Amsterdam, IJB. The majority of its members have chosen this gym due to the proximity to their homes. IJB is on a single floor, with tanning rooms, a physiotherapy room, childcare, a health bar, a spinning studio, a large room for group classes, and an area with cardio machines, weight-lifting equipment, stretching equipment and free weights. The music is not loud. Attached to several of the pillars in the gym are disinfectants available to clean the sweat from the machines so everything is neat and clean. It is, the trainers themselves who clean the gym.

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10 This is a significant fact considering that there was a high prevalence of malnutrition in Chile, characteristic of the period 1960-1970, which was reduced in the late 1980s (Salinas & Vio, 2003: 281).
IJB was the first gym where I worked out and started my research once I had arrived in Amsterdam, and thus consciously and unconsciously I always compared it to my previous experiences in Chile. Being a foreigner I noticed that going to IJB was connected to different ideas, mainly influenced by three cultural sets of meanings. Firstly, it is seen as something everyone should do; especially if they do not do any other type of physical activity. Cycling within the city is not considered a sporting activity, despite the 2.9 kilometres that the Dutch cycle every day.\footnote{Source: Statistics Netherlands, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). BOVAG-RAI, GFK Panel Services, Dutch Cyclists Union (2015).} Secondly, the Dutch themselves are described as an individualistic society and there is nothing that we can call typically Dutch in the gym. In Amsterdam people are from everywhere around the world and gyms are flexible spaces where different activities can be carried out. The particularities of the gyms I visited in Amsterdam varied significantly even though some were located just a few blocks from each other. For instance, IJB was a meeting place for women. The final idea about going to the gym is that it can be seen as a practical tool for personal development.

In my conversations with different people and trainers at IJB, I found that to have a gym membership and to do sport is something that many people do, even if they don’t like it. A collaborator said “I don’t like to go to the gym, but it's quite practical, especially with the Dutch weather”. In IJB I heard many times that sport is something that has to be done, such as eating healthily. There is a moral context where the cult of healthy lifestyle and healthy food is a desire to feed the body, and the difference with others. The importance of staying healthy and to lead a natural life is a worthy thing to do. In this sense, it is “natural” and healthy to do some sport, but why is it natural? I asked this of my interviewees many times, and every time my question sounds absurd to them. Then I have to rephrase it, and the common answers are “to live longer”; “to feel good”; “to be in shape and energized”; “to have a healthy old age”. Note that mostly there is no reference to physical appearance but there is an idea of planning for the future and to live healthily in general.

But more important than knowing why it is natural to do sport, the key topic is to know what the word natural means to gym user? There are over 180 different nationalities living in Amsterdam. This diversity is reflected in the fact that 45% of the population of Amsterdam has non-Dutch parents (Hannerz in Deben, \textit{et al.}, 2000; De Waard, 2012). Given this cultural diversity, words like natural or normal may mean different things to different people. Not eating meat or enjoying nature can be natural and/or can help to lead a natural life, while for others it is natural to drink beer with friends at the weekends, or smoke cannabis.
once in a while. Yet somehow everyone agrees that to do sports and/or go to the
gym is important and it helps to have a natural and better life both now and in
the future. A female collaborator said: “I leave my daughter in the childcare centre, and
I like to come with her [to the gym] and to know that she sees me doing sports. It’s important
to inculcate the importance of sport from childhood”.

In IJB one can find all kinds of people of different ages, from children
aged 5 or older (with special supervision for them) to elderly people, and from
different status like politicians, famous people or models. It is also common
to see people with learning difficulties, people on crutches or in wheelchairs,
and even people with guide dogs. Given the multiculturalism mentioned before,
it is easy to see and hear people from all over the world. So one of the first
challenges that I faced in IJB was how to approach different types of people?

I met most of my female collaborators in zumba lessons, which were
predominantly with Latin music, so I could hear people singing some songs in
Spanish and thus my first approach was with them. During my time going to
IJB I was the only heterosexual man doing zumba. The zumba lessons were held
on Tuesdays at 20:00, Saturdays and Sundays at 11:00, and the people there were
almost always the same, especially at weekends. When I talked to them they
immediately asked “Where are you from?” I replied “I’m Chilean”, and everyone
said “Ah, that’s why!” I asked what they meant, and three women said in unison:
“because Dutch men do not dance!”

With these female informants I realized that the gym can also be used
as a meeting place. Before, during or after working out there is always the
possibility to spend some time with others. Every gym has its own environment
and is created by the people that use it, which is why in Amsterdam it is quite
common that people have visited or worked out in different gyms until they
find the right one for them. As a helper said, they want to be “with the right people
and environment”, where they can spend some time while they work out. These
women were around 35-48 years old and most of them also take the aerobic
lesson before the zumba class at 10:00. Usually after two hours of training they
all came together at the health bar to talk, they always invited me and we talked
about their children, the weather, the future, our work and sometimes about
having a nice body. One collaborator said “This is our time. After working the whole
week we came here to relax and have fun. Even the gym seems exclusively ours: on Saturdays
or Sundays at 10:00 you do not see too many men training”. This area of the gym was
predominantly occupied by women that meet up after or before their workouts.
This was also the area where they plan parties and meetings.
At IJB I also saw people who were working out without exchanging a word with anyone. When I approached them, they were always suspicious, polite and direct, answering my questions in a fast way, letting me know that they wanted to work out with the least possible disruption. Some of them were reading, studying or listening to audiobooks while on the elliptical trainer or treadmill. A Dutch man explained to me that: “We place great importance in planning and using time in the most efficient way. We love efficiency, and structure everything down to the smallest details [...]. We don’t need politeness or long sentences full of compliments; we like to be direct and we expect other to do the same”. In this sense, this gym is a meeting place just for women; men work out alone or in pairs but do not talk much. However, IJB also offers kickboxing lessons, and some people who attend these lessons train in the gym before or after the lessons, so they tend to speak more and interact with each other. Most of these people seemed to be of eastern Mediterranean origin and although they were always friendly to me, their body language was constantly trying to show them to be tough guys.

IJB was always a quiet place and it was never crowded. There was not much interaction between the gym users, and everyone was concerned with their own business. The conversations I had with men were related to working out, healthy food, and improving physical appearance and health, while women were more concerned about health than physical appearance. Cockerham (2005) mentions that healthy lifestyles are supported by an extensive health products industry of goods and services (running shoes, sports clothing, diet plans, health foods, club and spa memberships), which promotes consumption as an inherent component of participation. In IJB this consumption of health products was reflected in food and in the use of the gym as a tool to improve health rather than in the use of brands or sportswear.

For my respondents, health, energy, and optimizing future vitality are important. They are consumers of healthy products. Health has become an invisible product which makes it easier to sell, and as health is a priceless commodity, any price can be asked for it (Wiest, et al., 2015). A Chilean helper who has lived in Amsterdam for twenty years told me: “The Dutch women have self-imposed a number of things quite different than in Chile. Here they give birth without anaesthesia, they ride a bike with three kids on it and a bunch of grocery bags and it doesn’t matter for how long, not even if they are pregnant! They repair things at home and they hate to ask for help. They love to be independent, empowered and active. But you know, they need a lot of vitality and energy for that. In my opinion they go to the extreme and sometimes they even mistreat their bodies because of that idea of equality, strength and independence”.
Interestingly, IJB satisfied the expectations of both genders to develop personally, but for men this personal development was more individual and focused on appearance, whilst for women it was related to gaining energy, sharing with others and relaxing. But is personal development a process, an idea, a goal? What is known is that this concept is used to describe activities that improve personal skills, self-esteem and quality of life and because of this is a wide topic. However, when someone points out that they want to develop personally, what do they mean by this? For my IJB collaborators, personal development is a process. It takes time, it is set in the future and sometimes (especially for women) related to health, including mental, physical and spiritual health. It is also personal in the sense that it is not related to the opinion of others, their goals or judgments. The gym is a tool that helps in this process of personal development because it is the place where they can work out daily on their goals, health and future.

Going to the gym in Santiago

For confidentiality I will call this gym, located in south-east Santiago, ELF. The majority of its members are middle-aged people who have chosen this gym due to the proximity to their work, homes or the large shopping center located in front of it. During my fieldwork there I never saw people with disabilities or people over 50. I saw teenagers, though entry to people under 15 was prohibited. ELF has two floors; it has a health bar, a room for group classes, a spinning studio, an area with training and cardio machines and free weights.

After 18:00, ELF was really crowded, especially before the summer (September to December), and it was often difficult to find an available locker. People who used the cardio machines had to book them 40 minutes in advance. Although most people didn't know each other, they greeted each other and exchanged a couple of words. There was always loud music and the gym was permanently messy. Nobody put their weights back and one had to scour the gym looking for plates strewn across the floor. There were cleaning staff that did the vacuuming but did not sort the discs or dumbbells, and the trainers did not do this either. The cleaning staff wore green uniforms, almost no one greeted them, and they walked around looking at the floor. Trainers wore three different t-shirts: a yellow one when they were working as trainers in the gym; a black one when they were working as a personal trainer; and a black one with their name in gold for those who sold more personal training services. These latter people sometimes greeted members of the gym but they did show great deference to their potential customers.
Going to ELF is influenced by three cultural motives: firstly, a moral idea of being better than those who do not work out; secondly, the idea of a fit body as a guarantee of social, sexual, and even professional success; and finally, the idea of the gym as a tool for personal development.

Based on my experience, I consider ELF a quite typical gym for middle-class people in Santiago. When I did my first fieldwork there I did not see the zumba lessons as important. Although it was a lesson with a mainly female presence, I could always see a few men dancing there. What caught my attention was the spinning lessons attended by both genders and where the idea of striving or “no pain, no gain” was paramount (Sossa, 2015). The first thing that struck me was the body language of the people and the words used to refer to themselves and others. They compare themselves with others trying always to excel. I was not born in Santiago, but in the north of Chile, 1,500 kilometres away. I was not really aware of either the strong segregation in Santiago or that the importance of physical appearance was much higher than in my city.

In Chile, doing sport is not common. As noted in the statistics, only 20% of the population regularly play sport. Thus, those who go to the gym are proud of themselves and sometimes admired by others. Also, people who do not do sport and are overweight are considered irresponsible, unattractive, and lazy. As Goffman (1990) mentioned, there is a social presentation of the embodied self and people make effort to manage the perceptions of others by controlling the appearance of their body. Individuals have a duty to control their bodies and the appearance of being out of shape comes to signify a lack of self-control and weakness (Thompson & Hirschman, 1998).

My two fieldworks were conducted with middle class and lower middle class people. For them the transformed body has become a resonant cultural metaphor through which they can carry out their identity projects of creating a desirable embodied self (Thompson & Hirschman, 1998; Sossa, 2015). At the same time, working out for them was a form of recreation and a form of showing status, as a proud collaborator said: “I guess I’m not anyone; at least I have time for myself and for the gym”. This quotation has two meanings. First, it reveals an indicator of job success: those who have more free time are those who have a good job and therefore do not need to work overtime. In Santiago, the working hours are long; people work 50.6 hours per week on average, i.e. more than 10 hours a day. If on top of this is added the time that it takes to go and come back from work (1-2 hours), there is virtually no free time for physical activity (Salinas & Vio, 2003). Secondly, going to the gym in ELF is associated with purchasing power. In the particular case of this informant, she not only paid for the gym membership, but also parked her car in the shopping centre located in front of the gym, for which she also paid. In her words, she was not anyone; she was different and more successful as she could access to these privileges.
It is a common saying in Chile that someone (especially a woman) can develop a career with the help of a nice body. Indeed, in Chile, for good looking people it is easier to find a job (Sanhueza et al., 2008; Contardo, 2013) and even end up working in television or in politics. In my first fieldwork in Santiago, one of the women who worked out in ELF looked like a model and made a few small appearances on TV. She refused to talk to me because she said she did not have the time, but she did have the time to talk to others. My interpretation is that she looked down on me because I was not on the same level as her, or not on the same level that she wanted to be (I was not famous, rich or “important” enough in other words). To my surprise, on my second fieldwork, when people heard that I was coming from the Netherlands, many changed their dealings with me and were more participatory and cordial. Discussing this with a collaborator, he told me: “You know how we are, people here love foreigners, but gringos, Europeans. Chileans still believe that stupid thing that we are the Jaguars of Latino America”.

In Santiago, people have a great sense of insecurity and; people distrust each other (Bengoa, 2009; Rodríguez, et al., 2012; Varela, et al., 2015), and even though Chile is an orderly country and relatively quiet, there still are many social differences and inequalities, which produces resentment and hatred (Bengoa, 2009; Contardo, 2013). For instance, according to a 2006 study of rights and citizenship in Chile published by Genera, 92% of respondents said that Chileans are discriminators. In the particular case of La Florida, where ELF is located, 61.6% of people say they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood when it is dark (Rodríguez, et al., 2012). This situation leads to strong mistrust of others and a strong sense of wanting to distinguish oneself from others. A collaborator said: “In Chile you always have to prove who you are”. Another one said: “I’ve been robbed twice in this gym, and nobody takes responsibility, no explanation, no compensation, nothing. Nobody saw anything, nobody knows anything, and no one guarantee me that’s not going to happen again”.

For many of my collaborators, going to the gym was a way of showing that they were someone; that they were also different from the average Chilean person. Some said: “In Chile everything moves under the influence of appearances”; “I don’t want to be at home watching garbage on TV, I want to do something for myself”. In my particular case, as a Chilean and having conducted fieldwork a couple of years ago in Santiago, I used the fact that I was coming from the Netherlands to get more and better access to information.

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12 This is a non-derogatory term used to refer to US citizens and to people with blonde hair.
Another important fact in Santiago was to see some distinction, as Glassner (1989) explains, that some fitness enthusiasts distinguish between “fitness” and “health”. Even though the two words have become generally synonymous in everyday usage, I heard that distinction in ELF. For instance, some of my collaborators take steroids. They say that it might be harmful for their body, but they take the risks because they prioritize their fitness over their health. During my second fieldwork at ELF I discovered that some of my former collaborators who were previously against steroids were now taking them. When I asked why, the common answer was: “here everyone does it”. Someone explained to me in detail: “I got super tired of not seeing results or seeing minimal results; I’m tired of being average. Here, as you well know, everyone uses steroids, and I’ve seen that many of who have done it, they have done it for years and I’ve never seen any side effects happened to them. I’m taking steroids carefully, without abusing. If it’s harmful to my health or not, that remains to be seen, but for now I’m glad to see that they give results”. In this sense, as Brown (2003) has explained, in these collaborators concerns about the future and bodily decay by age, illness or death are rationalized in the context of fully existing in the present. At the same time, these “drugs of body image” (Kanayama in Faccihni, 2006a) are not used for their psychoactive action but their effect on self-image.

The birthplace, gender, appearance, and image of a person in Santiago is important, not only to establish a relationship, but also to find a job or to avoid discrimination. One example during my ethnographic work in ELF is that some so-called trainers had not done any kind of study as a trainer (or very short courses, such as two days long), and were employed only due to their muscular bodies. Some of them were very concerned about selling their services as personal trainers and I even got personal calls from them to offer their services. The trainers with the best bodies were doing more private lessons in the gym during their non-working hours, and in their working hours, rather than supervising or assisting gym users, they were engaged in offering their services as personal trainers. As a result, I discovered that the importance of a good-looking body includes cultural ideas of success in social, personal, labour and sexual terms.

My helpers viewed their physical development as a way to transform themselves and at the same time enhance their possibilities. Through these transformations the concern over the symbolic value of bodily appearance became a prominent vehicle of upward socio-economic mobility, which in turn expanded middle-class consumer demand for an almost dizzying assortment of body-focused products and services, the gym being the one of greatest importance (Falk, 1997; Thompson & Hirschman, 1998). A female collaborator said: “If you’re blonde and thin, you have a lot more done. Even if you are blonde but not thin, you still have more possibilities than a brunette. Here [in ELF] all the girls are working their ass off to get fitter, if you go to Providencia or Las Condes [these are wealthy areas], the girls are relaxed when they train. They only go there to stay as they are”.
Chile and especially Santiago is a place where social stratification is strong and clear. There are very well-defined areas for people in good economic situations, and poor areas. In this sense, beyond the equipment that the gym has or the environment inside, the membership price and the people that use it will be determined by the area where the gym is located. Besides, Santiago is a city four times larger than Amsterdam, so it is more practical when choosing a gym to evaluate its prices and proximity.

In ELF, going to the gym was more related to beauty and status than to health. My collaborators mentioned that for them it was important to go to the gym for their personal development, but unlike IJB, this was seen as a goal, something to be achieved, in the short term, the faster the better. It is personal but it is also related to the opinions of others, such as family, or friends, or in connection with a new trend.

Super-setting cultural ideas

Indeed, leisure time has grown increasingly in industrialized societies, but it is not necessarily one of the main reasons why more and more people are compelled to go to the gym. If we compare Mexico, the Netherlands and Chile, in the case of Mexico the OECD (2015) reports that on average the annual hours worked are 2237, putting it first on the list of countries with longer working hours. In Chile the average number of hours worked per year is 2015, ranking it fourth, while the Netherlands is ranked 36 with an average of 1421 annual hours worked. Thus, even though in Mexico City and Santiago people work considerably more hours than in Amsterdam, gym attendance has increased in all three cities.

Gyms have become important because they enable people to “super-set” personal and social demands in relation to the body and corporality. In society, every political order occurs together with a somatic order where not only the physical appearance acts as an intermediary of the moral condition according to some code that has historically made the physiognomy a kind of semiotic indicator of virtue, but where, above all, appearance and uses of the body act as a political device of differences in capital, economic, social, cultural or symbolic capital; in particular they act as an indicator of differences in terms of inequality (Le Breton, 2002). In this sense, gyms are in tune with the emergence of a “somatic society” (Turner, 1984) where people have “body projects”. This idea, based on seeing the nature of bodies in the course of life as something that one can work on, transforming them and making this work a process of individual identity. These bodies in a consumer culture have been generally represented in terms of a “possession” of the self, which are malleable at will (Featherstone, 1982). Therefore, being fit is increasingly becoming a part of the successful performance of selfhood (McCormack, 1999).
Nowadays we all have an idea about our image. Body image (BI) refers to the picture of the body built by the individual that can be considered as a multidimensional construction about perceptions and attitudes that individuals refer to their body and in particular to their appearance (Carrao, et al., 2010). The body is judged as a result of a lifestyle and certain values attached to it (Malson, et al., 2009). Thus, the size of the body and what is done with the body, can be problematized and criticized. Obesity, thinness, and wrinkles are internalized as individual concerns and the methods are sought for body transformation. That is why the size of the body is experienced as a personal matter; we must not forget that these concerns of the body are socially constructed, since people rely on the meanings of the bodies in their social environment to make sense to themselves. From this perspective, the “war on fat”, the “ideal of thinness”, and the idea of feeling healthy can be regarded as ideologies that legitimize certain behaviours, experiences and forms of the body as “normal”. However, body sizes, the amount of fat that can be regarded as excessive, and the characteristics that determine a healthy body, are not fixed or definite.

As a result, the growth in the gym market is more related to ideas of consumerism and also of moral judgments that varying in each culture. The body has become a central aspect of postmodern consumption. Consumer culture promotes a dazzling array of cultural discourses, services, products, and cosmetic-medical technologies to revitalize and re-shape the body. “Our consumer culture is dominated by a preoccupation with the body. This preoccupation extends from such areas as food, dieting, clothing, fashion, exercise, to all kinds of phenomenological experiences with the body” (Joy & Venkatesh in Thompson & Hirschman, 1998: 403-404).

In both ethnographies I could ascertain that the body that people were hoping to develop in the gym was a functional body in their context; a competent body for their culture. The activities carried out in the gym are connected to moral ideas and, to external and internal thoughts. These activities produce a sense of control of people’s life; they enjoy knowing that they are taking charge of their life and are investing in a body that is useful to them in their daily lives. Yet the gym is not for everyone: older people, people with disabilities or, poor people can barely be found training in gyms in Santiago.

Interestingly, in IJB going to the gym is more related to the future and to consumption/investing in health, while in LFL it is related to the present and to consumption/investing in status and beauty. In both places, the gym is presented as a practical space where different activities can be done. If there is a lot of rain and wind, it is presented as a place to work out in Amsterdam, while, if one wants to work out with more people around, it is a good choice for
someone in Santiago. In both cases the gym delivers the services that society demands in relation to transformation of the body. On the other hand, the activities and the language inside the gym vary in relation to their orientation (beauty, competition, health). In the gyms the emphasis is not exclusively upon objective properties of the body such as: health, and fitness. These properties remain important but are not pre-emptive. Agents appeal to incentives at the level of the lived body: the ‘feel-good factor’ of the workout, the opportunity to relax or let go, and the reactivation of their physical self (Crossley, 2006). Discourse around fitness is replete with references not only to morality and discipline, but also to the pleasure of working out (Sassatelli, 2010).

Our societies, as a result of excessive labour competitiveness, individualism, consumerism and the over-importance placed on the healthy/beautiful body and purchasing power as moral indicators, requires areas where one can relax, interact with others, do exercises and get attention and/or get rid of stress. As Sarlo (2009) said referring to Foucault’s work, gyms are the last heterotopic construction of our time. The heterotopia has the power to juxtapose in a single real place, multiple spaces, and multiple sites that are themselves inconsistent. In this sense, the gym industry has taken advantage of this and offers a private area where one can not only exercise, but also where get their hair cut, get tanned, go to a sauna, a swimming pool, a massage room, and attend ballet lessons, among other things. Due to these phenomena, the activities and relationships inside the gym vary. Based on my two fieldworks I can illustrate this with three sets of data.

First, in IJB health and the gym are more related because I saw pregnant women, people with disabilities and people with limbs in plaster working out, who were there because of the benefits in health due to working out. I also appreciated that cleanliness was important, to correctly perform the exercises, to stretch and learn about different work outs. However, in ELF I saw how important it was to get bigger and fitter no matter what. The beauty of the body generates a social distinction, which is why people really follow the idea of “no pain, no gain” and also why taking supplements and steroids was very popular in the gym (even though both are more expensive than in the Netherlands and can be harmful to health). At the same time, in IJB I found a physiotherapist room and trainers with health-related qualifications, while in ELF there was a hairdressing salon and some trainers worked there just because of the way that they look.

Second, in ELF I saw the significance of standing out from others and the importance of clothes to perform the exercises comfortably but also to show the body. Brands and expensive gadgets were displayed with pride.
to the gym walking or by car is also presented as a mark of distinction). In IJB everyone arrives at the gym either walking or cycling, people tend to not care about brands, and most people do not work out wearing gloves, belts or special clothes. On average, in Amsterdam gyms are not expensive and there are many people who do sport either in gyms or outdoors. Therefore someone who does sport or has the money to go to the gym has no special status. In Santiago, there is a more sedentary lifestyle and fewer areas for outdoor sports, and they can also be dangerous and counterproductive given the large number of stray dogs and high levels of pollution in the city. Consequently, the gym is one of the few places where one can do sport (Salinas & Vio, 2003). At the same time, at ELF people looked down at the cleaning staff. Almost no one greeted them and they waked around with submissive posture. Meanwhile in IJB the trainers are the ones who clean. There are cleaning staff, but they only clean the gym once a day, and therefore the maintenance and cleanliness is the responsibility of the trainers and gym members.

Finally, in Amsterdam gyms are cheap, and the difference between rich and poor is not as pronounced as in Chile. In IJB there were people of different social status, and some of them were celebrities or politicians. I was unaware of their reputations because no one gave them more attention and they behaved and dressed like everyone else. I was only made aware of who they were when it was pointed out by my helpers. However, people in ELF that are fitter and/or have more money, seek attention in one way or another. Much of their identity is based on their purchasing power and their well-developed bodies.

It is more difficult to observe whether someone is concerned about being healthy or cares about old age than the appearance and the use of brands, body language, or the activities they perform. It is even harder to see the meaning that people attribute to their actions knowing that those meanings change in relation to personal goals and the cultural environment. In this sense, as Cockerham (2005) said, the dialectical relationship between life choices and life chances proposed by Weber in his lifestyle concept is important for understanding ELF and IJB. Life choices are a proxy for agency, and life chances are a form of structure. Whereas going to the gym and other lifestyle choices are voluntary, life chances, which primarily represent class position, either empower or constrain choices, as choices and chances work off each other to determine behavioural outcomes. This distinction is easier to see in Santiago than in Amsterdam.

Nowadays there is a tendency towards an existential view of embodied identity. Our body image speaks for us and connects us to the world. I have seen in my collaborators that there is a psychological and even spiritual affinity to discovering and having more experiences through and with their own bodies.
That identity process occurs largely through consumption activities and lifestyle choices. The idea is to cultivate an image of success, sexiness, or health, which follows a personal and cultural scrutiny. In ELF, people will observe others and will try to differentiate themselves from others, while in IJB some people like to follow their own personal ideas, and others will try to get closer to a certain group with the same thoughts or in similar situations, such as being a migrant, speaking the same language, or having the same goals.

These practices of self-creation through bodily transformation are related to the use of gyms, cosmetics, and supplements, as well as fashion styles, and therefore related to purchasing power, but the important fact in both ELF and IJB is the cultural ideas linked to going to the gym. In ELF it is about being better than others, and being concerned about oneself. In IJB it is about health, having more energy and the future, and for some people it is also about being closer to others. In both places there was the idea of “working” for results and even though these days cosmetic surgery is more available, it is not a choice, at least not for my helpers, and especially not in IJB. The idea is to make the effort and at the same time enjoy the process of following personal aspirations.

In this sense both gyms and the people that use them become the perfect helpers for making this process possible, but there is another important factor, namely culture. The gym can be adjusted to everyone’s expectations according to whatever is important for people and their culture. There is always something more, something else, something new in fitness, something which can be adjusted to members’ needs (Sassatelli, 2012). For example, in ELF it was easier to find activities that involve dance, while in Amsterdam the activities in gyms involve other activities like boxing or kickboxing. However, in IJB, given the presence of many women and people from Latin America, the gym offered three zumba classes per week, and the aerobics or steps lessons prioritized dance movements over classic aerobic steps.

My Chilean collaborators wish to be part of a particular status group and try to adopt the appropriate lifestyle. Status groups are stratified according to their patterns of consumption (Cockerham, 2005). These patterns not only establish differences between groups, but they also express differences that are already in place. Healthy lifestyles are a form of consumption as well, and in IJB the idea of health was produced and used for certain purposes, such as to achieve a longer life, to have more energy or enhanced enjoyment of one’s physical being. In this sense, people that go to gyms can “super-set” their activities and goals, to take care of their health, meet people and do sport; look for a date, recover from an injury and get rid of stress; listen to an audio book, stretch and lose weight; to dance; or to gain social distinction and improve self-esteem. At the same
time, this space can help individuals who are struggling with issues constructing their identities and establishing their body images as men, women, gay, with disabilities, or as migrants, among others.

Conclusions

In times when more and more people want everything, to have a beautiful, energized, young and healthy body, but also to be successful at work, in social life and in love, to live longer, to be happy, free, and independent, the gym is presented as a place that can meet the most varying needs in the most efficient time. In this regard, I can clarify two of the most common responses in relation to the growth of the gym market. This growth is related to the fact that people have more free time and attach more importance to having a fat-free body, but these are not the only reasons. In this article, through the comparison of two ethnographic works, I have shown that people who go to the gym do so for different motives. Those reasons are personal and diverse but also related to their socio economic and cultural background. Although an ethnography has no way of making representative claims about the reality in Santiago or in Amsterdam, this paper shows that there is a concern around matters of the body. Ideas such as freedom, independence, moral character, success and self-determination emerge and vary depending on cultural ideas. These ideas can be achieved by going to the gym, changing body shape and embodying the activities that go with it.

The values around the body and health care that are offered and circulate in the gym are associated with the interests of the middle class (Maguire, 2007) and as Thompson & Hirschman (1998) explain, acts of consumption (surrounding diet, exercise, fashion, and cosmetic surgery) are a primary means by which a personal body project can be accomplished in the sphere of everyday life. In these practices of consumption, the body also becomes the site for consumers’ most intensive practices of emotional investment and the material conduit through which culture reproduces and revitalizes certain ideas. Banbery, et al., (2012) have exposed that an individual experiences success through society’s attention and approval. Regardless of any physical evidence of success, self-evaluation is always an evaluation in the eyes of others and self-recognition is not possible without the internal belief that recognition comes from other people. While achievement in other areas remains invisible for many people, and can often only be appreciated by experts, success in sport and in changing the body, are immediately recognizable and can be understood by one and all.
Going to the gym permits the recognition of achievements and with this recognition the development and reinforcement of identity can follow. Fitness gyms have become rather popular, both because of their visibility in urban contexts and commercial images and because of the increasing number of participants. Sassatelli (2012) explains that gyms also place emphasis on the ‘pleasure’ of training, ‘well-being’ and on the absence of ‘competition’. In these spaces, consumption not only expresses but also performs identity: through making objects their own, social actors create themselves, both as consumers and as embodied selves with specific and different roles linked to different identity markers such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, which are loosely coupled with specific styles of consumption.

Interestingly in Santiago, even though the participation in sports is low and fluctuating, the gym market continues growing. Apparently it is one of the few spaces for sport and on the other hand it is a space where other expectations can be reached such as sexual success, work, and moral issues. It is also important to highlight that being a member of a gym is not only linked to training, but something that should be done for its practical aspects, especially in Amsterdam where membership is quite cheap. Those who go to the gym may not only work out; there are a range of diverse practices carried out inside, like meeting people, going to the sauna, and trying something different. Finally, the relationship between beauty and fitness or fitness and fatness is more obvious and has been studied, but it is also important to study the relationship between fitness and vitality and, fitness and health, which is a more invisible relationship but still very moralized, medicalized, and patent in the activities that are carried out in gyms.

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296


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