

# One more rep



An investigation into how toxic gym cultures have influenced body dysmorphia and the impact on young males and females.

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## **Introduction**

Over recent years, the gym has evolved beyond its traditional role as a space for physical health and well-being. For many young people today, it has become a complex and often harmful environment defined by competition, comparison, and performance. This Personal Interest Project (PIP) investigates the growing phenomenon of toxic gym cultures. This term describes gym environments and fitness communities where exclusion, judgment, body shaming, and unrealistic expectations are not only present but normalised. Such spaces can breed insecurity and reinforce social hierarchies based on appearance, strength, and gender conformity. The rise of toxic gym cultures reflects a broader cultural issue deeply connected to sociocultural themes such as the commodification of the body, hypermasculinity, performative health, and the influence of digital media.

The motivation for this research stems from both personal observations and growing societal concern about the mental and emotional toll that modern gym culture is having on young people. As someone who has engaged with fitness spaces both in person and online, I am interested in understanding how and why gym spaces that are intended to be inclusive for all body types and abilities often create pressure for conformity and social exclusion in the form of negative stereotypes and discrimination. Through this Personal Interest Project, I aim to uncover what toxic gym cultures are, their origins, who or what drives them, and the dangers they pose to the well-being of young individuals.

To thoroughly explore this topic, I employed a range of primary and secondary research methods. Primary research included two focus groups, one male and one female, both from Gen Z, as well as an interview with a gym owner who has worked diligently to eliminate toxic culture within his gym. The interview provided valuable insight into the commercialisation of gyms and how they encourage competition.. Additionally, an anonymous questionnaire was distributed to gather data on how young people experience toxic gym environments. Secondary research comprised academic articles, media reports, and statistical studies, providing a broader sociological and cultural framework for analysis. The PIP draws on relevant concepts such as socialisation, stereotyping, social conformity, and identity, as well as the evolution of gym cultures over time from the origin point to the present day.

This PIP is structured into three main chapters. Chapter one explores what toxic gym culture is and how it manifests in real-world gym settings. It investigates exclusionary behaviours, gender dynamics, and mental health consequences faced by gym-goers, particularly young men and women who do not fit narrow ideals of fitness perfection. Chapter two traces the origins of toxic gym cultures from the golden era of bodybuilding in the 1980s to the current influence of social media, illustrating how evolving beauty standards, celebrity fitness culture, and commercial marketing have driven the normalisation of harmful gym behaviours. Chapter three examines the driving forces behind toxic gym cultures, focusing on how gym environments, online influencers, and fitness communities contribute to pressure, exclusion, and unhealthy habits.

Ultimately, this PIP aims to raise awareness about the negative impacts of toxic gym cultures and to promote more inclusive, respectful, and realistic attitudes towards health, fitness, and society today.

## Log

My research into toxic gym cultures began when I attended a new gym for a free trial and was shocked by the non-inclusive and negative atmosphere. This sparked an idea to investigate these spaces and how they affect others. I believed this topic to be socially and culturally relevant as the impacts of non-conformity and social exclusion are very prevalent in our society, and I researched this further. As I explored the topic, I noticed body dysmorphia was mentioned frequently. Understanding the issue of body dysmorphia presents I modified my question to focus on how toxic gym cultures influence body dysmorphia in young people. This issue is relevant in today's society due to the ongoing struggle young people face with the idea of the 'perfect body'. This issue is significant to me as a regular gym-goer who frequently uses social media. I am exposed daily to toxic gym cultures, and social media fuels these by promoting unrealistic standards that many young people try to reach. This often leads them into unhealthy habits such as eating disorders and overtraining. For this reason, I wanted to use my platform to educate others, especially young people, about the dangers of toxic gym cultures.

I aim to make this PIP something I wish I could have read before I started the gym. At the start of my research, I found personal reflections and reports on how toxic gym cultures contribute to body dysmorphia in young people. However, after extensive searching, I struggled to find academic sources, but after a deeper look, I managed to find many useful resources. My PIP is structured around three key chapters. The first chapter focuses on what toxic gym cultures are and how to identify and understand if you are being influenced by one. My second chapter highlights where toxic gym cultures began, focusing on the golden era of bodybuilding in the 1980s. My final chapter is centred around the driving forces of toxic gym cultures, looking at who drives them, such as social media or gym goers themselves.

In my society and culture lessons, I planned my chapters and linked my methods, starting with a questionnaire that gathered close to one hundred anonymous responses to understand how young people are affected. Second, I held focus groups, one with young males, one with young females aged 16-18, to understand in first person how each experiences body dysmorphia differently. My final primary research method was an interview with my gym owner, who has worked hard to remove toxicity and create an inclusive environment. His experiences gave me valuable insight into toxic gym cultures and a broader understanding of

my topic. Overall, my PIP journey was smooth, largely due to careful planning and consistent research. The PIP process has been beneficial to me in my own life, as now I can see toxic gym cultures in my day-to-day life and avoid them, therefore improving my mental health. I have also been able to help others avoid toxic gym cultures and better their understanding of how to identify a toxic gym culture. Furthermore, from the PIP process, I was able to achieve a better understanding of the challenges young people such as myself face each day when comparing ourselves to Instagram influencers.

## Chapter 1- What are toxic gym cultures?

Toxic gym cultures have gained widespread attention in recent years, particularly with the rapid rise of social media and the heightened spotlight on mainstream fitness culture. This emerging phenomenon has not only reshaped the way fitness spaces are perceived but also fostered environments marked by exclusion, hyper-competition and subtle yet persuasive forms of social policing. At its core, the toxic gym culture refers to an atmosphere where individuals feel alienated, judged, and often unsafe due to prevailing norms that exploit certain body types' performance standards and gendered expectations. These spaces, which should ideally promote health empowerment and self-improvement, instead become arenas where societal hierarchies and inequalities are reinforced. A deeper sociocultural analysis reveals how gym environments often mirror broader systematic issues, such as gender-based discrimination dominating masculinity and the internalisation of harmful beauty standards. This unwelcoming environment serves as the baseline for toxic gym cultures. However, a deeper dive into the topic reveals broader societal issues at play, including social exclusion, degrading stereotypes, and discrimination based on gender. Evidence shows that these dynamics are not isolated incidents but are embedded in a wider cultural fabric that normalises exclusion and shaming under this guise of motivation and discipline. As a result, many individuals particularly women, non-binary people, and those who do not conform to conventional ideals of health, find themselves marginalised in spaces that should, in theory, foster inclusivity and personal growth.

A significant and deeply troubling aspect of gym culture is the practice of publicly shaming others, often through filming individuals without consent and disseminating the footage online for ridicule or criticism. This behaviour not only violates personal boundaries but also reinforces a culture of surveillance and humiliation, particularly among young people navigating fitness spaces. A young male recounted, "People putting other people down, filming others and putting them on the internet"<sup>1</sup> is a personal fear of his as he experiences the never-ending fear of making mistakes or not living up to expectations. This culture of performance and perfectionism fosters a climate of constant self-monitoring and fear of judgment. Women also face distinct yet equally harmful pressures. One female gym goer shared, "I feel uncomfortable with males around me in the gym. If I am the only girl around, I feel pressure from other people in terms of weight lifting."<sup>2</sup> Her account underscores how

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<sup>1</sup> Primary research: focus group

<sup>2</sup> Primary research, focus group

gendered power dynamics and the male-dominated nature of many gym spaces can result in feelings of alienation, hypervisibility, and intimidation. These personal narratives serve as powerful evidence of how toxic gym culture is not merely about isolated behaviour but is rooted in broader societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality.

Toxic gym cultures are increasingly driving individuals into unhealthy and obsessive relationships with exercise and self-worth. Rather than fostering holistic well-being, many gym environments have become sites of silent rivalry and internalised pressure where self-improvement is overshadowed by constant comparison. Through secondary research, the extent of this phenomenon is revealed by the experience of one individual: “But I’m the only one playing the game. This girl doesn’t know my name, and I don’t know hers. Frankly, I doubt she’s ever noticed me or is even aware I view her as competition”<sup>3</sup> This statement exemplifies the covert but intense competitiveness that permeates many gym goers where even strangers become perceived adversaries in an invisible contest of bodies, strength and progress another young male new to the gym culture shares “I have to keep up with others or else they will beat me”<sup>4</sup> reflecting on the immense pressure to match the performance of more experienced gym goers rather than feeling supported he feels demoralised and inadequate eroding his motivation and sense of belonging. These examples reflect a broader cultural shift where fitness has become less about personal growth and more about performance success. The gym, once a symbol of health and empowerment, now often mirrors the values of a hyper-competitive society that equates physical dominance with social worth and personal value.

The body dysmorphia fueled by toxic gym culture poses a serious threat to young people and contributes to an increasingly hostile fitness environment “In the U.S., it is estimated that about 1 in 50 people struggle with body dysmorphia,”<sup>5</sup> a statistic that suggests that nearly everyone knows someone currently dealing with or recovering from body image issues. Toxic gym cultures reinforce the idea that a person's worth and social value are directly tied to their physical appearance, leading many young individuals to chase unrealistic body standards. One male shared, “Feel there is a lot of pressure to look perfect, which leads people to abuse

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<sup>3</sup> M. Lewis, ‘When Did Gym Culture Get so Toxic?’ (*The Michigan Daily* 11 September 2024) <<https://www.michigandaily.com/statement/when-did-gym-culture-get-so-toxic/>> accessed 21 July 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Primary research, questionnaire

<sup>5</sup> ‘Ballard Brief’ (*Ballard Brief* 17 May 2024)

<<https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/the-link-between-social-media-and-body-image-issues-among-youth-in-the-united-states>> accessed 22 July 2025.



steroids just to be happy with themselves”<sup>6</sup> This comment reflects a dangerous reality that the pressure to achieve the “Ideal” physique can push individuals to harmful substances, risking serious health issues and even early death. Teenage boys often face immense pressure to put on muscle and obtain unrealistic strength, while teenage girls battle with unfair expectations. One female said, “I feel like I need to be skinnier but also have more muscle each day” This highlights the conflicting beauty standards imposed on women, forcing them into a never-ending chase for perfection, which is harmful and exhausting for them. Furthermore, toxic gym cultures are detrimental to the physical and mental health of teenagers and young adults; they place immense pressure on young people, pushing them towards harmful behaviours and lifelong struggles with body image.

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<sup>6</sup> Primary research, Focus group

## Chapter 2- Where did toxic gym cultures come from?

While researching toxic gym cultures, I discovered that pinpointing their origin is more complex than it initially seems. The rapid rise of social media and unrealistic expectations for young men and women have led to the formation of various branches of toxic gym culture, creating a complicated and interconnected system. Through my research, I have found that toxic gym cultures don't always need to come from a gym; they could come from a person, app, place or just an atmosphere. Toxic gym cultures can be obvious and scary, like big bodybuilding gyms, but they can also be hidden away in comment sections of social media posts. Toxic gym cultures come from various places and have changed over time.

Toxic gym cultures have existed for a long time, but originally looked quite different from what we have today. In their early stages, they were very bodybuilder-centred, mainly found in specific gyms where competition was encouraged. Members often constantly race with other gymgoers to become bigger and stronger. This early form of toxic gym culture was brought into the mainstream largely due to the rise of bodybuilding during the “Golden era” and its promotion in popular media “The focus on compound movements like squats and bench presses in modern workouts can be traced back to the 80s emphasis on building overall muscle mass and strength.”<sup>7</sup> this quote from an article on how 1980s bodybuilding has impacted today's gym cultures. While the continuity of competitive culture still exists today, particularly in gyms that focus on strength and image. Gym toxicity has evolved and changed. The rise of technology and social media has played a big role in reshaping it “100% social media has been the main point of toxic gym culture in today's life”<sup>8</sup> Platforms like Tik tok Instagram and YouTube now expose young gym goers to compare unrealistic body standards and influencer-driven fitness trends further fueling toxic behaviours in both competitive and general fitness spaces. “With the rise of social media, gym spaces have become stages where influencers spotlight their workouts for the whole world to see, blurring the lines between personal and performative fitness.”<sup>9</sup> This is a quote from an article that highlights the origin of toxic gym cultures in today's society through social media influences and how they have influenced a younger generation to follow their teachings. As a result,

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<sup>7</sup> D. Muscle, 'Bodybuilding in the 80s: What Is It, Why It Matters, pro Tips & More' (*Dr. Muscle University: Free Articles & Updates* 15 August 2024) <<https://dr-muscle.com/bodybuilding-in-the-80s-what-is-it-why-it-matters-pro-tips-more/#:~:text=The%20influence%20of%2080s%20bodybuilding%20paved%20the%20way%20for%20modern,for%20athleticism%20and%20physical%20beauty.>> accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Primary research, interview

<sup>9</sup> Primary research, questionnaire

toxic gym cultures have gone from being a niche bodybuilding-focused culture to a worldwide issue affecting many gymgoers.

The origins of toxic gym culture can be traced back to the 1980s, often referred to as the golden age of bodybuilding featuring prominent figures such as Tom Platz, Mike Mentzer and Arnold Schwarzenegger. During this era, bodybuilding fostered a culture of extreme physical idealism where individuals were valued primarily for their appearance or how much weight they could lift. This focus on aesthetic Perfection laid the foundation for a culture obsessed with performance and looks, contributing to issues such as body dysmorphia and fear of judgment in gym environments. Gyms, once regarded as inclusive spaces for personal improvement where everyone was welcome and encouraged, gradually transformed into environments marked by judgment and competition. These ideals became embedded in cultural norms, further amplified by social media and fitness marketing, which normalised body-shaming, steroid use and exclusion. These features are key identifiers of toxic gym cultures today. Through a focus group of 5 females, 60% of them stated that they had experienced toxic gym culture, with experiences such as exclusion and feeling intimidated by masculine energy in weighrooms<sup>10</sup>. With these norms comes the need to conform to unhealthy standards, and if you choose not to conform, you are shunned from the community. To fully understand the origins of toxic gym culture, it is important to examine how shifting societal ideals around health and beauty have evolved through commercialisation and the fitness industry since the 1980s. The continuation of these ideals has led to unhealthy eating and training habits, habits that encourage men to appear hypermasculine and physically perfect while encouraging women to be lean with flawless curves. Such expectations contribute to harmful disorders. Studies show that in 2015, 22% of male fitness instructors and 56% of female fitness instructors were dealing with an eating disorder<sup>11</sup>. Prompting unrealistic standards that disregard individual genetics and physical abilities. As one observer noted, “New and ridiculous fad diets appeared. Some quickly became irrelevant, but others became household names, like Slim Fast.”<sup>12</sup> This quote illustrates how the 1980s diet

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<sup>10</sup> Primary Research: Focus Group

<sup>11</sup> S. Çimke and D. Yıldırım Gürkan, ‘Factors Affecting Body Image Perception, Social Media Addiction, and Social Media Consciousness Regarding Physical Appearance in Adolescents’ (2023) 73 Journal of Pediatric Nursing <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0882596323002506#:~:text=Research%20demonstrates%20that%20greater%20exposure,distort%20adolescents%20body%20image%20perceptions.>> accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Muscle, ‘Bodybuilding in the 80s: What Is It, Why It Matters, pro Tips & More’ (*Dr. Muscle University: Free Articles & Updates* 15 August 2024) <<https://dr-muscle.com/bodybuilding-in-the-80s-what-is-it-why-it-matters-pro-tips-more/#:~:text=The%20influence%20of%2080s%20bodybuilding%20paved%20the%20way%20for%20modern,for%20athleticism%20and%20physical%20beauty.>> accessed 22 July 2025.

culture established harmful precedent that persists today, leading women to believe their bodies are inadequate unless they resemble the models promoting these diets. These norms have contributed to an unwelcoming gym culture that discourages many from participating due to fear of judgment or failure. “I try to go to the gym either early morning or late at night so people don't judge me for how much I lift<sup>13</sup>” This is the result of a young boy who has just started the gym and is a victim of the toxic gym cultures. However, as education around healthy habits continues to grow, more individuals are beginning to attend gyms. The emergence of women-only gyms has also created a safer, like-minded environment, allowing women to work out without feeling intimidated by male-dominated environments. Ultimately, the toxic standards established in the 1980s remain at the root of today's toxic gym culture.

Toxic gym cultures emerged as a result of broader societal and cultural forces that commodified the body, where ideals that favour individualism and self-discipline intersected with marketing strategies driven by profit to promote narrow physical ideals as tokens of success and social worth. Toxic gym cultures turn bodies into marketable objects that gain value over aesthetic appeal, not health this, in turn, creates an unrealistic standard of what it means to be healthy for young males and females driving them into a spiral of unhealthy habits “When I was younger, I was influenced by diet culture and felt like my worth was measured by my fitness and if I had a 6 pack<sup>14</sup>” this quote has a male speaking about his struggles with the fitness industries commercialisation of body ideals. Many young males and females struggle with the same problem, as shown in a focus group, where a male aged 17 says, “Never enough. Never big enough. Like an arms race<sup>15</sup>” This young adolescent is struggling with the commercialisation of body id, ideals leading him to believe that his body will never be good enough for this society. Society's ideals of individualism and self-discipline promote the stereotype that physical appearance is purely the result of personal effort while ignoring the genetic factors that play a large role. This creates a difficult and almost impossible task for young people striving to obtain the “Perfect body” A young male said “I've been working so hard to achieve my body but I can't achieve what I want<sup>16</sup>” This male is talking about his struggles with coming to terms that he cannot look like the gym influencers as he has different genetics to them, this has created a toxic culture as people who

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<sup>13</sup> Primary research, interview

<sup>14</sup> ‘Gym Culture and Body Image: A Toxic Mix for Men | Blog | Glow Group’ (*Glow Group Health & Wellbeing* 29 August 2019) <<https://glowgroup.co/gym-culture-and-body-image/>> accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Primary research, focus group

<sup>16</sup> Primary research: questionnaire

don't have the same genetics think of themselves as not good enough or they need to try harder. This toxic mindset feeds into the belief that failure to achieve a certain body is a personal flaw and not a unique genetic makeup that influences things such as muscle growth. The toxic gym cultures have led young adults to believe they can achieve the body of someone who has perfect muscle-building genetics while also taking performance-enhancing steroids "I want to look like that person so I work extra hard taking no days off to achieve it"<sup>17</sup>" while this young male thinks he needs to achieve this he, unfortunately is being misled and not researching the facts "Genetics impacts health, and it seemed safe to assume it also determines some of our fitness abilities. Not all of us are destined to be elite athletes, no matter how hard we train."<sup>18</sup>" this quote from a website breaks down the truth of genetics and muscle building exposing the toxic gym cultures for misleading young people. Contemporary society's obsession with self-optimisation has allowed the fitness industry to exploit cultural ideals of individual success and beauty through profit-driven marketing, reinforcing narrow standards of physical appearance, and promoting products that capitalise on insecurity and exclusion. This has been proven through a focus group where a young female said, "I get influenced to buy gym sets as the people modelling them are who I want to look like"<sup>19</sup>" The fitness culture exploitation of this young female's mind has brought profit to the industry, which is driven by fake marketing strategies such as influencer workouts and diets.

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<sup>17</sup> Primary research: focus group

<sup>18</sup> 'The Link between Genetics and Muscle Growth | ISSA' (*Issaonline.com*2023)

<<https://www.issaonline.com/blog/post/the-link-between-genetics-and-muscle-growth>> accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Primary research, focus group

### Chapter 3- Who Drives Toxic Gym Cultures?

Gym cultures are driven by three big things: the gym itself and the atmosphere within, social media, and people such as bodybuilders and unqualified fitness coaches. Exploring the driving forces of toxic gym cultures can help educate people on how to identify a toxic gym culture and how to avoid it. This chapter works to investigate why these things are driving toxic gym cultures, alongside the “So what” aspect of these issues, to understand the lasting effects they are having on young people.

The gym is the most common and most identifiable toxic gym culture it being the origin point for all toxic gym cultures. During an interview, an expert in the field and a current owner of a gym states “The gym in itself and the atmosphere around it is the biggest toxic gym culture<sup>20</sup>” Although many gyms are specifically trying to eradicate toxic environments within their gym many fitness institutions do not address the problem and this leaves the people who go to this gym experiencing stereotypes such as being put down for starting or being told they can't do it because of something they can't control as shown when a young male stated “My friends have experienced exclusion as they only started going to the gym<sup>21</sup>” this form of exclusion leads people who are looking to work on their health in a different direction and not allowing them to work in the gym. These gym environments often lead people to feel an overwhelming sense of competition as spoken about by this woman who has written about gym cultures “Instead of focusing on bettering our health and challenging ourselves, gym culture turns fitness into a competition and a way to judge others.<sup>22</sup>” these problems of exclusion and competition push people away from working out in the gym and further bettering themselves as a person instead it harms them emotionally this leads to fewer people attending gyms in general and fewer people getting the chance to improve themselves through working out.

Social media has become the most influential driver of toxic gym culture, according to many young people. Social media often presents an unrealistic standard of health and fitness, showcasing individuals who possess elite genes, follow intense training regimes and benefit from professional photography and lighting. As a result, many young males and females have created this image as attainable “It was found that those who compared themselves with others on social media scored 8.5 points (0–27) higher on a body dissatisfaction survey than

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<sup>20</sup> Primary research- interview

<sup>21</sup> Primary research- focus group

<sup>22</sup> M. Lewis, ‘When Did Gym Culture Get so Toxic?’ (*The Michigan Daily* 11 September 2024) <<https://www.michigandaily.com/statement/when-did-gym-culture-get-so-toxic/>> accessed 22 July 2025.

those who did not<sup>23</sup>” This distortion creates a harmful mindset which leads to young individuals to believe they must push themselves harder to reach these standards often leading to overtraining, fatigue and eventually injury “I need to go each day or i will fall behind<sup>24</sup>” this young male believes he will fall behind if he doesn't go to the gym each day which leads him to compete with unobtainable goals which will lead to further physical and mental problems. Furthermore, social media influencers, many of whom lack formal qualifications in nutrition or fitness, promote extreme and unstable eating habits to their large audiences. These influencers frequently prioritise profit over accuracy. Misleading young people who will jump at any chance to improve their bodies. Consequently, this can result in eating disorders such as chronic undereating or binge eating “I followed these tiny gym girls' eating advice and lost a lot of weight in an unhealthy way<sup>25</sup>” This young adolescent female has experienced dire repercussions for unqualified influencers giving advice. This persuasive culture has led many young individuals to feel inadequate or believe they are not trying hard enough, fostering low self-esteem or distorted self-image.

The final driver of toxic gym cultures is a specific person; these individuals are the key drivers of toxic gym environments. These can include gym influencers and those who exhibit negative or exclusionary behaviour within the fitness spaces. A prominent example in this group is gym goers who actively promote performance-enhancing substances, which are linked to severe health risks such as Liver tumours, or High blood pressure. “Problems with the heart and blood flow. And many more side effects that can lead to premature death<sup>26</sup>” The people promoting these substances to young people are contributing to the growing number of people who are trying to achieve their desired physique. The second group of people who are driving toxic gym cultures are those who exclude and disrespect other gym goers. These individuals reflect broader issues within a society where cultural norms tie physical appearance to respect given within the gym, which often leads to a social hierarchy that privileges those who are fit and idealised hypermuscular or have a “Perfect” figure. This culture alienates beginners and those with different body goals, transforming gyms from inclusive health-driven spaces to image-driven environments. This young male decided to

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<sup>23</sup> Ballard Brief” (*Ballard Brief* 17 May 2024)

<<https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/the-link-between-social-media-and-body-image-issues-among-youth-in-the-united-states>> accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Primary research- focus group

<sup>25</sup> Primary research- focus group

<sup>26</sup> ‘Learn about the Risks of Performance-Enhancing Drugs’ (*Mayo Clinic* 2025)

<<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/performance-enhancing-drugs/art-20046134>> accessed 22 July 2025.

quit the gym after experiencing exclusion for not being fit “I felt out of place and unwanted.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, the last person who drives toxic gym cultures is people who feed off praise; their influence is magnified by social media, where curated videos and images reinforce narrow and often harmful standards of fitness. In this way, toxic figures within gyms both shape and reflect wider social pressures that emphasise their appearance over wellbeing and competition over community support.

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<sup>27</sup> Primary research- focus group



## **Conclusion**

This Personal Interest Project has provided compelling evidence that toxic gym cultures significantly influence the development of body dysmorphia among young people, particularly focusing on Generation Z. Through personal reflection, I have become acutely aware of how many young individuals, including myself, are exposed to harmful environments and unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by toxic social media platforms and negative gym environments. These influences are alarmingly prevalent, reinforcing my hypothesis that social media acts as a primary catalyst behind the proliferation of toxic gym cultures that impact younger gym members.

In the first chapter of my project, I delved into the true meaning of toxic gym cultures and their profound effects on individual mental health and physical well-being, with side effects such as eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Utilising a comprehensive questionnaire, I gained valuable insights into the lived experiences of adolescents who have been affected by or victimised within these toxic environments. The second chapter examined the origins and development of these cultures; through a focus group, I uncovered how these environments differently impact males and females, shedding light on gender-specific experiences. In the final chapter, I explored the main factors that drive and sustain toxic gym cultures. An in-depth interview helped identify critical aspects that contribute to their persistence and widespread nature.

This research is highly pertinent to social and cultural studies, as toxic gym cultures substantially influence youth identity, self-esteem, and body image. The media's infinite acts as both a mirror and a mould for these influences, making it nearly impossible to avoid exposure. Crafting this PIP within the constraints of the word limit was a challenging but rewarding process; the time dedicated to editing and refining ensured a stronger, clearer final product. The findings demonstrate that toxic gym cultures not only foster body dysmorphia and related issues among young males and females but also challenge traditional stereotypes surrounding masculinity and femininity ingrained in these environments. Furthermore, this project seeks to combat stereotypes that frame gyms solely as competitive arenas, instead highlighting their broader purpose as spaces for health, community, and self-improvement. Promoting inclusivity and understanding is crucial in addressing toxic gym environments and driving social change, and ultimately, fostering a culture where everyone, regardless of

appearance or athletic ability, hears the motivating phrase, “ONE MORE REP,” can be a powerful step toward positive transformation in gym culture and youth well-being.

### **Annotated bibliography**

#### **Primary Research**

##### Focus Groups

I conducted two focus groups for my primary research. My first focus group was male-only and included five males aged 17-18 who all attend gyms. My questions focused on body image and how young males perceive the ideal image in today's society. My results helped shape my chapters and supported my hypothesis. Alongside my male-only focus group, I also organised and ran a female-only focus group, which was an idea suggested by my mother. A female-only focus group creates a more comfortable environment for females aged 16-19, who answered the same questions as the males. This provided two different perspectives, strengthening my argument for my hypothesis. The focus group was mainly referenced in my second chapter, where participants were asked about the origins of toxic gym cultures. The accuracy and validity of my findings are high, as I had separate groups for males and females. However, each group had only five participants, resulting in a small sample size that may not represent experiences elsewhere. Finally, there is some bias in my focus group, as all participants were chosen by me based on their gym habits, as I believed they would be good participants. Additionally, all participants attended the same school and were in the same year, which may have skewed the results.

##### Interview - gym owner

The interview I conducted was a one-on-one conversation between me and the owner of my gym. The interview consisted of ten questions, each one relating to my chapters and how my interview expertise can assist with the making of them. The interview proved useful as it supported my secondary research, alongside giving me a deeper understanding of my topic. The interview was successful in giving me information for all of my chapters, as I had a long conversation with my interviewee covering all aspects of my chapters. A useful part of this interview was that I have been a member at this gym for close to four years and have built a strong relationship with my interviewee, which created a more friendly discussion, which helped me get more out of the 10 questions I asked.. The validity of this method is strong, as the owner of my gym is highly educated and experienced in the gym community and aware

of the toxic environments some gyms possess; alongside this, he has worked to create a toxic-free environment. Bias within this interview includes the owner not being from Generation Z, which is what my PIP is focused on. Having a professional perspective has helped enhance my knowledge and given me useful information to help deepen the information in my PIP.

### Questionnaire

The construction of and the collation of data from my questionnaire were done at the very beginning of the PIP process in term four of 2024, where I worked diligently to get my questionnaire sent out to as many people as possible in a short span, so I could work on writing my chapters quickly and getting ahead of the PIP process. My questionnaire consisted of fifteen questions, both open-ended and closed, alongside a mix of multiple-choice and short-answer questions in order to obtain the maximum amount of knowledge and first-hand respondents. The questionnaire has a high level of validity as it has a high number of respondents and consists of a variety of questions, which were simple enough so that everyone would understand how to answer the questions to a full level of detail. Finally, the bias within my questionnaire was that the only respondents were young males and females who attended the gym close to my area, where I live, which leaves a hole in my research, as there were no respondents outside the small area it was sent to. Furthermore, my questionnaire was one of the most valuable sources within my PIP as it gave people a place to speak their mind while remaining anonymous, which created an ethical and inclusive environment to share their personal experiences.

### **Secondary Research**

Çimke, PhD *et al.* (2023). *Factors affecting body image perception, social media addiction, and social media consciousness regarding physical appearance in adolescents*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0882596323002506#:~:text=Research%20demonstrates%20that%20greater%20exposure,distort%20adolescents%27%20body%20i mage%20perceptions> (Accessed: 04 May 2025).

- This source talks about the factors affecting body image in young adolescents, where it talks about information on how social media has been causing harm to young

people. This site is highly credible and peer-reviewed, with a bias towards highlighting social media's negative effects on body image.

Kale, S. (2019). *Gym, eat, repeat: The shocking rise of muscle dysmorphia*, *The Guardian*.

Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jul/17/gym-eat-repeat-the-shocking-rise-of-muscle-dysmorphia> (Accessed: 22 April 2025).

- This source shows the dangers of toxic gym cultures and how they can lead to body dysmorphia as it follows the story of a male who from a very young age has been struggling with body image problems and chasing the perfect body, this source introduced me to a form of body dysmorphia called “Biggorexia” which mainly affects males and leads them to believe no matter how big they get it's not enough, this source helped me grasp the larger implications of body dysmorphia. This source was utilised in my first chapter, where I explored what toxic gym cultures are and what can come out of them. The validity of this source is high as it is a first-hand account retold years after recovering from their disorder; they speak to raise awareness and hold a neutral tone in order to exclude bias. Finally, this source works to help people struggling with the same problem and helps them find assistance.

Konstantinovskiy, M. (2024). *The impact of gym culture on eating disorders: Understanding the connection, How Gym Culture Can Contribute to Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating*. Available at:

<https://equip.health/articles/food-and-fitness/gym-culture-eating-disorders> (Accessed: 01 April 2025).

- The usefulness of this source was revealed through its ability to portray the negative side effects of toxic gym cultures, focusing on eating disorders. This was a point I covered in my second chapter, focusing on where toxic gym cultures come from, alongside what they can lead to. This site is a high-quality quality valid resource which has been reviewed by licensed providers. While the source has a good level of validity, it possesses some bias, as it may use this source to promote its treatment services.

Krzymowski, J. (2025). *The link between social media and body image issues among youth in the United States, The Link Between Social Media and Body Image Issues Among Youth in*

*the United States*. Available at:

<https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/the-link-between-social-media-and-body-image-issues-among-youth-in-the-united-states> (Accessed: 10 April 2025).

- The usefulness of this source was high as it provided me with real and on-topic statistics about the harmful nature of social media. This source helped me with the creation of my final chapter focusing on the driving forces of toxic gym cultures, and it helped me grasp the scale of the situation and how large the problem is. The validity of the information comes into question as it is an American source, and the statistics are not the same as in Australia, as I noted in my interest project. Furthermore, the source shows no opposing perspectives, alongside being student-written, which poses some bias within it.

*Learn about the risks of performance-enhancing drugs* (2023). *Performance-enhancing drugs: Know the risks*. Available at:

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/performance-enhancing-drugs/art-20046134> (Accessed: 19 November 2024).

- This site talks about and explains the dangers of performance-enhancing drugs that have been on the rise in toxic gym cultures, especially in young people, to help them achieve their desired body. I used this information in my second chapter, which talks about the emerging problems from toxic gym cultures. This source is highly credible through its evidence-based approach and its recent updating; it remains in a neutral clinical tone, emphasising the dangers of performance-enhancing drugs.

Lewis, M. (2024). *Gym culture toxicity. When did gym culture get so toxic?* Available at:

<https://www.michigandaily.com/statement/when-did-gym-culture-get-so-toxic/> (Accessed: 11 April 2025).

- This site gives a first-hand account of a female experiencing competitive, toxic gym culture and how gyms have evolved into hostile environments that are the opposite of what they should be. This site is moderately credible as a student publication with a clear bias to critiquing toxic gym culture and social issues.

Muscle, Dr. (2025). *Bodybuilding in the 80s: What is it, why it matters, Pro Tips & mor., Bodybuilding in the 80s: What Is It, Why It Matters, Pro Tips & More*. Available at: <https://dr-muscle.com/bodybuilding-in-the-80s-what-is-it-why-it-matters-pro-tips-more/> (Accessed: 21 March 2025).

- This source was useful because it helped me grasp a perspective of the gym culture in the 1980s and how toxic gym cultures originated from this era. This source was mainly used for my second chapter, focusing on where toxic gym cultures come from. The validity of this source is shown through the accuracy of the information, focusing on the historical context, but what is questionable about the source is the author's credentials and the lack of sourcing. Overall, the source is biased as it is a fitness brand, alongside the call to action at the end of the article, with a subtle promotion of their brand. This source is useful at a surface level to gain an understanding of the topic, but it is biased and promotional.

N/A (2023) *Gym culture and Body image: A toxic mix for men: Blog: Glow Group, Gym Culture and Body Image: A toxic mix for men*. Available at: <https://glowgroup.co/gym-culture-and-body-image/> (Accessed: 10 November 2024).

- This source is useful as it is a first-hand account of being a victim of toxic gym cultures and the toll it takes on a person physically and mentally. The source breaks down how a person who is suffering from toxic gym cultures heals and gets through their troubled time used this source in my first chapter, where it helped me cement a point about how toxic gym cultures deal great damage to people physically and mentally. The source is valid as it is a first-hand retelling by the person; alongside this, the source does not possess any bias, as the sole goal is to educate people on the dangers of toxic gym cultures.

N/A (2023b) *The link between genetics and Muscle Growth, The Link Between Genetics and Muscle Growth*. Available at: <https://www.issaonline.com/blog/post/the-link-between-genetics-and-muscle-growth> (Accessed: 21 May 2025).

- This source was useful as it delved into a more science-based side of body image problems and toxic gym cultures through the genetic factors that go into achieving someone's desired physique. This helped me put together my second chapter, as I

talked about genetic factors that limit people's ability to put on muscle at the same speed as others. The validity of this source is high as it is backed by respected international sports scientists, although it points in a biased direction to the ISSA and their genetic testing.

N/A (2024) *The relationship between social media and body dysmorphia: D'amore, Social Media and Body Dysmorphia*. Available at:

<https://damorementalhealth.com/social-media-and-body-dysmorphia/> (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

- This source was useful to me through its accuracy in explaining what body dysmorphia is and how it affects people. This assisted me in my first chapter, which looked at 'what are toxic gym cultures', where I explained the negative outcome of toxic gym cultures, such as body dysmorphia. The validity of this site is good, but it lacks peer-reviewed or academic credibility. This site may have some bias as it emphasises mental health issues to promote its treatment services.

Pinto, E. (2022). *Body goals then and now: Why the 'perfect' figure is a total fallacy. Body Goals Then and Now: Why the "Perfect" Figure is a Total Fallacy*. Available at:

<https://katiecouric.com/health/mental-health/body-image-ideals-history/?utm> (Accessed: 26 May 2025).

- This source is centred around females and the body image problems they struggle with, alongside the impossible standards they are made to face. I used this article in my final chapter, talking about where toxic gym cultures came from, which stems from eating disorders and body standards. This article gave me a detailed rundown of female body standards through the years. This site is credible because it features expert input and clear authorship. This site possesses bias through the mainstream Western views and promotes awareness.