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Emotional Labor And Flourishing Achievement Process Of Personal Trainer

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Abstract

The modern fitness industry demands personal trainers (PTs) to not only manage clients' physical performance but also navigate an intensive workload of emotional labor. This qualitative study aims to explore in-depth how PTs construct their experiences of emotional labor in relation to achieving flourishing (positive mental health). Employing a qualitative approach with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study involved three PTs (two males and one female) at a modern fitness center in Yogyakarta, selected via purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using the six idiographic steps of IPA. The findings unraveled a psychological paradox: the demands of emotional labor do not linearly trigger burnout, but rather act as a catalyst for achieving flourishing. The key to this transformation lies in the shift of emotion regulation strategies from surface acting to authentic deep acting via cognitive reappraisal. Once positive emotions and genuine empathy are internalized, work activities are transformed into a source of meaningful work. Furthermore, the gender dimension modifies the form of emotion regulation; the female PT applied protective emotional regulation to negotiate rigid interpersonal boundaries, whereas male PTs managed motivational energy to maintain client-professional ego. These findings empirically support the theoretical model of reciprocal flourishing, wherein positive mental health is achieved through mutually growth-enhancing interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Emotional Labor, Flourishing, Personal Trainer

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INTRODUCTION

A recent analysis of the urban fitness landscape reveals a notable shift, particularly in cities such as Yogyakarta. Contemporary fitness facilities, as exemplified by *Infinity Gym and Club*, no longer function solely as commercial spaces for physical conditioning. Instead, they have evolved into complex centers of socio-psychological interaction. The personal trainer (PT) plays a pivotal role in this transformation. Nowadays, a trainer's mandate eclipses the traditional boundaries of prescribing exercises and correcting biomechanics, as these professionals increasingly take on the mantle of motivators, informal therapists, and emotional guides. Consequently, there is an implicit expectation that they maintain peak interpersonal engagement, radiating unwavering enthusiasm, empathy, and positivity, even when grappling with personal fatigue or internal psychological turbulence.

The ongoing effort to manage emotions with the goal of ensuring client satisfaction is referred to as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). PTs use two mechanisms in their daily routines: surface acting, where outward emotional displays are fabricated without changing underlying feelings, and deep acting, where internal emotional states are intentionally aligned with professional demands (Grandey, 2000). A substantial body of literature suggests a potential link between prolonged exposure to emotional labor, particularly when heavily reliant on surface acting, and heightened risks of burnout, depersonalization, and diminished job satisfaction (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Zapf, 2002). It is evident that personal trainers may experience a certain degree of vulnerability regarding their mental well-being, particularly given the continuous demands placed upon their psychological resources.

On the other hand, framing of the personal trainer profession strictly through a lens of psychological fragility and burnout yields a rather reductionist picture. A curious paradox is revealed when considering the profound demands of emotional labor in the context of personal trainers. It is noteworthy that many of these individuals exhibit remarkable resilience, profound job satisfaction, and an ability to thrive within their occupational roles. The aforementioned manifestation of robust mental wellness is closely aligned with the psychological construct of flourishing. As stated by Widiantoro (2026), flourishing operates far beyond the mere absence of psychopathology; it denotes a state in which individuals actively cultivate positive affect, build meaningful interpersonal bridges, and actualize their inherent potential despite navigating stressful environments. Within human-centred profession, a practitioner's capacity to flourish is indispensable, as their own mental equilibrium transfers a vital, positive regulatory energy to their clients (Keyes, 2002; Widiantoro, 2026).

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Once a personal trainer successfully internalizes authentic deep acting to manage their emotional labor, the task of motivating others ceases to feel like an exhausting burden. Accordingly, the phenomenon under discussion is characterized as a means of self-expansion and meaningful work, as posited by Seligman (2011). The profound interpersonal intimacy experienced with clients serves as a direct catalyst for the fundamental components of flourishing, particularly the realization of mutual accomplishment and positive emotional engagement. Therefore, the course of emotional labor is not necessarily indicative of a decline in mental well-being.Under the right conditions, it functions as a potent catalyst, propelling trainers to construct a richer, more profound sense of life's meaning and ultimately achieve an elevated state of flourishing.

Although research on emotional labor and the concept of flourishing have expanded considerably, they are rarely brought together in empirical studiesm, especially within the Indonesian fitness sector. The majority of seminal studies on emotional labor have focused on conventional service sectors, including nursing, aviation, and education (Grandey, 2003; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). Concurrently, the extant literature addressing positive mental health in domestic gyms demonstrates a marked tendency to prioritize quantitative metrics, such as client retention and physical performance, over psychological well-being. This leaves a significant theoretical blind spot regarding how fitness professionals, particularly personal trainers, subjectively make sense of and negotiate their day-to-day emotional burdens to actually reach the state of flourishing outlined by Widiantoro (2026).

Furthermore, the dynamics of gender introduce an additional layer of complexity that has not been extensively examined in the context of emotional labor within the gym environment. Modern fitness spaces are still heavily shaped by masculine stereotypes and bodily commodification, which forces male and female personal trainers to navigate very different performative expectations (Simpson, 2009). Female trainers frequently have to police strict interpersonal boundaries and deal with a high risk of objectification. Male trainers, by contrast, face systemic pressure to curate their emotions to project a specific brand of professional assertiveness. Because these gendered expectations directly shape how trainers regulate their feelings and work toward flourishing, there is an urgent need to investigate these lived experiences through a gender-balanced scope.

In order to address the theoretical and empirical discrepancies, this qualitative study seeks to examine the mechanisms by which personal trainers construct their experiences of emotional labor in relation to achieving flourishing. The investigative focus is directed toward the daily

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psychological dynamics of practitioners at a modern fitness center in Yogyakarta, a location that represents the characteristics of the urban fitness industry with its intensive and dynamic client interactions. Given the complexity of individuals' subjective meaning-making, which involves emotional aspects, professionalism, and gender negotiation (involving two male participants and one female participant), a qualitative approach utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is considered the most precise analytical tool (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The IPA method enables the researcher to do more than merely describe superficial phenomena; it facilitates a double hermeneutic process, wherein the researcher attempts to understand how the participants make sense of their own internal worlds when confronting professional demands. Through this intimate phenomenological exploration, this study is expected to provide a significant scholarly contribution to the development of positive psychology in Indonesia, specifically by enriching the practical applications of Flourishing Psychology theory (Widiantoro, 2026) within the domain of the fitness industry and human-centered professions fraught with emotional pressure.

RESEARCH METHOD

Approach and Research Design

The present research employs a qualitative approach, adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. The IPA framework was purposefully chosen due to its core orientation, which focuses on the in-depth exploration of lived experiences and how individuals subjectively make sense of their personal and social realities (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, the idiographic nature of IPA, which emphasizes the particular and the specific, is highly congruent with this study's objective to intimately examine the internal dynamics of emotional labor and the process of achieving flourishing within each individual personal trainer (PT).

Participants and Sampling

In accordance with IPA methodological principles, which emphasize small-scale, homogeneous samples to achieve optimal analytical depth (Smith et al., 2009), participant selection in this study utilized a purposive sampling technique. The participant inclusion criteria were established as follows: (1) actively working as a personal trainer at *Infinity Gym and Club Yogyakarta*; (2) possessing a minimum tenure of one year to ensure experiential maturity and saturation in managing client dynamics; and (3) demonstrating a willingness to participate

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voluntarily throughout the entire in-depth interview process.

Based on these criteria, this research involved three participants, comprising two male personal trainers (Participant 1, aged 50; Participant 2, aged 40) and one female personal trainer (Participant 3, aged 37). The incorporation of a varied gender composition within the parameters of this homogeneous group was deliberately intended to elicit diverse narratives regarding how interpersonal boundaries and emotional regulation are adapted according to respective gender roles within a modern fitness center environment.

Data Collections Procedures

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This approach allowed the researcher the flexibility to explore unexpected narratives shared by the participants, while still staying focused on an interview guide based on the conceptual frameworks of emotional labor and flourishing (Widiantoro, 2026). To ensure comfort and privacy, all interviews were conducted face-to-face in a suitable setting near *Infinity Gym and Club Yogyakarta*.

Each participant was interviewed between two and three times, with sessions ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in duration. The interview process was thoroughly documented using a digital audio recorder after obtaining written informed consent from the participants. In order to maintain the validity and trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the researcher implemented member checking, whereby the participants were provided with the typed verbatim transcripts and invited to confirm the accuracy of the data in terms of their intended meanings.

Data Analysis Stages

The data analysis was conducted in accordance with the established idiographic procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). To ensure a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experience, the researcher conducted a meticulous individual analysis of each transcript prior to undertaking cross-case comparisons. This process involved six stages:

1. Reading and Re-reading:

The researcher's immersion in the data was achieved through repeated engagement with the transcripts and audio recordings, facilitating the discernment of subtle emotional nuances exhibited by the participants.

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2. Initial Nothing:

Detailed notes were added to the margins of the transcripts. The aforementioned elements comprised descriptive comments concerning the content, linguistic observations regarding word choice and metaphors, and conceptual interpretations from a psychological perspective.

3. Developing Emergent Themes:

The researcher then proceeded to examine the manner in which these preliminary notes were interconnected, employing a process of data reduction to identify and delineate discrete, overarching themes that emerged from the raw data.

4. Connecting Themes:

These emergent themes were subsequently grouped together based on conceptual similarities to build broader, superordinate themes.

5. Moving to The Next Case:

Staying true to IPA's idiographic focus, the first four steps were repeated from scratch for the remaining transcripts so that each individual's unique story was honored.

6. Looking for Patterns Across Cases:

The researcher subsequently proceeded to map out the connections, similarities, and stark contrasts among the three cases. This included highlighting the different dynamics experienced by the male versus the female trainers, ultimately producing a final master table of themes to guide the discussion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: The Manifestation of Emotional Labor and Interpersonal Boundary Negotiation on The Gym Floor

An examination of the daily realities at *Infinity Gym and Club Yogyakarta* reveals that a personal trainer's workload eclipses mere physical exertion, demanding relentless emotional governance. Idiographic analysis indicates that all three respondents felt a perpetual obligation to uphold a positive professional front, radiating friendliness, boundless enthusiasm, and emotional equilibrium, irrespective of their actual psychological state. This transactional modulation of

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feeling perfectly embodies Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor.

Among the male cohort (P1 and P2), such labor typically materialized as an ongoing imperative to channel motivational energy and delicately massage client egos. P1 (male, 50) vividly captured this dynamic:

> *"Sometimes, when I arrive at the gym at the crack of dawn, I'm still absolutely exhausted—plus, I might be dealing with personal issues at home. But the moment a member walks in, I have to flip my emotional switch to 'on' immediately. I have to smile right away, offer an enthusiastic greeting, and cheerfully ask how they're doing. We're expected to act as a 'battery' for them. If I look lethargic or unfriendly, a client might complain to management or decide they never want to train with me again." (P1, W1, 42-47).*

The narrative provided by P1 exposes the mechanics of surface acting during the critical early moments of client interaction. It underscores a harsh disconnect between his internal reality, marked by exhaustion and private distress, and the performative cheer demanded by his role. However, comparative scrutiny unveils a much more restrictive and complex dynamic for the female participant, P3 (aged 37). Navigating a fitness environment still heavily steeped in masculine cultural norms, P3 is compelled to perform a dual layer of emotional regulation. She must conjure the requisite motivational energy for her clients while simultaneously erecting rigid interpersonal boundaries to fend off objectification and unsolicited romantic overtures from male patrons. P3 elaborated on this tension:

> *" As a woman in this role, the challenge is twofold. I have to be friendly and supportive to put clients at ease, but that friendliness is often misinterpreted by some male members. So, I have to be really careful about managing my expressions. I need to maintain a professional smile, but set firm boundaries in my tone so they realize there's a professional "wall" that can't be crossed. That's the exhausting part—constantly figuring out how to stay friendly without appearing to invite flirtation." (P3, W2, 112-119).*

Subjecting the metaphors employed by P1 and P3 to deeper psychological scrutiny lays bare fundamentally divergent emotional workloads. By referencing an 'emotion switch,' P1 highlights a swift mechanism of re-personalization, effectively reducing his body to a commercial asset designed to output mechanical positivity on demand. Conversely, the professional 'wall'

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invoked by P3 signifies a highly active ego-defense strategy. Her emotional regulation extends far beyond performance enhancement; it constitutes a form of self-protective emotional labor aimed at neutralizing the risk of emotional dissonance triggered by boundary-crossing clients. This revelation adds a critical layer to Hochschild's (1983) original framework. It proves that within the masculine topography of the sports ecosystem, emotional labor executed by a gender minority is inherently multidimensional, acting as both a tool for customer satisfaction and an existential shield defending professional integrity.

Ultimately, these findings echo Simpson's (2009) premise that gender paradigms within the fitness sector fundamentally alter the mechanics of emotional labor. For P3, emotional management is less about appeasing the client and more about fortifying the self. Without the counterbalance of profound internal resilience, the emotional strain shouldered by all three trainers holds the perilous potential to spiral into acute psychological distress.

From a positive psychology perspective, surviving such a pressurized interpersonal climate requires trainers to forge unshakeable mental health anchors. As Widiantoro (2026) has observed, the way individuals are able to manage their stress in demanding occupations may have to do with their ability to find positive meaning in challenging situations. While poorly internalized emotional labor inevitably degrades well-being, successfully elevating this regulatory process to a place of authenticity allows individuals to harness emotional tension as a potent catalyst for personal growth (Widiantoro, 2026).

Theme 2: The Transition of Emotional Regulation: From Surface Acting to Deep Acting

Initially, the chronic weight of emotional labor forced all three trainers into a reliance on surface acting, a coping mechanism notorious for draining psychological reserves and breeding professional cynicism. Crucially, however, the data illuminates a profound psychological transition. Recognizing the unsustainability of artificial facades, the participants consciously evolved their regulatory strategies. In order to preserve both their performance and their sanity on the gym floor, they moved away from surface acting and embraced the authentic internalization characteristic of deep acting.

The transition process under investigation did not occur instantaneously. Rather, it was mediated by a cognitive reappraisal of their professional roles. P2 (male, 40 years old) vividly illustrated this shift:

" Back in my first year, I felt like I was wearing a mask every day. I'd leave the gym feeling

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drained and stressed because I constantly had to pretend to be friendly. But over time, I realized that if I just kept up the act, I'd be the one who fell apart. So, I changed my mindset. When a member came in with a complaint or negative energy, I stopped viewing it as a burden and started seeing myself as someone who could help them. I tried to genuinely care about their goals. Once that sense of care came from the heart, the smile and enthusiasm came naturally. I didn't feel pressured to put on an act anymore." (P2, W3, 88-96).

The reflection from P2 illustrates how deep acting works by fundamentally changing how one internally makes sense of a work situation (Grandey, 2000). In this paradigm, emotional regulation is not perceived as a mere transactional obligation imposed by Infinity Gym's administration. Instead, the individual in question actively engages in the reconstruction of this concept, interpreting it as a manifestation of genuine empathy.

A similar dynamic was observed in P3 (female, 37 years old). She was able to transform gender boundary tensions into interactions characterized by genuine acceptance and sincerity. As P3 shared:

" Now, when I coach, I approach it as if I were training a close friend. When I focus sincerely on their health progress, my fears about being teased or judged negatively simply melt away. Positive emotions flow naturally because my intention is to help fellow women grow more self-confident." (P3, W3, 142-148)

The participants' successful shift from surface to deep acting makes sense when viewed through Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Early in their careers, they viewed emotional regulation as a restrictive job demand because they were simply trying to meet external expectations. However, as time progressed, the participants employed cognitive reappraisal techniques to transform their innate empathy and altruism into substantial internal job resources. However, as time progressed, the participants employed cognitive reappraisal techniques to transform their innate empathy and altruism into substantial internal job resources. Phenomenologically, this indicates a marked transition from extrinsic motivation, which is characterized by concerns regarding management complaints, to intrinsic motivation that is rooted in the fundamental values of one's profession. Once the trainers stopped using positive emotions as a transactional "mask" and started seeing them as a true reflection of their authentic

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selves, their exhausting emotional dissonance faded away, replaced by a strong sense of self-integration. This resonates with the principles of positive psychology by underscoring the notion that authentic emotional expression is a fundamental element of psychological resilience in high-pressure environments.

Navigating this transition provides a massive protective buffer for the personal trainers' mental health. As outlined in *Psikologi Flourishing: Dinamika Kesehatan Mental Positif* (Widiantoro, 2026), bringing outward expressions in line with inner feelings is absolutely essential for true authenticity. Widiantoro (2026) argues that faking emotions for long periods leads to self-alienation, which ultimately breaks down a person's mental integrity. In contrast, when emotional regulation is rooted in genuine internal values, like real care and altruism, even the most demanding work turns into a source of positive psychological energy that actually fuels mental health (Widiantoro, 2026).

In effect, this emotional transformation functions as a conduit, facilitating the transition of participants from a state of merely surviving their work shifts to one of genuine flourishing. The establishment of authentic emotional connections with their clients fosters a positive resonance that serves to reinforce their fundamental purpose as agents of health and well-being.

Theme 3: The Maifestation of Flourishing and Meaningful Work

The ultimate culmination of the personal trainers' (PT) psychological navigation through the burdens of emotional labor is the achievement of flourishing. Once deep acting strategies are fully internalized, their daily work is no longer experienced as an exhausting transactional routine. Instead, it transforms into an arena for self-actualization filled with meaningful work. A cross-case analysis reveals that the manifestation of flourishing among the three participants is characterized by three fundamental pillars: positive interpersonal relationships, a profound sense of accomplishment, and the discovery of existential meaning through their clients' positive transformations.

P1 (male, 50 years old) reflected on how his client's achievement of their physical goals created a deep resonance of psychological fulfillment within himself:

> *" The greatest satisfaction for me isn't receiving a paycheck or a bonus from a client. It's when a client someone who used to be obese, insecure, and even struggling with health issues suddenly comes up and hugs me, weeping with joy because their medical results show they are healthy and have achieved an ideal physique. That's when I feel my life truly*

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has purpose. All the fatigue, stress, and emotional burdens I carry every day are instantly repaid by their success. I feel that this profession is my true calling." (P1, W3, 192-200).

The narrative shared by P1 deeply reflects the pillars of accomplishment and meaning within the flourishing framework. By embracing their clients' progress as personal achievements, the trainers significantly strengthen their professional self-efficacy.

A similarly touching process of meaning-making was revealed by P3 (female, 37 years old). She discovered that her role in the women-only training area on the upper floor of Infinity Gym offered her a dedicated space to empower other women:

"Upstairs, I see many female members who initially arrive with very low self-confidence due to their body shape. As I guide them, listen to their stories, and watch them gradually grow stronger and learn to love themselves, I feel an incredible emotional bond. I'm not just training their bodies; I'm helping to build their mental resilience. That is what keeps me going and makes me truly happy in this profession.." (P3, W3, 210-218).

The experiences of these three participants offer clear empirical support for the theoretical model proposed by Widiantoro (2026) in *Psikologi Flourishing: Dinamika Kesehatan Mental Positif.* Widiantoro argues that flourishing occurs when individuals move beyond merely existing in their environment to actively engaging in mutually beneficial relationships, a concept known as reciprocal flourishing. In this context, the close interactions between trainers and clients engender a distinctive environment conducive to reciprocal expressions of positive emotions. Here, emotional labor transforms into an altruistic catalyst: by motivating and improving the health of others, the trainers simultaneously heal and nurture their own psychological well-being (Widiantoro, 2026).

The discovery of life's meaning through the physical achievements of clients represents a profound manifestation of eudaimonic well-being in the workplace. As indicated by all three participants, the primary source of happiness was not financial gain. Instead, the participants identified positive relationships and meaning as the primary drivers of their subjective well-being. These relationships and their associated meanings took shape within the framework of reciprocal flourishing. The positive emotional resonance that stems from witnessing a client's life transformation creates what are known as high-quality connections right on the gym floor. Through these close interpersonal bonds, the trainers do not just chase personal accomplishment;

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they blend their own egos into a shared journey of collective growth with their clients. As a result, the physical exhaustion of long shifts and the mental fatigue lingering from emotional labor are entirely neutralized by a fresh surge of psychological energy, born from the profound realization that their work genuinely benefits others. This dynamic is precisely what anchors them in a state of flourishing. It elevates them from professionals who are merely surviving the pressures of the industry to individuals who are developing optimally and achieving comprehensive mental health.

In conclusion, attaining this state of flourishing functions as an exceptionally efficacious psychological shield. Even as the modern fitness industry in Yogyakarta becomes increasingly competitive and demanding, these three participants demonstrate remarkable resilience, grounded in their robust sense of purpose. The physical and mental effort they exert every single day at *Infinity Gym and Club* ultimately crystallizes into an authentic, holistic, and sustainable form of positive mental health.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This qualitative research guided by an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, effectively decodes the psychological paradox at the heart of the personal trainer (PT) profession within modern fitness center in Yogyakarta. The findings indicate that the substantial emotional labor necessitated by the fitness industry is not necessarily accompanied by the expected outcomes of exhaustion and psychological distress. Instead, it can serve as a powerful catalyst for flourishing. The key to this transformation is a shift in emotional regulation: moving from surface acting (merely faking emotions to satisfy transactional needs) to deep acting (authentically and sincerely internalizing empathy). Upon undergoing this cognitive transition, trainers perceive the daily undertakings of fostering and assisting clients as a significant catalyst for personal growth and the fulfillment derived from meaningful work.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that gender exerts a substantial influence on the manner in which emotional regulation is implemented. Female trainers often employ protective emotional strategies to navigate rigid interpersonal boundaries, while male trainers focus their motivational energy on safeguarding their clients' egos. In regard to the concept of reciprocal flourishing, these empirical insights offer a valuable contribution to the field of positive psychology. The study's findings are unequivocal in demonstrating that even in highly demanding work environments, the cultivation of robust positive mental health among professionals can be achieved through the establishment of genuine, mutually uplifting relationships between

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professionals and their clients.

Recommendations

In alignment with the aforementioned findings, the following practical and academic recommendations are proposed:

1. For Fitness Center Management (*Infinity Gym and Club*): It is highly recommended that management move beyond merely focusing on physical technical training and sales targets. Instead, they should actively facilitate mental health support programs for their personal trainers. Providing training in emotional management, therapeutic communication, and positive psychology-based burnout prevention is essential for sustaining the quality of their staff's deep acting.
2. For Future Research: This study is limited to three participants within a single modern, urban gym setting. It is recommended that future studies expand the scope of participants to include a more heterogeneous sample, such as independent or freelance personal trainers, as well as those operating in conventional or suburban gyms. In addition, it would be advantageous to quantitatively examine the long-term repercussions of this reciprocal flourishing on client retention and satisfaction rates.

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