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Making sense of the body: embodied information engagement among Cordilleran gym users and enthusiasts

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Abstract

Introduction. Besides being a place for lifting weights, the gym is an interesting environment to explore how certain individuals performing routine activities engage with information. This paper investigated Cordilleran gym users' interaction with information sources in pursuit of their fitness goals.

Method. Applying sense-making approach, the research conducted interviews with forty-one regular gym users (students, athletes, trainers, and fitness enthusiasts).

Analysis. Qualitative data analysis was carried out, specifically using thematic analysis, assisted by Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) Miner Lite.

Results. Gym users desire physique enhancement, weight management, overall well-being, sports training, and recreation. The identified information gaps concerned gym rules, workout techniques, nutrition, and muscle development, which were obtained from trainers, peers, and online communities. Information gathered is validated through personal experimentation, observation of trainers' physical fitness, and engagement levels of online influencers.

Conclusion. The body plays an important role in information seeking, acting both as a source and a validation tool. The ideal Cordilleran physique drives many individuals to join the gym to feel a sense of belonging in the community. The gym was found to be a rich information landscape; a place where social groups with different interests, lived experiences, and cultural backgrounds engage with everyday information through group and individual activities and practices.

Introduction

The people of the Cordillera Region in Northern Philippines are known for being physically fit and healthy because of their diet and lifestyle. The Igorots, the indigenous highland people from the region, are reputed to be strong, tough, and sporty, often described as having a *warrior spirit*. This is why combative sports like mixed martial arts (MMA) are favoured by Cordillerans (Anolin, 2021). The success of the MMA group Team Lakay has further popularised the sport in the region (Jacinto, 2020). Team Lakay, based in La Trinidad, Benguet, is internationally acclaimed, and its fighters are recognised for their warrior spirit, which they attribute to their roots (Floresca & Uy, 2019; Owens, 2020). Asians in general tend to have prominent calves, which are noticed by others (Bazile, 2022). According to Fernandez (2023), anthropologists describe the Igorots as more muscular than other Filipino ethnic groups. Online forum participants on Reddit (2023) attribute the Igorots' muscular physique to their active lifestyles, livelihoods, and genetics. Many Cordillerans maintain these traits through bodybuilding and weightlifting. Early exposure to combative sports in education shows that physical fitness remains popular and continues to grow in the region. Education officials note that Cordillerans are called the *Fearless Cordillerans* for consistently winning the most medals in combative sports during athletic meets (Pangpangdeo, 2019). Historically, sports were introduced to indigenous peoples to 'modernize' them (Enverga, 2022). Today, Cordillerans are reclaiming their relationship with sports and fitness.

The strong involvement of Cordillerans in modern sports and gym exercise can be explained by their cultural emphasis on physicality and the desire to achieve a fit body. Beyond stereotypes, Cordillerans maintain their physique to gain the benefits of being healthy and fit. Working out at the gym and engaging in resistance training are among the most effective ways to achieve a healthier body (Steele et al., 2017). Understanding how Cordilleran gym users seek information could show how physically active people in this culture interact with information sources to reach their fitness goals.

This paper covers how the Cordilleran or Igorot body moves with information inside the gym. An interesting study revealed that 'the Igorot body becomes a site for colonial and fascist counter-discourse that fuses Igorot bodily customs and their claimed resistance heritage to subvert their colonial misrepresentations and perform their self-acquittal' (Calabias, 2022). The Cordillerans in this aspect embody 'resistance heritage' through their body, accessories, and customary practices. These acts of resistance come in forms of war dances, performances, foot works, and symbolic gestures that serves as an embodiment of the Cordilleran identity (Decenteceo, 2024). This makes the Igorot body an interesting subject to study embodied information seeking.

Beyond the rich cultural context, this could reveal distinct information behaviour and practices from a physically active community that emphasises physicality. The paper focuses on how they experience information in their context, specifically inside the gym. Hoyte (2019) recommends examining the embodied, enactive mind since information is constructed by the individual, shaped by experience, and contextually situated. It is also important to recognise that the body acts as an information source and site of knowledge in space and time (Lloyd, 2023). The goal is to explore how bodies interact with, and experience information within their context.

The interaction between fitness communities and information is notable because misinformation persists within them. Studies among fitness trainers have shown gaps in how evidence-based knowledge is gained and used in practice (Bennie et al., 2017; Stacey et al., 2010). This shows that more research is needed to improve the quality of information and its use in training routines. Such studies can provide practical insights into how information is communicated and managed, helping coaches, trainers, and gym operators sustain gym users' motivation and intention for consistent exercise (Ong et al., 2022). González-Serrano et al. (2024) reinforces that up-to-date, reliable information about physical activity encourages participation. Identifying the most trustworthy sources and channels for gym users could improve access to reliable fitness

information. Determining which information users value as credible can inform the design of a tailored information dissemination strategy (Jalali et al., 2020). This study aims to add to the growing literature on information research in lifestyle contexts.

Research objectives

The aim of this study is to find out how Cordilleran gym users seek, evaluate and use information regarding their fitness practice. The study aims to answer the following questions:

(RQ1). What are the motivations and goals of Cordilleran gym users in pursuing fitness?

(RQ2). What information do they seek and use to support these goals?

(RQ3). What are their preferred information sources and criteria for evaluating fitness-related information?

(RQ4). How do cultural, regional, and social contexts shape their information behaviours and practices?

(RQ5). How are information behaviours embodied through gym users' physical, sensory, and experiential engagements in the gym environment?

Literature review

Information behaviour and information practices

This study adopts the information behaviour perspective to examine how gym users locate, interpret, and use information related to their fitness routines. Information behaviour research views an individual as an agent who interacts with manual information systems, such as a newspaper or library, or with computer-based systems, such as the World Wide Web, to satisfy a goal (Wilson, 1999). It examines information seeking as an internal mental process and sees knowledge and meaning as products of individual cognitive processes, emphasising motivation, decision-making, and resolving uncertainty. According to Talja et al. (2005), cognitive constructivism in information science stems from the idea that knowledge is created by the mind, not given. This cognitive constructivist perspective highlights that people go to the gym for different reasons. With its focus on human cognition and action (Pilerot & Ekström, 2025), the information behaviour approach is well-suited to studying the motivation, goals, information needs, and information use of gym users.

However, the study acknowledges that individuals who engage with fitness information are social beings influenced by their interactions with others. Individual gym users are part of a larger fitness community and belong to certain gyms with exclusive perks and access to equipment or resources. To extend the information behaviour approach, socioconstructivist and post-humanist perspectives are incorporated to address the social dimensions of gym activities. These frame information seeking as a process shaped by social interactions within the gym environment. In addition to cognitive and behavioural frameworks, the framework of information practice enables analysis of how information activities are shaped by social and material conditions, including routines, conversations, and actions in specific communities and environments (Lloyd, 2010; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017; Olsson et al., 2018). This socio-constructivist activity sees knowledge acquisition and meaning construction as internalised and co-constructed. This method focuses on agency, the material, and practices as the unit of analysis (Pilerot & Ekström, 2025). This allows analysis of information seeking through embodied practices in the gym. Information practice provides a valuable framework for examining how individuals participate in activities as members of groups or communities within the gym setting (Talja et al., 2005).

This study integrates the individual orientation of information behaviour with the collective emphasis of information practices. It views information seeking as a cognitive process shaped by motives and influenced by social context. The analysis begins with gym users' motivations, information needs, and sense-making processes, then incorporates a practice-based perspective that accounts for the physical, cultural, and spatial contexts of gym environments. Dervin's (1998) Sense-making framework is used to investigate how individuals address information gaps. Information practices include the role of context, embodied experience, and social interaction in shaping information sense-making.

Sense-making in the gym

Sense-making has long been used to study gym culture. Researchers have explored how people make sense of their experiences and information in daily life. In gym and sports contexts, sense-making helps explain knowledge and skill acquisition, program design, and decision-making in physical activities. In physical education and sports, it clarifies how learners interpret movement and develop skills (Rönnqvist et al., 2019), how teachers decide on physical education programmes (Beni et al., 2023), and how athletes and parents navigate elite youth sports (Smits et al., 2018). Studies show that referees use storytelling to shape their professional identity and role in organisations (Manuti et al., 2016). Research on basketball players highlights how sense-making affects quick decisions during games (Macquet & Kragba, 2015). These studies examined how different individuals use sense-making to understand the logic of a physical activity. Sense-making produces the knowledge and understanding that are the two fundamental attributes of a physically educated or physical-activity-literate individual (Godbout, 2023). In sports psychology, practitioners make sense of their professional identity through contextually situated meanings from professional experience (Haluch et al., 2021). In health studies, sense-making, along with self-understanding and self-awareness, informs people's decision-making in complex health situations or healthcare innovations (Naveh & Bronstein, 2019; Patrício et al., 2019). Sense-making offers a flexible way to explore how people interpret experience and learn. This can also determine how decisions are made in changing environments.

For gym users, this means they create meaning from their physical activity and the information they encounter. They develop routines, goals, and strategies by interpreting information from their environment and social interactions in the gym. Sense-making helps us understand how fitness enthusiasts think and act as they navigate information in these settings.

Information in the gym

This study does not focus on physical activities and routines from a sports and exercise science perspective. Instead, it examines how gym users obtain and handle information to make sense of their gym experience. The gym is not limited to weights, plates, bars, lifting, sweating, and grunting. Fitness knowledge and information are also present inside the gym (Brighton et al., 2021, p.176). This study aimed to determine how gaining knowledge and information is embodied. Most studies describing information behaviour in the gym have explored which information sources gym users and fitness communities use. There is abundant fitness and health information online, especially on social media, shared by experts, role models, and 'gymbros' (Wood, 2024). However, Thomas et al. (2023) highlighted the prevalence of low-quality information across platforms and the critical role of source credibility and content framing in combating misinformation. Similarly, Coopoo et al. (2020) recommends further education of gym users regarding nutritional supplement consumption, especially since their study found that only 41% of respondents read supplement label information. This emphasises the need to understand why gym users prefer and consume information available online.

Beyond understanding the motivations for consuming online wellness information, the selection of information gym users retrieve online also describes their information behaviour. Several studies have highlighted criteria and strategies gym users use to evaluate information. Sidhu (2018)

found that gym users see the number of likes, shares, followers, and comments as referrals or recommendations from others. The problem with popularity-based metrics is that some content is misinformation; presenting misleading information or unrealistic expectations for wellness consumers (Dedrick et al., 2020). Thomas et al. (2020) referred to this as low-quality information, which is prevalent across platforms. This calls for further understanding of how gym users compare information from different media, especially between academic or scientific sources and those with established reputations in the online fitness community. There are channels and pages on the Internet and social media discussing which wellness information is legitimate (Hill, 2024). These platforms spark discussions and heated arguments about what is effective. Wood (2024) mentioned that social media platforms serve as venues for information dissemination and discourse. This intrigued the researcher to know how gym users make sense of the discursive nature of gym-tok, a genre of fitness-related content on the social media platform TikTok, and apply it to their own regimen.

Besides retrieving information, studies have revealed information creation practices among gym users. Individuals training in the gym view self-tracking to document their progress and training quality through notebooks and records (Kristensen et al., 2021). Some use mobile applications or personal health information management to track their activities and progress (Feng et al., 2017). This raises the question of what other strategies gym users use to create knowledge or information through personal tracking. Lupton (2014) explored various self-tracking techniques, including private, pushed, communal, imposed, and exploited. This present study examined how gym users engage in and interpret personal tracking within the gym.

Bodies in the gym

Besides information practices, other concepts are embodied in the gym. The gym is a space where men perform their embodied masculinity, specifically through skills and physical labour as key markers of masculine status (Gibbs, 2022). Within gym culture, muscularity is interpreted through socially embedded norms, and these interpretations are shaped by gendered expectations (Hedblom, 2009, pp.94-104). This is an opportunity to examine how this is embodied in a demographic with a specific culture or concept of masculinity. Sossa (2017) revealed how culture can be embodied in the context of fitness activities.

Through exploring how the traditional concepts are being echoed in this day, Andreasson and Johansson (2014) discussed that gym and fitness culture have transformed over time and might have brought changes in how masculinity is viewed and practiced in the gym. In the local setting, studies have also explored the embodiment of masculinity among spornosexual men in the Philippines (Cagas et al., 2010; Cagas et al., 2014; Ceria-Ulep et al., 2011; Hinay, 2019). Not only masculinity, but also the embodiment of all genders in the gym could provide significant insight into how contexts shape the meanings individuals make (Clark, 2017; Coen et al., 2018). The separation alone of sexes in competitive sports is evidence of gendered embodied subjectivities and asymmetrical power order in sport (Larsson, 2016). Even experiences such as pleasure, pain, and enjoyment can be studied by examining individuals' embodied practices (Wellard, 2016b). Studies also show that embodied practices differ across sports, as each requires distinct bodily actions, performances, and rules that make up its culture (Cherrington, 2016; Evers, 2016; Gubby, 2016; Roy, 2016). However, the body can be a flawed tool for studying embodiment. Matthews (2016) argued that, in being 'nosy' about embodiment, researchers must turn their sociological imagination inward to develop some appreciation for the shadows their embodied engagement with social life casts on their research. Wellard (2016a) suggests that adopting an embodied approach to research offers opportunities to reveal experiences that are simultaneously emotional, physical, social, moral, and political. To illuminate theoretical and analytical dilemmas, researchers must maintain an embodied, reflexive, empathetic, reflective, and inductive approach in the field (Brighton et al., 2021, p.14). Rojas (2015) even recommends that researchers find ways to become

an insider, go beyond socially desirable answers, and remember that not all bodily practices can be verbalised.

This study examines gym users' information behaviour and the practices that shape their participation in fitness settings. Both perspectives provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gym users engage with information during their fitness journey. In addition to an inventory of information-seeking practices, this study explores how gym users interpret their circumstances in pursuit of fitness goals. It examines how individuals fill information gaps, respond to questions, develop ideas, and acquire necessary resources.

Conceptual framework

This study uses two distinct orientations to examine how gym users engage with information. Besides examining the phenomenon separately, it treats information behaviour and information practices as complementary concepts and, where possible, identifies their intersection. Information behaviour research emphasises identifying individual information needs, information seeking, and decision-making (Wilson, 1999). This concept is grounded in cognitive constructivism, which views individuals as meaning-makers who internalise information (Savolainen, 2007; Talja et al., 2005). It is also rooted in social psychology and examines individuals' thinking, experiences, and actions as its unit of analysis (Pilerot & Ekström, 2025). In this aspect, information behaviour foregrounds attitudes, motivations, and decision-making.

In contrast, information practice examines how information is embedded in collective routines, shared norms, and social participation from a social perspective. It is grounded in social constructivism, which holds that knowledge is a product of shared activities (Savolainen, 2007; Talja et al., 2005). Practice is the unit of analysis, focusing on embodied actions and rooted in social philosophy, especially practice theory and phenomenology (Pilerot & Ekström, 2025).

This research examines gym users' routines and practices. It treats going to the gym as both an individual, goal-oriented decision (information behaviour) and as participation in a shared programme, social routine, or bodily norm (information practices). The research is guided by two complementary analytical frameworks: Dervin's sense-making methodology (1998, 2015) and the concept of embodied information practices (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017; Olsson et al., 2018).

The sense-making framework helps explain how individuals address information gaps during their fitness journeys. Its focus on lived situations, discontinuities, and individualised meaning-making aligns with examining gym users' motivations, needs, and evaluative processes. The framework of embodied information practices explores the gym as a social and physical environment where information is sought, enacted, observed, and communicated through movement, posture, routine, gesture, and shared norms. This perspective highlights the collective enactment of information (Hoyte, 2019). Combined, these frameworks allow a reflexive approach to connecting cognitive and social constructivism. This study explores how participants in the Cordilleran gym process and embody information. It views the gym as a site of convergence, personal decision-making, and participation, integrating cognitive sense-making and socially situated practice.

Method

To understand how Cordilleran gym users construct meaning and engage with information in the gym, the study employed Dervin's (2015) sense-making approach to guide the analytical framework. It also informed the data collection strategy, specifically on the phrasing of interview questions. This approach is consistent with prior library and information studies exploring how individuals make sense of complex, embodied, and affective information experiences (Lloyd, 2010; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017).

Recruitment was purposive to obtain participants who could provide rich narratives about gym users' experiences. Prominent Cordilleran bodybuilders and regular weight-loss clients were first identified, then a diverse set of gym users was recruited through referrals and network-based invitations in local fitness communities and gyms. In total, forty-one participants were included: students, student-athletes, gym coaches or trainers, gym employees, professional bodybuilders, weightlifters, CrossFit practitioners, and calisthenics athletes.

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between May and December 2024. Interviews were held in person for participants in Baguio City and nearby areas, or via online video calls for those outside the region. Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted in English, Filipino, Ilocano, or a mix, given the multilingual nature of the respondents. The interviews followed Dervin's sense-making methodology (2015), which views participants as experts of their worldview and focuses on how they construct meaning through information encounters. Dervin's nine-point framework enabled moving from participants' past and present situations, to their information needs and emotions, and finally to their sense of agency, power, and identity in the gym.

Data collection concluded when saturation was reached. Saturation was indicated by identifying a new type of gym user whose responses closely resembled previous participants. For example, calisthenics enthusiasts, MMA fighters, and power lifters had similar experiences to bodybuilders and athletes. The data was then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify meanings shared across participants' narratives. One researcher conducted semi-structured interviews at various gym locations. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Transcribed and anonymised data was systematically coded and organised. QDA Miner Lite was used in the process, with themes developed and discussed among researchers for coherence. Further validation was done through member checking, using follow-up interviews and gym visits. The research process adhered to established ethical guidelines from participant recruitment to data analysis.

Type of Gym Client Participant	Number of Participants
Athlete/Varsity (AT)	7
Body builder (BB)	10
Calisthenics enthusiast (CA)	3
Gym coach (GC)	6
MMA fighter (MF)	2
Powerlifter (PL)	1
Professional body builder (PB)	6
Weight loss client (WC)	6

Table 1. Gym client participant type

Results

Motivations of gym users

The gym journey of clients interviewed began with different triggers. Prior events led them to develop a purpose for going to the gym. Most started after recommendations from experts like

doctors, coaches, or physical education teachers. Athletes training for competition are often advised by coaches and physical education teachers to include the gym in their routines (AT4, MF2, AT6). Doctor visits and health scares started the gym habit of non-athlete adults (WC1, WC4, WC2). Some noticed insecurities or signs that they needed to take better care of their bodies as they aged. Observing weight gain or difficulty with physical activities sparked the need to improve their health through working out (WC3, WC1, PB5). Recommendations from friends and relatives who already went to the gym also motivated some. Others were convinced or became curious about how people achieve and maintain fitness (WC6, BB2, PB5). Student athletes and young gym users wanted to try bodybuilding after being introduced to fitness in gym classes. Discussing the gym in class made them curious to try working out (AT6, BB2). Others became interested through exposure to online and print content promoting the gym, especially from mainstream media and inspirational fitness videos on social media (PB1, BB4, BB8, AT7). These varied events prompted respondents to develop a purpose for going to the gym.

Goals of gym users

The findings revealed that most participants go to the gym to achieve a certain physique. Some set body goals based on fitness influencers, relatives, and celebrities like David Laid, Cris Bumstead, and other well-known fitness personalities (BB7, BB4, BB2). Beyond aesthetics, some work out to lose weight and reduce body fat, especially adult gym users who notice signs of aging and a slowing metabolism (WC1, WC4, AT7). Others deal with mental health problems and want to improve well-being or boost self-esteem and confidence (BB6, BB2). Several gym clients interviewed were student and professional athletes who use the gym for strength conditioning to supplement their training in athletics and combative sports that are popular in the region (AT4, AT3, AT6, MF2). Some participants described going to the gym as a hobby rather than a structured pursuit of fitness. They saw gym visits as a more productive or health-oriented alternative to social drinking or other activities they considered vices or unhealthy lifestyles (BB9, BB1, PB4, BB6). Their stories suggest the gym became a positive substitute for previous social or leisure activities. Many initially had no specific goals related to body transformation, weight loss, or athletic improvement. They simply stumbled across the gym or fitness content online, grew interested, and eventually made the gym part of their lifestyle. These purposes influenced the initial information needs of the gym users.

Information needs of gym users

Depending on their goals and level of commitment, gym users had different information needs. They first familiarised themselves with gym terminology and jargon by asking or searching online (BB8, BB4, PB1). Initially, they asked about house rules, etiquette, rates, opening hours, and other requirements (BB3, GC3, AT2). Some admitted they thought the gym was just about lifting weights, so they later sought information on specific workout routines and programmes. When they realised they were doing something wrong, they then inquired about proper programmes and routines (BB3, BB7, PB1). After joining the community, they became interested in advanced topics like health, nutrition, physiology, and anatomy to target specific muscle groups. Those who intensified their workouts researched calorie intake and food supplements (BB10, WC2, PB5). Future competitors looked up exercises to define or enlarge certain muscles. Learning about biomechanics, kinesiology, and how muscles work became important to maximise workouts (PB5, PB2, PB4). The progression from basic to advanced knowledge is clear in the information needs of gym users.

Information sources of gym users

Gym users consult various sources when seeking information about the gym or working out. Most gain information from people by asking questions of fellow gym users, gym staff, coaches, and trainers who they can approach easily during workouts (BB3, BB1, PB4). Others search online on social media and the web, including fitness applications that provide workout routines and dietary suggestions. Some respondents search these contents out of curiosity, while others receive

recommendations from social media algorithms or personalised advertisements (WC3, BB4, PB1). Some pick up information by observing others at the gym and listening to conversations of other gym users to get tips on lifting (WC1, WC5, BB3). Few respondents consult academic papers, but those who are committed, obtain information from science-based sources such as books, health magazines, and gym infographics (PB5, BB4, WC1, MF2). Gym users encounter science-based articles only when content creators they follow share them (BB2, BB4, BB7). Some, especially coaches who want to share quality information with their clients, attend seminars, classes, and training to gain more knowledge about working out and exercising (GC1, GC2, GC5). Gym users use varied sources depending on the level of commitment they want to exert in working out.

The body as an information site

The body itself can be a key source of information or stimuli that prompt gym users to develop the habit of going to the gym. For most participants, their bodies signalled when it was time to work out. Clients in the weight loss program felt motivated to exercise after sensing heaviness and a decline in vitality (WC5, WC1). One adult gym user described that the physical signs of aging and weight gain from declining metabolism were motivating factors (WC2). Comments or feedback from health professionals and peers about their physical state were also signals for starting to go to the gym (WC1). Such feedback from others, including experts, coaches, and fellow gym users, was often based on observations and assessments of the participants' physique or fitness level. Comparing themselves to others and not meeting physical standards for their age and gender could also motivate them to start going to the gym.

These signals triggered their search for information about exercise routines, diet plans, or fitness programmes to address what they sensed in their bodies. One mixed martial arts fighter shared that he sensed mid-fight that something was lacking in his training (MF2). Physical strain and perceived weakness prompted him to change his routine, consult his coach, and research strength conditioning programmes. In this case, the body provided real-time information that guided his decisions. Some individuals become conscious of their bodies and feel the need to get in shape when they look in the mirror (WC2). Coaches also relied on bodily cues to identify clients' needs before formal consultation, assessing whether someone needed to build muscle or lose weight based on appearance (GC3). Athletes may sense that their body is limiting their sports performance because of a less-than-ideal body mass (AT4). These visual and sensory cues that guide personal and professional fitness decisions show the body acting as an active agent in the information process.

The body in information evaluation

Trial and error was the best way for participants to test workout routines and see if they worked for their bodies. Gym users relied on their own bodies to validate results. They gathered information from various sources, but applied and evaluated routines themselves. Most described this validation process as testing new exercises, diets, or techniques and observing how their bodies responded (MF2, BB3, BB7, BB4). Athletes highlighted the risks of imitating fitness routines they saw elsewhere. For them, gym training was mainly supplementary conditioning rather than muscle-building, so they adjusted or stopped exercises that felt harmful or ineffective (AT6, AT4). Similarly, bodybuilders noted that their bodies could tell if a workout was effective and that being aware of these sensations was important (PB5). One bodybuilder added that programmes could be negotiated with coaches, who must be informed about how the body responds to the workout (PB7).

Participants also used social and digital forms of verification. Those with access to coaches often asked questions or cross-referenced multiple sources (AT5, AT4, AT3, AT2). They compared by testing advice to see which worked. For people sources, they checked if coaches were certified (PB2, PB3, PB6, GC3). Most said a simple visual assessment of a coach's physique was enough to judge credibility, since physique is noticed before certificates or educational background (PB2,

GC2, BB8, WC1). For online content, engagement statistics indicated legitimacy and comments confirmed or debunked fitness claims (PB1, BB4, BB6, PB5). Gym users also looked for red flags for sponsored information to see if a creator was genuinely sharing tips or just promoting products (BB7, BB9, BB1, PB4). Ultimately, they enacted what they learned and checked for themselves if it was valid.

The body in information exchange

There is also a unique form of communication among gym users. Body language gives information on how they will interact with others. According to a gym coach, some signs show whether someone wants to be disturbed or approached. The way a person carries themselves, such as wearing headphones or full gym attire, often shows if they are open to conversation or prefer working out alone (GC3). Confidence and fluency in movement help coaches spot inexperienced lifters (GC3). In this sense, bodily competence conveys status within the gym. Facial expressions and visible strain are cues that gym users instinctively interpret as signs of fatigue or struggle, helping them decide when to assist, such as spotting during lifts (PB1). These exchanges show how the need for support is communicated physically through observation and response.

Gestures and subtle signals complement these interactions. Thumbs-up gestures or nods are quick acknowledgments during equipment sharing, while eye contact or small waves indicate turn-taking or readiness to give up a machine (BB3). Fist bumps are also non-verbal cues cited by participants to show they are heading out. Often exchanged after a workout or when passing a fellow regular, the fist bump acknowledges presence or shows respect (GC1, GC2). Professional bodybuilders notice that flexing can seem like bragging to some, but it is part of training muscles for competitions (PB5). These practices are examples of non-verbal exchanges that govern gym interaction. A nod, a quick fist bump before leaving, or stepping aside for someone finishing a set are gestures gym users use to show they understand rules of space. These are not widely known, and some gradually pick up these communication practices (WC2, GC2, BB3). However, gym coaches recognise that these etiquette signals are not obvious, even though they are regularly observed among gym users. Explicit signage for respecting space, not hogging weights, or reminders to wipe equipment after use are still posted in the gym (WC2, GC2).

The body in information creation

Gym users use various information creation practices, such as workout tracking and weight progress recording. Some use notebooks and whiteboards at the gym, while others prefer digital tools like mobile devices (BB4, BB8, PL1). Others document their journey through diaries and vlogs to capture progress, updates, and gym activities they want to share. Many agreed that taking pictures and videos of themselves is important for comparing before and after (WC1, GC4, PB1, CA1). They also share these daily logs and pictures online to inform others of their progress. Some have turned these activities into a way to provide fitness information and started online fitness coaching careers (GC4, GC5, PB2, GC2). Applications like My Fitness Pal (2026) for calorie intake, and Gym Workout Trackers and planners (Hevy App, 2026), are available for free or with paid versions, making it easier to record workout information (BB4, BB7, PB5, WC6). Others rely on mental notes and memory of previous workouts as a basis for their next routines. Participants noted that presence of mind during the workout is important, as they can get preoccupied and forget what they are doing mid-set (WC6, WC2, PB1, AT7). They acknowledge the usefulness of tracking and recording, but find it sometimes inconvenient to do between sets.

These strategies employed by gym users are evidence of the role of the body in information creation as a subject of documentation. Coaches keep records to monitor their clients on their daily records and check-ins (GC3). Taking pictures and videos of their bodies to compare before and after workout routines or programmes is also a form of documenting progress. Some compare right after their exercise, while the pump is still there, while others compare after months or years (BB8). Besides storing bodily statistics, some curate and upload these contents online for personal

diary purposes or as a way of sharing progress and outcomes through social media vlogs. Sharing progress may inspire others to also go to the gym (CA1).

Cultural attribution of gym users

When asked about the advantages of Cordillerans in the gym, several participants mentioned lifestyle, genetics, environmental factors, and attitudes. According to some participants, lifting and physical labour are common to the lifestyle of locals; them being farmers, truckers, and miners (BB6, AT7, WC3). Others acknowledge the naturally stocky genetics of Cordillerans and have prominent muscle insertions (BB4, GC5, MF1, PB1). They based these on observations and even on stereotypes perpetuated in mainstream media. Environmental factors were also cited, specifically mentioning that the region has mountainous terrain compared to the flat lowlands in other regions of the Philippines (AT4, AT7, WC6). Additionally, the warrior attitude is often attributed to highlanders having willpower and motivation. This warrior attitude is also acknowledged by most combative sport athletes who represent the country in international fights (MF2, PB6, PB1, GC2). But for some, there is no innate advantage as the gym culture or lifestyle is not unique to any heritage (BB4, BB9, PB2). One participant added that everybody could integrate themselves into the habit of working out regardless of cultural background (BB1).

Discussion

Information behaviour of gym users

Participants began going to the gym for various reasons. Most cite being influenced by online fitness content. As in other studies, social media and online content motivated people to go to the gym (Mooney, 2018). Some were prompted by recommendations from experts or gym users, and often by doctors providing health prescriptions such as exercise and diet (Rooney et al., 2023). Others attributed their initial interest to exposure to fitness and wellness during physical education classes. Studies have shown that physical education helped develop students' autonomous motivation, which predicted their intention to be physically active (Fierro-Suero et al., 2023). Some were motivated by observing their own bodies and comparing themselves with others. The environment, exposure to content, and personal needs define the starting point of an individual's motivation to go to the gym. Dervin (1998) identified this situation as a starting point for individuals engaging in sense-making tasks, in this case to achieve specific gym goals.

This motivation translates into the different goals that gym users set. Participants revealed they aimed to achieve a certain physique, weight loss, improved wellbeing, and supplements for sports training and recreation. Studies confirm that common goals of gym users include losing weight, building muscle and strength, and unwinding from work (Mooney, 2018). Similarly, local studies show that extrinsic motivations are among the top reasons Filipinos participate in exercise activities (Cagas et al., 2014, Manasan et al., 2023). Although some gym users reported goals such as improving physical health and body image, these aims may still be associated with forms of extrinsic regulations (de Liz et al., 2018). This may also involve enhanced self-confidences gained from a more positive perception of their body image (Taniady et al., 2024). Gym users appear to be motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors (Elbe et al., 2023; Kopp et al., 2020).

Gym users encountered various gaps in achieving their goals. Information gaps identified by study participants included not understanding terminology and jargon, gym rules, basic forms and routines, proper nutrition and diet, and knowledge about muscles and the body. Rules, regulations, and proper forms are the first things one must know in the gym to prevent injuries and accidents (Nae et al., 2022). Communicating in the gym requires learning bodybuilding jargon that is often derived from scientific discourses such as medical and anatomical jargon (Strong, 2003). As they advanced their gym training, participants cited the need to learn more about nutrition to improve. Athletes and bodybuilders also need to enrich their knowledge about nutrition (Embry et al., 2023). Competing bodybuilders, weightlifters, and powerlifters expanded their knowledge about anatomy

and biomechanics. Integrating biomechanical principles and anatomical knowledge to target specific muscle groups helps improve performance and minimise the risk of injury (Kobayashi et al., 2025; Penichet-Tomas, 2024). As their commitment grows, their information needs progress from basic to advanced knowledge.

These information needs, shaped by individual intentions, motivations, and goals, lead gym users to seek fitness information from various sources. To fill these needs, gym users identified people (doctors, friends, relatives) and online sources (internet and social media). Individuals consult online sources for health and wellness information because they are accessible, free, easy to use, and recommended by others (Stvilia & Choi, 2015). Only a few participants mentioned referring to science-based articles or attending seminars and training to enrich their knowledge. Similar to the findings of Hernandez et al. (2025), non-trustworthy sources such as the internet and media were the most used, while few gym users referred to experts and professionals. Some gym users resort to eavesdropping or simply observing others in the gym to learn how to lift or exercise. Learning through observation is one way to gain information about how to perform a skill, and it helps beginners cope with the challenges of learning a new sport, especially in interactive sport environments (Law & Hall, 2009).

Drawing from Savolainen's view that information needs operate as both the trigger that initiates information seeking and the force that sustains it (2017), the narratives of Cordilleran gym users show how goal-oriented intentions generate awareness of discrepancy between their existing knowledge and the information required to achieve their training goals. Beliefs, traits, and motivations also affect individual needs, information seeking, and decision-making (Ahmed et al., 2019; Peck, 2020; Uslu & Durak, 2022). These intentions or goals create a need for information and shape how people seek it. Gym users tend to prefer sources that help them reach their goals, whether through quick online searches, tips from fellow gym users, advice from experts, or detailed workout plans from websites. This relationship between gym users and varied information sources forms to transform the body into the ideal physique (Lloyd, 2023).

Information practices of gym users

Participants described listening to and observing their bodies while working out. Understanding one's limitations or genetic maximums can help achieve fitness goals (Andreasson & Johansson, 2015). Physiological responses to exercise vary widely, highlighting the need for customised training programmes that consider each athlete's unique traits (Yu, 2025). Gym users must have body awareness to understand soreness, muscle pump, pain, and other sensations during workouts (Andreasson, 2014). Learning about the body aids exercise, but information from social media about the ideal body image can negatively impact users through comparison and lack of representation, reducing enjoyment of fitness content (Dennehy et al., 2024).

The active and passive roles of the body in connecting and interacting with information are also revealed in the study. There are embodied information practices such as active seeking, scanning, non-directed monitoring, and information search by proxy (McKenzie, 2003). The findings confirm the active, not passive, role of the body in the enactment of information practices (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). Gym users access information sources through interactions with fellow gym users and trainers within physical gyms (Brighton et al., 2021, p.71), by joining online fitness communities (Ilhan, 2018), or following content creators (Dennehy et al., 2024). The purpose of connecting to these institutions and communities is to obtain health and fitness information, self-presentation, socialisation, and entertainment (Ilhan, 2018). Gym users also interact with these sources by building relationships in physical gym communities (Brighton et al., 2021, pp.12-15) and by commenting, liking, and messaging content creators in online fitness communities (Dennehy et al., 2024).

Gym users use their bodies as tools for information exchange. They communicate and share information in the gym through body language, including hand signals, facial expressions, and gestures. Nonverbal communication such as hand signals, gestures, and touch behaviours is common in sports, with some behaviours being sport specific (Furley & Shweizer, 2020). Coaches, referees, and athletes in various sports communicate through nonverbal signals (Furley, 2021; Furley & Roth, 2021; Smilkova, 2020). In exercise activities, nonverbal communication through physical demonstrations shows proper form or exercise execution (Islam et al., 2024). Increasing awareness and control of body language is encouraged to better integrate into the gym community (Sossa, 2017).

The study also notes practices that document the body. Information about progress and vital data is recorded through traditional and digital means (Feng et al., 2017; Feng & Agosto, 2019; Patel & O’Kane, 2015; Sossa, 2017). Gym users record visual markers of progress through pictures and videos. Some select or edit relatable images and share progress to inspire others (Dennehy et al., 2024). Gym users also create fitness content documenting their progress. Some gyms share before and after pictures of clients to motivate others to continue working out. Sharing gym progress among peers can improve gym habits and attendance (Condliffe et al., 2017). The visible capacity and build of the body represent physical capital in the fitness industry (Harvey et al., 2014). Coaches use their bodies to supplement certifications, and a better body often leads to greater success.

The gym context also highlights how information practices are embodied. The information-sharing practices of people in the gym show how information is not just accessed or understood through the mind. Information can be expressed and derived from and through the body by observing, validating, communicating, and creating information. These are among the practices described by the participants which necessitated the physical involvement of the body in the process either as a medium or the subject. Bodies are not passive, but are active creators and anchors of information, making the embodied experiences of practice visible (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). Especially in the gym, the body enacts procedural knowledge, feels the proprioceptive feedback, and signals performance data. While earlier studies have looked at the body as a place of information (Villanueva, 2021) or explored body-based records and nonverbal communication in different settings (Dudak et al., 2024; Shankar et al., 2018; Solhjoo, 2022), this study brings these ideas into the gym environment. The gym is a unique information landscape where the body becomes the source of information, the subject of information creation, and a medium of information exchange. The body both references and expresses the conditions of life, serving both actor and medium (Lloyd, 2023).

Information experiences of gym users

Examining gym users’ narratives showed that some aspects of their information handling do not fit exclusively into information behaviour or information practice. Individuals treat both conventional and non-conventional information sources subjectively. Some forms of validation are internally processed, while trial and error in workouts is information practice. Certain activities exist in both the cognitive and social spheres of a gym user. This points to the need for another lens to understand how gym users interact with information.

Because most information gym users obtain comes from non-conventional sources, they use varied strategies to validate it. Literature warns that much fitness content is potentially harmful or unhealthy (Curtis et al., 2023) and that fitness is being commodified by some brands and influencers (Wood & Watson, 2023). Participants mainly rely on trial and error to verify information. This validation is common in fitness communities, where people copy or imitate exercise routines (Jong & Drummond, 2020). Athletes and bodybuilders also use this approach to evaluate nutrition information, supplementing it with research and reviews (Embry et al., 2023). For online content, views, likes, insights, and engagement indicate credibility. For some, trustworthiness depends on how many others accept the content rather than the creator’s professional background (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2021). The physical appearance of coaches,

trainers, influencers, or other human sources also affects perceived credibility (Soekmawati et al., 2022). Participants said they selectively ask for information from physically fit individuals.

Beyond assessing credibility through visual inspection and online engagement, gym users also use their bodies to validate information. They interpret muscular burn, stiffness, soreness, a pounding heart, and exhaustion as immediate pleasures and signs of achievement and well-being (Sossa, 2017). Applying information to exercise or diet is a common way to check its legitimacy (Jong & Drummond, 2020; Embry et al., 2023). Because gym information is mostly enacted, learning through actual and vicarious experiences is common in the gym (Dennehy et al., 2024). Still, professional supervision is advised to prevent injuries in recreational weightlifting and bodybuilding (Bonilla et al., 2022).

These dynamics reveal a dimension of information activity that neither cognitive nor social orientations solely capture. This paper does not claim that information experience is simply the intersection of information behaviour and information practice; as noted by Huvila et al. (2021), the boundaries between information behaviour and information practice are already fluid, and Sahut (2023) emphasises that information experience stands as an autonomous field of study. As Lloyd (2014) explains, understanding information experience means looking at how people create meaning in shared spaces and practices. In the gym, this includes seeing how gym users feel, interpret, and value information through personal, physical experiences. According to Yu and Liu (2022), information experience can be defined as a person's subjective, pre-reflective living through their life as an information user in the information sphere of the lifeworld. It further complements the cognitive acts and social practices analysed in the study through information behaviour and information practices. Information experience emerging from phenomenology analyses lived experience of the individual and examines the subjective encounter with information (Bruce et al., 2014). These experiences are lived by the body of gym users as they interact with other body subjects and materials temporally and spatially (Lloyd, 2023).

Despite their shared focus on the human-information interaction, information behaviour and practice offer different viewpoints on how people engage with information. Recent reviews show (Huvila & Gorichanaz, 2025; Sahut, 2023; Zhong et al., 2023) that each approach emphasises a distinct part of that interaction. This includes the cognitive actions that motivate information seeking (Savolainen, 2017), the social and material practices through which information is used (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017), or the lived and emotional experiences that influence how information is handled (Savolainen, 2020). The gym, as revealed in this study, is a particularly rich information landscape. As shown in the figure below, the same activities disclose different insights into how gym users navigate, interpret, and construct meanings, depending on the lens to be applied. Looking through these three perspectives in parallel, therefore, makes the complexity of information engagement in this setting visible and shows the value of keeping the orientations analytically distinct.

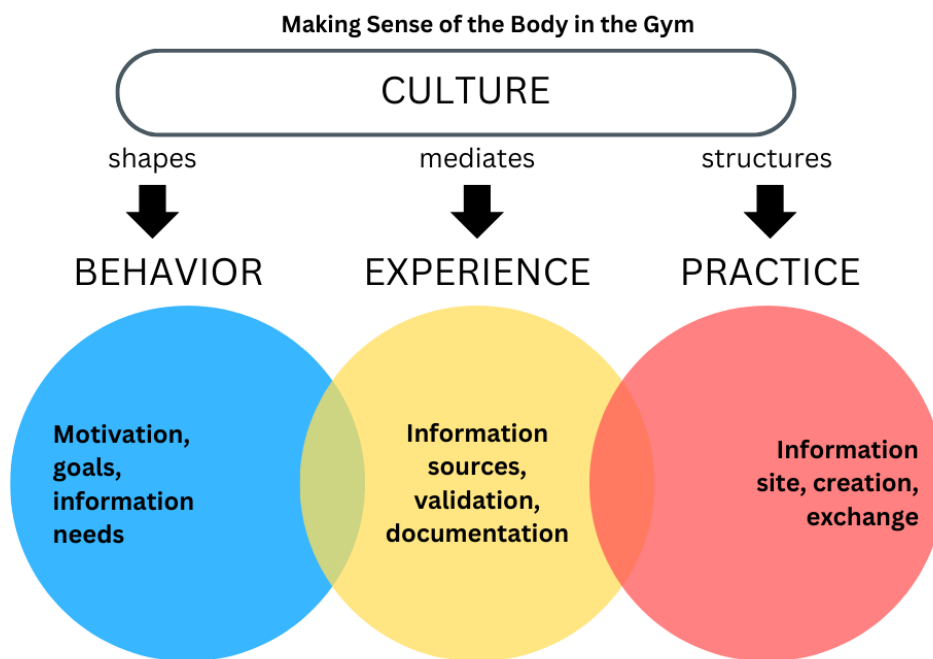


Figure 1. Making sense of the body

Cordilleran gym culture

While the preceding sections differentiated information behaviour, information practice, and information experience for clarity, the accounts of Cordilleran gym users show these aspects do not work separately. Thinking, doing, and experiencing are always part of larger cultural contexts. Culture shapes what people see as an information need, which sources they trust, how they communicate knowledge through their bodies, and how they judge information as meaningful or valid. Culture cuts across all three lenses. It frames cognitive orientations toward fitness, informs the social and embodied practices that govern gym interaction, and influences the lived interpretations through which information becomes personally and collectively significant. Rather than being a separate theme, the cultural dimension grounds the gym as an information landscape that shapes how Cordilleran gym users engage with information tied to their histories, environments, and identities. Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for understanding gym users' information engagement across three lenses. It also shows how culture influences, structures, and mediates these dimensions.

Sossa (2017) stated that there is always a cultural construction of bodies; bodies are not neutral biological essences, and the body must be seen as a state of multiple interpretations and processes. This means culture also resides in bodies, and every culture outlines unique knowledge about the body within its worldview, giving it a unique sense and self-worth. Cordilleran gym users identify their body as a product of their environment, lifestyles, and genetics. Most integrate gym habits into their lifestyle or enjoy lifting and conforming to the ideal 'Igorot body'. The body's role as a site for constructing identities through distinct markers of difference and similarity was evident among Cordillerans through tattoos or blackened teeth (Salvador-Amores, 2009). Campbell-Meier and Krtalić (2022) described tattoos as visual records through which individuals communicate and make sense of their lived experiences. Instead of cultural markers such as tattoos, several Cordilleran gym users in the survey formed their identity by attaining a 'warrior' physique through bodybuilding or weightlifting. An examination of how gym users interpret their bodies as embodied narratives of their fitness journeys enriches the conceptualisation of the information experience in the gym. They interpret the toned body as a visual document of their lived experience as a gym

user. These culturally specific ways confirm identity in relation to a fellow fighter and provide a sense of belonging by signifying membership in the wider MMA community (Sparkes, 2017). The sense of belonging in Cordillera fitness communities can be seen through team names that bear cultural information such as Team 'Lakay' or Bardilleranz. However, some also acknowledged that gym culture is not exclusive to one heritage or cultural background. Individuals can integrate into various fitness settings by increasing physical and cultural capital in different ways (Brighton et al., 2021, p.54).

Culture directly influences information behaviour by shaping what an individual considers an information need, which goals feel important, and which bodies are seen as ideal or attainable. For many participants, the desire to identify with their culture motivated them to seek information from peers with similar goals of attaining the ideal Cordilleran body type. This subconsciously shapes their motivations, goals, and the information needs they develop. In this relationship-based information culture, people seek information from social groups and manage information to encourage a sense of identity (Choo, 2013).

Culture also structures how their bodies enact these information practices, as gym activities are easily integrated due to familiarity with agricultural labour, carrying loads, and living in mountainous terrain. This makes lifting, endurance work, and physical discipline feel familiar for Cordilleran gym users rather than foreign. The body becomes a visible representation of practice while performing these routine activities (Lloyd, 2014). This includes associated emotion and mental challenges (Lloyd, 2023), such as pain, struggle, drive, or fatigue. This embodied lifestyle practiced through working out allows them to amplify their identity as Cordillerans.

The lived experiences of the gym users also show how information is culturally mediated. The meaning people assign to bodily change, progress, and physical expression is based on shared values and identities. Cordilleran gym users see their toned and trained bodies as a visual document that tells the story of their effort and cultural identity. Information becomes subjective and internally experienced as gym users change or improve their narrative identity through working out (Wong et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The investigation of Cordilleran gym users' information practices revealed that various motivations prompted them to go to the gym. Environmental triggers and personal desires shaped their motivation, leading to goals like attaining a certain physique, losing weight, improving wellbeing, supplementing sports training, and passing the time. To achieve these goals, they needed information about terminologies, gym rules, basic forms and routines, proper nutrition and diet, and muscle functions. They consulted various sources, including people and online platforms, to meet these needs. To validate information, gym users tested or implemented it to decide if an exercise or diet program worked for them. They also considered factors like the trainer's physical appearance or the engagement received by online fitness influencers when evaluating the trustworthiness of a source. Additionally, practices like documenting gym progress using traditional and digital means were found.

The role of environment and social factors in shaping the gym culture among Cordillerans was also revealed in the study. Achievement of the 'ideal Cordilleran physique' perpetuated by mainstream media for some is a form of identity conforming practice which encourages the gym culture among the Igorots. This confirms that the physical body is a site for constructing identities for modern Cordillerans and achieving a sense of belonging in local fitness communities.

The body plays an active role in information-seeking. It does not just contain the mind; it also interacts with other bodies. For gym users, the body provides signals to modify workouts based on progress or failure. It connects with information sources in both physical and online communities,

whether by going to the gym or joining online forums to exchange fitness information. Enacting information also requires the body's involvement in validating exercise or diet information. Gym users implement exercises and listen to their bodies to decide whether to continue or modify routines. The body also conveys information through body language and gestures, such as non-verbal cues for turn-taking or assistance. Finally, documenting the body completes the information experience, helping monitor gym progress and create fitness content that inspires others. This allowed Cordilleran gym users to assign unique value and meaning to their bodies as products of the gym.

These findings show that the gym is a rich information landscape where cognitive processes, social practices, and lived experiences simultaneously unfold. Information seeking among gym users explored through the three lenses yields distinct yet complementary insights into information research. Culture was also found to play a role in all these orientations of information research. It influences what and where information is pursued by gym users, structures how information practices are enacted through the body, and informs the way people attach meanings to physical transformation. The information activities of Cordilleran gym users are not only practical or individual but deeply situated within cultural background and shared identities.

Recommendations

Gym users depend not only on information available in the gym but also seek information from other sources. The body plays an essential role in how we interact with and respond to fitness information. Librarians and information specialists may create a gym literacy program to help gym users distinguish between quality and fake fitness information. The findings may help gym owners and fitness professionals decide how to share information with clients. Coaches can maximize gym users' information-sharing and creation strategies. They may also suggest that clients get to know their bodies before adapting any exercise routines. Gym users can apply practices from this study, such as contributing visual documents to online communities that enrich fitness information for beginners and amateurs. Theoretically, this deepens our understanding of the body as an information site in the gym context. This paper highlights its role in information sharing and creation. Individuals engaged in physical activities still seek information but rely on visual documents and bodily sensations. Future researchers can explore other sports and fitness activities where unique participant interactions with information may be revealed.

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