

**Bodybuilding:**

**Trajectories of Involved Young Male Bodybuilders**

**Martina Sciberras**

**BA (Hons) Youth and Community Studies**

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**University of Malta**  
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## **STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY**

April 2014

I, the undersigned hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Bodybuilding: Trajectories of Involved Young Male Bodybuilders” is an original study carried out by myself and conclusions drawn herein are a result of my own research, unless otherwise acknowledged by citation. This work has not been submitted, either in the same or different form, to this or any other University for the award of a degree/diploma.

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To all of you

For your unfailing love, support and understanding.

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## ABSTRACT

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Martina Sciberras

### **Bodybuilding:**

### **Trajectories of Involved Young Male Bodybuilders**

This dissertation seeks to explore how young males, aged 19 to 30, experience their career trajectory of bodybuilding. It will explore the onset, the escalation and the perceptions of their commitment to their chosen sport. It will talk about the motivators during their career trajectory. More specifically, the study will attempt to shed a light on the contingencies why youths engage in this hobby, focusing on psychological, sociological and cultural influences and implications.

A qualitative design was employed. Data was based on semi-structured interviews with six male bodybuilders. The constant comparative method was employed to analyse the resultant data.

The major propositions of the study indicated that there are clearly distinct features of the onset, the commitment, and the escalation stages of the career trajectory of bodybuilding. Contingencies which bind a bodybuilder to his career are psychological, social and cultural in nature, and progress in the field is not linear. Similarly, motivators are dependent on an intricate interplay between personal and social factors. It is clear that bodybuilders are members of a sub-culture, which has defined criteria for membership. Recommendations for future research concluded the dissertation.

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Keywords: Bodybuilding, perceptions, onset, escalation, commitment, career trajectory

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Title page	i
Statement of Authenticity	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Dedications	iv
Abstract	01
Table of contents	02
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>05</b>
1.0 Preamble	05
1.1 The Ancient World	06
1.2 Renaissance Period	07
1.3 Post-Renaissance and Early Modern	07
1.4 The Modern Age	09
1.5 Contemporary	10
1.6 Aims of Study and Research Questions	11
1.7 Research Approach	12
1.8 Rationale	12
1.9 Conclusion	13

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<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>15</b>
2.0 Introduction	15
2.1 The Bodybuilder’s Career Trajectory	15
2.2 Psychological Perspectives	17
2.3 Social and Cultural Perspectives	23
2.4 Conclusion	29
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>31</b>
3.0 Introduction	31
3.1 Research Agenda	31
3.2 Research Approach	32
3.3 Participants	33
3.4 Research Tool	34
3.5 The Role of the Researcher	34
3.6 Data Collection and Procedure	35
3.7 Data Analysis	37
3.8 Ethical Considerations	38
3.9 Methods of Verification: Reliability and Validity	38
3.10 Conclusion	39
<b>CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS</b>	<b>40</b>
4.0 Introduction	40
4.1 Profile of Participants	40
4.2 Presentation of Results	42
4.3 Onset	43
4.3.1 Psychological Contingencies for Onset	44
4.3.2 Social and Cultural Contingencies for Onset	46

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4.3.3 A Quest for Health	49
4.4 Escalation	50
4.4.1. Psychological Implications of Escalation	50
4.4.2 Social and Cultural Implications of Escalation	54
4.4.3 Increased Knowledge of Subject Area	55
4.5 Commitment	56
4.5.1 Psychological Contingencies for Commitment	57
4.5.2 Social and Cultural Implications of Commitment	60
4.6 Conclusion	61
<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION</b>	<b>63</b>
5.0 Introduction	63
5.1 Major Propositions	63
5.2 Limitations of the Study	64
5.3 Recommendations for Future Research	65
5.4 Final Note	66
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>76</b>
Appendix 1 Interview in English	77
Appendix 2 Interview in Maltese	79
Appendix 3 Recruitment Letter	81
Appendix 4 Ittra ta' Partecipazzjoni	82
Appendix 5 Consent Letter	83
Appendix 6 Ittra' ta' Kunsens	85
Appendix 7 Quotes in Maltese and English	87

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## Chapter 1

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### Introduction

#### 1.0 Preamble

The gym is full of social people, and that's not even counting the pencil-necks whose main purpose in the gym is to follow thongs around – or the thongs whose main purpose is to ignore the pencilnecks and follow good-looking bodybuilders around (Ironman, as cited in Ian, 2005, p. 384).

Our attitudes towards the body are socially constructed and the construction of the body has been ever changing since time immemorial. Society changes, and so do perceptions and realities, and the word “body” has, over the years, changed its meaning. Plato described the body as the tomb of the soul, Saint Paul claimed that the body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, Descartes suggested that the human body may be considered a machine and Sartre claimed that “the body is what I immediately am...I am my body” (as cited in Synnott, 1992, p. 79). Throughout the years there has been a dramatic change in opinions on what constitutes a body. Bodies are different, both physically and socially, and ideas about the body vary widely from culture to culture. The evaluation of the body was and still is highly controversial. According to Mary Douglas (as cited in Synnott, 1992), “the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body... sustains a particular view of society” (p. 80). Modern constructions of the body have imposed on society a need for the body to be built in a way where men can, through their body, display power, might, beauty and strength (Douglas, as cited in Synnott, 1992).

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## 1.1 The Ancient World

For many years, well before the discipline of bodybuilding as practiced today, the physical culture of muscle-building has been the attraction of numerous followers. Ancient Egyptian and Greek societies used weight-training as a general athletic activity, as a way to gain strength and measure power. In their quest to transform their body, they used stones of various sizes and weights. One of the Greek ideals was in fact the celebration of the human body through muscle development. According to Dutton and Laura (1989), “later Greek sculpture was more inclined to build upon the Greeks’ interest in gymnastics and athletic games and to portray the transcendent potential of man by a well-developed muscularity, which symbolised supreme energy” (p. 31). The visual culture of the perfect athletic human body, with an ideal muscular structure, reached its climax in the sculptural work produced during the classical Greek period. Such statuary remained as prototypes for the perfect and youthful human body even during the Roman period, when numerous Greek originals were copied by Roman sculptures (Chapman, 1994).

Attention to exercise and to the importance of nutrition for a sculpted body dates back to the ancient world. Grivetti and Applegate (1997) stated that Diogenes Laertius, a biographer of the Greek philosophers, claimed that athletes ate mainly figs, moist cheese and wheat, whilst later meat was given more importance. Athletes also avoided desserts and did not drink wine regularly. Philostratos, a Greek sophist, disapproved the athletic diet in his era consisting of white bread with poppy seeds, fish and pork.

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## 1.2 Renaissance Period

Painters and sculptors of the Italian Renaissance were influenced by late Greek sculptures, such as the Greco-Roman *Torso Belvedere*, which inspired Michelangelo in his representation of nude male figures in the Last Judgement at the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican (Dutton & Laura, 1989). Discovered in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century in fragment form, the *Torso Belvedere* was considered to be the most remarkable example of the male athletic physique (Hibbard, 1974). Synnott (1992) claimed that during this period the body was being appreciated by humanists “for its own, purely secular sake, not simply a rung on the ladder of God” (p. 90). This period saw the end of the ascetic idea of the body and the start of the idea that the body is personal and private.

## 1.3 Post-Renaissance and Early Modern

In Europe, the representation of the perfect human body regained its popularity during the post-renaissance and early modern period. A completely new physical culture for entertainment purposes also emerged. During those days, weight-lifting preceded bodybuilding. The intention of weight-lifting was mainly to awe crowds with amazing feats of strength and not to develop one’s body into a glorious spectacle, the main aim of bodybuilding (Robson, 2005). Through intensive weight-training, the professional strongman emerged. Challenges with fellow strongmen increased in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, men’s physiques were not always an issue and protruding stomachs and thick, fatty limbs were common amongst competitors and “cosmetic” muscles were sneered at. It was the strength of these men and the novelty of the sport which got the general public interested.

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It was Eugene Sandow, a physical cultural icon who, in the 1890s, was the first famous bodybuilder. Sandow is considered to be the father of modern bodybuilding and the model behind the Mr Olympia statuette, having revolutionised the scene and set the pace for committed young male bodybuilders. Sandow was the symmetrical and densely muscular physique the people were longing to see. Wiegers (1998) stated that “his embodiment of gorgeous brawn shifted the focus on extraordinary strength to the aesthetics of muscularity” (p. 149). According to Chapman (1994), Sandow has changed dramatically our way of viewing ourselves and our bodies. Chapman described Sandow as “a blond, blue-eyed Teutonic Adonis, he was the very picture of robust good health and manly strength” (p. 1). Sandow developed some of the first bodybuilding machinery and his genius was to transform muscle and strength training into a cure for the stressed and sedentary male population (Robson, 2005). In 1891, the first weight-lifting contest was held in England and in 1896, in Athens, weight-lifting featured in the first modern Olympic Games (Dutton & Laura, 1989). Following the contest in England, bodybuilding gained popularity.

By the end of the 1920s, dumbbells and other equipment were being sold all over the world. During the 1930s, bodybuilders focused on losing body-fat and developing balanced physiques. There was a notable advancement in the use of exercise equipment. In the 1970s, bodybuilding increased in popularity and superstars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Frank Zane and Dave Draper became household names. Their muscular physique was targeted by the movie industry. This in turn increased the gym industry, making it more lucrative. Over the years, the practices of dieting, weight-training and the use of steroids were adopted by the mainstream society. Mass at all

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costs approach was, and still is, a general trend and those carrying the most size are the top place getters (Robson, 2005).

#### **1.4 The Modern Age**

Murray (1984) stated that bodybuilding is one of the oldest sports known to man. Before 1903, the interest in bodybuilding was to make one stronger and no particular attention was given to the appearance of the body. However, after being practiced by the Chinese and the Greeks, it evolved into a systematic sport. After 1903, emphasis on symmetry and a well-muscled physique became of paramount importance. Since the 1970s, physical fitness was being given more importance and “neither Herculean strength nor bulging muscles” (Murray, 1984, p. 197) were, for the majority, particular goals to achieve whilst working out at the gym.

Modern bodybuilding has its origins in 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of muscular Christianity and sport (Wiegers, 1998). Building a strong, disciplined body meant being a good disciple of God. Although bodybuilding today has been separated from Christianity, “bodybuilding has retained its emphasis on moral devotion, hard work and spiritual transcendence of the uncontrolled and unrestrained physical body” (p. 148).

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## 1.5 Contemporary

Since its primitive beginnings, bodybuilding has come a long way. One cannot deny its popularity and the current trajectory will continue if its current rate of growth is anything to go by. Stokvis (2006) stated that there were as many people practising bodybuilding as there were people taking part in organised sports as from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Bodybuilding has been transformed from an activity restricted to a small number of devotees, to a fashionable form of exercise for the masses. There exist variations regarding discipline, ranging from the more traditional and extreme development of the muscle mass to the more modern and general ideal of just lightly toning the muscles. It has been accepted that there is no longer the need to feel ashamed about efforts made to reshape the body. Hence, effectively the modern fitness industry targets specific needs and caters for people's desires and towards the fulfilment of their wishes.

Around the world, we are witnessing the evolution of an obsession with body image (Clark, 1970). Young, middle-class men in particular, are looking for status-seeking activities (Luciano, 2002). What does it mean to be a man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? According to historian and philosopher Elisabeth Badinter (as cited in Luciano, 2002), "models of masculinity haven't changed much over the years" (p. 4). Badinter stated that there are four important issues for the men of today. Men must be men; they must be competitive and constantly show their superiority and success; they must also be impassive and detached; and they must be willing to confront danger and take risks to the point of violence. What is interesting in what has been said is that none of these four issues show how a man is supposed to look. Then why have men become so obsessed

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about their body image? A confluence of economic, cultural and social changes has been important in shaping the new cult of male body image all over the world. Modern lifestyles and the emphasis on health and beauty, propagated even further by the media, have surely lent a hand to the growth of this sport, especially amongst young men (Pollack, 2011). The media has portrayed 21<sup>st</sup> century men as having pumped shoulders and well-defined abdominals and nowadays, the muscular guy dominates catwalks and magazine pages. In view of the above, young people today are being constantly reminded of the importance of a well-toned body, to the extent of becoming unsociable beings as a result of their rigid exercise routines and diet regimes (Gauntlett, 2003).

### **1.6 Aims of Study and Research Questions**

The present study aims to explore how young males, aged 19 to 30 years, experience their trajectory of bodybuilding. For the purposes of this study, the term “trajectory” refers to the development of the bodybuilding career from the onset, the pursuing of the career and eventual commitment to the chosen sport. Clark (2011) stated that “once a social identity has been established, rejection of that identity becomes even more difficult” (p. 563). Moreover, the term “bodybuilding” implies the pursuit of a muscular physique, through a regime of weight training and a tailored programme of nutrition (Mosley, 2009, p. 191).

The research questions which guide the study are the following:

- How do young males perceive the onset, escalation, and commitment to their chosen sport?
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- What are the motivators which guide youth to engage in this hobby?
- How are young male bodybuilders influenced by psychological factors and social and cultural practices during their holistic experience of bodybuilding?

### **1.7 Research Approach**

The study adopts a qualitative approach, as the scope of the work in question is the in-depth understanding of lived experiences. Seeking to explore narratives of individual lives sheds a better light on subjective realities. As far as possible, the researcher employs a neutral stance when conducting semi-structured interviews with six male bodybuilders, aged between 19 and 30 years, hence depicting authentic portrayals. While a narrative inquiry was used to collect data, the analytic strategy utilises the constant comparative method, as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

### **1.8 Rationale**

It is increasingly becoming more common for young people to engage in processes which modify the body (Grogan, 2008). In view of this need for body transformation, it would be interesting to attempt to study why young people are seeking bodybuilding to transform their body. Such a study is relevant to youth work in general, and to youth workers who work with young male bodybuilders specifically, as attempting to understand individual, subjective narratives is of utmost importance to examining current lifestyles (Silverman, 2006). There is a dearth of literature on this area in the local context.

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From a very young age, my involvement in sports and attendance in gyms has featured daily in my personal life. Being an extremely energetic person, verging on hyperactive, sports in my childhood helped me use up excess energy. Sports helped me remain focused and kept me away from dangerous childhood pranks. As I grew older I developed obsessions, linked to my training routine, which may be due to various factors. One of the most important factors, I believe, is a considerable amount of low self-esteem in my teenage years. Sports helped me excel in a particular field and allowed me to show that I could be the best in a sphere of functioning; schoolwork, although always above average, still did not meet the expectations set by the immediate environment. Another important factor which is linked to self-esteem is the fact that I always wanted to have an athletic and toned body, a body which reflected my perfectionistic traits. Following a period in my life when I was going through a mild eating disorder, exercise was a means of keeping my weight in control and achieve the body I always wanted. This personal interest in the field, coupled with my awareness of the substantial efforts which athletes go through, has led me to research further the lived experiences, and to seek to understand the psychological, social and cultural aspects which lead young male bodybuilders to start, increase their participation in, and commit themselves to a bodybuilding career.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

Following the introductory chapter, chapter two will review literature pertaining to the subject matter of bodybuilding as experienced by the young male. Chapter three will then delve into the methodology employed in the study. Chapter four will present an analysis of the presented work, using the constant comparative method linked with

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previous research in the field. Chapter five will conclude the research by summarising it, whilst addressing its limitations and implications, and making suggestions for future research in this area.

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## Chapter 2

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### Literature Review

#### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter will present an overview of current literature in the area of young males and bodybuilding. It will highlight the career trajectory of bodybuilders, whilst considering the impact this has on identity and meaning making. Psychological factors, as well as social and cultural contingencies associated with the bodybuilder's career trajectory, will also be highlighted in this chapter.

#### 2.1 The Bodybuilder's Career Trajectory

Males are not born bodybuilders. Bodybuilding is a progressive development, a trajectory through time, a transition from one position to another, linear or otherwise (Becker, as cited in Clark, 1999). As in any career, the bodybuilding career carries an element of "developmental determinism in which childhood experience sets the course of later development" (Bandura, as cited in Clark, 1999, p. 13). However, certain life events and the bodybuilder's interpretation of them may also significantly impact and refocus the career trajectory, implying that childhood factors are not the sole determining factor for the progression of a career trajectory (Clark, 1999). Moreover, when the bodybuilding career commences, it need not follow a linear approach. Hence, the term "career trajectory" may not only indicate progression in bodybuilding but also

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movement in any life direction, even if this flux is diametrically opposed to the initial life path.

The bodybuilding trajectory is shaped by an initial exploratory phase, often as a movement away from other sport disciplines; a distinct intensification into the world of bodybuilding; and a definite commitment to the career. Significant and varied life events will impact on the commencement, the escalation, and the commitment to the career. Yet, each phase of the career trajectory is fuelled by different motivators, and the meaning of the behaviour for the individual changes (Clark, 1999). The motivation for engaging in bodybuilding, and the meaning given to the experience by the bodybuilder may shift as the career progresses. While a young bodybuilder may lift weights to compensate for perceived limitations in physique, this compensatory defence mechanism, which serves well in the teenage years, may not be a suitable reason for continued perseverance in the sport. The committed bodybuilder may learn that, without bodybuilding, there is little perceived meaning in life. The identity of the bodybuilder becomes entrenched in the sport, and finding exit paths from the career trajectory is often not even an option.

Apart from psychological determinants which impact on the career trajectory, the social identity attributed to the bodybuilder cannot be overlooked. The self is formed through continuous interaction with society, particularly with significant others (Giddens, 2005). For the sake of this dissertation, the psychological, as well as the social and cultural contingencies, will be presented when discussing the development of the bodybuilding career trajectory.

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## 2.2 Psychological Perspectives

Modern man is increasingly being faced with a widespread crisis. Millions of men are suffering in silence from the Adonis complex - the secret crisis of male body obsession, which “is created by biological and psychological forces that combine with modern society’s and the media’s powerful and unrealistic messages emphasizing an ever-more-muscular, ever-more-fit, and often unattainable male body ideal” (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000, p. xv). Men are going through misery because of psychological effects of unrealistic body expectations and because of societal pressures. Men cannot talk about their problems, as in our society men have been taught that they should not worry about how they look, let alone express how they feel about it. “Another million or more men have developed ‘body dysmorphic disorder’, an excessive preoccupation with perceived flaws in their appearance” (Pope et al., p. xiii). As a result of this disorder, men may suffer loss of self-esteem and depression. From an early age, young males resort to the consumption of anabolic steroids, they develop eating disorders, exercise excessively and develop other psychiatric problems related to their body image (Pope et al., 2000). Murray (1984) added that young bodybuilders also give importance to other essential factors related to this sport, such as sleeping and sun tanning, which, although very important, are easier to control.

Social theorists believe that individuals who participate in this sub-culture have bodies which are overwhelmingly lived and healthy. They are active, sexually attractive and fit (Featherstone; Glassner, as cited in Monaghan, 2001). Mosley (2009) stated that an emerging condition which affects primarily male bodybuilders is muscle dysmorphia. Individuals who suffer from this disorder obsess about being inadequately

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muscular and they go to all extremes so as to develop larger, muscular bodies. According to Pope et al. (2000), sufferers of muscle dysmorphia are probably genetically predisposed to develop obsessive compulsive symptoms. The sufferer may, while growing up, have been teased because of small stature. Society and the super-male image it portrays leaves vulnerable people more prone to develop muscle dysmorphia or the Adonis Complex.

Ten per cent of bodybuilders have shown prominent symptoms of muscle dysmorphia (Pope et al., 2000). Baghurst and Kissinger (2009) stated that although different athletes suffer from muscle dysmorphia, bodybuilders are arguably the most “acute sufferers” (p. 85). Sufferers of muscle dysmorphia often decline social invitations because of training and diet schedules. They also very often cover their body with baggy clothes and refuse to be seen at the beach, so as not to reveal, in their opinion, their lack of muscle. Some bodybuilders suffer from milder cases of body obsession which, although not disabling in any way, still inflict pain. Although bodybuilders are concerned with gaining muscle rather than losing fat, they still display increased pre-occupation with their body image, food and exercise (Mangweth et al., as cited in Mosley, 2009).

Biological and psychological forces are the root of the problem with media and society transmitting unrealistic messages which emphasise bigger muscles, fitter men and an unattainable male body image. Sociocultural factors may lie at the root of the development of muscle dysmorphia (Cohan & Pope, 2001; Olivardia, 2001; Pope et al., 2000). Other research has confirmed this, stating that the ideal male physique has come to be based largely on muscle mass (Klein; McCreary & Sasse, as cited in Baghurst &

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Kissinger, 2009). Grieve (as cited in Baghurst & Kissinger, 2009) also added that although “distortion of body self-perception, dissatisfaction of one’s body, and an internalized ideal body image” (p. 84) are important factors which may lead to muscle dysmorphia, one must not exclude “perfectionism, negative affect, low self-esteem and media pressure” (p. 84), which are also important variables and which may lead to this syndrome. One has to consider that the issues are further exacerbated during adolescence (Koplewicz & Gurian, 2002).

Stokvis (2006) stated that since bodybuilding is practised strictly to achieve personal goals with regard to the body and the physiology of the individual, a strong narcissistic element prevails. In a study conducted by Rubinstein (2003), Israeli bodybuilders who completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory showed the highest levels of narcissism when compared to men who have never trained. Previously, Murray (1984) had observed narcissistic traits in bodybuilders and spoke about “young men who gave deviant exhibitions of their bodies and who were fuelled by narcissistic voyeurism” (p. 196).

Similarly, this great interest of well-developed bodies is especially popular with the homosexual community in Europe, as homosexuals like to look at well-developed bodies and also work out to develop a better body (Stokvis, 2006). In fact, the author added that homosexuals are amongst the best gym clients and magazines such as *Adonis* especially appeal to gays. Moreover, Connell (2009) asserted that heterosexual men who are committed bodybuilders sell their bodies to middle-class homosexuals who admire and desire them, hence having the necessary financial resources to sustain their expensive hobby.

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Bodybuilding may be associated with feelings of inferiority as people who want to develop their bodies are usually motivated to do so due to inferiority complex with respect to their body image. Pleck (as cited in Wiegers, 1998) argued that muscular development is linked to self-esteem, thus bodybuilding is “perhaps the archetypal expression of male identity insecurity” (p. 106). Moreover, advertisements portray the fact that physically inferior people are weak whilst superior people are strong, especially in terms of sexual relations. Building a better body is a way of overcoming feelings of insecurity regarding appearance, whilst additionally impressing other people (Stokvis, 2006). Choi, Pope, and Olivardia (as cited in Rohman, 2009) believed that some bodybuilders have a very poor perception of their own body image, with parts of the body being perceived as particularly problematic. Weight and musculature are also very important factors of preoccupation. Klein (as cited in Wiegers, 1998) described bodybuilding men “as neurotically insecure, and engaged in a futile search for a hypermasculine body image” (p. 147). This was confirmed by Rohman (2009), who said lifting weights, especially during the adolescent years, is a way of covering inner insecurities by building a muscular physique. Nonetheless, building a better body does not necessarily mean overcoming these insecurities as at times these insecurities persist.

A case study by Pope et al. (2000) revealed that low self-esteem makes the person withdraw from others and hold back in social situations. Relationship problems or breakdowns due to commitment to bodybuilding are also a possibility. White and Gillet (as cited in Wiegers, 1998) argued that bodybuilding was a response to a “crisis in masculinity” (p. 20). Men are expected to uphold masculine traits which are sometimes impossible to reach and which very often make men feel powerless. “Researchers have

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also linked a muscular male physique with power, dominance, strength, sexual virility and self-esteem” (Baghurst & Kissinger, 2009, p. 83). It is very interesting to note that a man’s self-efficacy may decrease and he may feel worse about his appearance, less confident and less muscular when a female has completed a cognitive task which the man has failed to complete (Mills & D’Alfonso, as cited in Baghurst & Kissinger, 2009). The sense of masculinity is threatened by perceived physical or cognitive frailty and the male compensates by developing a powerful stature.

In contrast, Glassner and Pleck (as cited in Wieggers, 1998) stated that a bodybuilder’s self-esteem is positively affected and bodybuilders have a more positive body image as compared to athletes in other sports. When the body is large, it demands more attention and respect and thus self-esteem increases. In a study conducted by Wieggers (1998), bodybuilders stated that bodybuilding increased their self-confidence and enhanced their sense of masculinity. They felt confident as regards to their size, proper masculine behaviour, strength and attractiveness. Furthermore, the jobs they held, such as bouncers in clubs, made other people more submissive, even by only looking at them. However, some respondents claimed that there is no relationship between their bodybuilding training and self-confidence. Bodybuilding is beneficial to mental, physical, and social health (Monaghan, 2001). Individuals who practised this sport were in pursuit of “self-improvement, happiness and healthiness” (Foucault; Gordon, as cited in Monaghan, 2001, p. 332).

Notions of self-esteem are related to self-satisfaction (Brehm & Kassin, 1993). The authors added that one had to be dissatisfied with oneself to have low self-esteem. Additionally, “genuine and spontaneous attraction to others requires feeling secure and

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confident about oneself” (Sullivan, as cited in Brehm & Kassim, 1993, p. 201). Dion and Dion (as cited in Brehm & Kassim, 1993) concurred with this theory and added that, while individuals with high self-esteem are able “to pursue potential social rewards despite the risk of failure” (p. 202), individuals with a low self-esteem “feel a greater need for positive regard from others and may be especially grateful when they receive it” (p. 202).

Of utmost importance to bodybuilders is their body awareness and body image. Since the body is where the individual lives, it is important that the individual is content with his dwelling. Bodybuilders strive hard to sculpt and define their body according to their desires. “The reflexivity of the self extends to the body, where the body is part of an action system rather than merely a passive object” (p. 77). Rainwater (as cited in Giddens, 2005) suggested that “body awareness ...is a means of constructing a differentiated self, not as one of the dissolution of the ego” (p. 71). Yet, with bodybuilders, body awareness may be erroneous and hence leads to a faulty self-image. In fact, body image concerns may not allow them to perform well at work or other important areas of functioning. Although sufferers may be aware of physical and psychological consequences, their diet, exercise and supplement regime continues as usual (Mosley, 2009).

Many bodybuilders, though displaying severely pathological behaviour through the abuse of anabolic steroids, believe that their activities are simply part of a healthy lifestyle and may not present to health services for help. Interestingly, steroid withdrawal can be associated with depression and even suicide (Pope & Brower, as cited in Mosley, 2009). Monaghan (2001) interestingly noted how a sport which is as

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health-promoting as bodybuilding is frequently associated with illicit activities, such as drug use. It is also interesting to note why bodybuilders are willing to engage in health-damaging practises to achieve their dream.

This generally single-minded and driven approach towards bodybuilding leaves little room for frivolity and games. Murray (1984) claimed that bodybuilders, especially contest participants, do not joke about their sport. “They see no humor in a lifestyle that makes such drastic demands on their physical and mental stamina, their monetary resources, and their time” (p. 203). In a study conducted by Wiegers (1998), it emerged that pain features high when accompanying weight training. Bodybuilders believe pain is necessary to build and maintain the “ripped” body (extreme muscular definition which can be obtained through steroid use, low body fat and excessive training). Some bodybuilders may be inspired to work harder psychologically if they feel pain, as “the burn was described as a rush, euphoric, stimulating, intensely desirable and invoking feelings of power and strength” (p. 158). The “burn” is so overwhelming and unique a sensation that some respondents compare it to sexual orgasm.

### **2.3 Social and Cultural Perspectives**

Wiegers (1998) stated that it was the French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault, who contributed greatly in understanding the relationship between the body and the social system. “The body constituted the link between daily practices and the large-scale organizations of power” (p. 151). Thus, the way the body was constructed changed with the change in society, from traditional to modern. He added that Foucault “described the body as being socially constructed through relations of

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power and knowledge” (p. 151). The body becomes the target of social control. This implies that bodybuilders are at the risk of becoming social constructs, moulded materially in the way society projects. The construction of social identity is paramount to the understanding of the career trajectory of a bodybuilder, particularly as society projects onto the bodybuilder a set of preconceived perceptions, which he seeks to live up to, consequently further strengthening his identity and social position. Moreover, by belonging to this elite group, a bodybuilder acquires a social identity, simply based on his participation in the group, hence achieving a sense of belonging (Tajfel, as cited in McLeod, 2008).

Kidd (as cited in Wiegers, 1998) stated that sport is an important site for the social construction and reproduction of heterosexual masculinity. Norms and behaviours transmitted during sports make it a masculinising practice. With bodybuilding being an individual sport, men may opt to build a better body aesthetically or emphasize strength or personal autonomy. “Bodybuilding is an important practice since ideas about masculinity are inscribed on male bodies” (Wiegers, 1998, p. 153).

Social constructs are reflected directly in social practices. It appears that popularity in bodybuilding has followed the same social pattern as previously established nationally and internationally in other modern competitive sports (Stokvis, 2006). The way bodybuilding was modelled in the USA made it become socially acceptable, especially when it started being practised at an early stage by an elite group. However, in Europe, hard-core bodybuilding became popular with lower-working class men, as bodybuilding substituted the heavy manual labour tasks which were being diminished because of the use of machinery. These labourers however, still wanted to

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give a positive valuation to their strength (Klein, as cited in Gidi, 2003). Green (as cited in Stokvis, 2006) suggested that “leanness in women and muscular bulk in men were new viruses” (p. 465). Klein (as cited in Gidi, 2003) stated that narcissism, homophobia, hypermasculinity and fascism were important elements for the newly constructed social-psychological male. Klein argued that since “they exist as exaggerations, these bodybuilder traits come to represent one end of the continuum of modern masculinity” (p. vi). Klein described bodybuilders’ masculinity as comic-book masculinity. Consequently, caring for a better-maintained body became a social norm, with self-control in both one’s food intake and level of physical activity becoming of utmost importance.

The media has played an important role in the development of bodybuilding. In 1977, the documentary *Pumping Iron* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger made bodybuilding more popular in the mainstream Western fitness culture (Mosley, 2009). The quest for six-pack abdominals and toned biceps made men join gyms, read fitness magazines and experiment with performance-enhancing supplements. In the 1990s, great focus was put on the phenomenon of muscle by the media, thus attracting people to weight training. Attractive, sexy, desirable and healthy were adjectives used to describe muscle, and bodybuilders were seen everywhere from gyms to television commercials (Prokop & Neveux, as cited in Wiegers, 1998). Pope et al. (2000) stated magazine covers, posters on walls and clothes advertisements are all portraying the same supermale images and conveying the same message that “if you’re a man, you should look bigger and better than you do” (p. 3).

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Bodybuilding is a sub-culture, having its own values, aesthetics and even its own vocabulary. Bodybuilders make use of words in the English language to communicate amongst one another. Murray (1984) suggested that words such as “bomb” and “burn”, which are commonly used while training muscles, and which bring to mind images of destruction to outsiders, have positive images to bodybuilders. “No Pain, no gain, and To hurt is to grow” (p. 205). Words such as “junk” and “garbage” when referring to food help serious bodybuilders remember that only through the abstinence of such food can they develop the body they desire with the least possible fat on their body (Murray, 1984).

According to Gaines and Butler (as cited in Murray, 1984), bodybuilding is an obsession for some and a way of life for those involved. Muscle dysmorphia is better classified as part of the obsessive compulsive spectrum of disorders (Chung, as cited in Rohman, 2009; Phillips, McElroy, Hudson, & Pope, as cited in Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). Its main characteristics include “obsessional preoccupations and impulsive behaviors similar to those of classical obsessive-compulsive disorder” (p. 66). Why are modern men displaying obsessions on their body as opposed to traditional obsessions such as hand-washing or checking rituals? Are societal variables also at play, apart from psychological factors? A possible explanation would be that since a male body is nowadays more capable of becoming more muscular due to the use of anabolic steroids and since the cultural messages published daily are depicting the male figure as muscular, men from all walks of life, especially men in their college years are succumbing to social pressures and transforming their bodies against all odds.

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“Some theories explore body image in relation to social comparison theory and media influences” (Baghurst & Kissinger, 2009, p. 84). To complement perceptions of body image, individuals may make comparisons with others in the social environment (Hausenblas, Janelle, Gardner, & Hagan, 2003). Vicarious learning thereby occurs (Bandura, as cited in McLeod, 2011). It appears that young males are after the mesomorphic body type, which is sporty and athletic, muscular looking and with broad shoulders and defined muscle-packs (Pope et al., 1999; Pope et al., 2000). This physique is the one which is very often portrayed by the media.

Through films, magazines and competitions for men, it became popular in America to visit gyms to build bodies. This practice later extended to women. Fussell (1994) stated that in recent years, triceps, traps and delts have taken the place of berets, velveteen jackets and lilies. Magazines and television portray images of men who seem to have “swallowed an air hose” (p. 43). From the office to the gym, young men and others who are not so young, stampede daily to pump iron. “Muscles. Not fifteen years ago the symbol of deviance; this form is now the norm” (p. 43).

The establishment of an international organisation for bodybuilding Californian style was also influential (Stokvis, 2006). Bodybuilding gained popularity and became fashionable amongst film stars, with actors such as Jack Nicholson and Al Pacino attending bodybuilding events. Television movies such as *The Incredible Hulk* and *Terminator* brought bodybuilding into people’s houses and professional wrestling promoted men with bulk. Thus, bodybuilding became recognised as a legitimate occupation (Wiegers, 1998). Moreover, Leit, Gray, and Pope (as cited in Rohman, 2009) proved the influence of the media on an individual’s body perception. Those who

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were exposed to “muscular male physiques demonstrated significant body dissatisfaction” (p. 192).

In a study conducted by Pope et al. (as cited in Rohman, 2009), bodies of action toys changed significantly in musculature over 30 years, with the more recent toys being leaner and more muscular. The popular action toy GI Joe has not only become more muscular, but also developed from some visible abdominal muscles to rippled abdominals of serious bodybuilders. The most modern figure also displays “distinct serratus muscles along his ribs – a feature readily seen in bodybuilders but less often visible in ordinary men” (p. 67/68). Interestingly, GI Joe’s bicep muscles are the biggest when compared to any bodybuilder in history. Rohman (2009) concluded that the results suggest that “societal/cultural expectations start early in life and may contribute to the development of body image disorders” (p. 192).

According to Schilling (2003), in this “somatic culture” (p. 5), the body is a project which should be worked at and “accomplished as part of an individual’s self-identity”. Since the body is considered a project, its shape, size and appearance are subject to reconstructions according to the expectations of the individual, and through hard work and vigilance the body can be restored. White and Gillet (as cited in Wieggers, 1998) also confirmed that the body is a site and that bodybuilding provides a site ready for construction. The body is a social and personal resource through which the person’s self-identity is reflected (Schilling, 2003). Schilling continued that “bodybuilding is a good example of the body as a project because the quality and size of bodybuilders’ muscles challenge accepted notions of what is natural about male bodies” (p. 7). Wieggers (1998) also suggested that the body is the result of the values of a culture.

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## 2.4 Conclusion

Dutton and Laura (1989) contended that as from the middle of the nineteenth century, following the effects of the Industrial Revolution, a sedentary lifestyle was being questioned and a new interest in physical exercise arose. Less people were engaging in hard physical labour in order to earn a living. Moreover, the benefits of exercise, due to more understanding in human physiology were being better understood. Although the main aim of exercise was to increase general health and strength, it was becoming obvious that people who were engaging in exercise were developing improved muscle tone and muscular development, thus enhancing the body and making it more attractive. The famous strongmen, though originally stocky and robust, were losing body fat due to the increase of aerobic exercise. Dutton and Laura (1989) stated that this realisation made people become aware that “the athletic appearance of the heroes of ancient statuary and Classical sculpture” (p. 36) could be regained should they “become the sculptors of their own bodies” (p. 36). People recognised that they no longer needed to be spectators but they could become active participants.

Nowadays, the idea of being the sculptor of your own body prevails. However, notwithstanding the increase in popularity in this sport, some serious bodybuilders quit their rigorous training routine and resume to a normal lifestyle. As Sam Fussell, ex-bodybuilder himself stated, “if muscles were considered property, I had regressed from a land baron to a serf” (Luciano, 2002, p. 155).

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Opinions regarding the bodybuilding culture may differ. Rick Telander, sportswriter, (as cited in Fussell, 1994) compared the bodybuilding sub-culture to “a freak show at the circus” (p. 43). Schwarzenegger himself stated that “posing is pure theatre. I understand that and I love it” (as cited in Fussell, 1994, p. 44). Telander continued by mocking bodybuilders’ gestures and attitudes, their posing trunks, music and tan-lotion. He affirmed that “if sports are a ritualized performance of mock-combat, bodybuilding and pro-wrestling take it one step further. They are an abstract of an abstract. With their music hall grandiloquence, they parody a parody” (as cited in Fussell, 1994, p. 44). Telander’s description goes to an extreme as it ridicules these young muscled beasts and he tends to overlook the difficulties they willingly endure so as to achieve the body they dream of, a body which like the Greek God Atlas can carry the world, and, like Adonis, marvel in its ultimate beauty.

The next chapter will outline the methodological considerations of the study, primarily the research design, the recruitment of participants, data collection and procedure, research tools, data analysis, and ethical considerations of this study.

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## Chapter 3

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### Methodology

#### 3.0 Introduction

The methodology chapter will describe the main aim of the study and subsequent research questions. It will provide an overview of the research design. Participant selection and the procedures employed for the collection and analysis of data will be presented. Finally, methods of verification and ethical issues will be considered. Developing a meticulous methodological approach was considered to be of paramount importance, as a robust research design is the driving force behind valid research projects.

#### 3.1 Research Agenda

The major aim of the study is to explore how young males, aged 19 to 30 years, experience their trajectory of bodybuilding. For the purposes of this study, the term “trajectory” refers to the development of the bodybuilding career from the onset, the pursuing of the career and eventual commitment to the chosen sport. Thus, the research questions guiding this study were:

- How do young males perceive the onset, escalation, and commitment to their chosen sport?
  - What are the motivators which guide youths to engage in this hobby?
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- How are young male bodybuilders influenced by psychological factors and social and cultural practices during their holistic experience of bodybuilding?

### **3.2 Research Approach**

A qualitative research design was employed for the study. The nature of the topic under study guided the choice of research design. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that a qualitative design is the best approach to use when exploring a new field of study. As the career trajectory of bodybuilders is a relatively new field of study, qualitative research design was considered more appropriate. Secondly, the researcher wanted to depict a phenomenon of lived experiences, as this design lends itself to an in depth immersion into the subjective world of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, as cited in Ponterotto, 2002). Moreover, the researcher considered the subjects as experts in their chosen sport, and hence a collaborative research-participant relationship was adopted (Ponterotto, 2002).

In this study, an inductive, idiographic stance was adopted, as the purpose of the study was to generate thoughts about a particular situation (Creswell, 1998). Unlike traditional scientific approaches, the inductive approach does not set off with a set of hypotheses but a hypothesis is derived following data analysis, and in fact “the information is derived from the data to formulate a theory” (Hayes, 2000, p. 5). Moreover, an idiographic position was taken up as the study was concerned with individuals and their uniqueness, as the researcher wanted to gain “a thorough and more subtle understanding of just a few people to lead to a more general understanding of others” (Hayes, 2000, p. 9).

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### 3.3 Participants

The participants were chosen through purposeful sampling, according to standards of relevance to the research questions. Specifically, the inclusion criteria were that the participants must be male bodybuilders, aged between 19 and 30 years, who have been training bodybuilding for at least two years, and who participate in competitions, locally or abroad. Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (as cited in Carter & Little, 2007) stated that in qualitative research, participants are selected “to serve an investigative purpose rather than to be statistically representative of a population” (p. 1318). Thus, the group of participants was a homogeneous group in as far as they shared the bodybuilding experience (Willig, 2001), which they agreed to speak about with the researcher. The participants were not all known to the researcher, but they were recruited by the researcher following the researcher’s attendance in gyms and in bodybuilding competitions. Participation was voluntary.

The participants chosen varied in degrees of experience and commitment, with the youngest subject being 20 years old and the oldest being 30 years old. However, age was not necessarily a reflection of the intensity of commitment, as two of the youngest participants had already participated in European Championships, with one of them obtaining an admirable placing in his category.

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### **3.4 Research Tool**

Semi-structured interviews, compiled into an interview guide, were carried out so as to gather in-depth “explanatory speech material” (Brenner, Brown, & Canter, 1987, p. 140) from the participants’ own perspective. Three “account agenda themes” (Brenner et al., 1987, p. 154) were taken on - the first dealing with the onset of the bodybuilding career; the second with the escalation; and the third dealing with their commitment to their chosen sport (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). The interview questions were derived from the literature and were suited for the aim of the research, bringing out themes related to the trajectory of bodybuilding and the psychological factors, and social and cultural practices during their holistic experience of bodybuilding. The interview questions helped facilitate easier communication and encouraged participants to elaborate, whilst allowing for a level of flexibility.

### **3.5 The Role of the Researcher**

The researcher adopted an open stance to the participants’ experience. As stated above, the semi-structured interview-schedule was not completely adhered to, as flowing with the participants’ narrative allowed a richer and fuller report and helped participants feel more at ease whilst relating their narrative. This was, after all, the reason why a semi-structured interview was considered more appropriate.

The creation of awareness, through researcher reflexivity, instigates an honest and open approach to research, as “indeed, through engagement in such processes, the dependability and authenticity of our findings will be greatly enhanced” (Gilgun, 2010,

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p. 3). Awareness of the various influences that the researcher had on the research process, as well as the impact that the research process itself had on the researcher, remained tantamount throughout the study. Brenner et al. (1987) stated that in conducting interviews, there is always room for bias, since these types of interviews retain a degree of structure and guidance. Such factors included the gender of the researcher vis-à-vis the participants, the power dynamic between researcher and participants, and the biases and expectations of the researcher. The researcher accounted for the process of reflexivity by discussing with a trusted peer issues related to the choice of subject, the research design process, the implementation and data analysis, and the actual writing of the dissertation.

### **3.6 Data Collection and Procedure**

Prior to the interview, the researcher communicated with participants via telephone, social network messages or personal meetings. The purpose of the interview was explained and the content of the consent form read and explained to the participants. A recruitment letter, available both in English and Maltese, was also handed out to the subjects (see Appendix 3 and Appendix 4). Confidentiality and anonymity were explained and any concerns and questions raised by the participants, which were however minimal, were clarified by the researcher. The researcher sought and obtained permission to record the interviews. Researcher assured participants that withdrawal from the study at any time during the interview was acceptable. Corbin and Morse (2003) claimed that to establish a level of trust and set the tone for the forthcoming interview, the first conversation is regarded as very critical.

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The interview was carried out at a place of the participants' choice, more specifically at training studios, between the end of May and the beginning of July, 2013. Consent forms (see Appendix 5 and Appendix 6), which were available in English and Maltese, were given to the participants, after which the purpose of the study was verbally discussed with the participants. Questions were clarified if needed and confidentiality was assured. Every interview lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. The interviews were all held in Maltese, although an English version had been compiled. The interview guides had been translated from English to Maltese. Accuracy was ensured through a back translation. The two translations were done by different individuals.

An audiotape recorder was used to record the interviews. During interviews, some notes were jotted down by the researcher in case of failure to record, as well as to describe the non-verbal behaviour observed during the interview. The notifications with respect to non-verbal behaviour were not employed during the data analysis phase. The audiotape was essential as it preserved the spoken words, which were eventually transcribed by the researcher. Thus, the transcriptions were used as tools during the data analysis stage.

The pilot study conducted assured the researcher that participants would understand and respond to the interview questions. It also served to test the adequacy of the recording material and to pinpoint any unforeseen difficulties (Cone & Foster, 1996). The individual chosen to participate in the pilot study shared the same characteristics as the main participants chosen. Feedback was presented by the participant as regards to clarity of questions, difficulties arising whilst answering them

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and whether the researcher's behaviour hindered the interview-experience. Only parts of the interview were recorded during the pilot study. Following the pilot study, one question was amended. The data collected during the pilot study was included later in the main study, as the interview guide's changes were only minimal.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

“The goal of transcription is to transform oral speech into a printed copy, accurately capturing the words of the research participant” (Sandelowski, as cited in Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007, p. 135). The recorded material was accurately transcribed. For the purpose of the dissertation, participants' quotes were translated to English, whilst the original quotes in Maltese may be perused in Appendix 7. Familiarization with the data was important so this involved listening to the recordings several times. Warr (as cited in Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) stated that “absorbing the voices and stories of research” (p. 367) is the job of the transcribers.

The data was then analysed using a constant, comparative method. Open coding, which allows for a thorough examination of the data, coupled with a constant comparative method highlighting similarities and differences, was the first step employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categories were developed, out of which sub-categories were formed. The next step involved axial coding, which deals with connections between categories and their respective sub-categories (Creswell, 1998). Consequently, the themes evident in the separate categories were elicited. This exercise was followed by selective coding, wherein the core category is related to other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Substantive level propositions about the

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experiences of bodybuilders were established, links with research were conducted, and a tentative framework for understanding the generated theory was developed.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

The Ethics Committee of the University of Malta approved the ethical research process of this study, through an email dated 3 February 2013. Participants were informed that they could listen to their recording and have a copy of the transcript as well as a final copy of the report, should they want to. Hewitt (2007) confirmed that “ethically sound research should guarantee the protection of human rights” (p. 1151). Issues which were considered imperative were privacy, anonymity and confidentiality; disclosure regarding the nature of the study; and self-determination – including the right to withdraw at any time. Prior to the interview these issues were discussed with the participants. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant so as to ensure confidentiality. Once all issues were clarified and resolved, the researcher felt confident to ask participants to sign the consent form.

### **3.9 Methods of verification: Reliability and Validity**

Langdrige (2004) argued that qualitative research cannot apply traditional notions of reliability and validity. Nonetheless, measures were still taken to verify these constructs.

The stability of what one is measuring is ensured by reliability (Langdrige, 2004). During interviews, the researcher’s memory should not be the sole basis of

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later use of data. Hence, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the same researcher to increase accuracy. Moreover, the use of a semi-structured interview guide maintains consistency of questioning between subjects, and ensures that all main topics of importance are covered during the interview.

The validity of the study implies that the original area of investigation is actually being researched (Langdrige, 2004). In this study, a rigorous sampling frame and clear inclusion and exclusion criteria reduced the possibility of confounding variables, hence increasing validity. Furthermore, data which was not congruent with previous literature was identified to maintain objectivity, as ascertained by the refutability principle (Silverman, 2000).

### **3.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter, an overview of the research agenda and approach, participant selection and the procedures employed for the collection and analysis of data were discussed. Methods of verification and ethical issues were also considered. The next chapter will present the results that derived from the study and an analysis of the emergent data.

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## **Data Analysis**

### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter presents a coherent analysis of the data gleaned from the interviews with the goal of developing an explanatory framework towards a better understanding of bodybuilding trajectories among Maltese young men. Prior to data analysis, a brief description of the participants is given. So as to ensure anonymity, a different letter is used to identify respective participants.

### **4.1 Profile of Participants**

#### **Participant A**

Participant A is a twenty-four year old hairdresser, who is in a relationship. He has been training bodybuilding for the last eight years. He has participated in competitions and posedowns, but he has no intention to continue further, due to disappointment in results in his last competition.

#### **Participant B**

Participant B is a twenty year old university student reading for a degree in physical education with the hope of becoming a physical education teacher. At this very early age, participant B has already won various competitions both locally and abroad.

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He is very well-built and has the potential of becoming one of the best bodybuilders on the island. He has been attending the gym for these last nine years.

### **Participant C**

Participant C is a twenty-seven year old gym instructor. He has been going to the gym for these last five years. He is very well read and is knowledgeable about his chosen sport. He has competed a couple of times in various competitions and he has also won his latest competition. However, although he won, he was still unhappy with his physique on the day of the last competition.

### **Participant D**

Participant D is a twenty-seven year old salesman. He is currently working in a shop which sells sports equipment. He has been attending the gym for these last five years. Unlike the other participants, participant D started going to the gym specifically to compete in a competition. He has won a couple of trophies and intends to carry on training. The food deprivation, which results as a consequence of his commitment to bodybuilding, is evident in his experience.

### **Participant E**

Participant E is the youngest of all the participants. He works in a factory and claims that work at times disrupts his training schedule. He has been attending the gym for these last seven years. Although only twenty-two years of age, he has already

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competed locally and abroad. He was disqualified whilst participating abroad because of excessive use of steroids which resulted in imperfections in the body. Yet, he has a bright future ahead in this field.

### **Participant F**

Participant F is the oldest of all participants, being thirty years of age. He is a personal trainer and is currently reading for a degree in Bachelor of Science in physical training. He is very professional in his field and considers training as a way of life. He is very much against steroids, which he disclosed clearly during the interview. Due to his experience in the field, he was a great source of information both during the interview and through informal conversations. He has been training regularly for a very long time and has taken part in competitions both locally and abroad.

## **4.2 Presentation of Results**

The following table presents three separate categories, which give a picture of the emergent data. The categories were further classified into sub-categories and themes. The emergent explanatory framework is grounded in data to ensure validity and is linked to existent literature on the subject.

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Category	Sub-category	Themes
Onset	Psychological Contingencies	Poor self-image
		Low self-esteem
		Supermale image
	Social and Cultural Contingencies	Solitary pursuit
		Social instigators
		Media influences
	A quest for health	Search for a healthy body
		Genetic predisposition
		Previous participation in sports
Escalation	Psychological Implications	Positive self-image
		Self-efficacy
		Improved self-esteem
		Physical demands
	Social and Cultural Implications	Mental stamina
		Change in lifestyle
		Social comparison
	Increased knowledge of subject area	Increased social admiration
		Factors that support learning
Commitment	Psychological Contingencies	Self-satisfaction
		Gamut of emotions
		Bodybuilding as an addiction
		Achieving maximum potential
	Social and Cultural Implications	Identification with bodybuilding subculture
		Social withdrawal

### 4.3 Onset

The bodybuilding career trajectory, as in any other career trajectories, has a beginning and an end, and a progression in between. Contingencies constitute variables or factors that make movement in the career more or less likely. However,

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contingencies do not simply occur – they are interpreted by the person who experiences them. Bandura (as cited in Clark, 1999) stated that the concept career carries an element of “developmental determinism in which childhood experiences set the course of later development” (p. 13). However, Clark (1999) argued that certain life events and the way the individual interprets them may impact significantly and refocus the career trajectory. According to Clark (1999), childhood factors are not the sole determining factor for the progression of a career trajectory. Onset contingencies towards a bodybuilding career, and the way the participants interpret them, will be documented below.

#### **4.3.1 Psychological Contingencies for Onset**

An emergent theme derived from the data was that the bodybuilders in this study, at the onset of their bodybuilding career had a poor self-image and low self-esteem. All participants reported experiencing these feelings in early adolescence, with some of them coupling them with other negative issues such as bullying. Self descriptions included being too thin, too short or too small. Supporting data includes:

“When I went to the gym I was very thin” (Participant A).

“I always wanted to grow bigger, build up my muscles” (Participant D).

“I went to the gym just to build up a bit” (Participant E).

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Choi et al. (as cited in Rohman, 2009) stated that bodybuilders often have a very poor perception of their own body image, with parts of the body being perceived as particularly problematic. The picture is further confounded by the fact that the bodybuilders were in the adolescent stage of development, where cognitive distortions surrounding body image are more prevalent (Koplewicz & Gurian, 2002). Low self-image emerges significantly in the data collected. Pleck (as cited in Wieggers, 1998) argued that muscular development is linked to self-esteem, thus bodybuilding is “perhaps the archetypal expression of male identity insecurity” (p. 106). As Participant D elaborated:

It used to bug me when someone referred to me as “the small one”. I did not feel I had low self-esteem but that used to bug me and I used to say “One day, one day...I will be big, not a problem.” But I never suffered, the fact that I was of a small stature used to bug me. But as I was saying, I always always trained, always kept up to training, I always wanted to have a good shape, at least....

Similarly, Participant C described how he used to be teased and how he felt he suffered from inferiority complex because of his small stature.

Emm, from my brother, not bullied, but he used to tease me. He used to tell me “Ee you are small, what can you do to me?” He used to tease me. I wasn’t physically bullied but yes I was teased that I was small, but even at football, I used to play in the middle as I was small and I was told that it was better for me to play right back, so growing up I had that inferiority complex, but I was always ambitious, I was always determined, I never thought that I was too small to engage in certain things in fact I was always determined to find a way to succeed.

An emergent theme which was significantly important across all the interviews was the supermale image perception. The perceptions of the interviewees support the statement that having a bigger body by default implies being more virile and more masculine. Paradoxically, on the other hand, it is evident that although individuals who

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participate in bodybuilding have bodies which are overwhelmingly lived and healthy, they are generally not happy with their body. This dissatisfaction is very common in these athletes and as stated by Mosley (2009), an emerging condition which affects primarily male bodybuilders is muscle dysmorphia. Participants, especially at the onset of their career, feel that they are inadequately muscular and they go to extremes to develop larger, muscular bodies. This insecurity about their bodies serves as a good motivator to take their training sessions seriously. Baghurst and Kissinger (2009) argued that although different athletes suffer from this condition, it is bodybuilders who are the most “acute sufferers” (p. 85). Wiegers (1998) confirmed this and stated that since ideas about masculinity are so clearly inscribed to male bodies, bodybuilding practices put participants at more risk of developing muscle dysmorphia. In fact, Participant C had this to say about his body image. “No, no, no I never used to see myself well enough before I started training. I wasn’t big enough”.

#### **4.3.2 Social and Cultural Contingencies for Onset**

In their study with male bodybuilders, Pope et al. (2000) showed that due to low self-esteem, the person may withdraw from others and hold back in social situations. This indicates that psychological contingencies cannot be divorced from social ones. Relationship difficulties were recurrently reported throughout the interviews. A good number of participants, especially during their onset stage, commented about arguments with their girlfriends due to their commitment to their chosen sport. Their usual routine changed drastically thus resulting in problems with their partners. Not only did their

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daily routine change, but they also refused to attend social activities and at times wore baggy clothes as they deemed that their body was not good enough.

With respect to socialisation at the gym, the majority of participants held that, for them, bodybuilding is a solitary pursuit. Although it is technically a potential outlet for friendships, at least in the onset stage, gym attendance is not of a social nature.

For me I feel the gym is a therapy. The gym is the only time when I do not think of anything. I do not think of problems at home, I do not think about my girlfriend. I do not think of anyone. It is that time – the weights and myself and that is it (Participant E).

At the gym, the participants claimed to forget their worries and troubles, and they focus on their own selves and bodies. Hence, it serves as a therapeutic space which fulfils their needs, hence increasing the possibility of maintaining the chosen career trajectory.

Through the data collected, it was apparent that individuals known to the participants were strong motivators in the early stages of the bodybuilding career. Many subjects stated that they were encouraged to start training due to other people in the field who believed they had a genetic predisposition, and hence the necessary prerequisites for bodybuilding. Family members and girlfriends often featured as providing great support, although one participant declared that during his first competition his family were unaware of him competing as they did not approve of his chosen sport. Bandura (as cited in McLeod, 2011) stated that behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. This was evident specifically in one interview where one participant was also very influenced by his father who had practiced the sport and who accompanied him to the gym to help him during his sessions.

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Bodybuilding owes its increase in popularity mostly to the media. The influence of films, documentaries, cartoons, martial art films, printed media, bodybuilding idols and action figures were predominantly mentioned throughout the interviews. According to Pope et al. (2000), the media is portraying the supermale images through magazine covers, posters on walls and clothes advertisements, hence “if you’re a man, you should look bigger and better than you do” (p. 3).

Since I was young I used to admire He Man and Action Man and I used to tell my mother that I wanted to be like them – big. Then since I am not that tall, I told her, it’s not a problem, I won’t grow tall but I will grow wide (Participant D).

Mosley (2009) confirmed that idols like Arnold Schwarzenegger made bodybuilding more popular in mainstream Western fitness culture. In fact, idols like Schwarzenegger and Frank Zane, both bodybuilding classics, were mentioned even by the youngest participant, Participant E. “Arnold Schwarzenegger. There are a lot. I like the classics like Frank Zane”.

Fussell (1994) stated that in recent years, triceps, traps and delts have taken the place of berets, velveteen jackets and lilies. Magazines and television portray images of men who seem to have “swallowed an air hose” (Fussell, 1994, p. 43). From the office to the gym, young men and others who are not so young, stampede daily to pump iron. “Muscles. Not fifteen years ago the symbol of deviance; this form is now the norm” (Fussell, 1994, p. 43).

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### 4.3.3 A Quest for Health

Participants reported that the quest for a healthy body featured high on their agenda. In fact, it was one of the reasons why at their onset they started participation in this sport. Monaghan (2001) interestingly noted how a sport which is as health-promoting as bodybuilding is frequently associated with illicit activities such as drug use. It is evident that, as from the onset of the bodybuilding career and during the quest for a better, bigger body, bodybuilders consume a concoction of products which are far from healthy and which may have serious consequences, including depression and suicide. However, the consumption of illicit products was not under study in the current project, and hence the use and abuse of such products was not investigated further in the interviews.

Bodybuilders have been described as active, sexually attractive and fit (Featherstone; Glassner, as cited in Monaghan, 2001). Who does not want to be described as such, in this modern world - a world which revolves around beauty and aesthetics?

Certain things I can't obtain because of my small stature but the most important thing is to be healthy. Why? So that I can, if a tall person jumps in a certain way, I have to be stronger so that I can still catch up with him (Participant F).

All subjects had participated in other sports prior to commencing bodybuilding. Most participants had formed part of football nurseries, while other competed in gymnastics, waterpolo and athletics. One common theme that emerged was that they all

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preferred bodybuilding to a team sport, as their performance depended solely on themselves, their training, their diet and their dedication. On the other hand, in football and other sports, success or otherwise depended on other players in the team and the coach.

#### **4.4 Escalation**

Once the participants had initiated themselves into this chosen sport, they escalated their activities so that it became a more significant dimension of their lives and contributed significantly to their lifestyles and identities as they became more immersed in the sport. A distinct intensification into the world of bodybuilding could be noted as the trajectory progressed. Possibly personal and social motivators for deeper engagement in the sport are different motivators to those experienced at onset. This was collaborated by participants in this study.

##### **4.4.1 Psychological Implications of Escalation**

As their career trajectory progressed, participants described an improvement in self-image, talking in a more positive manner about the way they look. According to Murray (1984), narcissistic traits were observed in bodybuilders and he spoke about “young men who gave deviant exhibitions of their bodies and who were fuelled by narcissistic voyeurism” (p. 196). Participant C commented:

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*Researcher:* “Let me ask you something, when you are at the gym, do you look at the mirror?”

*Participant:* “I forgot that, that is the nicest part of the diet, you forget everything, you forget everything because you say. Look at the results, they are there.”

These kind of comments were recurrent during the interviews. A good number of participants agreed that when looking at the mirror they felt pumped and elated. Participant B also described the feeling of dogged determination and extreme motivation when looking at the mirror, emotions which makes him push himself harder to achieve his maximum potential. “I think the mirror is not only there to show technique but to show anger and motivation”.

An emergent theme was that of an improvement in self-efficacy as the bodybuilding career developed. Anderson (1977), citing Bandura’s mastery experiences theory, stated that the foundation of human motivation, emotional well-being and performance accomplishments lie in the core belief, a belief that actions can be acquired through the production of the desired effects. This belief guides bodybuilders to undertake activities and persevere in the face of difficulties. One’s actions can make a difference whilst other factors may serve as motivators or as guides. This self-efficacy lands itself to an improved self-esteem. Participant C stated, “When I won my first competition, I was ecstatic. I knew that now I could do it. Despite all the difficulties I went through to reach the competition, I was sure I wanted to do it again”.

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One psychological factor concerns the ability of bodybuilders to withstand arduous physical demands to practice their chosen sport. Participants stated that they endured much physical pain and suffering and followed a strict training regime which at times, close to the competition peaks at four times a day. This rigid training schedule takes its toll on them and makes them very irritable and anti-social. They feel guilty if they are too sick to attend training with their absence from the gym being very rare and taken as a last resort. A common comment was that towards the competition they would rather be alone than be surrounded by other people, even omitting their loved ones. They cannot function well, both at work and in other important areas of functioning. Murray (1984) claimed that contest participants do not joke about their sports. "They see no humor in a lifestyle that makes such drastic demands on their physical and mental stamina, their monetary resources, and their time" (p. 203). Participant D in fact stated that "physically and mentally I am shattered. I am nervous and I do not reason well".

These physical demands spill over to the mind, and bodybuilders are required to have as much strength mentally as they do physically to endure the pressures which bodybuilding brings with it. One emergent theme which was common in all interviews and which requires great mental strength is the limited food intake and rigid diet, especially towards competition time. Bodybuilders have to follow strict diets so that their bodies are "ripped" with muscle definition which can only be obtained through the use of steroids, low body fat and excessive training. They all agreed that food preparation is done by them as they do not trust anyone in preparing their meals.

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How good the chicken is, what does it have in it? [She said] I added a cube and some salt and that was it, I was furious and so I drew a line and said I will cook my food myself (Participant D).

This food deprivation issue came up very often during the interviews and it is very evident that their lack of food makes them feel deprived and they cannot carry out their daily routine as they wish because of their lack of energy due to the low carbohydrate intake. Murray (1984) stated that words like “junk” and “garbage” are used when referring to food so as to help serious bodybuilders remember that only through the abstinence of such food can they develop the body they desire with the least possible fat on their body. “During that period, I am also very moody, that is when one is not eating enough carbohydrates, one feels moody (Participant E)”. This was reiterated by Participant D.

I would have that craving, it is there. When I am dieting I keep to myself a lot, I cut myself off from everyone....and I think, and think. Because in all fairness, it is nobody's fault neither my girlfriend's nor my family's .

However, paradoxically, their fixation on their body and the way it looks does not translate to their being health conscious, as they declared that following a competition they immediately started eating pasta, pizza, ice-creams and crepes - food which they described as “junk” prior to the competition.

It is interesting to note that as the career progresses and escalates, bodybuilding becomes a central part of their life. It becomes a central feature of their existence and it

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impacts on other areas of their lives. The centrality of functioning makes bodybuilding assume several characteristics of addictive behaviour.

#### **4.4.2 Social and Cultural Implications of Escalation**

Bodybuilders are aware that only a serious change in their lifestyle can give them the result that they desire. The supermale image is not easy to acquire and maintain, and it requires a lot of hard work, dedication, deprivation and isolation. Training schedules, increased restrictions in their diet, socialising and sleep time all change drastically, especially towards the competition season. According to Baghurst and Kissinger (2009), sufferers of muscle dysmorphia often decline social invitations because of training and diet schedules. This theme emerged in the data with the participants stating that it is difficult for them to socialise especially towards the competition, as they are deprived of so many things such as food, alcohol, smoking and late nights out amongst others, that it is better for them to be alone and reflect upon their journey.

The media has played an important role in the development of bodybuilding. Baghurst and Kissinger (2009) said that “some theories explore body image in relation to social comparison theory and media influences” (p.84). Mosley (2009) stated that documentaries such as *Pumping Iron*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, made bodybuilding more popular in the mainstream Western fitness culture. The media portrays images of supermale images with toned bodies and biceps and six-pack

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abdominals. Data gathered revealed that participants, albeit of a young age, still look up to the bodies of idols such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Frank Zane, with the youngest Participant E stating:

When you go to the gym, you see exercises which are associated with people such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Frank Zane and although these are idols of the past they are still influential, they are influential up to this present day.

Rick Telander, sportswriter (as cited in Fussell, 1994), compared the bodybuilding sub-culture to a “freak show at the circus” (p. 43). Telander mocked their gestures and attitudes, their posing trunks, music and tan-lotion. Participants on the other hand are very satisfied with the way they look and try to maintain that look, even if they have to pay a very high price. What Telander deplores as practically comic, bodybuilders seek and extol. They feel proud when they are admired on the beach or in the streets, especially by the opposite sex. They are proud that they belong to a sub-culture where people look at them in awe of their grand body. This increased social admiration fills them with determination to pursue further and with more seriousness their chosen sport. “One of the reasons why I wanted a fit body, a six pack and to attract girls’ attention. Oh yes! Girls, that is the biggest motivator” (Participant C).

#### **4.4.3 Increased Knowledge of Subject Area**

Participants came from all walks of life, yet it emerged from the data that they all tried to pursue their knowledge further when it came to bodybuilding. They

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purchased and read books and they searched on the internet for information, so that they could learn more about their chosen sport. Some of them have also attended courses and also managed to change their work as they studied to become personal trainers. This increase in knowledge in the subject shows the interest and the willingness that the participants hold in pursuit of their dream toward a bigger and better body. “I became very interested in nutrition, physiology, strength training and these things, I started implementing them on myself and started to see more results” (Participant F).

During the escalation phase, the participants declared an increased interest in the theoretical aspect behind bodybuilding, at the same time that psychological factors and social and cultural influences are shaping the individual. These determinants pave the way to commitment towards the sport.

#### **4.5 Commitment**

Commitment is the phase when an individual chooses to engage in activities which lead to the same goal (Clark, 1999). Although actions are not made deliberately or consciously, turning back to normal routine may pose problems and may seem impossible. At this level, participants exhibit consistent behaviour and they would be fully engrossed in the bodybuilding world, with all the physical sacrifices and psychological perseverance it requires.

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This increased centrality of bodybuilding practices and all that is associated with it in their lives supports the development of their identities, and further strengthens their commitment to the sport. Bodybuilders strive hard to sculpt and define their body according to their desires and their perceived self-image, which is a reflection of their new identity. “The reflexivity of the self extends to the body, where the body is part of an action system rather than merely a passive object” (p. 77). Rainwater (as cited in Giddens, 2005) suggested that “body awareness ...is a means of constructing a differentiated self, not as one of the dissolution of the ego” (p. 71).

#### **4.5.1 Psychological Contingencies for Commitment**

As the bodybuilding career progresses, so do psychological determinants which impact on the career trajectory and the social identity of the bodybuilders. Clark (1999) stated that each career trajectory is fuelled by different motivators, and the meaning of the behaviour for the individual changes. Giddens (2005) held that the self is formed through continuous interaction with society, particularly with significant others. This interaction in itself serves to support the standing of an individual in the society to which he pertains, and the standing thereby consequently further reinforces and moulds societal perceptions. Roles, rights and responsibilities are determined by this co-constructed identity.

Social identity and its construction leads us to a better understanding of the changes which the participants went through during their career trajectory. Data

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indicated an improvement in self-satisfaction from the onset till the stage of commitment in the bodybuilding career. This improvement may have in turn improved the self-image and self-esteem of most of the participants from the onset till the stage of commitment. Whereas at the start most participants were not happy with the way they looked and resorted to exercise to improve or change the way their body looked, at the stage of commitment most participants were satisfied with their physique. This increase in self-image, and consequently of self-esteem, can be backed by literature where Wiegers (1998) stated that bodybuilders themselves confirmed that bodybuilding increased their self-confidence. Glassner and Pleck (as cited in Wiegers, 1998) held that bodybuilders' self-esteem is positively affected and bodybuilders have a more positive body image as compared to athletes in other sports. A large body demands more attention and respect and consequently self-esteem increases.

*Researcher:* "How do you look at your self-esteem now?"

*Participant C:* "As regards to how I feel about my looks?"

*Researcher:* "Your self-esteem now, how do you feel?"

*Participant C:* "Good good. I don't care what other people say. I feel good. At the end gym has helped me a lot in that regard".

This increase in self-satisfaction was evident in the way the participants described their sessions at the gym feeling, the "pump", the "burn" and their "ripped body" as they looked at the mirror in awe of their glorious body. These intense feelings motivate bodybuilders and further commit them to their chosen sport.

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On the other hand, it appears in the data that participants experience a large array of emotions as their trajectory reaches the commitment stage. The only positive emotions mentioned were excitement and euphoria, with all other emotions being negative. Guilt, anger, moodiness, and depression were some emotions which were recurrently used when asked about their commitment towards this sports. It is evident that bodybuilding, mentally, does not give the participants a joyful life and the ecstatic moments they receive are during training where the endorphins are doing their fair share of work and when they win competitions, although it is apparent that most of the participants are never happy with the result they achieve. “Disappointment, a whole year and at the end I spilled and carbs went between muscle and skin” (Participant C).

Wiegers (1998) in his study discovered that pain features high when accompanying weight training. “I feel a great weakness, both physically and mentally” (Participant B).

Bodybuilders believe that pain is necessary to build and maintain the “ripped” body. Some bodybuilders may be inspired to work harder psychologically if they feel the pain, as “the burn was described as a rush, euphoric, stimulating, intensely desirable and invoking feelings of power and strength” (Wiegers, 1988, p. 158). This euphoric feeling, which bodybuilders state they never experience elsewhere, firmly stakes the claim to increased commitment. Once again, the similarities to addiction cannot be overlooked.

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According to Gaines and Butler (as cited in Murray, 1984), bodybuilding is an obsession for some and a way of life for those involved. Training becomes an addiction, a compulsive activity interfering with work, relationships and health. Behaviour towards the sports spirals out of control with bodybuilders being unaware, but still causing problems for themselves and others. This addiction is so strong that once they take part in a competition, they are sure that they want to compete in another one. They start complaining about things that have gone wrong and scheming on what they can do in the next competition to achieve the placing they want to. They even consider competing overseas to obtain the desired result. They are not happy and they erroneously blame themselves for their placing, knowing that they could have dieted better and trained more rigorously. In fact they constantly strive to achieve their maximum potential. “Where I do not see anything, but the competition. I think this is a longing for success, I think” (Participant C).

#### **4.5.2 Social and Cultural Implications of Commitment**

Bodybuilding is a subculture – a group of people who have a set of beliefs and behaviours which are different from the main groups within a culture or society. The majority of the participants are proud that they belong to this subculture, and feel gratified when they are referred to as bodybuilders by strangers. This resonates with Tajfel’s (as cited in McLeod, 2008) view that social identity leads to satisfaction and feelings of belonging, creating a homogenous in-group.

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In their case study, Pope et al. (2000) discovered that low self-esteem makes the person withdraw from others and hold back in social situations. Due to commitment to bodybuilding, there existed a possibility of relationship problems and breakdowns. An emergent theme was that participants suffered from relationship problems especially with their girlfriends because of the great amount of time and dedication they allotted to their chosen sport. An alternative view of the above hypothesis is that belonging to the bodybuilding culture in itself may cause a bodybuilder to shun members of the out-group, feeling more valued and accepted by those of his ilk. "I meet my friends at the gym, it became a social activity, that is what I tell my friends there, I feel it is my buddies club" (Participant D).

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

It appears that there is a progressive development during the trajectory of bodybuilding. The onset features feelings of poor self-image and low self-esteem, with evident improvement noted in the escalation period. Furthermore, self-satisfaction is present at the stage of commitment. Bodybuilding and the results it brings helps these young people to improve their self-image and as a result improve their overall perception of themselves. There are various motivators which help them continue in their trajectory, namely encouragement by family and friends, and the considerable impact of the media, which daily transmits messages of the supermale image - if you want to be a man, you should be bigger and better. Other psychological, social and cultural factors have been noted and discussed throughout this chapter. However, it may be hypothesised that individuals are being inhibited from dealing with their core inner

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issues, this being the most negative consequence of all because they are masking their inner tensions by seeking comfort and control through their physiques, which will ultimately some day fail them. Finally, the subcultural features and the social identity of the bodybuilding phenomenon cannot be overlooked.

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## **Conclusion**

### **5.0 Introduction**

The nature of the work was preliminary and exploratory. The author was able to make a few tentative objective conclusions and recommendations, as the rigor of this study and the quality of the social interactive context of the interviews gave room for that (Golafshani, 2003). This chapter will highlight the main elements that emerged from data analysis. It also outlines the limitations of the study, followed by implications for further research and suggestions for service development and policy.

### **5.1 Major Propositions**

Bodybuilders engage in a career trajectory with clear distinctive features for onset, escalation and commitment. Through social identification with their chosen subculture, they assume characteristics pertinent to the in-group, and develop a social identity consonant with this social construct. This identity is a public one, and is evident to self and others. Bodybuilders perceive themselves, and are consequently perceived, as members of a sub-group with its own distinguishing criteria for membership. Perceptions change throughout the course of the career trajectory, and are closely linked to psychological, social and cultural factors for membership in the bodybuilding world.

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Initial psychological, social and cultural needs at onset shape the bodybuilder's entry into the sport, yet vary from the needs which bind him further to the chosen sport, and which eventually make him commit to a cause which he often perceives to be greater than himself – a world where pain comes at a great physical and psychological cost, yet leads to euphoric gains.

Similarly, motivators and contingencies which fuel and accompany the bodybuilder vary depending on the career stage he would be experiencing. Clearly, the bodybuilding career is moulded by a multitude of defining variables, and progression in the career is not of a linear nature. It also depends to a large degree on perceived successes and failures in the chosen sport.

This study has made it clear that further research in the field is necessary for a more thorough understanding of this intricate subgroup.

## **5.2 Limitations of the Study**

The focus of this particular study was male bodybuilders and their experience of bodybuilding. The data arising from this study is a reflection of the participants' narratives. Hence, richness of the elicited data is totally dependent on the voice of the subjects. Unfortunately, some of the subjects found it difficult to express themselves and to verbalise their experience. Research has established the difficulties which

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modern men experience in disclosing intimate or emotional experiences (Real, 2003). To speak about personal trials with a female researcher might have challenged intimacy notions.

In the current study no verification process was employed. This implies that, due to time constraints, the subjects were not consulted following transcription of data and no feedback was obtained as to their views about the veracity of the transcribed interpretations.

Finally, as a researcher, I carry my own personal bias to the study, especially since I am an avid follower of weight training myself. Hence, researcher bias is acknowledged to have influenced, at least to some degree, the process of data analysis, thus affecting the reliability and validity of the study.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Future Research**

The research design of the present study was qualitative in nature, allowing for an understanding of the subjective realities of male bodybuilders, but allowing no space for generalisation of data. Considering the absolute dearth of literature in the local context, future research may focus on a larger sample, employing quantitative research designs, depicting a snapshot of bodybuilding practices in Malta, both with respect to demographics and trends.

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Tied to the above is the issue of gender and bodybuilding. It would be interesting to note how perceptions of female bodybuilders vary from their male counterparts. Employing a qualitative approach and using triangulation of data would highlight similarities and differences in the subjective perception of both genders. Hence, future research may delve into female bodybuilding practices and the manner in which females engage in and commit to their chosen sport.

Finally, a study focusing on athletes from varying disciplines may paint a colourful picture of sports in the local context. The onset, escalation and commitment of athletes in different sports in Malta could be highlighted, and a pattern of the different sporting practices could emerge. The project could be further amplified through a comparative study between the local scenario and foreign settings.

#### **5.4 Final Note**

Just take your sissy selves elsewhere

You'll turn your heads but still you'll stare

Go right ahead and pay attention

Glimpse into this strange dimension

Yeah you're still weak and never grow

This world of pain you'll never know

The Mighty Squat

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In Joe Skopec's "The Mighty Squat", the reader is given a graphic depiction of the manner in which bodybuilders view non-bodybuilders, and of the travails they go through so as to attain the perfect body they dream of. The career trajectory of the bodybuilder, with its onset, escalation and commitment phases, coupled with the psychological, social and cultural factors present in each phase, have been the focus of this dissertation. The lived reality of the bodybuilders has given an authentic flavour to this interesting experience, which vacillates between the depths of pain and euphoric heights.

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**APPENDICES**



Appendix 1 Semi-structured interview

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

1. For how long have you been practicing bodybuilding?

Onset

2. Let's talk about the time when you first started practising this sport/hobby. Can you tell me about this time? Tell me whatever you think is important and then I will ask you some questions.

Prompts

What made you start?

Was there anyone who influenced you?

Did you start going to the gym alone or with a friend/friends?

Why did you choose bodybuilding and not any other sport?

Did the media have any effect on you at the beginning of your career?

Do you think you were influenced by celebrities or athletes?

Were you interested in sports when you were young?

Do you recall any episode in childhood which may have influenced you?

Escalation

3. Let's talk about that time when you started to take this more seriously. What changed? Tell me what you think was important at this stage of your bodybuilding career.

Prompts

When did you decide to participate in competitions?

Was there any individual or any particular episode which made you start this participation?

Did you feel you had to commit yourself more towards your chosen sport at this stage?

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How did your life change as a result of your commitment to bodybuilding?

Commitment

4. I'm interested in how committed you are to body building and how does this commitment effect your life. Can we talk about that for a while?

Prompts

Do you feel that your commitment towards bodybuilding effects your daily lifestyle?

Your family? The type of food you eat? Your social life?

Do you follow any particular cardiovascular training routine besides going to the gym?

Do you practice any other sport?

What satisfaction do you get out of your chosen sport?

What is the most exciting part of your training regime?

What emotions do you feel before, during and after a competition?

Is there any particular negative emotion associated with your bodybuilding regime?

Is there anyone who hinders your training programme?

What do you think lies in the future for you regarding this sports?

Do you ever consider quitting your training regime?

Would you advise younger people to start practicing bodybuilding? Why?

Thank you

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Appendix 2 Semi-structured interview

Isem: \_\_\_\_\_ Eta' \_\_\_\_\_

1. Kemm ilek li bdejt il-karriera tal-‘bodybuilding’?

Onset (Il-bidu)

2. Ejja nitkellmu dwar dak iż-żmien li bdejt tippratika dan l-isport. Tista' tkellimni dwar dak iż- żmien? Ghidli dak kollu li taħseb li huwa mportanti, imbagħad jien nistaqsik xi mistoqsijiet.

Prompts

X'hajrek tibda?

Kien hemm min influwenzak?

Bdejt tmur il-‘gym’ waħdek jew ma' xi ħabib/ħbieb?

Għaliex għazilt il-‘bodybuilding’ u mhux sports ieħor?

Il-‘media’ setgħet kellha xi effett fuqek fil-bidu tal-karriera tiegħek?

Taħseb li kont influwenzat minn xi ċelebritajiet jew atleti?

Kont interessat fl-isports meta kont għadek żgħir?

Kien hemm xi episodju fit-tfulija tiegħek li seta' influwenzak?

Escalation (It-tkomplija)

3. Ejja nitkellmu dwar dak iż-żmien li int bdejt tieħu dan l-isport aktar bis-serjeta. X'inbidel, għidli x'taħseb li kien importanti f'din il-faži tal-karriera tiegħek tal-‘bodybuilding’.

Prompts

Meta ddeċidejt li tibda tieħu sehem fil-kompetizzjonijiet?

Kien hemm xi hadd jew inkella xi episodju partikolari li gieghlek tibda tippartecipa?

Hassejt li kellek tikkommetti ruħek aktar lejn il-‘bodybuilding’ f'dan l-istadju?

Kif inbidlet hajtek b'riżultat tal-impenn tiegħek lejn dan l-isport?

Commitment (L-impenn)

4. Jien interessata li nkun naf dwar l-impenn tiegħek lejn il-‘bodybuilding’ u kif dan l-impenn jeffetwalek il-ħajja tiegħek, nistgħu nitkellmu ftit fuq hekk?

Prompts

Thoss li dan l-impenn lejn dan l-isport jeffetwalek il-ħajja personali ta' kuljum?

Il- familja? It-tip ta' ikel li tiekol? Il-ħajja soċjali tiegħek?

Tagħmel ukoll xi trejning ‘cardiovascular’ barra li tmur il-‘gym’?

Tipprattika xi sport ieħor?

X' sodisfazzjon jagħtik dan l-isport?

X' jagħtik l-aktar gost waqt ir-rutina tat-trejning tiegħek?

X'inhuma l-emozzjonijiet tiegħek qabel, waqt u wara li tikkompeti?

Għandek xi emozzjoni partikolari li hija negattiva li hija assoċjata mar-rutina tat-trejning tiegħek?

Hemm xi hadd li jtellfek mir-rutina tat-trejning tiegħek?

X' futur personali tara f' dan l-isport?

Timmagina li fil-futur tieqaf tipprattika l-‘bodybuilding’?

Tagħti parir liż-zgħażaġh biex jibdeu jipprattikaw dan l-isport? Għaliex?

Grazzi

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Appendix 3 Recruitment Letter

October 2012

Dear future participant,

I am currently reading for a Bachelor of Honours degree at the University of Malta in Youth and Community studies. My thesis will focus on male, competitive bodybuilders aged between 19 to 30 years of age. This thesis will seek to explore how young males experience their trajectory of bodybuilding. It will explore the onset, the escalation and perception of the nature of their commitment to their chosen sport. More specifically, the study will attempt to shed a light on the contingencies why youths engage in this hobby, focusing on psychological, sociological and cultural influences and implications.

You are invited to participate in an interview of not more than 1 hour in which we would discuss your experiences in this regard. You will also be given a consent form. The interviews would be audio recorded and said interviews will be destroyed after completion of the study. You will have access to the data collected at any point throughout the study. Your name will not be disclosed at any time and quotes which may identify you will not be included in the final text. I guarantee that any information, direct or indirect, which you offer shall be treated with the greatest respect and confidentiality. You can choose to terminate the interview and quit the study at any time. You can refrain from answering any question which you do not wish to answer.

Thank you.

Martina Sciberras (173 M)  
Mobile No: 79704705

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Appendix 4 Ittra ta' Parteċipazzjoni

Ottubru 2012

Sinjur,

Bhalissa jiena qiegħda nagħmel Baċelerat fl-Universita' ta' Malta fid-dipartiment tal-Youth and Community Studies. It-tezi tiegħi ser tiffoka dwar kif għuvintur li għandhom bejn id-dsatax u t-tletin sena, jesperjenzaw id-dinja tal-“bodybuilding”. Se tesplora l-bidu tal-karriera, kif eskalat u x'inhuma l-perċezzjonijiet dwar dawk il-fatturi li jirrikjedi dan l-isport. L-istudju se jipprova jifhem fa' dawl fuq ir-raġunijiet għaliex xi għuvintur jagħzlu li jibdew jipprattikaw dan l-isport u se jiffoka speċifikament fuq l-influenzi u implikazzjonijiet psikoloġiċi, soċjali u kulturali li jista' jkollhom dawn il-għuvintur.

Inti mistieden li tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju permezz ta' intervista li ma ddumx iktar minn siegħa li fiha nitkellmu dwar l-esperjenzi tiegħek rigward dan l-isport. Ser tingħata wkoll ittra ta' kunsens. L-intervisti ser ikunu rrekordjati u dawn l-istess intervisti jiġu mħassra wara li jintemm l-istudju. Jista' jkollok aċċess għall-informazzjoni miġbura tul il-perjodu tal-istudju. Ismek mhu se jissema fl-ebda ħin u kwotazzjonijiet li jistgħu jidentifikaw mhux se jkunu inkluzi fil-kitba finali. Nixtieq nagħmel enfasi li kull informazzjoni, diretti jew indiretta, li inti tagħti tkun ittrattata bl-akbar rispett u kunfidenzjalita'. Tista' tagħzel li ttemm l-intervista u tiegħi tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju meta trid. Tista' ma taċċettax li tirrispondi xi mistoqsijiet li inti ma tixtieqx twieġeb.

Grazzi.

Martina Sciberras 173(M)  
Mobile No: 79704705

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Appendix 5 Consent Letter

February 2013

Dear Sir,

Thank you for accepting to participate in this study which focuses on how young males, aged 19 – 30, experience their trajectory of body building. It will explore the onset, the escalation and the perceptions of the nature of commitment to the chosen sport. Thanks to your valid contribution, we shall have a realistic snapshot of the reality of bodybuilders in the local scene.

This study, which is approved by the University of Malta, shall require you to be interviewed by the undersigned student.

- Interviews shall not last more than 1 hour each.
- Each interview will be recorded.
- You will have access to the data collected at any point throughout the study.
- Recorded interviews will be destroyed after completion of the study.
- Your name will not be disclosed at any time and quotes which may identify you will not be included in the final text.
- I guarantee that any information, direct or indirect, which you offer shall be treated with the greatest respect and confidentiality.
- You can choose to terminate the interview and quit the study at any time.
- You can refrain from answering any question which you do not wish to answer.

Whilst thanking you heartily for your contribution, may I ask you to sign the note hereunder to confirm your consent.

Yours faithfully,

Martina Sciberras  
Diploma Youth Studies

Prof. Marilyn Clark  
Dissertation Supervisor  
Psychology Department  
University of Malta

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I thoroughly understand the content of the above letter and grant my full consent to participate in this study.

Participant's name (BLOCK LETTERS):

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Participant's signature:

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Student's name (BLOCK LETTERS):

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Student's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Appendix 6 Ittra ta' Kunsens

Frar 2013

Sinjur,

Grazzi talli aċċettajt li tieġu sehem fl-istudju li ser isir dwar kif gúvintur, li għandhom bejn id-dsatax u t-tletin sena, jesperjenzaw id-dinja tal-“bodybuilding”. Dan l-istudju se jesplora x'inhuma l-fatturi u l-perċezzjonijiet li jinfluwenzaw lil dak li jkun biex jibda jipprattika dan l-isport. Permezz tal-kontribut tiegħek, ser ikollna stampa aktar ċara tar-realta' tal-“bodybuilders” fix-xena lokali.

Parti minn din ir-riċerka, li hi approvata mill-Universita' ta' Malta, ser tikkonsisti f'intervista miegħek. L-intervista se ssir mill-istudenta li isimha jidher fit-tmiem ta' din l-ittra.

- L-intervista ma ddumx aktar minn siegħa.
- Kull intervista se tiġi rrekordjata.
- Jista' jkollok aċċess għall-informazzjoni miġbura tul il-perjodu tal-istudju.
- L-intervisti rrekordjati jiġu mħassra wara li jintemm l-istudju.
- Ismek mhu se jissema fl-ebda ħin u kwotazzjonijiet li jistgħu jidentifikawk mhux se jkunu inkluzi fil-kitba finali.
- Nixtieq nagħmel enfasi li kull informazzjoni, diretta jew indiretta, li inti tagħti tkun ittrattata bl-akbar rispettt u kunfidenzjalita'.
- Tista' tagħzel li tteemm l-intervista u tieqaf tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju meta trid.
- Tista' ma taċċettax li tirrispondi xi mistoqsijiet li inti ma tixtieqx twieġeb.

Għaldaqstant, filwaqt li nerga' niringrazzjak minn qalbi għal dan il-kontribut siewi tiegħek, nixtieqek tiffirma li taċċetta li tieġu sehem fl-istudju fil-parti ta' taht ta' din l-ittra.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Martina Sciberras  
Diploma Youth Studies

Prof. Marilyn Clark  
Dissertation Supervisor  
Psychology Department  
University of Malta

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Jiena nifhem il-kontenut ta' din l-ittra u nagħti l-kunsens sħiħ tiegħi biex niehu sehem f'dan l-istudju.

ISEM IL-PARTEĊIPANT (ITTRI KBAR):

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Firma tal-partecipant:

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ISEM L-ISTUDENTA (ITTRI KBAR):

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Firma tal-istudenta: \_\_\_\_\_ Data: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix 7 Original quotes from transcripts and translation

Original Maltese version followed by translation in English.

### **4.3.1 Psychological contingencies for onset**

“Meta mort il-gym kont irqiq hafna.” “When I went to the gym I was very thin.”  
(Participant A).

“Jien dhalt go gym just to build up a bit.” “I went to the gym just to build up a bit.”  
(Participant E).

“Dejjem xtaqt nikber inkabbar il-muscle hu.” “I always wanted to grow bigger, build up my muscles.” (Participant D).

“Jien għalija kienet iddejjaqni l-ħaġa meta persuna kien jirreferi għalija “iż-żgħir”. Ma kontx inhossni jġifieri low self-esteem jew xi ħaġa imma kienet iddejjaqni dik il-ħaġa li jirreferi għalija “iż-żgħir” u kont ngħid, u ija xi darba, xi darba...inkun kbir iwa mhux problema. Imma qatt ma kelli, niddejjaq bħal speċi għax kont magħmul żgħir jew hekk. Imma kif qed ngħidlek dejjem dejjem kont nittrenja, dejjem żammejt bħal speċi, dejjem ridt li jkolli daqsxejn, daqsxejn shape biex ngħid għallinqas...”

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“It used to bug me when someone referred to me as “the small one”. I did not feel I had low self-esteem but that used to bug me and I used to say “One day, one day ...I will be big, not a problem.” But I never suffered, the fact that I was of a small stature used to bug me. But as I was saying, I always always trained, always kept up to training, I always wanted to have a good shape, at least....” (Participant D).

“Emm, minn hġja imma mhux bullied kien jinkini, kien jgħidli “Ee, inti żgħir x’tista’ tagħmilli?” Kien jinkini. Ma kontx fizikament bullied pero’ kien jinkini iva li jien għadni żgħir, pero’ tipo wkoll, wkoll ovvjament fit-tim tal-football, jekk kien ha jilgħabni fin-nofs, għadek żgħir aħjar tilgħab right back, għalhekk growing up kelli naqra dik l-inferiority complex fija, imma imbagħad tipo, kont dejjem grintuz, dejjem kelli dik il-grinta fija, qatt ma kont noqgħod ngħid jien żgħir minix kapaċi anzi nara kif ha nagħmel...”

“Emm, from my brother, not bullied, but he used to tease me. He used to tell me “Ee you are small, what can you do to me?” He used to tease me. I wasn’t physically bullied but yes I was teased that I was small, but even at football, I used to play in the middle as I was small and I was told that it was better for me to play right back, so growing up I had that inferiority complex, but I was always ambitious, I was always determined, I never thought that I was too small to engage in certain things in fact I was always determined to find a way to succeed” (Participant C).

“Le, le, le qatt ma kont narani sew qabel bdejt nittrenja. Ma kontx kbir biżżejjed”.  
 “No, no, no I never used to see myself well enough before I started training. I wasn’t big enough.” (Participant C).

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### 4.3.2 Social and Cultural Contingencies for Onset

“Il-gym għaliġa nħossu bħala terapija. Il-gym huwa l-uniku hin li ma naħseb f’xejn. La naħseb fil-problemi tad-dar, la naħseb fit-tfajla. La naħseb f’ħadd. Huwa dak il-hin – il-ħadid u jiena u daqshekk”.

“For me I feel the gym is a therapy. The gym is the only time when I do not think of anything. I do not think of problems at home, I do not think about my girlfriend. I do not think of anyone. It is that time – the weights and myself and that is it.” (Participant E).

“Jien minn meta kont żgħir dejjem kont iffissat fuq He Man u Action Man jiġifieri u dejjem anki lil ommi kont ngħidilha dejjem irrid inkun bħal speċi hekk – kbir. Imbagħad peress li jien ma tantx jiena twil għedtilha mhux problema, ma nitwalx imma nitwessa.”

“Since I was young I used to admire He Man and Action Man and I used to tell my mother that I wanted to be like them – big. Then since I am not that tall, I told her, it’s not a problem, I won’t grow tall but I will grow wide.” (Participant D).

“Arnold Schwarzenegger hu. Hemm ħafna ta’. L-antiki kollha jogħġbuni jien tal-classic u hekk. Frank Zane, qas tieqaf.”

“Arnold Schwarzenegger. There are a lot. I like the classics like Frank Zane.” (Participant E).

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### 4.3.3 A Quest for Health

“Mela allright, ċertu affarijiet ma nistax ingib bil-persuna tiegħi imma l-importanti li nkun b’saħħti. Għaliex? Biex nista’, jekk persuna twil jaqbeż mod, jien irrid inkun iktar b’saħħti biex xorta nlahhaq miegħu.”

“Certain things I can’t obtain because of my small stature but the most important thing is to be healthy. Why? So that I can, if a tall person jumps in a certain way, I have to be stronger so that I can still catch up with him.” (Participant F).

## 4.4 Escalation

### 4.4.1 Psychological Implications of Escalation

*Researcher:* “Ha nistaqsik xi haġa issa, meta tkun il-gym, il-mera tati każha?”

*Participant:* “Għandek raġun, hemmhekk dik insejtha, dik the nicest part of the diet, tinsa kollox, tinsa kollox għax tgħid. Ara r-rizultati fejnhom.”

*Researcher:* “Let me ask you something, when you are at the gym, do you look at the mirror?”

*Participant C:* “I forgot that, that is the nicest part of the diet, you forget everything, you forget everything because you say. Look at the results, they are there.”

“Naħseb aktar milli biex tara technique u hekk naħseb aktar rabja u motivation.”

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“I think the mirror is not only there to show technique but to show anger and motivation.” (Participant B).

“Meta rbaħt l-ewwel kompetizzjoni, ridt intir bil-ferħ. Indunajt li issa nista’ nirnexxi għalkemm għaddejt minn hafna diffikultajiet sakemm wasalt għall-kompetizzjoni.”

“When I won my first competition, I was ecstatic. I knew that now I could do it. Despite all the difficulties I went through to reach the competition, I was sure I wanted to do it again.” (Participant C).

“Fizikament, mentalment imkisser tkun. Nervuż, ma tibdiex tirraguna hu.”

“Physically and mentally I am shattered. I am nervous and I do not reason well.”  
(Participant D).

“Kemmi hi tajba din ic-chicken, x’fiha? [Qaltli] Għax tfajtlek cube u għamiltlek il-melħ u daqshekk splodejt u allura qbadt, qtajt line, l-ikel tiegħi nsajru jien.”

“How good the chicken is, what does it have in it? [She said] I added a cube and some salt and that was it, I was furious and so I drew a line and said I will cook my food myself.” (Participant D).

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“Ikolli dik il-craving iva hemmhekk tkun qiegħda. Jiena meta nkun bid-dieta nintefa’ hafna hin wahdi, tista’ tghid ninqata’ wahdi ghax...u nahseb, u nahseb. Ghax fil-verita’ la t-tfajla tiegħi m’ghandha tort u lanqas il-familja.”

“I would have that craving, it is there. When I am dieting I keep to myself a lot, I cut myself off everyone....and I think, and think. Because in all fairness, it is nobody’s fault neither my girlfriend’s nor my family’s.” (Participant D).

“F’dak il-perjodu nkun moody wkoll, jigifieri meta mhux qed tiekol bizzejjed carbohydrates tkun moody.”

“During that period I am also very moody, that is when one is not eating enough carbohydrates. one feels moody.” (Participant E).

#### **4.4.2 Social and Cultural Implications of Escalation**

“Meta tidhol il-gym tibda tara exercises assoċjati ma’ nies bħal Arnold Schwarzenegger u Frank Zane u dawn kienu diġa passat pero’ xorta influwenti, bħalma huma influwenti fis-sena tal-lum.”

“When you go to the gym you see exercises which are associated with people such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Frank Zane and although these are idols of the past they are still influential, they are influential up to this present today.” (Participant E).

“Wahda mill-affarijiet ghaliex xtaqt fitness body, six pack u nigbed l-attenzjoni tat-tfajliet. U iva n-nisa dik wahda mill-motivators kbar.”

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“One of the reasons why I wanted a fit body, a six pack and to attract girls’ attention. Oh yes! Girls that is the biggest motivator.” (Participant C).

#### **4.4.3 Increased Knowledge of Subject Area**

“Minn dak l-aspett iffissajt fuq l-aspett ta’ nutrition, physiology, strength training u dawn l-affarijiet, imbaghad bdejt ninplimentahom fija u bdejt nara aktar rizultat.”

“I became very interested in nutrition, physiology, strength training and these things, I started implementing them on myself and started to see more results.” (Participant F).

### **4.5 Commitment**

#### **4.5.1 Psychological Contingencies for Commitment**

*Researcher:* “Ha nistaqsik xi haga issa, is-self-esteem tieghek issa kif tarah?”

*Participant:* “Rigward kif inhossni jien bhala looks?”

*Researcher:* “Issa s-self-esteem, kollox kif thossok?”

*Participant:* “Tajjeb ta’ tajjeb. Ma naghtix kaz x’jghid haddiehor. I feel good. Ghax il-gym gheni hafna fl-ahhar mill-ahhar minn daqshekk”

*Researcher:* “How do you look at your self-esteem now?”

*Participant C:* “As regards to how I feel about my looks?”

*Researcher:* “Your self-esteem now, how do you feel?”

---

*Participant C*: “Good good. I don’t care what other people say. I feel good. At the end gym has helped me a lot in that regard”.

“Weakness kbir thoss dak il-ħin, kemm physically u mentally.”

“I feel a great weakness, both physically and mentally.” (Participant B).

“Dizappunt, sena shiħa biex fl-aħħar spilljajt u l-carbs marli bejn il-muscle u l-ġilda.”

“Disappointment, a whole year and at the end I spilled and carbs went between muscle and skin.” (Participant C).

“Fejn moħħi daqshekk ma jibdux jara aktar ħlief competition. Nahseb ġuħ għas-suċċess nahseb.”

“Where I do not see anything, but the competition. I think this is a longing for success, I think.” (Participant C).

#### **4.5.2 Social and Cultural Implications of Commitment**

“Ma nafx minn fejn giet din l-impressjoni ħazina ħafna ta’ bodybuilding. Jekk jgħiduli qisek bodybuilder titfagħni mitt sena lura.”

“I don’t know where I got this very bad impression of bodybuilding. If someone tells me I look like a bodybuilder I feel devastated.” (Participant B)

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“Niltaqa’ mal-ħbieb il-gym, saret attivita soċjali, hekk ngħidilhom fejn nittrenja jien, għalija il-gym huwa l-kazin tiegħi.”

“I meet my friends at the gym, it became a social activity, that is what I tell my friends there, I feel it is my buddies club.” (Participant D)

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