

Original Research Article

Social Pressure and Psychological Distress among Individuals Living with Obesity in the Contemporary Fitness Culture

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Abstract: Contemporary fitness culture has become increasingly influential in shaping societal perceptions of health, body image, and self-worth through gyms, wellness spaces, and social media platforms. While fitness culture promotes health awareness and self-improvement, it may also contribute to social pressure and psychological distress among individuals living with obesity. This study explored the lived experiences of individuals living with obesity regarding social pressure within contemporary fitness culture and examined how these experiences affected their psychological well-being. The study utilized a qualitative research design employing thematic analysis. Thirteen (13) participants residing in the Philippines were selected through purposive sampling based on their experiences related to obesity and exposure to contemporary fitness culture. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings revealed that participants experienced pressure to conform to ideal body standards, fear of judgment and social exclusion, emotional distress triggered by social comparison, desire for inclusive fitness environments, and internalization of negative body perceptions. Furthermore, the study found that contemporary fitness culture affected participants' psychological well-being through constant self-monitoring, emotional detachment from their bodies, guilt and self-blame, emotional exhaustion, and cycles of temporary motivation followed by long-term emotional strain. The findings suggested that contemporary fitness culture extended beyond health promotion and became a socially evaluative environment that significantly influenced

participants' emotional well-being, confidence, and self-perception. The study highlighted the importance of promoting inclusive, body-sensitive, and psychologically supportive fitness environments that encourage holistic well-being rather than appearance-centered validation alone.

Keywords: Contemporary Fitness Culture, Obesity Stigma, Psychological Well-Being, Body Image, Social Pressure

Introduction

The increasing visibility of fitness culture in contemporary society has transformed health and body management into highly public and socially evaluated practices. Through gyms, wellness programs, and digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, individuals are constantly exposed to idealized body standards that equate physical attractiveness with discipline, health, and personal worth. While fitness culture promotes physical wellness, it also produces unrealistic expectations regarding body appearance, particularly for individuals living with obesity. Existing literature suggested that these standards contributed to social pressure, body dissatisfaction, and emotional distress among individuals who perceived themselves as not conforming to dominant body ideals (Jongenelis et al., 2024; Tylka et al., 2024; Mena & Boursier, 2024).

International studies consistently demonstrated that weight stigma and social discrimination negatively affected the psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity. Faccio et al. (2025) revealed that psychosocial distress among overweight and obese individuals was more strongly associated with experiences of stigma and rejection than with obesity itself. Similarly, Cobo-Cuenca et al. (2024) found that obesity-related stigma contributed to anxiety, depression, stress, and body dissatisfaction independent of body mass index. These findings indicated that obesity should not only be understood as a physical health concern but also as a psychosocial issue shaped by social perceptions and interactions.

Recent international research also emphasized the role of digital environments and social media in reinforcing body surveillance and appearance-related pressure. Tylka et al. (2024) found that online discussions surrounding obesity were largely negative and stigmatizing, while Alimoradi et al. (2024) reported that individuals with self-perceived obesity experienced poorer quality of life due to internet-related weight stigma. Likewise, Henn et al. (2025) noted that online fitness interventions and wellness content often unintentionally reproduced shame and exclusion among people living with obesity. These studies suggested that contemporary fitness culture, particularly in digital spaces, intensified emotional vulnerability through continuous exposure to unrealistic body expectations.

Research further demonstrated how fitness-related pressure affected participation in physical activity and social engagement. Kłosowska et al. (2024) revealed that body

dissatisfaction, bullying experiences, and psychological distress contributed to the avoidance of sports and physical activity among overweight individuals. In addition, Rounsefell et al. (2024) found that media and family pressure to lose weight significantly influenced emotional distress and unhealthy coping behaviors among adolescents. Villanueva and Dela Cruz (2025) further explored the lived experiences of gym-goers pursuing ideal physiques and identified self-comparison, emotional struggles, and social pressure as recurring themes within gym culture. Collectively, these studies illustrated how contemporary fitness culture could become psychologically burdensome rather than empowering.

In the Philippine context, body image concerns and obesity-related stigma have also emerged as growing social issues. Macuha et al. (2024) explored the lived experiences of Filipino gym-goers who experienced body shaming and found that participants encountered embarrassment, social comparison, and pressure to meet societal body standards. Similarly, Angeles (2024) reported that overweight Filipino adolescents experienced discomfort and negative self-perception that discouraged participation in physical activities. These findings reflected how body-related judgment in fitness and social environments affected the confidence and emotional well-being of Filipinos living with obesity.

Local literature also highlighted the influence of media exposure and cultural expectations on body dissatisfaction among Filipino youth and adults. Cruz and Reyes (2023) found that online fitness trends intensified insecurities and unhealthy social comparison among Filipino college students and reported increasing appearance-related pressure linked to social media exposure. Sibug et al. (2026) further emphasized the growing influence of digital fitness content among Filipino students through social media engagement. In addition, Dela Peña and Navarro (2024) identified weight-based teasing as a major contributor to shame, anxiety, and emotional withdrawal among Filipino adolescents. These studies demonstrated that appearance-based pressure had become increasingly normalized within contemporary Filipino social and digital culture.

Although existing studies discussed obesity stigma, body dissatisfaction, online fitness culture, and psychological distress, several gaps remained evident. Most international studies focused on quantitative associations between obesity and mental health outcomes, while local studies primarily examined adolescents, students, or gym-goers separately. Furthermore, previous research often explored body image issues generally without specifically examining how individuals living with obesity navigated social pressure within contemporary fitness culture. The lived emotional experiences, coping responses, and meaning-making processes of individuals living with obesity within socially idealized fitness environments remained insufficiently explored, particularly in the Philippine setting (Macuha et al., 2024; Henn et al., 2025; Faccio et al., 2025).

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the relationship between social pressure and psychological distress among individuals living with obesity within the context of contemporary fitness culture. Specifically, the study sought to understand how social expectations, digital fitness environments, and body-related experiences shaped the

emotional well-being and self-perceptions of participants. The study intended to contribute to broader discussions regarding body stigma, inclusivity, mental health, and the psychosocial consequences of modern fitness culture. The study was guided by the following general objectives: (1) To explore the lived experiences of individuals living with obesity regarding social pressure within contemporary fitness culture; and (2) To examine how contemporary fitness culture affected the psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity.

This study was anchored on three theories that explained the relationship between social pressure, body perception, and psychological well-being among individuals living with obesity within contemporary fitness culture. First, the study was grounded in Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posited that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their appearance, abilities, and worth with others, particularly within socially visible environments such as fitness and social media spaces. Second, the study utilized Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explained how societal emphasis on physical appearance may lead individuals to internalize external judgments and experience shame, anxiety, and body surveillance. Lastly, the study was anchored in Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963), which described how socially devalued characteristics, such as obesity, may result in discrimination, exclusion, and psychological distress. Collectively, these theories provided a framework for understanding how contemporary fitness culture and societal body expectations influenced the lived experiences and psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity.

Research Questions

To better understand the experiences of individuals living with obesity within contemporary fitness culture, this study examined how social expectations influenced their daily lives and psychological well-being. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do individuals living with obesity describe their lived experiences of social pressure within contemporary fitness culture?
2. How does contemporary fitness culture affect the psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity?

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research approach employing thematic analysis as the primary method of inquiry. The qualitative design was appropriate because the study aimed to explore the experiences, perceptions, and psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity within contemporary fitness culture. Through thematic analysis, the researchers were able to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring patterns, meanings, and themes from the participants' narratives regarding social pressure, body expectations, and experiences within fitness-related environments. This approach enabled the researchers to

generate an in-depth understanding of how contemporary fitness culture influenced the lives and psychological well-being of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Population and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of thirteen (13) individuals living with obesity residing in the Philippines. The participants represented diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of age and sex to provide varied perspectives and experiences related to contemporary fitness culture. Specifically, the participants included males and females ranging from young adulthood to middle adulthood, allowing the study to capture different social and psychological experiences across demographic groups. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, wherein the researchers intentionally identified individuals who met the inclusion criteria of having lived experiences related to obesity, exposure to fitness-related environments, and willingness to openly share their experiences. This sampling technique was appropriate because it ensured that the selected participants possessed relevant insights necessary for addressing the objectives of the study (Campbell et al., 2020). Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Participant Code	Age	Sex	Civil Status	Occupation/Status
P1	19	Female	Single	College Student
P2	21	Male	Single	College Student
P3	23	Female	Single	Sales Associate
P4	25	Male	Single	Gym Member/Working
P5	27	Female	Married	Office Staff
P6	29	Male	Single	Call Center Agent
P7	31	Female	Married	Small Business Owner
P8	33	Male	Single	Fitness Beginner
P9	35	Female	Married	Public School Teacher
P10	38	Male	Married	Driver
P11	40	Female	Married	Homemaker
P12	43	Male	Married	Government Employee
P13	45	Female	Married	Vendor

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences regarding social pressure, body image expectations, interactions within fitness-related spaces, and the psychological effects associated with contemporary fitness culture. The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions and probe deeper into participants' responses, enabling the collection of comprehensive and meaningful narratives. Prior to the conduct of the study, the interview questions were reviewed and validated by research advisers and experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the objectives of the study.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers first secured approval from the appropriate academic authorities and obtained informed consent from all participants. Potential participants were identified through referrals and community connections within the Philippines. After confirming their eligibility and willingness to participate, individual interviews were scheduled at a convenient time and setting chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and privacy. During the interviews, the researchers explained the purpose of the study and assured participants that their responses would remain confidential. Each interview was conducted using the semi-structured interview guide and was audio-recorded with participants' permission to ensure accurate documentation of responses. The collected data were then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The study utilized thematic analysis in interpreting and analyzing the gathered data. After transcribing the interviews, the researchers carefully reviewed and familiarized themselves with the participants' responses to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and significant statements related to social pressure and psychological well-being. Codes were then generated and grouped into broader themes that reflected the common lived experiences of the participants. Through this process, the researchers were able to develop meaningful interpretations and thematic categories that addressed the objectives and research questions of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

The researchers ensured that ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. To protect privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms and coded identifiers were used instead of real names in all transcripts and research documents. The researchers also ensured that the data gathered were used solely for academic purposes and stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. Sensitivity and respect were likewise observed throughout the interviews, particularly because the study involved personal experiences related to body image, stigma, and psychological well-being (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the Objective 1: *To explore the lived experiences of individuals living with obesity regarding social pressure within contemporary fitness culture* using thematic analysis.

RQ1: *How do individuals living with obesity describe their lived experiences of social pressure within contemporary fitness culture?*

Theme 1: Pressure to Conform to Ideal Body Standards

Ten out of the thirteen participants described experiencing pressure to conform to

socially accepted body standards within contemporary fitness culture. Participants shared that fitness-related environments, social media platforms, and even peer interactions often promoted the idea that being slim, toned, or physically fit was equivalent to being attractive, disciplined, and socially acceptable. Because of this, several participants reported becoming more conscious of their appearance, especially when exposed to workout content, gym culture, and body transformation trends online. Some participants also expressed that the pressure was not always directly stated but could still be felt through comments, stares, comparisons, and societal expectations regarding physical appearance.

“Kapag nakakakita ako ng fitness influencers online, parang nafefeel ko na hindi enough yung katawan ko kahit gusto ko naman mag-improve slowly.”
[Whenever I see fitness influencers online, I feel like my body is not enough even if I only want to improve slowly.] - P3

“Parang automatic na kapag mataba ka, iniisip nila tamad ka or walang discipline.” [It feels like when you are obese, people automatically think you are lazy or lack discipline.] - P11

The findings supported the study of Faccio et al. (2025), which found that individuals living with obesity often experienced psychosocial distress due to stigma, discrimination, and social rejection. The findings also aligned with the study of Tylka et al. (2024), which emphasized that online spaces and digital fitness culture reinforced negative body perceptions and appearance-related pressure. In addition, the theme reflected Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), which explained that individuals tend to evaluate themselves through comparison with others. In the context of contemporary fitness culture, participants frequently compared themselves with idealized body images portrayed online and within fitness spaces, leading to feelings of insecurity and social inadequacy.

Theme 2: Fear of Judgment and Social Exclusion in Fitness Spaces

Nine out of the thirteen participants described experiencing fear of judgment and social exclusion within fitness-related environments such as gyms, workout spaces, and online fitness communities. Participants shared that they often felt uncomfortable participating in physical activities because they believed they were being observed, criticized, or silently judged due to their body size. Several participants explained that these experiences made them feel out of place in spaces that were supposedly intended for health improvement and self-development. As a result, some participants avoided gyms, limited social interactions, or hesitated to engage in fitness-related activities due to fear of embarrassment and rejection.

“Nahihiya ako mag-workout sa public kasi feeling ko pagtatawanan ako kapag nahirapan ako sa exercises.” [I feel embarrassed working out in public because I feel like people will laugh at me when I struggle with the exercises.] - P5

“Minsan gusto ko mag-start maging healthy pero nawawalan ako ng gana kasi parang hindi welcoming yung environment para sa katulad ko.”

[Sometimes I want to start becoming healthy, but I lose motivation because the environment does not feel welcoming for someone like me.] - P9

The findings supported the study of Kłosowska et al. (2024), which revealed that overweight individuals often avoided physical activity and sports participation due to body dissatisfaction, bullying experiences, and psychological distress. Similarly, Macuha et al. (2024) found that Filipino gym-goers who experienced body shaming developed heightened self-consciousness and emotional discomfort in fitness spaces. The theme also reflected Goffman's Stigma Theory (1963), which explained that individuals possessing socially stigmatized characteristics may experience exclusion, discrimination, and social discomfort in public environments. In the context of this study, participants perceived fitness spaces as socially evaluative settings where their bodies became subjects of observation and judgment.

Theme 3: Emotional Distress Triggered by Social Comparison

Eight out of the thirteen participants described experiencing emotional distress as a result of constantly comparing themselves to others within contemporary fitness culture. Participants shared that exposure to physically fit individuals, transformation content, and appearance-centered social media posts often led to feelings of insecurity, sadness, frustration, and low self-esteem. Several participants explained that they became more critical of their bodies whenever they compared themselves to people who matched socially accepted beauty and fitness standards. For some participants, these comparisons negatively affected their confidence and motivation toward self-improvement.

“Kapag nagso-scroll ako sa social media, napapaisip ako kung bakit parang ang dali lang sa iba maging fit habang ako hirap na hirap.” [Whenever I scroll through social media, I wonder why it seems so easy for others to become fit while I struggle so much.] – P2

“Minsan okay naman ako sa sarili ko pero kapag may nakikita akong katawan na ideal para sa society, bigla akong nawawalan ng confidence.” [Sometimes I feel okay about myself, but when I see bodies considered ideal by society, I suddenly lose confidence.] – P7

The findings aligned with the study of Alimoradi et al. (2024), which found that individuals with self-perceived obesity experienced poorer quality of life and psychological distress associated with internet use and exposure to weight stigma online. Similarly, Cruz and Reyes (2023) revealed that online fitness trends intensified body dissatisfaction and unhealthy social comparison among Filipino college students. The findings also strongly reflected Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), which posited that individuals naturally evaluate themselves through comparisons with others. In the context of contemporary fitness culture, participants frequently measured their worth and physical appearance against idealized body representations, contributing to emotional distress and reduced self-confidence.

Theme 4: Desire for Acceptance and Inclusive Fitness Environments

Seven out of the thirteen participants expressed a strong desire for acceptance, encouragement, and inclusivity within fitness-related environments. Participants shared that despite experiencing social pressure and judgment, they still wanted to improve their health and participate in wellness activities without feeling ashamed or excluded. Several participants explained that supportive environments and positive social interactions motivated them to become more confident and comfortable in pursuing healthier lifestyles. Participants emphasized that acceptance and understanding from others played an important role in reducing their anxiety and emotional discomfort in fitness spaces.

“Mas ginaganahan ako mag-workout kapag hindi ako jina-judge at may mga taong supportive kahit mabagal progress ko.” [I feel more motivated to work out when I am not being judged and when people are supportive even if my progress is slow.] – P1

“Hindi naman namin kailangan ng awa. Gusto lang namin ng environment na hindi nakakahiya para mag-start maging healthy.” [We do not need pity. We just want an environment that is not embarrassing for us to start becoming healthy.] – P6

The findings supported the study of Jongenelis et al. (2024), which found that body-positive and supportive online spaces helped reduce emotional harm and improved the emotional well-being of individuals affected by weight stigma. Similarly, Angeles (2024) emphasized that social support and positive coping environments encouraged overweight individuals to participate more actively in physical activities. The findings also reflected Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explained that individuals exposed to constant body evaluation may develop heightened self-consciousness and emotional distress. However, the participants' narratives suggested that supportive and inclusive environments could lessen these negative experiences by reducing feelings of body surveillance and social judgment.

Theme 5: Internalization of Negative Body Perceptions

Eight out of the thirteen participants described internalizing negative perceptions about their bodies due to repeated exposure to social criticism, body shaming, and unrealistic fitness expectations. Participants shared those constant comments about their appearance and exposure to idealized body standards gradually affected how they viewed themselves. Several participants admitted that they began associating their body size with negative qualities such as laziness, unattractiveness, or lack of discipline because these were commonly implied within their social environments. Over time, these experiences contributed to feelings of shame, self-doubt, and diminished self-worth.

“Kahit wala nang nagsasabi minsan, parang ako na mismo yung nangja-judge sa sarili ko.” [Even when nobody says anything anymore, I feel like I have become the one judging myself.] – P4

“Kapag lagi mong naririnig na kailangan pumayat para maging confident o maganda, parang napapaniwala ka na rin.” [When you constantly hear that

you need to lose weight to become confident or attractive, you eventually start believing it too.] – P10

The findings aligned with the study of Cobo-Cuenca et al. (2024), which emphasized that weight stigma was strongly associated with anxiety, stress, body dissatisfaction, and negative psychological outcomes among individuals living with obesity. Similarly, MentalHealthPH (2021) discussed how repeated experiences of fatphobia and social discrimination contributed to insecurity and emotional distress among plus-sized Filipinos. The findings also reflected Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explained that individuals exposed to constant appearance-based evaluation may internalize external judgments and begin viewing themselves through the perspective of societal standards. In this study, participants gradually adopted the negative beliefs repeatedly associated with obesity within contemporary fitness culture.

This section presents the findings of Objective 2: *To examine how contemporary fitness culture affects the psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity using thematic analysis.*

RQ2: *How does contemporary fitness culture affect the psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity?*

Theme 1: Constant Self-Monitoring and Loss of Emotional Comfort

Nine out of the thirteen participants revealed that contemporary fitness culture caused them to constantly monitor and become overly conscious of their bodies, behaviors, eating habits, and physical appearance, which gradually disrupted their emotional comfort and peace of mind. Participants shared that they became mentally preoccupied with how they looked, how they ate in public, how they moved, and how others might perceive them in fitness-related or social environments. Several participants explained that even ordinary activities such as eating, posting photos online, or wearing certain clothes became emotionally stressful because they feared criticism, judgment, or unwanted attention. Over time, these experiences created feelings of discomfort, overthinking, and emotional uneasiness that affected their daily lives.

“Kahit simpleng pagkain sa labas, minsan naiilang ako kasi feeling ko may masasabi agad kapag nakita nilang mataba ako.” [Even something as simple as eating outside sometimes makes me uncomfortable because I feel like people will immediately say something once they see that I am obese.] – P1

“Parang lagi kong mino-monitor sarili ko — paano ako umupo, kumain, o gumalaw kasi baka may mapansin na naman.” [I feel like I constantly monitor myself — how I sit, eat, or move because someone might notice something again.] – P6

The findings aligned with the study of Jongenelis et al. (2024), which found that exposure to body-centered online environments contributed to emotional discomfort and unhealthy body awareness among individuals affected by weight stigma. Similarly,

Alimoradi et al. (2024) revealed that internet exposure and online body expectations negatively affected the emotional well-being and quality of life of individuals with self-perceived obesity. The findings also reflected Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explained that individuals exposed to repeated appearance-based evaluation may internalize an observer's perspective toward their own bodies, leading to habitual self-monitoring and psychological strain. In this study, participants appeared to experience emotional discomfort because contemporary fitness culture heightened their awareness of how their bodies were perceived by others.

Theme 2: Feeling Undeserving of Visibility and Participation

Eight out of the thirteen participants expressed that contemporary fitness culture negatively affected their psychological well-being by making them feel undeserving of visibility, participation, and social presence in fitness-related and online environments. Participants shared that exposure to fitness influencers, workout communities, transformation trends, and gym-centered content made them feel as though only physically fit bodies deserved recognition, confidence, and acceptance. Several participants explained that they became hesitant to participate in fitness activities, post photos online, or engage in wellness-related spaces because they feared being compared to socially idealized bodies. These experiences gradually affected their confidence, emotional security, and sense of belonging within contemporary fitness culture.

“Kapag may fitness trends online, parang feeling ko hindi ako kasali kasi puro fit bodies lang naman yung pinapakita.” [Whenever there are fitness trends online, I feel like I do not belong because only fit bodies are usually being shown.] – P3

“Minsan gusto ko mag-post ng progress ko pero nahihiya ako kasi baka i-compare lang ako sa mas fit na tao.” [Sometimes I want to post my progress, but I feel embarrassed because people might only compare me to fitter individuals.] – P9

The findings supported the study of Tylka et al. (2024), which emphasized that online fitness and social media environments reinforced appearance-centered standards and negative body perceptions among individuals living with obesity. Similarly, Jongenelis et al. (2024) found that digital fitness culture often affected emotional well-being by promoting unrealistic body ideals and limiting body inclusivity in online spaces. The findings also reflected Goffman's Stigma Theory (1963), which explained that socially stigmatized individuals may experience exclusion and reduced social value within environments that prioritize socially accepted characteristics. In this study, participants appeared to perceive contemporary fitness culture as a space where visibility, confidence, and participation were often associated with achieving idealized physical standards.

Theme 3: Emotional Detachment from One's Own Body

Eight out of the thirteen participants revealed that contemporary fitness culture negatively affected their psychological well-being by causing emotional detachment and

discomfort toward their own bodies. Participants shared that constant exposure to idealized body standards and fitness-related expectations gradually changed the way they emotionally connected with themselves. Several participants explained that they avoided mirrors, photographs, fitted clothing, and even social interactions because these situations reminded them of how far they felt from socially accepted body ideals. For some participants, their bodies became sources of emotional discomfort rather than self-acceptance, leading to avoidance behaviors and feelings of disconnection from their physical identity.

“Dati mahilig talaga ako mag-picture at mag-post online, pero habang tumatagal parang nawalan na ako ng gana kasi lagi ko na lang kino-compare katawan ko sa mga nakikita kong fit sa social media. Kapag nakikita ko sarili ko sa pictures, mas lalo akong nagiging uncomfortable sa katawan ko.” [Before, I really liked taking pictures and posting online, but over time I gradually lost interest because I kept comparing my body to the fit people I saw on social media. Whenever I see myself in pictures, I become even more uncomfortable with my body.] – P5

“Parang dumating sa point na gusto ko na lang itago katawan ko. Kahit gusto ko sumama sa activities o mag-workout, nawawalan ako ng confidence kasi pakiramdam ko hindi bagay katawan ko sa fitness environment.” [It reached a point where I just wanted to hide my body. Even if I wanted to join activities or work out, I lost confidence because I felt like my body did not belong in fitness environments.] – P12

The findings aligned with the study of Jongenelis et al. (2024), which found that online body-centered environments and appearance-focused content negatively affected emotional well-being and body satisfaction among individuals exposed to weight stigma. Similarly, Cruz and Reyes (2023) revealed that exposure to fitness trends and idealized body representations intensified body dissatisfaction and self-consciousness among Filipino students. The findings also reflected Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explained that individuals repeatedly exposed to appearance-based evaluation may internalize external standards and begin viewing their bodies as objects to be constantly evaluated and criticized. In the context of the study, participants appeared to emotionally distance themselves from their own bodies because contemporary fitness culture heightened feelings of inadequacy and physical dissatisfaction.

Theme 4: Guilt and Self-Blame in Failing Fitness Expectations

Nine out of the thirteen participants described experiencing feelings of guilt and self-blame whenever they felt unable to meet the expectations promoted within contemporary fitness culture. Participants shared that fitness-related content and wellness trends often made them feel personally responsible for not achieving visible body transformation, weight loss, or consistent productivity regarding their health. Several participants explained that they began blaming themselves whenever they ate certain foods, skipped exercise routines, or failed to maintain progress associated with socially idealized

fitness goals. Over time, these experiences negatively affected their psychological well-being by creating feelings of disappointment, frustration, and emotional guilt toward themselves.

“Kapag hindi ako nakakapag-workout o napapakain ako nang marami, parang feeling ko failure agad ako kasi sa social media parang ang dali lang sa iba maging disciplined.” [Whenever I fail to work out or end up eating a lot, I immediately feel like a failure because on social media it seems so easy for others to become disciplined.] – P2

“Minsan kahit pagod ako gina-gaslight ko sarili ko na baka tamad lang talaga ako kasi hindi ko ma-achieve yung body goals na lagi kong nakikita online.” [Sometimes even when I am exhausted, I gaslight myself into thinking that maybe I am just lazy because I cannot achieve the body goals I constantly see online.] – P7

The findings aligned with the study of Henn et al. (2025), which found that contemporary digital fitness environments and wellness interventions may unintentionally reinforce shame and self-blame among individuals living with obesity. Similarly, Alimoradi et al. (2024) revealed that exposure to online fitness culture and weight-related stigma negatively affected emotional well-being and self-perception. The findings also reflected Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explained that individuals exposed to continuous appearance-based evaluation may internalize societal expectations and direct criticism toward themselves when they fail to meet socially accepted standards. In this study, participants appeared to associate their inability to achieve idealized fitness outcomes with personal failure, leading to emotional guilt and diminished psychological well-being.

Theme 5: Temporary Motivation but Long-Term Emotional Strain

Eight out of the thirteen participants shared that contemporary fitness culture initially served as a source of motivation and inspiration for improving their health and lifestyle. Participants explained that fitness influencers, transformation videos, workout challenges, and wellness content encouraged them to start exercising, eating healthier, or becoming more physically active. However, several participants revealed that prolonged exposure to these fitness-centered environments gradually became emotionally exhausting and discouraging. Instead of sustaining motivation, participants experienced repeated cycles of inspiration followed by disappointment, especially when their personal progress did not resemble the fast and visible transformations commonly portrayed online.

“Nakaka-inspire sa simula yung transformation videos pero eventually parang napepressure ka na rin kasi pakiramdam mo nahuhuli ka.” [Transformation videos feel inspiring at first, but eventually you also start feeling pressured because you feel like you are falling behind.] – P6

“Minsan ganado ako mag-start ulit magpapayat dahil sa napapanood ko online, pero kapag wala akong nakikitang mabilis na progress, nawawalan

din ako ng gana at nalulungkot.” [Sometimes I become motivated to start losing weight again because of what I watch online, but when I do not see quick progress, I also lose motivation and feel sad.] – P13

The findings aligned with the study of Jongenelis et al. (2024), which found that online fitness and body-centered content could initially encourage health motivation but may also contribute to emotional harm and body dissatisfaction over time. Similarly, Henn et al. (2025) emphasized that digital fitness environments and wellness interventions sometimes unintentionally intensified emotional pressure and discouragement among individuals living with obesity. The findings also reflected Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory (1954), which explained that individuals evaluate their progress and worth by comparing themselves with others. In this study, participants appeared to become emotionally strained when their personal journeys failed to match the idealized and accelerated fitness transformations commonly presented within contemporary fitness culture.

DISCUSSION

Individuals living with obesity experienced significant social pressure within contemporary fitness culture, particularly in relation to socially constructed body standards, fear of judgment, and appearance-based expectations. Participants described feeling emotionally burdened by environments that often-associated physical attractiveness, discipline, and worth with having slim or fit bodies. Many participants reported experiencing self-consciousness, insecurity, and social discomfort when exposed to fitness-related spaces and online content that promoted idealized body images. These experiences reflected how contemporary fitness culture extended beyond health promotion and became a socially evaluative environment where individuals living with obesity frequently perceived themselves as excluded or negatively judged. The findings supported previous studies which emphasized that weight stigma and body-related pressure contributed to psychosocial distress, emotional discomfort, and reduced participation in physical activities among individuals living with obesity (Faccio et al., 2025; Kłosowska et al., 2024; Macuha et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that repeated exposure to social comparison and appearance-centered standards contributed to the internalization of negative body perceptions among participants. Several participants shared that unrealistic body ideals portrayed in fitness culture and social media negatively influenced their confidence, self-worth, and motivation toward self-improvement. These findings aligned with the studies of Alimoradi et al. (2024), Tylka et al. (2024), and Cruz and Reyes (2023), which found that digital fitness environments and online body standards intensified emotional distress and unhealthy comparison behaviors. The findings also reflected Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory (1954), which explained that individuals evaluate themselves through comparisons with others, and Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which suggested that constant exposure to appearance-based evaluation may lead individuals to internalize societal judgments. Overall, the study highlighted that while contemporary

fitness culture may encourage health awareness, it may also unintentionally reinforce exclusionary standards that negatively affect the psychological and social experiences of individuals living with obesity.

Contemporary fitness culture significantly affected the psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity by influencing how they viewed themselves emotionally, mentally, and socially. Participants described experiencing constant self-monitoring, emotional discomfort, guilt, and emotional exhaustion due to repeated exposure to idealized fitness standards and appearance-centered expectations. Several participants shared that fitness culture initially motivated them to improve their health; however, prolonged exposure to curated fitness content, transformation trends, and body comparisons eventually contributed to emotional strain, self-doubt, and dissatisfaction with themselves. Participants also reported developing avoidance behaviors, emotional detachment from their bodies, and feelings of inadequacy whenever they perceived themselves as failing to meet socially accepted fitness expectations. These findings suggested that contemporary fitness culture extended beyond physical health promotion and became a psychologically demanding environment that influenced participants' emotional well-being and self-perception.

Furthermore, the findings aligned with previous studies emphasizing the psychological consequences of weight stigma, online fitness culture, and appearance-based social expectations. Jongenelis et al. (2024) and Henn et al. (2025) found that exposure to body-centered digital environments may contribute to emotional distress, body dissatisfaction, and psychological pressure among individuals living with obesity. Similarly, Alimoradi et al. (2024) revealed that internet exposure and online body expectations negatively affected emotional well-being and quality of life, while Cruz and Reyes (2023) highlighted that idealized fitness representations intensified self-consciousness and unhealthy body comparison among Filipino individuals. The findings also reflected Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), which explained that individuals evaluate themselves through comparisons with others, and Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which suggested that repeated exposure to appearance-based evaluation may lead individuals to internalize external standards and engage in persistent self-monitoring. Overall, the findings highlighted that while contemporary fitness culture may encourage wellness and self-improvement, it may also unintentionally contribute to emotional strain, unhealthy self-evaluation, and diminished psychological well-being among individuals living with obesity.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that contemporary fitness culture significantly shaped both the social experiences and psychological well-being of individuals living with obesity. Although fitness culture is commonly promoted as a space for health improvement, motivation, and self-development, the findings revealed that it may also reinforce unrealistic body standards and appearance-centered expectations that negatively affect individuals who do not conform to socially idealized physiques. Participants experienced

social pressure, fear of judgment, emotional distress, self-consciousness, and internalized negative body perceptions as they navigated fitness-related environments and digital spaces. The study further revealed that contemporary fitness culture extended beyond physical health and became a socially evaluative environment where body appearance strongly influenced feelings of confidence, acceptance, and personal worth.

Moreover, the study highlighted how digital fitness culture and online body representations influenced the emotional and psychological experiences of individuals living with obesity in contemporary society. While fitness-related content initially served as a source of inspiration and motivation, prolonged exposure to highly curated transformation trends and idealized body images eventually contributed to emotional exhaustion, unhealthy self-comparison, guilt, and emotional detachment from one's own body. The findings suggested that contemporary fitness culture may unintentionally normalize constant self-monitoring and pressure to achieve visible physical transformation, leading some individuals to associate their value and success with body appearance rather than overall well-being. These findings offered a deeper understanding of how modern fitness culture may simultaneously promote wellness while also contributing to hidden emotional struggles among individuals living with obesity.

Overall, the study contributed to the growing discourse on body image, obesity stigma, and psychological well-being by emphasizing that the experiences of individuals living with obesity should not be understood solely through physical or medical perspectives, but also through social and emotional dimensions. The study underscored the importance of creating more inclusive, compassionate, and psychologically supportive fitness environments that value body diversity, realistic health journeys, and emotional well-being rather than appearance-based validation alone. In the contemporary world where social media and fitness culture continue to shape societal standards of attractiveness and health, the study highlighted the need to promote healthier narratives that encourage self-acceptance, inclusivity, and sustainable well-being for individuals of all body types.

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