

Self-Fulfillment and Health Perceptions Among Male Gym-Goers: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study Using Colaizzi's Thematic Approach and Focus Group Discussions

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ABSTRACT

Bodybuilding and gym participation have become increasingly popular among young adults as means of enhancing physical fitness, body image, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life. While previous studies have extensively examined physiological outcomes and competitive bodybuilding, limited qualitative research has explored the lived experiences of ordinary community-based gym-goers. This study explored the lived experiences of male bodybuilding gym-goers regarding their health perceptions, self-fulfillment, lifestyle practices, and challenges encountered in sustaining bodybuilding activities. A descriptive phenomenological design utilizing Colaizzi's thematic approach was employed. Seven male participants aged 22 to 27 years who had regularly attended a community gym for at least one year were purposively selected. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Analysis generated three major themes: (1) Perceived Health Improvement and Pursuit of Greater Body Bulk; (2) Self-Fulfillment Through Improved Physique; and (3) Projection of a Healthy Lifestyle and Challenges of Supplement Dependence. Findings revealed that participants perceived bodybuilding as beneficial to their physical health, emotional well-being, self-discipline, and self-confidence. Participants associated muscular physiques with personal achievement, social acceptance, and enhanced self-image. However, dependence on protein supplements and pre-workout products emerged as a common concern. The study concludes that bodybuilding functions as both a health-promoting and self-enhancing activity among young adults. Nevertheless, responsible supplement consumption and balanced fitness practices remain essential for sustainable health outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Physical fitness and bodybuilding activities have gained considerable popularity among young adults due to increasing awareness of health promotion, physical appearance, and psychological well-being. Participation in gym-based exercise is commonly associated with improvements in muscular strength, body composition, self-confidence, and overall quality of life. For many individuals, bodybuilding extends beyond physical training and becomes a lifestyle characterized by discipline, commitment, personal achievement, and social identity.

The growing influence of fitness culture has transformed bodybuilding from a specialized athletic pursuit into a mainstream recreational activity. Young men, in particular, often associate muscular physiques with attractiveness, masculinity, social acceptance, and personal success (Grogan, 2016). Consequently, bodybuilding has become an important avenue through which individuals seek not only physical improvement but also emotional fulfillment and positive self-perception.

Previous studies have demonstrated that resistance training and bodybuilding contribute positively to physical health, psychological well-being, and self-esteem (Holland *et al.*, 2021; Sabiston *et al.*, 2022). Participation in structured exercise programs has been linked to reduced stress, improved body image, and enhanced confidence among young adults. These benefits have contributed

to the increasing popularity of gym participation across various social and cultural settings.

Despite these positive outcomes, bodybuilding may also present challenges. Research suggests that some individuals experience excessive preoccupation with muscularity, body dissatisfaction, and dependence on dietary supplements and performance-enhancing products (Griffiths *et al.*, 2022). Social media exposure, fitness marketing, and societal expectations regarding ideal male physiques may further reinforce these behaviors, potentially creating unrealistic standards and unhealthy fitness practices.

Although a growing body of literature has examined bodybuilding and body image, much of the existing research focuses on competitive athletes or quantitative assessments of physical outcomes. Comparatively little attention has been given to the lived experiences of ordinary community-based gym-goers, particularly within local gyms that operate with limited facilities and resources. Understanding these experiences is important because community gym-goers represent a substantial portion of individuals engaged in recreational bodybuilding.

Furthermore, limited qualitative studies have utilized descriptive phenomenology combined with Colaizzi's thematic approach and focus group discussions to explore how bodybuilding influences health perceptions, self-

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fulfillment, lifestyle behaviors, and supplement practices among young adult males. Investigating these experiences may provide deeper insights into the personal meanings attached to bodybuilding participation and contribute to the development of more balanced and health-oriented fitness interventions.

Therefore, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of male bodybuilding gym-goers attending a community-based fitness facility and to understand the meanings they attach to health improvement, self-fulfillment, projected lifestyle image, and challenges encountered in maintaining bodybuilding activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bodybuilding and Health Promotion

Bodybuilding has evolved from a competitive sport into a widely practiced recreational activity associated with health promotion and physical development. Many individuals engage in resistance training to improve muscular strength, physical appearance, and overall well-being. Research has consistently demonstrated that regular participation in strength-training activities contributes to improved cardiovascular health, body composition, physical functioning, and mental health outcomes (Holland *et al.*, 2021).

Among young adults, gym participation is frequently associated with healthier lifestyle behaviors, including balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, and reduced engagement in harmful habits such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. These behaviors contribute to positive perceptions of health and personal well-being, reinforcing continued participation in fitness activities.

Body Image, Muscularity, and Self-Fulfillment

Body image plays a significant role in shaping psychological well-being and self-esteem. According to Grogan (2016), individuals often evaluate themselves based on perceived physical appearance, influencing confidence, self-worth, and social interactions. For many young men, muscular physiques are viewed as symbols of attractiveness, competence, masculinity, and personal achievement.

Research by Griffiths *et al.* (2022) suggests that the pursuit of muscularity remains a prominent motivation among male gym-goers. Even after achieving notable physical improvements, many individuals continue striving for greater muscular development. Such pursuits may enhance self-confidence and personal satisfaction while simultaneously creating pressure to meet increasingly idealized body standards.

Bodybuilding may therefore function as both a physical and psychological endeavor. Participants often derive a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment from observing improvements in their physiques, reinforcing motivation and commitment to long-term fitness goals.

Supplement Use and Contemporary Fitness Culture

The increasing popularity of bodybuilding has been

accompanied by growing consumption of dietary supplements, including protein powders, pre-workout products, and muscle-building formulations. While supplements may provide nutritional support when appropriately used, concerns have emerged regarding excessive reliance and misconceptions surrounding their necessity.

Ganson *et al.* (2023) reported that supplement use has become normalized within many fitness communities due to peer influence, social media exposure, and aggressive marketing strategies. Young adults are frequently exposed to online content promoting rapid muscular development and idealized physiques, potentially encouraging supplement dependence and unrealistic expectations regarding fitness outcomes.

Consequently, understanding participants' experiences with supplement use is essential for promoting evidence-based fitness practices and reducing potential health risks associated with inappropriate consumption.

Phenomenological Perspectives on Bodybuilding Experiences

Phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Within the context of bodybuilding, phenomenological inquiry provides an opportunity to examine how participants perceive health, self-identity, body image, and personal fulfillment through their involvement in fitness activities.

Colaizzi's phenomenological approach offers a systematic framework for identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and validating findings to ensure accurate representation of participants' experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). The incorporation of focus group discussions further enriches qualitative inquiry by allowing participants to collectively reflect upon shared beliefs, motivations, and experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Despite growing interest in bodybuilding and fitness culture, relatively few phenomenological studies have explored the lived experiences of ordinary community-based gym-goers. This study contributes to the literature by examining how young male gym participants perceive health, self-fulfillment, lifestyle identity, and supplement-related challenges within a community fitness setting.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of male bodybuilding gym-goers regarding health perceptions, self-fulfillment, lifestyle practices, and challenges encountered in sustaining bodybuilding activities. Descriptive phenomenology was selected because it enables researchers to understand and describe participants' experiences as they are consciously perceived and interpreted. Guided by Husserlian phenomenology, the study sought to capture participants' perspectives

while minimizing researcher assumptions through the process of bracketing.

The study utilized both semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to obtain rich descriptions of participants' experiences. The integration of FGDs facilitated collective reflection on shared beliefs, motivations, supplement practices, and bodybuilding culture, thereby enriching the depth and breadth of the data.

Research Participants

The study involved seven male bodybuilding gym-goers aged 22 to 27 years who regularly attended a community-based fitness gym. Participants had been actively engaged in bodybuilding activities for approximately one year and were selected through purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because it enabled the selection of individuals who possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation and could provide meaningful insights into bodybuilding participation and its perceived effects.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- Male gym-goers;
- Aged between 22 and 27 years old;
- Regularly attending the gym for at least one year;
- Actively involved in bodybuilding activities; and
- Willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in a small community-based gym equipped with basic bodybuilding and fitness equipment. The facility primarily catered to young adults engaged in recreational fitness and bodybuilding activities. The setting was selected because it provided access to individuals who regularly participated in bodybuilding within a non-competitive and community-oriented environment.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. Interview questions focused on participants' perceptions of health, motivations for bodybuilding, experiences of self-fulfillment, body image, supplement use, lifestyle practices, and challenges encountered in maintaining gym participation.

Following the individual interviews, one focus group discussion involving five to seven participants was conducted to explore shared experiences and collective perspectives regarding bodybuilding culture and fitness-related behaviors. The use of FGDs enabled participants to build upon one another's responses and generate richer insights into common experiences.

All interviews and discussions were conducted in a comfortable and private environment to encourage open communication. With participants' consent,

conversations were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participants received a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and their rights as research participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and research reports. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection and audio recording. All gathered information was treated with strict confidentiality and utilized solely for research purposes.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. This analytical framework was selected because it provides a systematic approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting participants' lived experiences.

The analysis followed the following stages:

1. Reading and familiarization with all interview and FGD transcripts.
2. Extraction of significant statements relevant to the phenomenon under study.
3. Formulation of meanings from significant statements.
4. Organization of formulated meanings into thematic clusters.
5. Development of exhaustive descriptions of participants' experiences.
6. Identification of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.
7. Validation of findings through participant verification and researcher reflection.

The integration of individual interviews and focus group discussions enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings through methodological triangulation. Consistency across participant narratives and shared experiences contributed to the authenticity and rigor of the thematic interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Perceived Health Improvement and Pursuit of Greater Body Bulk

Participants consistently reported improvements in physical health, muscular strength, endurance, and overall well-being following regular gym participation. They described feeling healthier, more energetic, and more disciplined in their daily routines. Many participants attributed these improvements to consistent exercise, healthier dietary practices, adequate rest, and avoidance of smoking and alcohol consumption. These findings

suggest that bodybuilding may serve as a positive health-promoting activity that encourages individuals to adopt healthier lifestyle behaviors.

However, despite acknowledging substantial physical improvements, participants expressed a continuing desire to increase muscular size and further improve their physiques. This finding suggests that bodybuilding participation is motivated not only by health enhancement but also by aspirations related to body image, self-presentation, and personal achievement. The persistent pursuit of muscularity may reflect broader sociocultural ideals that associate muscular physiques with attractiveness, masculinity, competence, and social status.

One participant stated:

“I feel healthier and stronger now compared before, but I still want to gain more muscle and improve my body.”

This statement demonstrates how health gains and physique enhancement often coexist as interconnected goals among gym-goers. Similar findings were reported by Griffiths *et al.* (2022), who observed that many young men continue striving for greater muscularity despite achieving satisfactory physical improvements. Likewise, Holland *et al.* (2021) found that resistance training often contributes to improved health perceptions while simultaneously reinforcing appearance-related motivations.

The community-based nature of the gym may have further influenced these perceptions. Participants regularly interacted with peers who shared similar fitness goals, potentially creating a social environment that reinforced bodybuilding behaviors and aspirations. Such peer influence may strengthen commitment to training while also maintaining the desire for continuous physique enhancement.

Theme 2: Self-Fulfillment Through Improved Physique

Participants described bodybuilding as a source of self-fulfillment, confidence, pride, and emotional satisfaction. Visible physical changes resulting from consistent training appeared to strengthen self-esteem and contribute to a more positive self-image. Participants frequently associated bodybuilding success with discipline, perseverance, and personal achievement.

One participant shared:

“When I see improvements in my body, I feel fulfilled and more confident with myself.”

The findings suggest that bodybuilding serves as more than a physical activity; it also functions as a psychological and emotional process through which individuals evaluate personal growth and achievement. Improvements in physique appeared to validate participants’ efforts and reinforce their commitment to self-improvement. This observation aligns with Grogan’s (2016) assertion that body image significantly influences self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Recent international studies have similarly demonstrated positive associations between resistance training, body satisfaction, and psychological well-being among young adults (Sabiston *et al.*, 2022). Participation in structured exercise programs has been linked to enhanced confidence, reduced stress, and improved emotional health. These benefits may explain why participants viewed bodybuilding as a meaningful component of their identity and daily lives.

Nevertheless, an alternative interpretation should also be considered. While increased confidence may result from genuine improvements in health and physical functioning, it may also be influenced by external validation from peers, social media, and societal expectations regarding ideal male physiques. Thus, self-fulfillment derived from bodybuilding may reflect both intrinsic satisfaction and external social reinforcement.

The findings further indicate that bodybuilding functioned as a mechanism for stress management and emotional regulation. Participants described gym participation as a productive outlet for releasing stress and maintaining emotional balance. This highlights the multifaceted benefits of bodybuilding, extending beyond physical fitness to include psychological resilience and overall well-being.

Theme 3: Projection of a Healthy Lifestyle and Challenges of Supplement Dependence

Participants perceived their physiques as representations of healthy living, discipline, and self-care. Muscular appearance was commonly associated with positive lifestyle practices such as regular exercise, balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, and avoidance of harmful habits. Participants believed that their physical appearance projected an image of health and personal responsibility. These perceptions reflect broader societal tendencies to equate muscularity with health, fitness, and success. Similar findings have been reported in international studies, where physically fit individuals are often viewed as more disciplined, motivated, and health-conscious than their peers (Ganson *et al.*, 2023).

Despite these positive perceptions, supplement dependence emerged as a recurring concern among participants. Several reported frequent use of protein supplements, shakes, and pre-workout products, often viewing them as necessary components of successful bodybuilding.

One participant explained:

“Sometimes I feel I depend too much on protein and pre-workout drinks because I think my workout is incomplete without them.”

This statement suggests that supplementation may have become psychologically integrated into participants’ exercise routines. While nutritional supplements can support fitness goals when used appropriately, excessive reliance may create unrealistic expectations regarding muscle growth and performance.

Recent studies have noted increasing normalization of supplement use within fitness communities, largely influenced by social media marketing, fitness influencers, and peer recommendations (Ganson *et al.*, 2023). Exposure to idealized physiques online may encourage individuals to view supplementation as essential rather than optional. Consequently, supplement use may reflect not only nutritional practices but also broader cultural influences within contemporary bodybuilding environments.

Furthermore, supplement dependence may place financial burdens on individuals and contribute to misconceptions regarding effective fitness practices. Participants' experiences suggest the importance of promoting evidence-based fitness education and encouraging balanced approaches to muscle development.

Overall, the findings reveal that bodybuilding provides meaningful physical, psychological, and social benefits. However, these benefits coexist with challenges related to body image expectations and supplement reliance. Understanding this balance is essential for developing fitness programs and educational interventions that promote both health enhancement and responsible bodybuilding practices.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of male bodybuilding gym-goers regarding health perceptions, self-fulfillment, lifestyle practices, and challenges associated with bodybuilding participation. The findings revealed that bodybuilding was perceived as a health-promoting activity that enhanced physical well-being, self-discipline, confidence, and overall quality of life. Participants associated improvements in physique with increased self-esteem, personal achievement, and positive social interactions.

The study further demonstrated that bodybuilding extends beyond physical exercise and serves as a means of identity formation, emotional satisfaction, and self-improvement. However, the findings also revealed a persistent pursuit of greater muscularity and a growing reliance on protein supplements and pre-workout products among participants. These practices appear to be influenced by contemporary fitness culture, peer interactions, and societal expectations regarding ideal male physiques.

Overall, bodybuilding provides meaningful physical, psychological, and social benefits among young adult males. Nevertheless, promoting balanced fitness practices, realistic body image expectations, and responsible supplement consumption remains essential to ensure sustainable and health-oriented participation in bodybuilding activities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, gym owners, fitness coaches, and health educators may strengthen health promotion initiatives by providing evidence-based

education regarding proper exercise practices, nutrition, and responsible supplement use. Fitness programs should encourage balanced approaches to bodybuilding that emphasize overall health and well-being rather than excessive pursuit of muscularity.

Community gyms may also conduct seminars and awareness activities focusing on body image, mental well-being, and safe fitness practices to help participants develop realistic expectations regarding physical development and fitness outcomes.

Future researchers may explore the lived experiences of female gym-goers, competitive bodybuilders, and participants from diverse fitness environments to provide broader perspectives on bodybuilding culture. Additional studies involving larger participant groups and different age categories may further enrich understanding of the psychosocial, behavioral, and health-related dimensions of bodybuilding participation.

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