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Professional Female Bodybuilding: Self-Determination Theory Approach

By Mark T Suffolk¹

Abstract

Female professional bodybuilders have received a substantial amount of scholarly and media attention. However, investigations have largely been conducted from a pathologizing perspective. This exploratory research investigated the female bodybuilding community from a positive development perspective. Thematic analysis was applied to twenty four publicly available online video interviews of female professional bodybuilders ranging in age from 29-49 years to understand the reasons as to why females take up the sport of bodybuilding, and to identify factors that contribute towards continued participation. Identified themes were framed within Self-Determination Theory. The findings indicate that pursuing bodybuilding can provide mechanisms that link the activity to psychological well-being by enhancing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In light of these findings, it is a worthwhile endeavor for researchers to further examine the sport of female bodybuilding from a positive functioning perspective. Further research can provide a better understanding of how active engagement in bodybuilding can positively impact psychological health and subjective well-being.

Key Words: Female Bodybuilding, Psychological Well-being, Self-determination Theory, Positive Psychology

Introduction

“Female bodybuilders look disgusting, she looks like a man.” (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009)

The above quote demonstrates the common reaction to imagery depicting the hyper-mesomorphic somatotype of the typical professional female bodybuilder. The sheer physical stature of such a woman elicits powerful reactions from those outside the bodybuilding subculture. Specifically, by developing the almost perfect androgynous body (Schulze, 1997), stigmatization, marginalization, and sexism are the repercussions for contravening gender physical norms (Felkar, 2012). For this reason, it may be difficult to understand why females commit to building highly muscled bodies in the face of Western culture's belief that muscularity is synonymous with masculinity (e.g., Helgeson, 1994). Although male bodybuilders typically display an exaggerated hyper-muscular somatotype that is often thought to represent a response to a crisis of masculinity (e.g., Cortese, 2007), they stay within their prescribed gender role and do not threaten the power structure of our patriarchal society. Conversely, female bodybuilders

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threaten the moral sensibilities of observers by stepping outside of this very power structure by abandoning the feminine physical ideology of Western culture. The salient mesomorphology does not fit into any previously defined category of woman and is argued to represent social resistance to the gendered norms of femininity (Scott, 2011). Consequently, negative commentary concerning female muscularity generally contains layers of meaning not found in expositions of muscular males (Felkar, 2012).

Competitive bodybuilding is an activity where the goal is to increase the muscle mass (volume), symmetry (overall proportions), and definition (the degree to which each muscle of the body visually stands out), in order to attain success within a competitive field (Bjornestad, Oyvind, & Anderssen, 2013). During competitive events, bodybuilders are scrutinized by a judging panel to determine which physique best adheres to the pre-determined criteria defined by a governing body (Holm, 2000). The competitor who best meets these standards is declared the winner. Much debate and controversy surround competitive bodybuilding. First, this may be due to the fact that competitive bodybuilding is an aesthetic pursuit that relies on somatic form, opposed to any apparent display of functional ability. Second, despite today's fitness-oriented culture, a public disrespect hovers over the bodybuilding community, which may be a consequence of past and more recent work that describes a relationship between female bodybuilding and maladaptive behaviors, for instance, substance use, extreme exercise regimes, and disordered dietary practices (Pope, Katz, & Hudson, 1993; Scott, 2011).

Physical appearance is a salient attribute upon which humans judge others (Freeman, 1988) and forms the basis for the cultural phenomena of stereotyping. Decades ago, it was noted by Goffman (1963) that possession of atypical physical attributes was the foundation for unfavorable reactions from others. According to Aoki (1996), despite carefully avoiding disparaging commentary of other minority groups, scholars have a tendency to uphold the culturally endorsed negative stereotype by assuming personality flaws in bodybuilders. For instance, Klein (1993) argues that the overdeveloped physique is synonymous with an underdeveloped 'psyche'. The literature on this topic frequently contains descriptions of female bodybuilding viewed through this pessimistic lens (see Roussel & Griffet, 2000). More recent research indicates that female bodybuilders are still assigned undesirable descriptive labels (Chananie-Hill, McGrath, & Stoll, 2012; Probert, Leberman, & Palmer, 2007). This further promotes an assumption that female bodybuilders represent a homogenous group with similar identities (Probert et al., 2007).

A limited number of studies with a broader focus have briefly discussed the reasons why females participate in bodybuilding. Semidirective interviews with nine experienced French female bodybuilders revealed that belongingness to a community and feeling fulfilled were rewarding aspects of continued bodybuilding participation (Roussel & Griffet, 2000). More recently, a two year ethnographic study of 26 British female bodybuilders noted that previous enjoyment of a different sport and emulating a physique they admired were motivating factors for their involvement in bodybuilding (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Furthermore, a mixed methodological approach with a sample of male and female bodybuilders that contained 243 New Zealand female bodybuilders found that commitment to a bodybuilding regime is associated with health and subjective well-being (Probert et al., 2007). Despite these reports, the wider focus of studies in this field has precluded consideration of these factors within a current positive psychology framework. Due to the derogatory comments often aimed at female bodybuilders (e.g., disgusting and freak; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009) and to the sport generally,

from a psychological perspective it is important to look beyond the physical characteristics to examine any psychological adaptive mechanisms that can contribute to a positive psychology.

To address this, firstly, I sought to examine the rationale for why females are motivated to begin bodybuilding, and to identify factors that contribute to continuation of the sport. Then, secondly, I sought to interpret the data and discuss findings within the ‘scaffold’ of self-determination theory (hereafter SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is one of a range of theoretical perspectives of well-being that co-exist under the relatively broad concept of eudaimonia, defined as the process of living well (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). SDT is a macro theory that was developed by Ryan and Deci (2000) to frame accounts of human motivation, personality development, and well-being. The overarching focus of the theory is that humans have three fundamental psychological needs that are found universally across different cultures. These basic psychological requirements to foster well-being are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy relates to freedom of choice. In effect, be the agent of one’s life. In terms of competence, this refers to the need to feel confident in one’s ability and to perform well in an activity that is enhanced with positive feedback. Relatedness is defined as the need to have social connections that are close, whilst respecting autonomy and encouraging competence. Further, the theory postulates that fulfillment of these needs in a given social context is essential to positive development of the human psyche and that well-being is enhanced when these needs are met. Conversely, if these needs are thwarted, then psychological functioning is impaired, to the extent that many forms of psychopathology develop (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & LaGuardia, 2006). Importantly, the dynamics of psychological need support and need thwarting are facilitated or undermined by supportive or unsupportive social and cultural networks. Situating findings from the present study within a psychological framework allows for greater focus on inner psychological motivational states, as opposed to a purely semiotic analysis that conforms to dominant values of society.

Purpose of this Study

Studies that investigate the bodybuilding community from a pathological perspective are numerous (Bjornestad et al., 2013). This may be explained by psychology’s strong interest in pathology instead of flourishing (Froh et al., 2010). However, research has begun to accumulate on positive psychology, with the aim of understanding what methods help people to move towards positive development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Up to this point, investigations of the female bodybuilding community have largely ignored factors that contribute towards well-being. Consequently, this has yet to be adequately addressed within the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory research is two-fold: firstly, to go beyond the countercultural physique and negativity surrounding bodybuilding in order to investigate the reasons why females participate in the sport of competitive bodybuilding; and, secondly, to find out if these reasons can foster psychological “nutrients” that can enhance well-being.

Participant Characteristics

The 24 female professional bodybuilders ranged in age from 29 to 49 years ($M = 36.2$, $SD = 5.8$). Nineteen of the sample were Caucasian and five African American, and all currently reside in the USA. Sixteen were born in the USA and eight in Europe².

² Participant characteristics were obtained from online sources.

Definitions

The term “female bodybuilder” covers a range of possibilities, as some females may self-label themselves as bodybuilders but not participate in actual competitions. Therefore, the definition provided by Parish, Baghurst, and Turner (2010), that “a bodybuilder is an individual who trains with weights on a regular and frequent basis in order to achieve high levels of muscularity and leanness for the primary purpose of competing” (p. 153) is utilized here. In addition, females compete in different categories, known as fitness, figure, bikini, and physique. The main distinguishing feature between categories is that those who compete in the physique category exhibit the greatest amount of muscle mass in combination with low levels of adipose tissue. All participants currently classify themselves as professional bodybuilders who compete in the physique category.³

Interviews

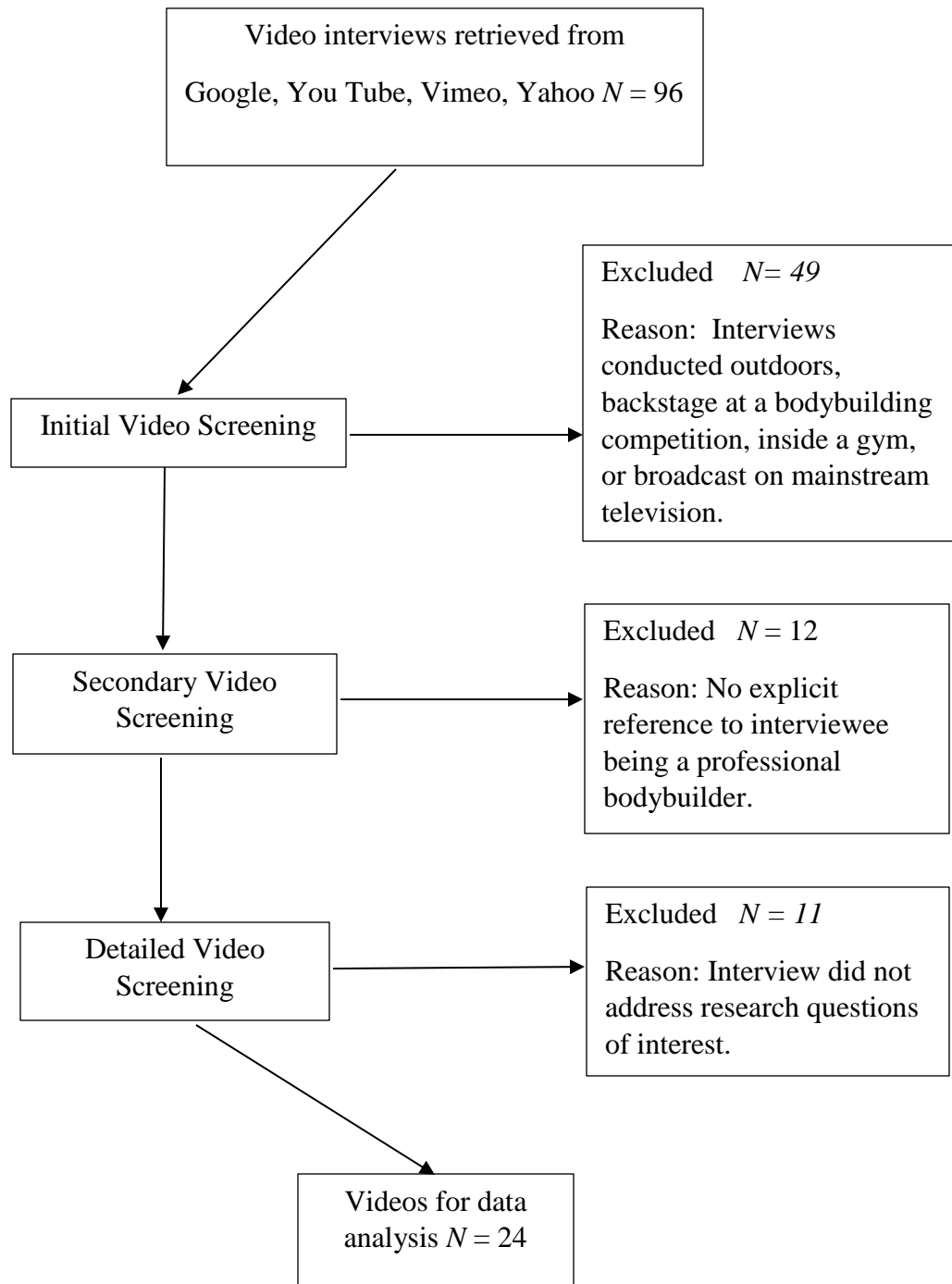
The present study utilized and analyzed publicly available online videos. Following the tradition of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, a method that has a long record of using third party audio recordings (Laurier, 2013), many researchers are taking a ‘technological turn’ to online video repositories as a source of scientific data (Kousha, Thelwall, & Abdoli, 2012). There are many instances of re-purposing videos for scientific research. Predominantly, investigations utilizing online video have employed content analysis with a coding system to analyze data (Kousha et al., 2012). Examples include the use of broadcast media (Chouliaraki, 2006) and YouTube videos (Adami, 2010) across a broad range of academic disciplines, including public health research (e.g., Paek, Kim, & Hove, 2010), and psychology (e.g., Hussin, Frazier, & Thompson, 2011).

To meet the aims of the present study, 96 publicly available video interviews were retrieved and viewed over a five day period by searching Google and YouTube with the term ‘interview with professional female bodybuilder’. Many of the same videos emerged during this search. A further search was conducted with the term ‘professional female bodybuilder interview’. Both terms were also employed to search Vimeo and Yahoo during the same time period. When no new videos emerged, the search was completed. Figure 1 is a flow chart showing video exclusion criteria.

This group was purposefully sampled according to the needs of this study (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For the interviews to be included in the analysis, the video interview met the following criteria: firstly, it contained the question “Why did you become involved with competitive bodybuilding?” or a variation of the same question (e.g., “What got you started?”); secondly, the interviewee made an explicit statement about being a professional bodybuilder; finally, attention was given to the context of production, its original purpose, audience and where the interview took place (Jewitt, 2012). Therefore, the interviews all took place indoors in a formal interview setting. Interviews were not included that were conducted outdoors, backstage at a bodybuilding competition, inside a gym, or broadcasted on mainstream television. From the original set of over ninety videos, twenty-four interviews between 5 minutes and 14 minutes in length met these criteria and subsequently formed the data for this study.

³ Confirmed by online sources. Publicly accessible personal websites and on-line profiles.

Figure 1. Flow Chart Showing Video Exclusion Criteria



Methodology

Theoretical thematic analysis provides a comprehensive analysis of one specific component of the overall data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This form of analysis can be inductive where the themes are driven by the data or deductive, which is driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area. In the context of the research question and the aims of the present

study, the decision was made to utilize a composite of the two (see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach, described by Hammersley (1992) as a ‘subtle realist’ methodology, complemented the research question, as this allowed for the identification of themes that did not fit into the pre-existing coding frame. Further analytical decisions were made in respect to identifying themes at a purely semantic level, and to interpret the broader meaning within an existing theoretical framework. For the purpose of the present study, a tentative coding template was developed a priori. The choice of a code template for the study was important, as it served as a data management tool, and assisted in the organization of related text to aid interpretation (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Based on the research question, the researcher’s knowledge in the area, and previous literature covering female bodybuilders (Probert et al., 2007; Roussel & Griffet, 2000; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009), six tentative broad codes formed the template. These were: emulation, previous sports participation, feeling good about oneself, community, body image, and enjoyment. The a priori determined code of body image was included as an umbrella term for a range of possibilities, for example, dissatisfaction with the body, or the desire to change without being dissatisfied with the body. Therefore, the analysis for this code was more inductive-based than the previously discussed codes.

The Role of the Researcher

The researcher’s personal biography and positionality, as someone who has been involved in male bodybuilding as both a competitor and trainer, is socially and culturally located within the bodybuilding community. As such, it is impossible for the researcher to be located outside of the subject matter. Therefore, it is important to recognize the researcher’s role during the process of analysis and also the preconceptions and assumptions the researcher brings to the data (Devine & Heath, 1999). In addition, the researcher’s epistemological and ontological position and theoretical perspective is entwined with this personal history (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Consequently, this paper is written based on the epistemological assumption that the researcher’s intellectual and emotional reaction to the participants can shape his accounts to constitute sources of knowledge (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

During the course of the video interviews, the female bodybuilders gave reasons as to why they took up the sport of bodybuilding, and also discussed factors that may contribute towards continued involvement. These reasons are summarized below.

Starting Bodybuilding

Emulation

Five participants described emulating others as a factor for commencing bodybuilding. However, the descriptions were based on imitating physical appearance and not in terms of emulating competitive success. A typical example was:

[Video 4] “I walked past the newsstand and saw Penny on the cover of a magazine. That was it, I started weight-training and from that moment I wanted to look just like her.”

Three more described physical emulation, although in the context of already participating in gym training for fitness:

[Video 19] “I was training when I saw these girls who were preparing for some kind of competition and I thought, this is cool, I want to get the abs and the vein in the bicep.”

Previous Sports Participation

Many of the respondents described previous competitive sport participation and a desire to participate in competitive events:

[Video 22] “I was a good competitive gymnast but gave up. But I missed being in competitions. I was already quite muscular from the gymnastics and a friend of mine suggested bodybuilding. From then I was hooked.”

This was further endorsed by another participant:

[Video 11] “I couldn’t stand the swimming and early morning training sessions. But I enjoyed the competition. It was just me and I didn’t have to rely on a team. I was already weight training for swimming, and thought to myself why not bodybuilding.”

Weight training as a means to recover from an injury in another sport was also described:

[Video 16] “I have a background as a swimmer, when I was younger I swam a lot. I got surgery to my shoulder which used to dislocate a lot. So I rehabilitate with weights. I had fun lifting weights and that’s how my passion for bodybuilding become.”

Body Image

Two sub categories were identified throughout the analysis: body dissatisfaction and physique plasticity.

Body Dissatisfaction

Body dissatisfaction is defined as a negative subjective evaluation of the weight and shape of one’s own body. This was identified in a number of interviews as a reason for becoming involved in bodybuilding;

[Video 2] “When I was younger I had a skinny upper body and pretty fat legs, and I was ‘erm’ embarrassed by this. I didn’t like going to the beach because I thought everybody was looking at me. I am so happy I got into this sport, because it made me feel better about myself.”

Commencing bodybuilding due to body dissatisfaction was a salient factor throughout the interviews.

[Video 8] “I used to be fat. In fact I was obese. I took up bodybuilding to lose weight. Now look.”

This was endorsed by another participant, who stated that:

[Video 12] “I exercised to burn up calories, I was unhappy with my body as I wanted to be slimmer and look like a model. Then I took up weight training and now I love it.”

Physique Plasticity

Changing one’s physique may in some ways ‘tap’ into body dissatisfaction. However, this was considered separately here, as dissatisfaction with physique as a motivator to change was not explicitly stated. This component also has relevance for continued participation:

[Video 10] “I just loved the idea that I could go to the gym and change my physique in whichever way I wanted.”

This was identified in other accounts:

[Video 14] “After I took up bodybuilding I used to look in the mirror and see changes to my body. The bodybuilding exercises changed my physique, and I liked what I was seeing.”

Continued Participation in Bodybuilding

Feeling Good

Eleven participants described how the competition itself or their strength and muscular condition made them ‘feel good’:

[Video 2] “Appearing in front of all those people makes me feel fantastic.”

This was further stated by another participant:

[Video 14] “I just love it, I feel so strong.”

One participant described how bodybuilding had changed her life and made her more confident:

[Video 21] “When I was a teenager I was so shy. My parents used to try and get me involved in sporting activities but I wasn’t interested. My friend talked me into going to the gym when I was about 19, and the more I trained and I noticed my body changing, the more confident I became. Now, I feel so good.”

A ‘good feeling’ was endorsed by participants throughout:

[Video 1] “It makes me feel good, and I love feeling good.”

Community

Camaraderie among the competitors and supporters was discussed by five participants:

[Video 4] “One of the things people don’t realize about this sport is that we are a huge family. There is no cattiness and we are just one big group together. The camaraderie is just amazing.”

This was also illustrated here:

[Video 24] “Before when I competed in athletics at college, the competitors just used to, you know, stare each other out, trying to psyche out the opposition. The locker room before was never a nice place. But in bodybuilding it’s so different, I can catch up with other competitors I haven’t seen for a while, it’s great. None of that trying to get inside your head nonsense.”

In describing the fans, one participant stated:

[Video 20] “The fans, are the sweetest, sweetest people I have ever come across in my life.”

Enjoyment

Twelve participants’ identified enjoyment as a primary reason for continuing bodybuilding:

[Video 3] “I love training. Even on vacation we train. People say why train when on vacation. Well why would I stop doing what I love? Right.”

Another participant stated:

[Video 20] “Training is a big part of my life. I enjoy other things like reading, and hiking. But I enjoy bodybuilding so much. Travelling around meeting new people, but most of all I love being in the gym and lifting weights.”

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory investigation was to find out the reasons why female professional bodybuilders were first attracted to bodybuilding and to identify factors that may contribute towards continued participation. The responses of the female bodybuilders are discussed below within the framework of SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Autonomy is greatest when individuals feel that they are pursuing an activity because they choose to do so, not because they feel pressured by external factors. Within SDT, different types of motivation are based on the different reasons that give rise to an action (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The most basic distinction between types of motivation is between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to participating in activity because of external

pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the present study, the female bodybuilders discussed factors that relate to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Given that winning competitions and financial rewards are important considerations for competitive athletes (Hughes, & Coakley, 1991), surprisingly, no bodybuilder directly identified either as motivating factors. This suggests that these extrinsic motivating factors are of secondary importance to female bodybuilders. Instead, discussion revolved around extrinsic motivations in terms of improving body image and intrinsic motivators such as enjoyment.

Research has shown that a negative perception of body image is related to poor psychological functioning, lower self-esteem and overall health (Maltby & Day, 2001). This suggests that the participants who took up bodybuilding as a result of body dissatisfaction suffered from poor psychological functioning. However, Maltby and Day (2001) also reported that these factors are associated with termination of exercise schedules within six months. Therefore, as the bodybuilders in this study are professional, it is reasonable to assume they have been bodybuilding over a long period. Consequently, although body dissatisfaction motivated some participants to begin bodybuilding, long term adherence, the feeling of becoming stronger, and noticing changes in their physique promoted an intrinsic motivational state. This is based on the notion that, when adherence to an activity is long term, extrinsic motivations must be replaced by intrinsic motivations (Wankel, 1993). Intrinsically motivated behavior, which is driven by interest and enjoyment in the activity, is characteristically autonomous (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Therefore, the findings of this study offer support for the view that professional female bodybuilders are intrinsically motivated, consequently enhancing the sense of autonomy. This is underscored by the large number of participants who endorsed enjoyment as a reason for participating in the sport.

In terms of competence, a number of participants reported that emulating a physique they admired and previous sports participation were primary reasons for bodybuilding. Sporting success and successfully reaching goals can develop psychological mechanisms to enhance the sense of competence and increase intrinsic motivations. The more competent individuals perceive themselves in an activity, the more intrinsically motivated they will be at that activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Assuming that building one's level of musculature to the standard required to attain professional status represents a challenging task, then successfully reaching pre-determined goals fosters a high sense of perceived competence, therefore fulfilling this basic need (Grolnick, Gurland, Jacob, & DeCoursey, 2002). Competence can also be enhanced as a result of the positive feedback from the subcultural audience reported by the bodybuilders in this study. In line with SDT, previous sport- or exercise-related studies have demonstrated that positive feedback enhances intrinsic motivation through satisfying the basic need for competence (e.g., Vallerand & Reid, 1984).

Studies have shown that bodybuilding participation leads to enhancing self-efficacy (e.g., Heywood, 1998). Furthermore, bodybuilders are reported to feel an increase in self-worth and a greater sense of self-mastery after becoming a bodybuilder (e.g., Klein, 1993; Roussel & Griffett, 2000). In brief, female professional bodybuilders can experience self-mastery, and this experience can enhance aspects of the self, particularly self-esteem, and self-worth, consequently fostering autonomy and competence.

The concept of relatedness gets to the heart of this article, given the sociocultural resistance to the hypervisibility of the female bodybuilder. Western culture's explicit disapproval of the sport has repercussions for the competitor and undermines this basic psychological need. The implications of group membership for self-esteem are contingent upon

the positive or negative evaluation of the group in relation to other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When a person is a member of a culturally valued group, self-esteem will rise, based on being a member of that group (Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom, & Bodenhausen, 2003). On the other hand, consistent with the theory of the 'looking glass self' that notions of the self are dependent on the appraisals of others (Cooley, 1902), one would expect the self-esteem of bodybuilders to diminish, given the negative appraisal of the subculture. As perceived social identity contributes to self-esteem, individuals strive for a positive self-concept by finding ways in which to view their group in a positive light to achieve positive distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Potentially, this is achieved by showing bias towards positive attributes of the in-group.

Alongside the sociocultural condemnation of female bodybuilding, described by Richardson (2008) as one of the "queerest activities of postmodern culture", the subculture itself has shunned the aggrandized muscularity of the competitors. Due to dwindling public interest, governing bodies of the sport have insisted that the competitors reduce levels of muscularity (International Federation of Bodybuilders [IFBB], 2004). Therefore, it was poignant to note, when analyzing the data, that the "in-group" seemingly consisted of just themselves and supporters. During the interviews, participants passionately described friendships with fellow competitors and fans. This may represent an intrinsically motivated attempt to achieve positive distinctiveness by over-emphasizing the camaraderie within the group to protect self-esteem and retain a positive sense of self. Alternatively, the camaraderie between bodybuilders and supporters may provide a 'psychological buffer' in the face of outside threats to belongingness, therefore allowing the bodybuilders to retain feelings of relatedness.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration when interpreting these findings. Firstly, the videos were relatively short in length, lasting between five and fourteen minutes, and some sections discussing the factors of interest were of especially short duration. However, this concern is ameliorated somewhat by the a priori decision to only interpret the data at a semantic level, in which case all participants discussed the questions relevant to this study. Secondly, it is assumed by the researcher that all the videos analyzed were produced for the benefit of female bodybuilding supporters; therefore, it is unclear to what extent these may have been "cut" during the editing process before public viewing. Finally, it is unclear if during the interviews the participants were finding ways to put a positive spin on themselves and also the sport of female bodybuilding. In terms of potentially maladaptive psycho-behaviors, none were discussed during the interviews; therefore, in terms of future directions, the suggestion should be to take a more holistic approach to examining female bodybuilding such that both the potentially positive and potentially negative aspects of the sport are examined together.

Conclusion

Female bodybuilding has attracted considerable academic and media attention. Much of this attention has focused on bodybuilding from a pathologizing perspective or attempted to unravel the complexities of the female bodybuilder's challenge to gender norms. The present study is among the first to integrate the reasons for bodybuilding into an established psychological framework of well-being. Despite research on this topic frequently portraying

female bodybuilders in a negative light, this exploratory investigation indicates that participating in bodybuilding can provide mechanisms that link the activity to psychological well-being. Framing the data within a SDT framework offers some support for the notion that enjoyment of the activity, achieving success, and feeling good, can mediate the relationship between competitive bodybuilding and perceived competence and autonomy. In terms of relatedness, by interpreting the data at only a semantic level it was inconclusive as to what extent alienation from society at large and from the sport's governing bodies has on the participant's subjective well-being.

Therefore, in light of the findings presented here, it is a worthwhile endeavor for researchers to examine the sport of female bodybuilding from a positive functioning perspective to recast behaviors and identities previously pathologized due to their gender nonconformity as potentially health beneficial processes. Quantitative research designs that utilize existing measures of psychological well-being with female bodybuilding samples can build on the present investigation. Integrating findings into existing models of well-being allows for a better understanding of how active engagement in bodybuilding impacts psychological health.

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