EXPLORING THE EMPOWERING AND DISEMPOWERING ASPECTS OF COMPETITIVE FEMALE BODYBUILDING

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By

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand the empowering and disempowering experiences of female bodybuilders who have previously participated in a competition. Basic interpretative qualitative research explored the emotional well-being of eight competitive female bodybuilders between 28 and 42 years old (Merriam, 2002). The participants had participated in at least one bodybuilding competition, including various divisions such as bikini, body fitness, wellness, figure, glamour, and physique. Bikini competitors are scored on proportion, symmetry, balance, shape, and skin tone, as well as their walk, posing, and presentation (Owen, 2015). These competitors wear a bikini and high heels to highlight an hourglass figure (Owen, 2015). Body fitness is a division between bikini and figure (UFE Shows, 2017). The competitors are scored on fitness level, athleticism, confidence, and muscle definition (UFE Shows, 2017). Body fitness has two rounds where competitors wear various costumes, such as swimwear, sportswear, and Halloween costumes (UFE Shows, 2017). Wellness is another division that is a cross between bikini and figure. The main difference is that wellness competitors have a muscular and well-defined lower body with a less defined upper body (Owen, 2015). Therefore, their suit includes the figure competitor's bottom and the bikini competitor's top (Owen, 2015). The figure division is a cross between bodybuilding and fitness (Owen, 2015). Competitors are scored on symmetry, presentation, and skin tone. Figure competitors have large and defined shoulders and upper back, a tiny waist, and shapely glutes and quads; as such, they do poses that present their well-defined physiques (Owen, 2015). Glamour is a division in which competitors range from bikini to women’s fitness (UFE Shows, 2017). This division has two distinct rounds where competitors wear swimwear and theme wear. The competitors are scored based on what musculature looks
best for their body types. Lastly, physique competitors are scored on femininity, symmetry, muscle tone, presentation, and skin tone (Owen, 2015). The competitors must do a choreographed routine to music and comparison judging.

Semi-structured interviews were the basis for data collection. The semi-structured interviews asked open-ended questions with probes designed to draw out more detail and explanation (Trainor, 2013). Thematic analysis identified, analyzed, and recorded patterns (themes) across data sets associated with the specific research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theories of self-determination theory (SDT), cognitive evaluation theory (CET), and social cognitive theory were used as lenses while applying thematic analysis. There was four themes: (1) Body shaping and training: Acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions; (2) Mental discipline and wellbeing: exploring the mental and physical effects of participating in bodybuilding competitions; (3) Social life and extraneous impacts: Reflecting the impact that bodybuilding has on one’s social relationships; (4) Changes and outcomes: Overcoming personal and social obstacles. Overall, this study found that the benefits of competing in a bodybuilding competition outweighed the costs (i.e., some benefits included feelings of empowerment, euphoria, increases in health and strength, and some costs included a decline in mental and physical health, stigma, and social isolation). Lastly, this study concluded with the strengths and limitations of the study and implications for future research.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Personal Context

Body image-related disorders have always piqued my interest, especially those amongst athletes. While in my bachelor’s program, I completed an honour’s thesis for my psychology degree. I decided to write about the body image experiences of male athletes. When I was accepted into my master’s program for School and Counselling Psychology, I had already competed in my first and only female bodybuilder competition. My experience before, during, and after preparing for competition sparked an interest in understanding the experiences of other female competitors. Once accepted into the master’s program, I further explored this interest.

In 2015, I competed in my first bikini competition. A bikini competition is a branch of female bodybuilding. The competitors wear a bikini with clear high heels meant to showcase a perfect hourglass figure with defined shoulders and a tiny waist and glutes (Owen, 2015). I was 24 years old at the time. Since high school, I have exercised – weight training and Beachbody programs – and was always interested in female bodybuilding. This interest stemmed from high school when I came across some of my dad’s Muscle and Fitness magazines. I remember the cover page; an incredibly muscular man and woman were posing in swimwear. My initial thought was wow, look at how strong that woman looks. After that, I decided to eat better and lift weights. I did not know what I was supposed to do; all I knew was that I needed to focus on proper nutrition and exercise.

In 2014, I decided that I wanted to try my first competition. It was a harsh reality check. I had no clue what I was getting myself into or the amount of work required for this type of conditioning. My calories were restricted to eating almost no fats and low carbohydrates. The
exercises were fine, only working out four days per week, but I was incredibly exhausted by the low-calorie intake.

When I finally arrived at the competition day, I realized that I was not nearly in enough shape to be on stage; the girls I was up against were tiny. I automatically felt self-defeated, considering I tried my best, but that did not seem enough; I was not ready. I ended up placing last. I knew that I could probably keep going, but the time, money, and effort were too much, so I decided to take time off. Unfortunately, I have never stepped back on stage since.

Before and after competing, I have always been interested in understanding athletes' experiences, specifically those in body image-related sports. Therefore, I have decided to explore different perspectives of what motivated others to participate in high-intensity sports such as powerlifting, CrossFit, track and field, football, and bodybuilding.

1.2 Introduction to Bodybuilding

According to Chapman (1994), bodybuilding has been a sport for over 100 years. However, bodybuilding was not recognized and did not become popular in Western society until the 1960s (Schwarzenegger & Dobbins, 1998). Female competition has grown steadily since that time (Lamar-Hildebrand, Saldanha, & Endres, 1989). Bodybuilding is a broad term with a vague definition since some might label themselves as a bodybuilder despite not participating in competitions (Goldfield, Blouin, & Woodside, 2006). In contrast, others only define a bodybuilder as someone who has competed in at least one bodybuilding competition or plans to compete within 12 months (Pickett, Lewis, & Cash, 2005). With that being said, the definition of bodybuilder used in this thesis will be “an individual who trains with weights on a regular and frequent basis to achieve high levels of muscularity and leanness for the primary purpose of competing” (Parish et al., 2010, p. 153). Unlike other sports that involve speed, strength, or
endurance, bodybuilding is based on the appearance and presentation of an athlete’s physique (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). The main goal of competitive bodybuilding is to “increase the muscle mass (volume), symmetry (overall proportions) and definition (the degree that each individual muscle of the body visually stands out)” (Suffolk, 2015, p. 72). During a competition, bodybuilders are evaluated by a panel of judges who decide the physique that best fits the pre-determined criteria developed before the event (Holm, 2000). The individual who best fits those standards wins the event.

1.3 Overview of Female Bodybuilding

Women’s professional bodybuilding began in the late 1970s but was classified as a beauty pageant rather than a muscle competition (Ian 2001; Shea, 2001; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Within these competitions, women wore high heels, cosmetics, jewelry, and embodied standards as being the perfect woman. This fashion trend was based on Western cultural ideals where women were not muscular; instead, these women were thin, toned, and feminine (Worthen & Baker, 2016). However, by the 1980s, women’s bodybuilding became a separate competition, and female bodybuilders were thrust into a male-dominated sport (Worthen & Baker, 2016). Therefore, female bodybuilders are partaking in gender deviant behaviours, risking social stigma, and exhibiting physical risks by participating in these competitions (Worthen & Baker, 2016).

Lowe (1998) pointed out that no other sport exemplifies the conflicts and contradictions between femininity, strength, and muscularity than female bodybuilding does. Bodybuilding deviates from feminine social norms; therefore, it is harboured with contradictions, compromise, and tensions, empowering and enslaving women who participate in the sport (Fisher, 1997). Many women attempt to redefine, negotiate, or resist the hegemonic or male-dominant culture placed upon them within the bodybuilding world, such as being expected to exhibit femininity by engaging in flirty poses and being expected to wear make-up, high heels, and sparkly bikinis
instead of focusing solely on their musculature (Lowe, 1998). Historically, bodybuilding has been coordinated, regulated, and managed primarily by men (Lowe, 1998) who operate as officials, judges, and sponsors. These men have the power to set and maintain standards by which female competitors are evaluated (Lowe, 1998). As a result, there is a power disparity between men and women regarding defining appropriate and acceptable behaviours and appearances within the sport (Lowe, 1998).

1.4 Divisions within Competitive Female Bodybuilding

There are several different divisions within competitive bodybuilding. Each division has different musculature requirements, skin tone, vascularity, suit selection, and stage performance. For this research, the following divisions will be described in more detail: bikini, body fitness, wellness, figure, glamour, and physique.

Within the bikini division, the competitors are scored on their lean and firm physiques (Owen, 2015). The judges score the females on proportion, symmetry, balance, shape, and skin tone; the judges are looking for the “X” factor, including an hourglass figure highlighting the shoulder caps with a tiny waist and glutes. During comparison judging, women in the bikini division do a front and back pose. Competitors in the bikini division are scored on their walk, presentation and posing as these elements become a deciding factor in determining a winner (Owen, 2015).

The body fitness division is in-between the bikini and figure divisions (UFE Shows, 2017). Two equally scored rounds within this division are swimwear and sportswear, but the competitors can also replace the sportswear with a costume during Halloween shows. During both rounds, the competitors are asked to come on stage individually and walk to three predetermined points on the stage. The competitors are scored on fitness, athleticism, confidence,
and muscle definition. At each point of the stage, the competitors execute one to two freestyle poses, perform any turn style, and showcase their sportswear or Halloween outfit during the costume round (i.e., if the competitor decides to wear a baseball outfit, they may pretend to swing a baseball bat or catch the ball). After the three points are hit, the competitors will go to the back of the stage and line up with the other competitors. Once a predetermined number of competitors line up, they are asked to come forward and execute a series of quarter turns for the judges before leaving the stage (UFE Shows, 2017).

Wellness is a newer division; it was added in 2019 and is only included in the National Physique Committee (NPC) Federation (Owen, 2015). This division is a cross between the bikini and figure divisions, including a strong lower body and a less developed upper body. The suit includes the bottoms used in the figure division and a top worn by competitors in the bikini division (Owen, 2015).

The figure division is a blend of bodybuilding and fitness (Owen, 2015). During comparison judging, the competitors line up and do a series of quarter turns to the right. They are scored on symmetry, presentation, and skin tone. The judges look for the “X” factor formed by having more prominent shoulders and upper back, a tiny waist, and shapely glutes and quads (Owen, 2015).

The glamour division includes women from various divisions ranging from bikini to women’s fitness (UFE Shows, 2017). This division emphasizes beauty, presentation, and theme wear. The competition consists of two equally scored rounds: swimwear and theme wear. Models in fitness magazines can characterize the ideal look for competitors. When referring to these magazines, competitors notice no perfect musculature or body fat; instead, it is whatever looks best concerning the competitors’ skeletal frames (UFE Shows, 2017).
Within the physique division, the competitors are scored on their athletic physique showcasing femininity, symmetry, muscle tone, presentation, and skin tone (Owen, 2015). The competitors also have an individual choreographed routine to music and comparison judging, including mandatory poses such as front double bicep, side tricep with front leg extended, side chest with arms and front leg extended, and more (Owen, 2015).

1.5 Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research study stemmed from the growing popularity of women to continue participating in bodybuilding competitions. Most studies relating to female bodybuilding sought to validate whether bodybuilding is empowering or harmful and tried to understand why women would be interested in competing in this sport. (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Parish, Baghurst & Turner, 2010; Worthen & Baker, 2016). There were 15 studies regarding female bodybuilding from 1989 to 2021 (e.g., Andersen et al., 1998; Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Halliday, Loenneke, & Davy, 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand, Saldanha, & Endres, 1989; Marshall, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2018; Money-Taylor et al., 2021; Parish, Baghurst, & Turner, 2010; Probert, Leberman, & Palmer 2007a; Probert et al., 2009; Shea, 2001; Spendlove et al., 2015; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016), and two of these studies (Probert et al., 2007a & 2009) had a mixture of male and female competitors. These studies mostly focused on why women would initially be interested in competing in bodybuilding and collected information regarding the positive or negative aspects of being a female bodybuilder. Only one study by Shea in 2001 tried to understand both sides simultaneously or why these women continued competing despite the difficulties encountered.

This study sought to understand better both sides (empowering and disempowering) of the female experience within a bodybuilding culture. I sought to understand why women continued or discontinued competing by considering each participant's unique perspectives and
experiences throughout the interview process while applying these experiences to three different theories: self-determination theory (SDT), cognitive evaluation theory (CET) and social cognitive theory (SCT), which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

This study is significant because there are still limited studies conducted on female bodybuilding even though the sport is becoming more popular among female athletes (Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Lowe, 1998; Marshall et al., 2018; Parish et al., 2010; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Having new, relevant information regarding different aspects of female bodybuilding could help improve the sport by providing valuable information to the federation, sponsors, coaches, personal trainers, athletes, and medical personnel.

There were three boundaries within this study:

1. Age: the participants had to be at least 18 years of age.
2. The participants had to be biologically female.
3. The participants had to have competed in or were training to compete in at least one Canadian Bodybuilding Competition (the number of years of experience will vary).

I attempted to recruit the participants from Saskatchewan through flyers posted in athletic organizations (i.e., physical activity organizations such as bodybuilding gyms and fitness centers) and on an online bulletin website of the University of Saskatchewan (see Appendix A). However, this recruitment method did not result in finding participants. Therefore, I contacted a female bodybuilder that I knew via social media, and she assisted in recruiting other participants through snowball sampling.
1.6 Definitions

Seven main concepts will be presented throughout this research and were defined for increased clarity:

*Bodybuilding.* Bodybuilding is a sport in which athletes compete to show extreme levels of muscular development, symmetry, and low body fat (BF) while maintaining muscle mass (Fagerberg, 2018, p. 385).

*Bodybuilder.* An individual who trains with weights on a regular and frequent basis in order to achieve high levels of muscularity and leanness for the primary purpose of competing (Parish et al., 2010, p. 153).

*Lean.* Used to describe a bodybuilder who has dieted properly and has little subcutaneous water and fat between muscle and skin (Lowe, 1998, p. 180).

*Micronutrient (Micros or Macromineral).* Micronutrients are essential dietary components and play a fundamental role in disease prevention. Thirty are essential and cannot be synthesized by the body on a daily basis, making dietary sources critical (Shergill-Bonner, p. 357).

*Professional Card. (Pro Card.).* A pro card is essentially the golden ticket that proves you have put in the work and competed in amateur level competitions and won. You cannot apply for a pro card, nor can you get one by being discovered, or from doing okay in a bodybuilding or physique competition. Rather, you will need to place in the top three of a National Physique Committee (NPC) National Qualifier bodybuilding show. These shows are there to help separate those who are qualified to move up from those who are not. (Center Podium Productions, 2016).

*Sport.* An activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes...
against another or others for entertainment (Oxford, n.d.)

Symmetry.

One of the criteria by which bodybuilders are evaluated. Judges evaluate how symmetrical/proportional their various muscular groups are to one another. In this round, judges determine if bodybuilders have ignored any part of their physique during training; if they have, judges will deduct points (Lowe, 1998, p. 181).

1.7 Summary

The primary purpose of carrying out this research study stemmed from the growing popularity of women participating in bodybuilding competitions (Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Lowe, 1998; Marshall et al., 2018; Parish et al., 2010; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Female bodybuilding had become more commonplace since the 1970s when it first emerged as a beauty pageant; however, by the 1980s, it transformed into a muscle competition once when women were thrust into a male-dominated sport (Ian 2001; Shea, 2001; Worthen & Baker, 2016). As such, most of the research conducted between 1989 to 2021 tried to understand what motivated women to start bodybuilding by hypothesizing that bodybuilding is either empowering (i.e., feelings of catharsis, strength, motivation) or disempowering (i.e., oppression, disordered eating, post-competition depression) (Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Halliday et al., 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Marshall et al., 2018; Spendlove et al., 2015; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Other than Shea (2001), most research has not attempted to understand both sides simultaneously, which was a gap in the research.

This study attempted to address the gap in female bodybuilding research by understanding both sides (empowering and disempowering) of the female experience within a
bodybuilding culture. Female bodybuilding provides a unique cultural context in developing a women’s identity within the community (Fisher, 1997; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001). Since bodybuilding deviates from feminine social norms, it is harboured with contradictions, compromise, and tensions, empowering and enslaving women who participate in the sport (Fisher, 1997; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001).

1.8 Chapter Organization

A literature review related to theory, construction of a female bodybuilder, body image, resistance and compliance to standard feminist norms, psychological effects, and social costs was reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 discussed the study's methodology, including describing the participants, data collection and analysis, evaluation criteria and trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Within Chapter 4, participant information, identified themes, and an overall summary was discussed. Lastly, Chapter 5 consisted of the summary of findings, the integration of findings with existing literature, the strengths of the current study, the limitations of the current study, the implications for future research, and the conclusion.
2. Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

The literature review was divided into seven major sections. Section one reviewed the theories that informed this study. Section two summarized 15 studies from 1989 to 2021 regarding female bodybuilding. Section three explained the construction of a female bodybuilder. Section four discussed body image in weight expectations, nutrition regimens, and steroid use. Section five provided an overview of the resistance and compliance to standard feminist norms, discussing empowerment and self-esteem. Section six examined the psychological effects of competing, including mood swings, energy, and post-competition depression. Lastly, section seven explained the social costs of competing, including voluntary social withdrawal and stigma.

2.1 Theories

Three theories helped guide the data following transcription: Ryan and Deci’s (1980) self-determination theory (SDT), Ryan and Deci’s (1985) cognitive evaluation theory (CET) and Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT). Once the interviews were transcribed, I began to code the data presented. The theories helped filter the information and find themes since the participants provided many details that needed to be sorted. SDT was the initial theory that helped guide the study by understanding autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Upon reading more on SDT, I discovered CET, which included the addition of how one’s environmental influences foster autonomy and competence. Lastly, SCT was used to understand different types of human agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency and collective agency, which are part of the preparation for a competition.
2.1.1 Self-Determination Theory

Ryan and Deci created the self-determination theory (SDT) in 1980. This theory focused on human motivation, personality development, and well-being. It contended that humans have three fundamental psychological needs to foster well-being and that these were found universally across diverse cultures (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These psychological needs were autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to one’s freedom of choice; competence refers to feeling confident in one’s ability and performing well in an activity while receiving positive feedback; and relatedness refers to the need to have close social relationships while still maintaining autonomy and encouraging competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Fulfilling these needs was essential to acquiring positive psychological development, enhancing one’s wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Suffolk, 2015). However, if these needs are not met, psychological functioning is impaired, leading to a predisposition to developing different psychopathology forms (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & LaGuardia, 2006). SDT has been previously used as a template to explore the positive aspects of female bodybuilding instead of solely focusing on the negative (Suffolk, 2015). Considering the various risk factors that were involved in competing (i.e., stigma, physical risks, etc.), the goal of this theory, as applied to female bodybuilding, was to understand why women chose to participate in bodybuilding by investigating how the sport contributed to their wellbeing (Suffolk, 2015).

2.1.2 Cognitive Evaluation Theory

The cognitive evaluation theory (CET), created by Ryan and Deci in 1985, was initially intended to be a sub-theory of SDT. They sought to specify the factors that explained variability within intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Social and environmental factors frame CET by facilitating or undermining intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 1985, 2000). Therefore,
studying conditions that either encourage or weaken intrinsic motivation was the first step in understanding the sources of both isolation and freedom within human nature (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The CET focused on the fundamental need for competence and autonomy by investigating the effects of rewards, feedback, and other external events on intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to the “inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Ryan and Deci (2000) found that intrinsic motivation was enhanced by positive performance feedback and diminished by negative performance feedback; these effects were mediated by perceived competence (Vallerand & Reid, 1984). Performance feedback was the verbal response given to individuals based on how well they perform on specific tasks (Vallerand & Reid, 1984). If the individual was given positive feedback, their feelings of competence increased, and their intrinsic motivation most likely increased. However, the opposite was found if the individual was given negative feedback (Vallerand & Reid, 1984). Nevertheless, CET further specified that feelings of competence would not enhance intrinsic motivation unless their behaviours were self-determined (Fisher, 1978; Ryan, 1982). In other words, individuals must have also experienced a sense of autonomy to be motivated initially.

The CET was used as a template to explore females' incentives to begin bodybuilding and evaluate why specific individuals either continue or stop bodybuilding (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Parish, Baghurst & Turner, 2010; Worthen & Baker, 2016). If bodybuilding provided positive performance feedback, there would likely be enhanced intrinsic motivation for the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, negative performance feedback was likely to
diminish feelings of intrinsic motivation, which encouraged the individual to cease bodybuilding (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

2.1.3 Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura created the social cognitive theory (SCT) in 1986. This theory focused on exercising control over the nature and quality of one’s life, which was the essence of being human (Bandura, 2001). Several core features describe human agency. These features operated through phenomenal and functional consciousness (Bandura, 2001). Humans can achieve a “temporal extension of agency through intentionality and forethought self-regulation by self-reactive influence, and self-reflectiveness about one’s capabilities, quality of functioning, and the meaning and purpose of one’s life pursuits” (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). This theory focused not only on the conception of human agency but also on collective agency (Bandura, 1997).

The SCT consisted of three modes of agency: direct personal agency was when the individual had complete control over their own life; proxy agency was when the individual needed someone else’s agency to accomplish a specific goal; and lastly, collective agency was when there was the interdependent effort of a community or social structure (Bandura, 2001). SCT was used as a template to explore how exercising human agency can encourage females to engage in bodybuilding (Bandura, 2001). Based on the three distinct types of human agencies, there are several reasons women compete in bodybuilding. By having direct personal agency, female competitors made personal decisions up to and on the date of competitions (Bandura, 2001). These included the type of division they wanted to be a part of, if they wished to have a personal trainer or coach, whom to work with, what kind of suit and colour of suit to wear, how to style their hair and makeup, and the types of jewelry they wanted to wear (Andersen et al., 1998; Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Halliday et al., 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Money-
Taylor et al., 2021; Spendlove et al., 2015). Proxy agency occurred if a competitor decided to work with a coach or personal trainer who gave them a meal plan and training program, provided feedback for suit selection, makeup, and hairstyle, and taught them a specific signature stage routine (Andersen et al., 1998; Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Halliday et al., 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Money-Taylor et al., 2021; Spendlove et al., 2015). Proxy agency relied heavily on perceived social efficacy; therefore, it was essential for a trusting relationship between the coach or personal trainer and competitor (Bandura, 2001). Lastly, collective agency was established within the bodybuilding community when there was a sense of cooperative effort within the sport, which included the perceived organization of the specific federation, the cooperation of the competitors, coaches, judges, sponsors, and the evident fairness of how the competition is being evaluated (Andersen et al., 1998; Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Halliday et al., 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Money-Taylor et al., 2021; Spendlove et al., 2015).

The SDT, CET, and SCT focus primarily on autonomy, competence and motivation (Bandura, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These similarities suggest that having autonomy and a perceived competence will enhance one’s motivation to engage in specific activities (Bandura, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within my research, I predicted that female bodybuilders would initially engage in a competition based on their autonomy and perceived competence. However, they will be motivated to continue participating if this perceived competence transitions to actual competence.

2.2 Overview and Critique of Existing Literature

There are 15 relevant summaries of the research regarding female bodybuilding, including the researchers, the date the study was conducted, where the study was conducted, participant information, the methodology used, and the strengths and weaknesses of the research
Lamar-Hildebrand, Saldanha, and Endres conducted a study in 1989. The participants in the study consisted of ten female university students who were aged 18 to 30. Six participants were preparing for the university’s annual bodybuilding competition, and the remaining four considered themselves bodybuilders despite not competing. The researchers obtained dietary, exercise and anthropometric data using three-day food records and self-report questionnaires collected over eight weeks on four separate occasions. Weeks one, four, and seven represented the pre-competition data. Week eight was the weekend of the competition, which included the day before, day of, and day after. Lastly, four weeks post-competition (week 12), the competitors provided information regarding their current weight.

The participants recorded their food and beverage intakes on Thursdays through Saturdays to obtain consistent data. Vitamin, mineral, and supplements intakes were noted but not added to the final dietary analysis. The dietary data were analyzed using the Nutrient Dietary Data Analysis (NDDA) System. Least significant difference tests following the analysis of variance evaluated the questionnaire data (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989).

Within the anthropometric measurements, the results found that all competitors followed a pre-competition weight loss regimen and experienced significant weight loss between weeks one and eight (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). During four weeks post-competition, the competitors gained at least 20 pounds, and two gained ten pounds or less (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989).
al., 1989). During data collection, the mean body weight for non-competitors was maintained within a three-pound range. For food intake, the results found that competitive bodybuilders changed and restricted their foods depending on the phase of training they were in for a competition (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). Non-competitors’ food intake was similar throughout the study, and competitors ate more similar to non-competitors post-competition. For energy and nutrient intake, the results found a dip in energy for competitors during weeks four and seven compared to non-competitors (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). Competitors followed a low-energy diet from week eight until post-competition. Vitamin and nutrient intakes were also measured lower for competitors when compared to non-competitors during pre-competition but were similar post-competition. For exercise practices, the results found that competitors devoted more time to exercise than non-competitors (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). Competitors also spend a lot of their time weight-training, posing and doing aerobics than non-competitors.

This study revealed that university students preparing for competition have exercise and dietary regimens unique to the sport (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). The study’s strength was that it showed a significant difference in food intake and energy expenditure for bodybuilding competitors verse non-competitors. The significances found are valuable knowledge in better supporting bodybuilders’ nutrition pre-during- and post-competition, including tailoring more gradual weight loss plans, training regimens, and vitamin, mineral and supplement recommendations. The limitation of this study was that it did not measure how the dietary and exercise regimens affect overall mental and physical well-being, such as steroid use, loss of menses, stress, etc. The study was relatively small and under-detailed; therefore, it provided preliminary results for future research.
Fisher conducted a study in 1997 regarding how female bodybuilders constructed and developed components of their identities – as a woman, a bodybuilder, and a moral person. She collected data by interviewing ten female bodybuilders over one year. Fisher (1997) pooled participants from the American professional female bodybuilders; there were only 25 competitors, and she interviewed ten of them. These ten participants represented 40% of the total pool of American professional female bodybuilders.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed before combining the data for analysis. Criteria required for selection were that the participants must have won a national championship at the amateur level and have their professional card. The average age for the competitors was 33 years old. Half the participants were in Southern California, and the other half were in Northern California. Fisher used qualitative methodology to: “pursue the meaning of the bodybuilding experience of the participants; provide a holistic view of the bodybuilding setting; develop a collaborative, trusting relationship with female bodybuilders; and collect data unobtrusively” (1997, p. 142). The qualitative methodology she used was one-on-one standardized interviews with follow-up probes meant to address any non-verbalized assumptions about female bodybuilding.

Fisher (1997) developed three measures for this study. A personal identity interview elicited responses regarding personal identities, such as self-descriptions as a woman, bodybuilder, and moral person. A second interview protocol, which she called the social identity interview, elicited the participants’ perceptions of the norms, values, personal qualities, and skills that best define the group: bodybuilders. Lastly, Fisher (1997) administered a demographic questionnaire that addressed racial identity, educational background, and family status.
Fisher (1997) found that the ten female participants oriented most of their lives toward bodybuilding competitions. Since professional bodybuilders’ livelihood focused on accurately scrutinizing their bodies, competitors monitor caloric intake, caloric burn, how much sleep they get at night, and the number of repetitions during a weight training exercise (Fisher, 1997). Amateur bodybuilders train for one to two competitions per year, whereas professional bodybuilders train for several competitions yearly; therefore, they must look good year-round (Fisher, 1997). The participants reported spending a lot of time doing bodybuilding or bodybuilding-related activities: including one and a half hours per day lifting weights, one hour per day doing a cardiovascular activity and three hours or more per day engaging in a related activity such as shopping, food preparation, tanning, practicing their posing routine, and working as a personal trainer at a gym (Fisher, 1997).

The participants also reported menstrual and health irregularities as very common among bodybuilding professionals (Fisher, 1997). Eight out of ten participants reported menstrual irregularities such as a cessation of menses at least once before a competition. One participant reported losing her menses for an entire year, even post-competition. Two of the participants linked the cessation of their menses due to anabolic steroid use, constant dieting, and exercise regimens that decreased their body fat percentages to below ten percent. Ten participants reported acquiring health problems resulting from bodybuilding, including sciatic nerve damage, spinal disc problems, torn muscles, and strained and sprained muscles.

Fisher (1997) used the social identity theory (Tafjel, 1978) and the identification of a superwoman complex as a framework for analyzing the results (Steiner-Adair, 1990). Social identity comprises social identifications derived from ingroup-outgroup categorizations such as gender, race, and sexuality (Tafjel, 1978). Therefore, Fisher (1997) wanted to determine if
female bodybuilders categorize themselves as distinct from non-bodybuilder females. The superwoman complex described particular patterns regarding the perceptions of societal values relating to women, ideal cultural images of women, and individual ideal images of women (Fisher, 1997; Steiner-Adair, 1990).

Based on these theories, the female participants saw themselves quite differently from the average woman and were proud of that difference (Fisher, 1997). When asked which of the three self-identifying components best described them, three participants described themselves as bodybuilders. A fourth participant described herself as primarily a woman; however, six participants had difficulty separating the bodybuilder from the female self. As a result, Fisher (1997) indicated that the female identity of the remaining six female bodybuilders revolved around five interrelated themes: (1) the uniqueness of being a professional female bodybuilder; (2) low self-esteem/insecurity; (3) obsessive control of the body; (4) sexuality; and (5) the superwoman ideal.

Overall, results found that the female participant had two identity constructs: the bodybuilder and the woman (Fisher, 1997). However, amalgamating the bodybuilder and the woman identities was necessary for the competitors to achieve healthy growth as a person and an athlete. Overall, Fisher (1997) found that female bodybuilding did not foster healthy coping strategies and that open communication between the corporation, judges, and competitors were essential. The strength of this study addressed unhealthy coping strategies that arose within female bodybuilding and the moral concerns regarding the bodybuilding community at the professional level. Future research should also look into the concerns reported by the coaches, judges, and executives within bodybuilding. So far, while researching for this thesis, I have found that nothing has changed despite the sport being around for several years.
In 1998, Andersen, Brownell, Morgan, and Bartlett conducted a study in Allentown, Pennsylvania, using 26 female bodybuilders preparing for a drug-free competition. Twenty-three were Caucasian, and three were African American. All the participants had to sign an affidavit asserting that they were not on drugs, and random polygraphs were used on the testing days. Participants were given the questionnaires on the morning of the competition after registration. Two investigators were present to answer any questions and ensure the questionnaires were fully completed. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. No identifying information was asked.

The researchers asked the participants a series of questions regarding weight fluctuation patterns, dieting patterns, supplement use, weight satisfaction on competition day, and other psychological factors (Andersen et al., 1998). The researchers evaluated the different weight loss and gain methods used in the month leading up to a competition (Andersen et al., 1998). The most common modes of reducing weight included consuming smaller meals, counting calories, and eating special diets. However, the researchers found that four percent of the competitors fasted or took steam baths or saunas (Andersen et al., 1998). None of the competitors used methods of induced vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, or diet pills to lose weight (Andersen et al., 1998). Intense weight training methods were the most common method to gain weight (Andersen et al., 1998). Andersen et al. (1998) also found that nutrient supplements were popular while preparing for an event. The most commonly used supplements were amino acids, protein supplements, multivitamins, Vitamin C, calcium, and potassium (Andersen et al., 1998). Overall, this study found that the participants reported high levels of dieting, weight loss, and weight regain. Interestingly, Andersen et al. (1998) found that approximately 60% of the competitors reported dissatisfaction regarding their body image, whereas 28% reported satisfaction,
suggesting that bodybuilding is a sport where competitors are encouraged to scrutinize their physiques and strive for constant improvement.

The study's strengths were that it found some alarming evidence regarding disordered eating patterns and self-hatred among female bodybuilders. Out of the participants, 68% reported dissatisfaction regarding their body weight, 42% said they had been anorexic, and 67% were terrified about being fat. The results from this study were good preliminary evidence to suggest that there needed to be some more support for competitors by coaches, trainers, sponsors, etc. It would be beneficial for competitors to work with a dietician while preparing for competition. The limitation of this study was that since it was novel research during its time, the sample size was not conducive to understanding whether there was a link between bodybuilding and disordered eating since it was small. However, recent studies have looked into the link between bodybuilding and disordered eating and have been discussed in more detail in this chapter (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Marshall et al., 2018; Money-Taylor et al., 2021; Probert et al., 2009).

In 2001, Shea explored three paradoxes of female bodybuilding in California, United States. She observed the empowering and disempowering aspects of the sport and simultaneously challenged and reinforced traditional hegemonic notions of femininity. Her observations found that bodybuilding may encourage resistance to traditional gender norms and restraints on women by allowing them to build muscle, which blurred the lines between masculinity and femininity (Shea, 2001). Therefore, engaging in bodybuilding may empower women by improving self-esteem, enhancing feelings of strength, encouraging fitness, and improving feelings of attractiveness.
On the other hand, many bodybuilders became overly obsessed and often depressed about their bodies, taking drastic and unhealthy measures to achieve the perfect physique: steroid use, rigid dietary restrictions, continuous food monitoring, or reducing carbohydrates and water intake (Shea, 2001). Other female bodybuilders became terrified of building too much muscle because they feared that their muscular physiques would not be sexually attractive to men (Shea, 2001). Losing their sex appeal is no different for these women than losing their power (Shea, 2001). Professional bodybuilding competitions also provided an arena where competitors could show off their muscular bodies (Shea, 2001). At the same time, these contests can be disempowering because they require competitors to be muscular, lean, and hard while being expected to maintain their femininity, softness, charm, and beauty (Shea, 2001). Therefore, this sport is perpetuated with inconsistencies since it can empower and challenge gender norms (i.e., muscular physiques) (Shea, 2001). However, at the same time, bodybuilding competitions still reinforce hegemonic femininity by normalizing, objectifying, and sexualizing the female competitor (Shea, 2001). The strengths of this study are that Shea conceptualized the contradicting experiences of female bodybuilders regarding feelings about gender norms within bodybuilding and Western society, which was a strength because I used the paper by Shea (2001) to conceptualize the participants’ experiences within her study with the participants in my study. Shea’s (2001) research did not include any participants but rather was a literature review from 1983 to 2001. There has been scarce up-to-date research that explored the empowering and disempowering aspects of different types of sports (Fisher, Berbary, & Misener, 2017; Sparkes, Brighton, & Inckle, 2017). Still, I have not been able to locate any current research that branches off Shea’s (2001) research regarding the empowering and disempowering aspects of female bodybuilding.
In 2005, Boyle interviewed six female bodybuilders in Vancouver, Canada. One participant was a professional competitor, and the other five were amateur competitors. The interviews took place in an informal setting and were between one and two hours long. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that probed the participants for competitive experience, personal ambitions, ideals for female muscle, and attitudes toward current developments in a bodybuilding competition. The participants’ age ranged from 30 to 48 years. They were all middle-class, identified as heterosexual, and had varied ethnic and racial identities.

Boyle’s (2005) focus emerged from two compelling themes that arose from the interviews: (1) constructions of the ideal female bodybuilder – participants negotiate their attitudes about female muscularity regarding gender, race, heterosexuality, and class norms; and (2) performing normative femininity in a bodybuilding competition – how participants negotiate heterosexuality and middle-class femininity in a bodybuilding competition.

The results from the study found that most of the participants did not passively agree with the constraints placed upon their bodies and self-expression by the bodybuilding association but that they must contend with these values to maintain success within the sport. The strength of this study revealed the extent to which heterosexuality, being Caucasian, and being of middle-class socioeconomic status governed the sport of competitive female bodybuilding and how this impacted the limitations placed on female competitors regarding their bodies and self-expression. However, future studies require in-depth research to broaden data collected by female bodybuilders, judges, promoters, reporters, and executives to investigate the changes in political, social, and ideological standards of the female physique, which has not been looked into while writing my paper.
Probert, Leberman, and Palmer (2007a) distributed 1431 surveys to current and former male and female bodybuilders in New Zealand to understand the homogeneity of this group in terms of gender, power, control, and empowerment, and also afflictions such as personal inadequacies concerning their identity. They had 382 competitive bodybuilders respond and complete a 55-question survey as part of a three-year project. Outcomes informed the qualitative portion of the study – participant interviews, photo-elicitation, observations and field note diaries. The first 18 questions focused on demographic information: age, gender, and ethnicity; and involvement in bodybuilding: competitive category, experience, and training. The remaining questions asked participant feedback regarding a broad range of issues that were within the existing bodybuilding literature: muscularity and gender, bodily perfection, discipline and control, steroid use, breast implants, personal health and social engagement, by using a four-point agree-disagree Likert scale. The participants were also able to provide additional information through open communication at the end of the study.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Factor analysis reduced the Likert scale data into groups of related variables. Factor analysis found the following themes: (1) self-life enhancement; (2) bodybuilder lifestyle; (3) body manipulation; (4) physical attractiveness tool; (5) healthy-balanced self-image; (6) the price of bodybuilding; and (7) an extreme competitive aesthetic pursuit (Probert et al., 2007a).

Within the first theme, self-life enhancement, bodybuilding was primarily viewed as a positive life-enhancing experience that offered physical, mental, and emotional pleasures and benefits in broader life (Probert et al., 2007a). The sport enabled participants to feel disciplined and in control of their lives and emotions. The second theme, bodybuilder lifestyle, found that bodybuilding was an integral part of the participants’ lives (Probert et al., 2007a). The
participants integrated bodybuilding into their self-identities and felt different from non-bodybuilders. Their dietary regimes reflected their standard eating patterns, and their social network comprised mostly of other bodybuilders. The third theme, body manipulation, found that participants engaged in specific interventions that manipulated their bodies but that these followed traditional gendered bodily ideals (Probert et al., 2007a). This theme also found that steroid use was more acceptable for male bodybuilders. The fourth theme, the physical attractiveness tool, found that participants believed that bodybuilding enhanced their physical attractiveness; they viewed themselves as physically superior, confident within their bodies, sexy, and enjoyed wearing clothing that showed off their physiques (Probert et al., 2007a).

The fifth theme, health-balanced self-image, found that participants were satisfied with their appearance and considered themselves as having a balanced outlook on their bodybuilding selves and life in general (Probert et al., 2007a). For example, if they missed a workout, they did not feel guilty, which suggested the participants did not fall into the trap of developing obsessions or going to extremes. The sixth theme, the price of bodybuilding, reflected the conflicts, negotiations, and struggles that the participants experienced between their bodybuilder identity and their other identities, which impacted their social self, relationships, and other life domains (Probert et al., 2007a). Lastly, the seventh theme, extreme aesthetic competitive pursuit, found that pursuing a competitive physique may lead to body obsession and unhealthy practices such as using steroids (Probert et al., 2007a).

The findings suggested that there are differences in the way that bodybuilders construct their identities (Probert et al., 2007a). Even though bodybuilding has fostered mostly positive identity formation, it may also lead to identity conflicts, negative experiences, and risk-taking behaviours (Probert et al., 2007a). The strength of this study was that there was a large sample
size to attain data collection, with 63.6% of the respondents being female. Therefore, the research
gave a hearty overview of the female competitive bodybuilding community. Probert et al.
(2007a) also integrated the open-ended questions to supplement the presented seven themes. The
open-ended questions captured the participants’ essence, emotion, and lived experiences, which
is helpful information for federations to develop strategies to improve female bodybuilding as a
healthier sport. As mentioned above, during my research, nothing has changed within the
bodybuilding federations when it comes to improving the sport to benefit the health and well-
being of the competitors, nor is there any research that integrates information from coaches,
sponsors, judges, and executives.

Probert et al. conducted a study in 2009 in New Zealand. This study aimed to branch off
of their quantitative research in 2007. This study featured a mixed-method approach utilizing the
information they acquired in 2007’s quantitative study by adding a qualitative component. They
asked 15 male and 17 female bodybuilding competitors open-ended questions in a survey
followed by a semi-structured interview. The researchers asked the participants whether they
perceived bodybuilding as healthy or unhealthy, whether bodybuilding is risky, their own
experiences of risk, and risky behaviours they had observed in bodybuilding (Probert et al.,
2009).

Probert et al. (2009) obtained data using open-ended questions and semi-structured
interviews. The researchers asked the participants about their reasons for becoming involved in
competitive bodybuilding, their experiences of the sport, how it contributed to their sense of self,
whether they perceived bodybuilding to be a healthy or unhealthy pursuit, if they believed
bodybuilding was risky, and their own experiences of risky practices and those they observed in
bodybuilding (Probert et al., 2009). After the interviews, a three-step process analyzed the data:
familiarization with the data, open coding and axial coding. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim leading to familiarization with the data. Probert et al. (2009) imported the transcripts into a qualitative data management and analysis software package, HyperRESEARCH, to generate descriptive codes. Axial coding identified patterns from the descriptive codes to ensure that the participants’ interviews were accurately displayed. After, the researchers combined descriptive codes into themes (Probert et al., 2009).

Health was important to most participants who perceived the bodybuilding lifestyle as healthy or health-enhancing. Some participants did not prioritize this position, and some even questioned and challenged the meanings of health and risk. The participants saw health as relative; therefore, bodybuilders can be healthy or unhealthy, and they wanted to portray themselves to others. Based on the notion of health, Probert et al. (2009) found the following themes: (1) pre-competition—food, fatigue, and social impacts; (2) steroid use; (3) post-competition—depression and weight gain; (4) bodybuilding addiction and unbalanced lives; and (5) the value of the dark side.

The first theme, pre-competition—food, fatigue, and social impacts, the bodybuilders felt much healthier during the off-season phase (Probert et al., 2009). During pre-competition, more stringent dieting and intensive training to reduce body fat created fatigue that impacted the participants physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. The second theme, steroid use, found that most participants did not take steroids because they prioritized their health or had a moral position against drug use in the sport (Probert et al., 2009). The third theme, post-competition—depression and weight gain, found that bodybuilders could experience depression due to the drastic routine changes and feeling a lack of purpose (Probert et al., 2009). Post-competition weight gain also affected mental well-being because weight gain may be drastic.
The bodybuilders believed that women struggled more than men with weight gain and were more susceptible to eating disorders or unhealthy weight management strategies.

The fourth theme, bodybuilding addiction and unbalanced lives, found that the bodybuilders did not see themselves as addicted or obsessed with the sport in an afflicted way (Probert et al., 2009). Still, instead, they lived their lives with drive and strict adherence to their regimens. Lastly, the fifth theme, the value of the dark side, showed first-hand the risky practices of competitive bodybuilders and the participants’ explanations, concerns, and justifications for these activities (Probert et al., 2009). However, despite the risks associated with bodybuilding, these encounters were also beneficial. The findings indicated that the risky practices within the sport could be liberating, valuable, internally strengthening, and therapeutic for the participants and contribute to their long-term well-being. Appreciating this meaning was essential to understanding why bodybuilders may continue with intensive competitive training regimes despite the unhealthy consequences that may occur (Probert et al., 2009).

This study found health was essential to many participants who perceived the bodybuilding lifestyle as healthy (Probert et al., 2009). However, the sport has a dark side since steroid use, extreme dieting, eating disorders, and obsessive behaviours were noted. The strength of this research was that it branched off from the previous research that has been conducted by Probert et al. (2007) by adding more qualitative information in conjunction with the quantitative data collection. The addition of more extensive qualitative information provided some critical information regarding the dark side of competitive bodybuilding. The researchers found that despite the many risks associated with engaging in the sport, participants found that participating in bodybuilding (and even engaging in risky behaviours such as extreme dieting and intense exercise) was beneficial to their overall well-being making it acceptable within the sport (Probert
et al., 2009). Negotiating risky practices allowed the bodybuilders to test their limits and capabilities, contributing to personal growth experiences and fostering a positive self-identity.

Parish, Baghurst, and Turner conducted a study in 2010. The purpose of their study was to understand why men become competitive bodybuilders. The participants were 339 adult males with a mean age of 28.84. Bodybuilders were selected from an online bodybuilding website (www.bodybuilding.com), where the profiles were voluntarily posted. Before data collection, an institutional review board granted permission to utilize profile information. Since profiles were voluntarily posted online for public viewing, no other informed consent was necessary. Parish et al. (2010) had experts in bodybuilding assess the bodybuilder profiles. Every week, “the website promotes an amateur bodybuilder of the week in the categories of teen, adult, and over age 40” (Parish et al., 2010, p. 155). Data collection was retrieved from the publicly displayed bodybuilder of the week forum. For the study, Parish et al. (2010) assumed that all the bodybuilders included in these categories were amateur competitors. Participant selection was based on the following criteria: they had to be male and at least 18 years of age at the time of their posting (this separated adolescents from adults), they had to have competed or are planning to compete in a bodybuilding contest within the next 12 months (this was determined through information provided in their profile), and the bodybuilders must have stated their reasons for becoming a bodybuilder in their profiles (if no reason was stated, the individual was excluded from analysis).

These experts (one professional bodybuilder, one former amateur bodybuilder, and one researcher in the bodybuilding field) evaluated the excerpts to rate why each bodybuilder began participating in the sport. To provide the reliability of the ratings, “an index of item-object congruence (IIOC) procedure was selected for unidimensional items” (Parish et al., 2010, p.
IIOC attempts to find the commonality of agreement among the experts. Sometimes there were multiple reasons given by the bodybuilders for why they began bodybuilding; therefore, it is the responsibility of the experts to discern the primary reason for beginning bodybuilding (Parish et al., 2010).

The results found that there were three different reasons that the participants began bodybuilding: previous sports participation (30.92%), self-esteem (14.45%), health (10.4%), emulation (34.1%) and other (10.4) (Parish et al., 2010). The strength of this study was that it contradicted previous research that stated that people start bodybuilding to enhance self-esteem (Blouin & Goldfield, 1995; Franzoi and Shields, 1984; Ryff; 1989). Instead, this study found that emulation and previous sports participation were the main reasons to begin bodybuilding (Parish et al., 2010). Despite the intriguing results from this study, there were some limitations. First, there was no direct contact between the bodybuilder and researchers; therefore, the responses on the profiles were subjective when discerning between those who were bodybuilders and those who were referring to weight training. Second, it was up to the researchers’ discretion to determine whether the bodybuilder was at the amateur level since there were no face-to-face interactions. Last, the researchers cannot determine whether the bodybuilders on this website represent bodybuilders in the greater community. The researchers collected the data from a more extensive bodybuilding website with many views; however, it is impossible to ascertain the actual demographics of the total bodybuilding population.

In 2012, Chananie-Hill and Garth conducted a study using ten women in college-level amateur bodybuilding at a university in the Midwestern United States. The researchers used ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and 45 to 90-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed
verbatim, and used direct quotes to support the analysis. The ten participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 37, and they were all engaged in bodybuilding at the amateur level from a few weeks to eight years. The questions during the semi-structured interviews asked questions to elicit information regarding pre-competition diet and supplement use, post-competition and off-season eating patterns, and exercise regimes. The researchers also asked the kinds of support the participants received from those important to them, how others perceived and reacted to them, and how they experienced the reactions from others regarding their bodybuilding practices and lifestyle (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). “The ten interviewees, plus the second author, made up the entire population of active female bodybuilders at the university during the interviews” (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012, p. 817). The first author participated in weightlifting and was a part of the gym subculture; and also attended and photographed bodybuilding competitions and assisted others in competition preparation.

The researchers argued that two factors helped strengthen the robustness of their findings (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). First, there was a certain level of trust between the researcher and participant, which was essential to producing in-depth and authentic interviews and observational data. Female bodybuilders are part of a subculture; therefore, they might be hesitant to be the subjects of research by outsiders (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). However, since the researchers were subcultural insiders, the interviewees had trust and openness (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). Second, all the themes they found correlate closely with other ethnographic or interview-based studies of female bodybuilders (Boyle, 2005; Lowe, 1998; McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). They theoretically framed and interpreted them differently using Heckert and Heckert’s (2002) typology of deviance (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012).
Chananie-Hill and Garth (2012) began their analysis using Ragin’s (1994) theory that qualitative research is a process of the interplay between induction and deduction, which involves a research approach that is fluid and changeable, meaning it is subject to revision and refinement during the research process. Once the recorded interviews were transcribed, the data was initially coded based on the literature regarding bodybuilding and deviance (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). The researchers identified recording themes or patterns in the data based on their version of deviance typology, which represented the participants’ lived experiences with theory (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012).

Within the interviews, three main topics emerged: body/appearance, diet, and exercise routines (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). The results found four typologies of deviance: negative deviance (counter-normative, negative reaction), positive deviance (pro-normative, positive reactions), deviance admiration (counter-normative, positive reactions), and deviant conformity (pro-normative, negative reactions) (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). Heckert and Heckert (2002) defined negative deviance as “behaviours that involve under-conformity or nonconformity to normative expectations and negative [societal] evaluations” (p.451). Negative deviance was mainly about bodily appearances caused by diet and exercise and how others reacted to this appearance. Previous literature documented that female bodybuilders increase muscle size and striation, resulting in counter-normative appearances from the stereotypical feminine physique and considered deviant in Western societies (Boyle, 2005). The participants’ narratives echoed these findings regarding derogatory reactions to their changing bodies. Heckert and Heckert (2002) defined positive deviance as “over conformity [to social norms] that is positively evaluated” (p.451). Positive deviance was mainly about the participants adhering to the
expectations to lose body fat, having toned muscles, dieting, exercising, and being physically fit rather than gaining muscular bulk (Heywood, 1996).

Heckert and Heckert (2002) defined deviance as admiration “under-conformity or nonconformity [to social norms] that is positively evaluated” (p.451). For example, while some approve of the look of toned muscles on women, they do not like women they perceive as having too much muscle (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). However, others admire, desire or value women with large, well-developed muscles, which best represents deviance admiration (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). Heckert and Heckert (2002) defined deviant conformity as “over conformity to normative expectations that is negatively evaluated” (p.451). For example, the basis for bodybuilding is physical fitness, toned and strong muscles, healthy bodies, and dieting and exercise, which are pro-normative behaviours in Western society (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). However, adverse reactions tend to emerge when others perceive that the bodybuilding crossed a line into obsessive or extreme forms of pro-normative behaviour (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012).

The strength of this study was that it looked at four types of deviance using Heckert and Heckert’s typology of deviance. Previous research has examined risky behaviours that female bodybuilders engage in as competitors and how these women engage in behaviours that go against the social norms for acceptable feminine appearance (Boyle, 2005; Lowe, 1998; Marshall et al., 2018; Probert et al., 2007a; Shea, 2001; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). This study takes the research further by understanding the types of deviance, why bodybuilders want to engage in deviant behaviours and others’ reactions to these behaviours (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). Since this study broadened the conceptualization of deviance to include positive social reactions and pro-normative behaviours, it showed how reactions to deviance were not
uniform or static (Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012). Instead, they are negotiable and manifest in contradictory ways. Based on this finding, the limitation of this study was that it did not incorporate conformity or cultural approval into its analyses.

Researchers in Australia have also considered the perceived social and psychological effects of participating in the figure division, a subclass within female bodybuilding that emphasizes less muscularity and more feminine presentation (Aspridis et al., 2014). They conducted semi-structured interviews ranging from 45 to 60 minutes with 11 female figure competitors aged 18 to 43. The researchers used thematic analysis to find patterns among the participants’ experiences.

This study found that the participants felt empowered from competing in the figure class. However, even those who emphasized the feminine aspects of the sport still experienced mood swings, stigma, and social isolation (Aspridis et al., 2014). These adverse experiences impacted the preparation strategies required to compete in bodybuilding, including strict dietary and exercise regimens that others might not understand (Aspridis et al., 2014).

The strength of this study was that it examined the experience of bodybuilders within the figure division instead of grouping the experiences of all-female bodybuilding divisions (Aspridis et al., 2014). Future research is necessary to determine if these findings apply to other figure competitors in other settings and cultures. Also, future research should broaden to other female divisions (bikini, wellness, glamour, physique) to determine if there are similar experiences of the sport’s negative psychological and social impacts, which Tajrobehkar did in 2016 regarding the bikini division, which I summarized and critiqued below. Understanding the experiences of other divisions will help determine if society is becoming increasingly intolerant
of female bodies not fitting the normative feminine body expectations (Shea, 2001, Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012).

In 2015, Spendlove, Mitchelle, Gifford, Hackett, Slater, Cobley, and O’Connor conducted a systematic search of electronic databases from the earliest record in 1980 until March 2014 in Auckland, New Zealand. The study consisted of 385 participants (323 males and 62 females). The majority of papers reviewed were published between the 1980s and 1990s, and four papers were published in 2000, 2007, 2010, and 2011.

To access the articles for review, the researchers used a systematic search of electronic databases, including Allied Complementary Medicine (via OvidSP), Cumulative Index to Nursing, and Allied Health Literature (via EBSCO), MEDLINE (via OvidSP), SPORTDiscus (via EBSCO), and Web of Science. The researchers searched for records from the earliest article published until March 2014. “The search strategy combined the terms’ body building’, ‘bodybuilding,’ ‘bodybuilder,’ ‘bodybuilder’ with diet, diet intake, diet supplement, and dietary supplement” (Spendlove et al., 2015, p. 1043). Due to the large volume of magazines and lay articles, the researchers limited the search to peer-reviewed journal articles (Spendlove et al., 2015). After, the researchers completed a systematic review process using PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Spendlove et al., 2015).

All study designs (e.g., randomized controlled trials, cohort, and observational) were potentially eligible for inclusion. However, Spendlove et al. only included baseline data that described habitual intake for intervention studies (2015). The studies excluded only described experimentally manipulated dietary intake, participants training to improve physique but were
not explicitly training for competitive bodybuilding, and studies that provided only the mean of intakes for men and women combined (Spendlove et al., 2015).

For an article to be eligible for the study, they needed to explicitly describe dietary intake and macronutrient consumption with or without supplement intake in male and female bodybuilders (Spendlove et al., 2015). Participants must be training for amateur or professional bodybuilding competitions across any division (e.g., natural bodybuilding, fitness model, bikini, figure, etc.). Dietary intakes must be described quantitatively (e.g., kcal/kJ, g, lg) rather than qualitatively (e.g., menus, food groups, etc.). Studies of any phase of training or competition preparation were eligible for inclusion, which had four distinct periods: non-competition (> 6 months from competition), competition preparation (< 6 months from competition), competition (week of competition), and post-competition (immediate days after competition). Not specified phases of competition training were also noted (Spendlove et al., 2015).

Initially, Spendlove et al. (2015) found 319 potential articles. They removed duplicates (n=166) and another 111 after screening the title and abstract for their final analysis. Spendlove et al. (2015) retrieved an additional 46 articles by hand searching. Out of these 46 articles, they removed 28 for not meeting the eligibility criteria resulting in 18 eligible manuscripts (Spendlove et al., 2015). One paper was excluded because Spendlove et al. (2015) could not contact the authors to obtain more information regarding participant characteristics and dietary details.

The study found that overall protein intake was high, whereas fats and carbohydrates were low. Energy intakes varied depending on the preparation phase: highest in non-competition or immediate post-competition period and lowest during competition preparation (Spendlove et al., 2015). The study’s strength was that it composed all the quantitative literature regarding
dietary practices that were up to date (Spendlove et al., 2015). Also, since this study was a meta-analysis that consisted of 18 articles from 1980 to 2014, it showed the gap between limited studies that consisted of female bodybuilders (n=62) compared to male bodybuilders (n=323). The limitation was that the studies used were of poor quality—the studies failed to provide details for the justification of different dietary practices. Since this research addressed a gap by pointing out that many of the studies were omitted due to lack of quality (Spendlove et al., 2015), future studies would benefit from conducting high-quality, contemporary research.

In 2016, Halliday, Loenneke, and Davy conducted a retrospective case study in Mississippi, United States. This study aimed to describe changes in dietary intake, body mass, exercise habits, and the menstrual cycle of one drug-free amateur female figure competitor during the 20-week competition preparation and 20-weeks post-competition. The participant was 26-27 years old, Caucasian, and biologically female. The study was exempt from Institutional Review Board review and approval.

The researchers asked the participant to electronically track dietary intake during the preparation period using weighed food records (a commercially available digital food scale) to the nearest gram (Halliday et al., 2016). Following the competition, the subject was less motivated to maintain a rigid diet and did not track food intake as diligently. Therefore, 20 weeks post-competition contained estimates of weekly macronutrient and caloric intake that were recorded via weighed records and food diary estimates. The researchers used USDA National Nutrient Database or product-specific nutrition facts panels to obtain nutrient information, and daily nutrient intake information was averaged each week (Halliday et al., 2016). The participant electronically tracked body mass daily on a commercially-available home scale throughout her preparation period and post-competition (Halliday et al., 2016). The daily body masses were
averaged each week. During preparation and post-competition, the participant recorded daily exercise training. The researchers used the 2011 Compendium on Physical Activity to estimate Exercise Energy Expenditure (EEE) (Halliday et al., 2016). Before and during weeks one, ten, and 20 of the preparation period and weeks ten and 20 of the post-competition period, energy availability was calculated from the dietary intake record, exercise training record and estimated body fat mass of the corresponding week. Halliday et al. (2016) established a 30 kcal/kg threshold as a reference level to compare the participant’s energy availability to a level where adverse health outcomes were detected. Lastly, the participant tracked menses throughout preparation and post-competition periods on a calendar.

The results found that caloric restriction, low energy availability, and a decreased fat mass led to a loss of menses during the preparation phase. The resumption of menses was delayed during post-competition despite a return of baseline energy intake, energy availability, and fat mass. Therefore, this information provided insight for healthcare professionals working with bodybuilding clients. The strength of this study was that it provided a detailed dietary intake and the weight composition of a female bodybuilder over an extended period. The study’s limitation was that psychological or social factors were not evaluated. Considering that the participant lost her menses once she reached low body mass levels, this information would have helped researchers understand her mental well-being.

Tajrobehkar conducted a study in Toronto, Canada, in 2016 regarding the experiences of nine bikini competitors. The participants were all Caucasian, of upper-middle socioeconomic class, and born in Canada. This study aimed to understand how bikini competitors perceived and negotiated the expectations of idealized femininity within bodybuilding.
For participant recruitment, purposive sampling at local gyms and snowball sampling were used; the bodybuilders had to have competed within a bodybuilding federation. For data collection, Tajrobehkar conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews to inquire about the participants’ experiences and views of bodybuilding competitions (2016). Her goal was to understand how they perceived and negotiated competition norms around idealized femininity and heterosexuality (Tajrobehkar, 2016). Tajrobehkar also supplemented the interviews with ethnographic fieldwork, which included observation notes and engaging herself with the lifestyle by immersing herself in the bodybuilding subculture. To immerse herself in the bodybuilding subculture, Tajrobehkar spent endless hours at the gym, lifted heavy weights, and ate a strict diet (Tajrobehkar, 2016).

As part of this study, Tajrobehkar (2016) also spent hours on the internet viewing, researching, and learning about bikini competitions. She had bodybuilding-related discussions with fellow enthusiasts, which she added to her notes. She also attended two bodybuilding-related events: the Toronto Pro SuperShow and a stage presence workshop. Tajrobehkar (2016) used grounded theory to transcribe and code the interviews into initial, axial and selective codes. These codes were analyzed and compared to establish themes relating to the original research questions. The Bourdieusian concept informed grounded theory for cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979) applied to aesthetics as a form of capital (Anderson et al., 2010). Bourdieu (1984) believed that aesthetic choices are an essential component of hegemony. Aesthetic choices demonstrate class fractions, privilege, and wealth (Anderson et al., 2010). During the research process, Tajrobehkar paid attention to how competitors resisted, embraced, or remained indifferent toward attempts to monitor and regulate their femininity (2018).
The results indicated that participants held contradictory views regarding normative hegemonic feminine expectations. For example, these participants did not feel oppressed by their femininity, nor did they feel like they were being defiant by increasing their musculature to participate in bodybuilding. Instead, these women enjoyed both aspects and saw bodybuilding as a way to increase their femininity and attractiveness.

The strength of this study is that it considered the perspectives of female bodybuilders within the bikini division, which has not been observed independently since using a mixed sample is popular, or the figure division is primarily the focus of research (Aspridis et al., 2014; Halliday et al., 2016; Probert et al., 2007a; Spendlove et al., 2015). Also, the researcher engaged in ethnographic fieldwork by immersing herself in the bodybuilding lifestyle (Tajrobehkar, 2018), which I did not find in previous or future research studies. The limitation of this study was that there was not enough diversity among the participants since all of them come from the same ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. Future research should attempt to branch into different groups to see any differences in perception and experience, which was scarce (Boyle, 2005).

Worthen and Baker conducted a study in 2016 in Oklahoma, United States. They used Stephen Lyng’s (2005) theoretical concept of edgework to understand what motivated women to engage in high-risk behaviours such as bodybuilding. According to Lyng (2005), the motivation to engage in high-risk behaviours was because the activity was seductive, addictive, and pleasurable. Postmodernist interpretations of edgework assumed that the motivation to engage in risky behaviours offered an escape from economic exploitation, restructuring, and dissatisfaction and was an outlet to rebel against society freely (Lyng, 2005). By negotiating the edge between two mental or physical states – sanity versus insanity – the individual can regain control of one’s
behaviours and choices (Lyng, 2005). Therefore, in the study conducted by Worthen and Baker (2016), women’s bodybuilding functions as edgework.

Worthen and Baker (2016) collected information from 29 female bodybuilders between 20 and 57 years old. Data came from an online survey that consisted of open-ended and close-ended survey questions. Previous experience in bodybuilding competitions before this survey was not a requirement. For this study, women who trained for competition within the last year were current competitors, and those who had not competed within the past year were non-current competitors (Worthen & Baker, 2016).

The online survey included basic background and demographic information and closed-ended questions to examine women’s bodybuilding as edgework. “Participants responded to statements on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to disagree strongly. Higher scores indicated higher agreement with the given statement and supported bodybuilding as edgework” (Worthen & Baker, 2016, p. 479). The answers to the survey revealed three components of edgework: activity, skill, and sensation, found within training and dietary regimens.

Thematic coding of responses to three open-ended questions was conducted: (1) Why did you decide to train to become a bodybuilder, (2) Describe your typical workout regimen during the given week. Please be as specific as possible, and (3) How do you feel after a workout or training session?” (Worthen & Baker, 2016, p. 481). Patterns of edgework were examined through participant responses (Lyng, 2005; Worthen & Baker, 2016). The study found that the primary motivation to compete in female bodybuilding was to physically and mentally challenge oneself (Worthen & Baker, 2016). The participants felt in control while training which was fostered by seeing how their bodies changed and challenging the perceptions of women being the
weaker sex (Worthen & Baker 2016). This study found that the participants felt euphoria, empowerment, and catharsis while working out and training (Worthen & Baker, 2016).

The strength of the study revealed the difference between current and non-current competitors. Therefore, further exploration of how competitive status affects experience would be informative. There were three limitations of this study. First, the study relied solely on responses to an online survey. Therefore, the results are not likely as in-depth as in-person interviews. Second, because this study used an online survey, there is the potential for measurement error, misunderstanding of specific questions, or inaccurate information. Third, the study’s sample resulted in a small number of respondents (n=29) who had relatively homogenous characteristics (86% Caucasian), which did not generalize to the broader diverse populations of female bodybuilders. Additional research is required to examine racial/ethnic differences in the participants’ experiences since almost no studies look into this (Boyle, 2005).

In 2018, Marshall, Chamberlain, and Hodgetts conducted a study by collecting posts from the Instagram profiles of 50 female bodybuilders through searches using popular bodybuilding-related hashtags such as #bodybuilding, #girlswithmuscle, and #girlswholift. The criteria for selecting profiles were that the bodybuilders regularly posted photographs of their bodies and regularly described their bodies and progress. Marshall et al. (2018) conducted a preliminary analysis of the 50 bodybuilding profiles to understand how these women self-surveillance their bodies.

During the preliminary analysis, Marshall et al. wanted to understand how female bodybuilders self-surveillance (2018). They categorized and analyzed the data to determine the overall extent to which the bodies of female bodybuilders displayed on Instagram resembled the ideal body of hetero-normative femininity and the degree to which these bodybuilders seek to
conform to this ideal (Marshall et al., 2018). Marshall et al. (2018) considered how much fat and muscle the bodybuilders possessed and how much fat and muscle they wanted to possess. They also compared the bodies of female bodybuilders to the feminine bodily ideal presented in the mass media (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). They identified how these bodybuilders expressed or did not express dissatisfaction with their bodies because they did not meet this ideal. How these bodybuilders showcased their muscularity and fat to influence others was also considered.

Marshall et al. (2018) identified and analyzed how these bodybuilders objectified and sexualized their bodies through poses, styles of dress, and hair and makeup. After, they explored how these practices may or may not be influenced by the opinions of other Instagram users by observing how others critiqued and complimented the bodies of these women (Marshall et al., 2018).

Marshall et al. (2018) categorized the posts according to their relevance to the above themes found in the preliminary analysis to conduct their analysis. Out of the 50 bodybuilding profiles, 15 of them fit enough of the criteria for in-depth analysis. The 15 bodybuilding profiles were chosen because they provide detailed information (musculature, body fat, physical representation) regarding their bodies and had frequently commented on their posts.

The results found that these women redefine femininity for themselves in ways that provide duality around strength and femininity. These women seemed to view muscularity as a status symbol linked to feelings of empowerment. Therefore, by posting photos of their muscularity, these women challenged the cultural notion that women’s bodies must be fragile, subservient, and unruliness to be considered feminine (Marshall et al., 2018). The strength of this study was that it used social media to examine behaviours exhibited by female bodybuilders, which is a scarce research methodology despite the increase in social media popularity among bodybuilders (Parish et al., 2010). The limitation of this study was that the women behind the
profiles were not contacted for follow-up information. Therefore, the information gathered might not correctly represent the bodybuilders and only acknowledges what they posted online, leaving out a lot of in-depth information from those in the bodybuilding community.

In 2021, Money-Taylor, Dobbin, Gregg, Matthews, and Esen conducted a study to investigate the eating habits of female bodybuilders compared to a non-athletic group. The participants must be between the ages of 18 to 35. To be eligible for the study, they cannot be previously diagnosed with an eating disorder (i.e., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating). An observational cross-section design divided the participants into two groups: female bodybuilding athletes and female non-athletes. The bodybuilder group consisted of many different divisions such as bikini, wellness, physique, and figure. The eating habits, behaviours, and attitudes were assessed using a cross-sectional design.

Eighty-two individuals provided their informed consent and self-assigned as a female bodybuilder (n=42) or a non-athlete (n=40) (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). Bodybuilding athletes must have been training for solely aesthetic purposes and must have competed in at least one affiliated bodybuilding competition. In contrast, non-athletes have engaged in less than 150 minutes of physical activity, exercise or sporting activity per week. Seven participants were excluded due to being previously diagnosed with an eating disorder (n=3), incomplete questionnaire data (n=2), and not meeting the study’s criteria (n=2). The researchers gathered the participant data between November 2017 to February 2018 (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). An online survey called The Bristol Online Survey (BOS) converted validated questionnaires into online questionnaires (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). The link for these questionnaires was distributed through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Snowball sampling,
when users shared the study information and questionnaires online with their social network, was also used to recruit participants (Money-Taylor et al., 2021).

The researchers used a 26-item Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) to assess both groups’ eating attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). The EAT-26 was composed of demographic questions, 26 eating attitude questions and five behavioural questions. Even though the EAT-26 is a valuable tool to identify disordered eating and eating disorders, it is not a clinical diagnostic tool. Therefore, the researchers used it to detect the incidence of subclinical eating disorders (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). The bodybuilding athlete group also completed the FAST, a valuable tool to detect athletes’ disordered eating and eating disorders. Some of the terminology in FAST was altered to fit bodybuilding terminology, which possibly impacted the validity of the results. However, Money-Taylor et al. (2021) stated that the alterations were necessary for their study to ensure suitability for bodybuilding athletes. Since the researchers removed some questions from the FAST questionnaire, results were reported as a frequency distribution for each criterion, enabling appraisal without compromising the validity and reliability of the tool (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). The FAST results were grouped into three key domains: dietary behaviours, training behaviours, and beliefs and perceptions (Money-Taylor et al., 2021).

The results found that female bodybuilders had a high preoccupation with their body mass, engaged in exercises to alter their body mass, and had negative perceptions of themselves, showing that the athletes were more likely to develop eating disorders (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). For example, a significant proportion of the bodybuilding athletes answered yes to the 26-EAT behavioural questions, including binge eating, self-induced vomiting, diet pills, laxatives or diuretics, excessive exercising and extreme weight loss (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). There was a
statistical significance in supplement use, exercise to lose weight, and substantial change in body mass (P>0.05) when comparing the bodybuilding athletes to non-athletes (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). There was also a difference between vomiting to control weight and the use of laxatives, but these values did not reach statistical significance (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). Likewise, the FAST data revealed statistical significance for all but one question regarding dietary behaviours and implications on body composition (P = 0.139 to 0.0001) (Money-Taylor et al., 2021). The results also showed that most female bodybuilders weighed themselves weekly and were concerned about body fat levels. Therefore, they would manipulate dietary intake and exercise regimes to keep body mass low.

The study’s strength was that it compared bodybuilding athletes with non-athletes since limited bodybuilding research looked into this (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). In combination with pre-existing literature, this research provided insight for the International Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation to produce healthy guidelines for acquiring leanness safely, information on how to spot someone at risk for developing an eating disorder and offer guidance and support to those struggling with an eating disorder.

The research summaries gave the most up to date overview of women’s experiences regarding challenges to the hegemonic feminist norms, creating and fostering one’s identity as a woman and as an athlete, how participation in bodybuilding affects body image, and the impact of social relationships on one’s decision to compete in bodybuilding (Andersen et al., 1998; Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Halliday et al., 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Marshall et al., 2018; Spendlove et al., 2015; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Based on the summaries, most of the research focused on why women would be interested in competing in bodybuilding (Chananie-Hil & Garth, 2012; Parish et al., 2010; Worthen & Baker,
2016). However, my research focused on the outcome of participating in bodybuilding rather than why women would begin competing in the first place. Also, aside from Shea (2001), most researchers undertook female bodybuilding with either a primarily positive or negative outcome (i.e., is it empowering or harmful) (Fisher, 1997; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009). In contrast, my research explored and documented women’s experiences in bodybuilding, both positively and negatively. Therefore, this research is intended to be used to form future hypotheses.

2.3 Construction of the Bodybuilder Identity

Bodybuilding is a subculture containing specific terminology, behaviour, and values (Fisher, 1997; Probert, Leberman, & Palmer, 2007). The bodybuilder identity formation depends on the social comparison between participants and non-bodybuilders (Fisher, 1997; Probert et al., 2007a). Bodybuilders differ from non-bodybuilders in that they exhibit a variety of behaviours that are separate from the average person; these include constantly weighing and measuring their food, counting calories, tanning their bodies, doing their posing routines in front of the mirror, and primping (Fisher, 1997; Probert et al., 2007a). These activities all focus on the body and are a normal part of becoming a professional bodybuilder.

Fisher (1997) conducted a study among six female bodybuilders and found that the female bodybuilder identity centred around five interrelated themes: (1) the uniqueness of being a professional female bodybuilder, (2) low self-esteem/insecurity, (3) obsessive control of the body, (4) sexuality, and (5) the ‘superwoman’ ideal. In this study, Fisher (1997) found that female bodybuilders saw themselves quite differently from the average woman and were proud of their uniqueness; however, the competitors had difficulty separating the female self from the bodybuilding self during the interviews.
For the uniqueness of being a professional female bodybuilder, identity formation depended on the constant social comparison (Fisher, 1997). Female bodybuilders compared themselves to non-bodybuilders to evaluate their abilities and beliefs. Despite the motivation found among female bodybuilders while manipulating their bodies, all participants in the Fisher study (1997) seemed to suffer from low self-esteem/insecurity (Fisher, 1997). The female participants’ feelings of personal inadequacy were present before or while competing and were associated with dieting and compulsive eating. However, dieting and other restrictions during contest preparation separate the bodybuilders from everyone else. These deprivations earned these individuals the right to be called a bodybuilder (Fisher, 1997).

Obsessive control of the body asserted that acquiring and maintaining a good body was extremely important to the female bodybuilders’ overall sense of worth (Fisher, 1997). Bodybuilders stressed the importance and significance of the physical body (Fisher, 1997). Obsession with control and perfection seemed to be related to the participants’ feelings of low self-esteem and insecurity about their bodies (Fisher, 1997). Sexuality also negatively influences the bodybuilder’s self-esteem. Since female bodybuilders differ from other females by building muscle, they are often stereotyped as wanting to be men and wanting female lovers (Fisher, 1997).

Lastly, the superwoman ideal is a thinking pattern that consists of three components, which are:

1. the more traditional values of caring and sensitivity to women and sometimes identifies the new cultural values of autonomy and success with women, (2) identifies the independent and autonomously successful ‘SuperWoman’ as society’s ideal image, and
finally (3) identifies with the societal image of ‘SuperWoman’ as her own ideal image (Fisher, 1997, p. 158).

Within the superwoman ideal, the need for an elevated level of achievement was vital among female bodybuilders. Total independence was a virtue, and relationships were described as accomplishments (Fisher, 1997).

2.4 Body Image: Weight, Nutrition, Exercise, and Steroid Use

Participation in female bodybuilding increased in the 1980s (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). Bodybuilding differs from other conventional sports. It does not involve speed, strength, or endurance; instead, contest outcomes are based on the overall appearance and presentation of the athlete’s physique (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). Low body-fat levels (8% to 14%) and prominent levels of muscularity fit the criteria for the winning physique (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). Many factors are involved in achieving a winning figure, including diet and exercise regimens, which are important in maintaining and exhibiting muscularity and low body-fat levels (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989).

Andersen et al. (1998) conducted a study using 26 female bodybuilders. They asked a series of questions regarding weight fluctuation patterns, dieting patterns, nutrient supplement usage, weight satisfaction on the day of competition, and psychological factors. The researchers evaluated the different weight loss and gain methods used in the month leading up to a competition (Andersen et al., 1998).

The most common modes of reducing weight included consuming smaller meals, calorie counting, and special diets (Andersen et al., 1998). Also, 4% of the competitors reported fasting or taking steam baths or saunas (Andersen et al., 1998). None of the competitors reported using
vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, or diet pills to lose weight (Andersen et al., 1998). Heavy training was the most common method of gaining weight (Andersen et al., 1998).

Andersen et al. (1998) found that the competitors were more likely to use nutrient supplements while preparing for an event. Commonly used supplements included amino acids, protein supplements, multivitamins, Vitamin C, calcium, and potassium (Andersen et al., 1998). Lastly, Andersen et al. (1998) found that most competitors (60%) were not satisfied with their weight, whereas 28% reported average satisfaction.

Similarly, Lamar-Hildebrand et al. (1989) conducted a study exploring the dietary and exercise practices of 10 college-aged female bodybuilders. They found that the competitors’ food intake, energy and nutrient intake, and exercise regimes fluctuated depending on whether they were in pre-competition or post-competition mode. For food intake, those preparing for a competition enjoyed a limited variety of foods. These consisted of chicken, tuna, egg whites, brown rice, rice cakes, pasta, sugar-free beverages, coffee, tea, and sugar substitutes; while avoiding fats, combination dishes, soups, legumes, egg yolks, red meats, dairy, alcohol, and sweets. In comparison, those in post-competition consumed a wider variety of foods (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). While investigating the competitors’ energy and nutrient intake, Lamar-Hildebrand et al. (1989) found that fat intake values were low among all the competitors throughout the study regardless of whether they were in pre- or post-competition mode. The total daily fat energy intake among competitors ranged from 11% before a competition, 17% at week 18 post-competition, and 27% for those not competing. Lastly, the researchers found that exercise patterns were determined by pre-and post-competition; competitors exercised 23-28 hours per week while non-competitors exercised 13-18 hours per week.
Probert et al. (2007a) compared data from male and female bodybuilders engaging in risky behaviours such as physical training, weight control, and steroid use. They found that male bodybuilders were less likely to perceive bodybuilding as a drug-free sport than female bodybuilders. They were more supportive of steroid use, and they saw steroids as being acceptable within the sport (Probert et al., 2007a). Within this study, Probert et al. (2007a) highlighted the differences between men’s and women’s experiences, perceptions, and concerns about risk. They noticed that bodybuilding men were more likely to engage in steroid use. In contrast, bodybuilding women were more likely to be preoccupied with diet and weight control, resulting in female participants developing eating disorders (Probert et al., 2007a).

Research has pointed out that the primary physical risk associated with female bodybuilders is pushing their bodies to extreme limits (Probert et al., 2007a). For example, female bodybuilders are susceptible to cultivating potentially harmful dietary and weight control practices to maintain a lean and muscular body (Worthen & Baker, 2016). Some of these practices include strict dieting, weight cycling, and a preoccupation with food (Andersen et al., 1998; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989), which can encourage female bodybuilders’ bodies to exhibit extreme levels of muscleularity, starvation, and sometimes obsession (Money-Taylor et al., 2021; Worthen & Baker, 2016). However, in the sport of bodybuilding, these women must endure some physical risks (i.e., vigorous exercise, calorie restriction, etc.) to be successful in their competition (Worthen & Baker, 2016).

Based on the previous research, bodybuilders must adhere to specific dietary and exercise regimes unique to the sport (Andersen et al., 1998; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Money-Taylor et al., 2021; Probert et al., 2007a). Including consuming nutrient-dense, low-fat foods and participating in strenuous exercise to develop their physiques (Andersen et al., 1998; Lamar-
Hildebrand et al., 1989). However, bodybuilding is empowering for many women despite the negative feelings that may arise before and during competition. It may be a way for some women to deviate from standardized femininity (Worthen & Baker, 2016).

2.5 Resistance and Compliance with Standard Feminist Norms

Female bodybuilding posed a considerable threat to the traditional notions of masculinity since strength and muscularity typically defined male bodies, while weakness and softness defined female bodies (Shea, 2001). With that being said, bodybuilding challenged the definite ways of thinking about masculine and feminine bodies. Schulze (1990) argued that “the female bodybuilder threatens not only current socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity but the system of sexual difference itself” (p. 59). Women’s participation in bodybuilding challenges the muscular male body, which previously dominated sports imagery and signified the physical power of patriarchy (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998).

2.5.1 Sense of Empowerment and Self-Esteem

Female bodybuilding enhanced and undermined self-esteem and a healthy body image (Shea, 2001). Shea (2001) pointed out that many women experienced improved self-esteem and a sense of personal power while lifting weights and building muscle. Schulze (1990) argued that women who lift weights report improvements in self-image, are more likely to take care of themselves, strive to be different, and take attention away from men. Similarly, Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) found that some elite female bodybuilders gained self-respect, felt more robust and more powerful, were less likely to copy overly thin models, and were not as obsessed with controlling their weight.

Worthen and Baker (2016) conducted a study of 29 female bodybuilders and found three components contributing to women’s motivation to compete in this high-risk sport – activity,
skill, and sensation. Their study found that the driving force in female bodybuilding was the motivation to challenge oneself both physically and mentally (Worthen & Baker, 2016). The women in the study also felt in control while training (Worthen & Baker, 2016). This sense of control constituted the control that they exhibited when changing how their bodies looked and challenging the perceptions of women as the weaker sex (Worthen & Baker, 2016). The women in this study mentioned that they felt euphoria, empowerment, and catharsis while working out and training (Worthen & Baker, 2016).

Aspridis, O’Halloran, and Liamputtong (2014) conducted a study of 11 female bodybuilders and found that the competitors perceived more positive than adverse psychological effects while preparing for competition. The women within this study described their experiences as empowering (Aspridis et al., 2014). Through rigid physical training and strict dietary practices undertaken by the competitors, there were more feelings of mental and physical strength, achievement, personal growth, and accomplishing something never imagined (Aspridis et al., 2014). Many women found that these empowering experiences integrated into their personal lives by encouraging them to partake in other challenging behaviours; it helped them develop the strength and confidence to try different things in life (Aspridis et al., 2014). Accordingly, they reported feeling more confident about going back to school, trying a new career, or increasing their professional development (Aspridis et al., 2014).

Similarly, Probert, Leberman, and Palmer (2007a, 2009) found that bodybuilding was perceived as a positive, life-enhancing experience. Their study found that both male and female bodybuilders felt more disciplined and in control of their lives and emotions (Probert et al., 2007a, 2009). Therefore, their experiences as bodybuilders offered benefits to the self that extended into their broader lives.
The opposite can also be found. Research has revealed that a female bodybuilder’s quest for the ideal body might negatively affect her self-esteem (Shea, 2001). A woman’s self-worth and image could become compromised if she became too strong or muscular because she may no longer be sexually desirable to men. (Shea, 2001). In 1998, Castelnuovo and Guthrie conducted a study of 20 elite female bodybuilders and found that what motivated most women to begin recreational bodybuilding was attaining the perfect body. All were concerned with weight and body fat control. The degree of psychological and behavioural investment in appearance, fitness, and health ranked high in contributing to the bodybuilder’s overall self-esteem (Castelnuobo & Guthrie, 1998). As a result, this study pointed out that some women who decided to participate in bodybuilding firmly adhered to the prevailing notions of beauty and femininity.

Many bodybuilders will go to unhealthy extremes to attain the perfect body (Shea, 2001). Many competitors will adhere to rigid dietary restrictions, continuous food monitoring (including severe reductions in carbohydrates and water intake), and engage in anabolic steroid use (Shea, 2001). However, steroids can often lead to undesirable and permanent side effects such as facial hair growth, baldness, acne, lowered voice, breast shrinkage, masculinization of facial features, liver and kidney dysfunction, and clitoral enlargement (Shea, 2001).

There was mixed research regarding the empowerment and disempowerment of female bodybuilders regarding resistance and compliance to feminine norms (Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Lowe, 1998; Marshaller et al., 2018; Parish et al., 2010; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Sparse research was conducted in the late 1990s and 2000s (Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Parish et al., 2010; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001) and an increase in the research after 2012 (Aspridis et al., 2014; Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Halliday et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2018; Money-Taylor et al.,
2021; Spendlove et al., 2015; Tajrobehkar, 2016). However, there were some years that there was no relevant research on female bodybuilders (i.e., 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020). Despite the negative consequences of bodybuilding, bodybuilding has increased in popularity among female competitors (Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Lowe, 1998; Marshall et al., 2018; Parish et al., 2010; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Only one relevant study (Shea, 2001) conducted a literature review regarding the empowering and disempowering aspects of female bodybuilding simultaneously. Most research tried to understand either one or the other but mostly leaned on the empowering aspects of the sport despite the risky behaviours engaged by the bodybuilders while preparing for competition and post-competition (Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Marshall et al., 2018; Parish et al., 2010; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Therefore, my research aimed to branch off Shea’s (2001) research by understanding the empowering and disempowering aspects of competitive female bodybuilding.

2.6 Psychological Effects

2.6.1 Mood Swings, Energy, and Post Competition Depression

Mood swings and decreased energy are constant within bodybuilding as a sport. Probert et al. (2007a) described the changes in mood as an emotional roller-coaster ride as competitors prepare for competition. The competitors in their study reported feeling increasingly irritable when they perceived any negative alterations in their bodies (Probert et al., 2007a). Likewise, Andersen et al. (1998) found that while preparing for a competition, 80% of the women in their study reported feeling fatigued, 60% said being short-tempered, 56% reported feelings of anxiety, and 25% reported feeling depressed or isolated.
Aspridis et al. (2014) found that depressed mood typically occurred post-competition when the women began to see their lean and muscular bodies fade as they resumed regular eating habits. These researchers found that the competitors were battling conflicting feelings of empowerment during the post-competition phase due to achievement and craving for societal acceptance within the bodybuilding world (Aspridis et al., 2014). Similarly, Probert et al. (2009) found that post-competition blues were common among the competitors due to a drastic change in routine, post-competition weight gain (or rebound) and feeling a lack of purpose. During this phase, female competitors might turn to drastic measures to control weight gains, such as disordered eating (i.e., binging and purging, caloric restrictions), overexertion through exercise, and the use of diuretics or laxatives (Probert et al., 2009).

2.7 Social Costs

2.7.1 Voluntary Social Withdrawal

Most competitors find it difficult to maintain a social life while preparing for a competition. Since bodybuilding requires a significant amount of the competitors’ time due to strict training regimens and the need for sufficient rest, competitors often find it tough to socialize (Aspridis et al., 2014).

Many foods and drink temptations are challenging to deal with while preparing for a competition (Aspridis et al., 2014). Therefore, most competitors will voluntarily remove themselves from social situations (Aspridis et al., 2014). Within the studies by Aspridis et al. (2014) and Probert et al. (2007), male and female competitors would deliberately withdraw from social situations to ensure that their training and diet regimens were not interrupted. These studies found that most social relationships would normalize again once competition training was over (Aspridis et al., 2014; Probert et al., 2007a). However, some women have reported that
competing has led to permanent social costs. Friendships have been lost due to a direct reaction to preparation practices and the stigma attached to female bodybuilding (Aspridis et al., 2014).

2.7.2 Stigma

Aspridis et al. (2014) found that female bodybuilders received different reactions when telling others about their participation in bodybuilding. Many competitors encountered stigma from people who perceived the sport as unhealthy due to its strict preparation practices (Aspridis et al., 2014). Several women reported that those within their social environments did not try to understand the process of competing and judged them based on competing requirements and scrutinized the changes in their physiques (Aspridis et al., 2014). This behaviour resulted in the breakdown of many friendships since their friends did not know how to support them (Aspridis et al., 2014).

Female bodybuilding stigma is not a new phenomenon and has been reported widely (e.g., Boyle, 2005; Probert et al., 2007a). Lowe (1998) suggests that competitors are under constant scrutiny by others – their bodies either provoke a sense of awe or disgust. This scrutiny may be because many find muscularity among female bodybuilders distasteful (Lowe, 1998).

2.8 Summary

Three theories helped guide this study: Ryan and Deci’s (1980) self-determination theory (SDT), Ryan and Deci’s (1985) cognitive evaluation theory (CET) and Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT). SDT focused primarily on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. CET focused on how one’s social environment influences decision-making. Lastly, SCT focused on the three types of human agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency.

Bodybuilding is a subculture with specific guidelines regarding terminology, behaviour, and values. Bodybuilders differ from non-bodybuilders in that they exhibit extreme behaviours
such as weighing and measuring their food, counting calories, tanning their bodies, doing their posing routines in front of the mirror, and primping (Fisher, 1997; Probert et al., 2007a).

Research has found varying psychological and social outcomes for women interested in competitive female bodybuilding. Female bodybuilders have reported that bodybuilding enhances self-esteem and a sense of empowerment (Aspridis et al., 2014; Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Schulze, 1990; Shea, 2001; Worthen & Baker, 2016); however, at the same time, the constant quest for the perfect body may diminish self-worth (Shea, 2001).

Since preparing for a bodybuilding competition is time-consuming, participants often engage in caloric restrictions, voluntary social withdrawal, and experience stigma (Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Lowe, 1998; Probert et al., 2007a). As a result, mood swings and post-competition blues are common during and after competing (Aspridis et al., 2014; Probert et al., 2007a, 2009). However, most of the literature review found that despite the challenges experienced by competitors, the benefits of competition outweigh the costs (Andersen et al., 1998; Aspridis et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Halliday et al., 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Marshall et al., 2018; Spendlove et al., 2015; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016).
3. Chapter Three: Methodology

This methodology chapter is divided into seven sections. Section one presented the rationale for qualitative methodology and provided an overview of the chapter. Section two provided an overview of basic interpretative qualitative research and explained what qualitative research entails. Section three described participant selection and recruitment and highlighted the criteria required to participate in this study. Section four focused on data generation, which describes the qualitative interview process. Section five related to data analysis and provided a broad overview of the thematic analysis process. Section six was related to evaluation criteria and trustworthiness; and was divided into four subsections: internal validity, reliability, external validity or generalizability, and field notebook. Lastly, section seven evaluated the ethical considerations required for this study.

3.1 Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

The present study used a basic interpretative qualitative research (Merriam, 2002) approach to explore the emotional well-being of female bodybuilders. This study aimed to understand the perspectives of female bodybuilders who have competed in a bodybuilding competition(s). The research focused on understanding both sides (empowering and disempowering) of the female experience within a bodybuilding culture.

I used a qualitative research approach to explore and better understand the experiences lived by the women. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative research refers to “research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movement, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations” (p.11). Therefore, while conducting this study, I tried to grasp the participants’ essence to give a complete, rich picture of their experiences.
Merriam (2002) referred to several key characteristics of qualitative research. The first is that the researchers strive to understand people's meaning of their personal experiences within the world (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research aims to understand how people make sense of their own experiences as part of a specific context and interactions. That being said, its purpose is not attempting to predict the future but understanding the essence of the setting. (Merriam, 2002). The second key characteristic is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002). Within qualitative research, the researcher “can expand his or her understanding through nonverbal as well as verbal communication, process information (data) immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy of interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). The third key characteristic is that qualitative research is an inductive process. In qualitative research, “researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively deriving postulates or hypotheses to be tested” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). In other words, researchers construct a theory based on observations and intuitive understandings during data collection (Merriam, 2002). Lastly, the product of qualitative research is richly descriptive. In qualitative research, the researcher uses words and pictures rather than numbers to convey what has been learned about the phenomenon (Merriam, 2002).

3.2 Basic Qualitative Research

Basic qualitative research aims to "understand how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). During the study, the researcher attempts to discover and understand the phenomenon and the perspectives of those involved (Merriam, 2002). The data is collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis; and is
inductively analyzed to identify recurring themes (Merriam, 2002). Descriptive details of the findings are presented and drawn back to the literature review (Merriam, 2002).

3.3 Participants Recruitment and Selection

Upon University of Saskatchewan Ethics Board Approval (Behavioural Research Ethics), purposeful sampling recruited eight female bodybuilding competitors. The goal was to interview at least one to two individuals from each bodybuilding division. The main divisions are bikini, figure, fitness, and physique. This research aimed to comprehensively understand women's experiences from various divisions (i.e., bikini, fitness, physique) within bodybuilding by interviewing at least one individual from each division.

Individuals were recruited via social media. After the first interview, purposeful sampling was used to identify and select individuals with a vast array of knowledge about or acquired experience with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). There was a predetermined set of criteria required for participation used to better narrow in on the focus of the study. The following criteria helped determine whether participants were qualified to participate in the study: (1) age: the participants had to be at least 18 years of age; (2) the participants had to be biologically female; (3) the participants had to have competed in or were training to compete in at least one Canadian Bodybuilding Competition (number of years of experience will vary). I attempted to recruit the participants from Saskatchewan through flyers posted in athletic organizations (i.e., physical activity organizations such as bodybuilding gyms and fitness centers) and on an online bulletin website of the University of Saskatchewan (see Appendix A). However, this method was not successful in finding participants. Therefore, I contacted a female bodybuilder I knew via social media, and she helped recruit the remaining participants through snowball sampling.
Participants were contacted for a second optional interview once the initial interviews were fully transcribed. During the second interview, participants had the opportunity to change, omit, and elaborate on any of the gathered information during the initial interview. The second interview was informal; therefore, participants could go over their transcripts via email, face-to-face, or phone interviews.

3.4 Qualitative Interview

During the study, each participant was asked to engage in one 45 to 60-minute-long semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview allowed me to ask open-ended questions with probes designed to draw out more detail and explanation (Trainor, 2013). The questions were sequenced loosely and changed form depending on the responses by the participant (Trainor, 2013). The interview questions were generated based on the literature review and were guided by the research question (see Appendix D). All interviews were digitally recorded for transcription. Before beginning each interview, I asked for the participants’ written and verbal consent to digitally record the interview. After the interviews, I listened to the recorded sessions to transcribe the data.

Upon arrival, I provided each participant with a demographic and consent form. The demographic form was used to record information regarding the participant’s age, sexuality (which was analyzed for stigmatization), number of years in competition, and what division the participant had or was competing in (i.e., bikini, figure, fitness, or physique) (see Appendix C). The consent described the purpose of the study and the participant’s rights within the study (see Appendix B). These rights included reminding the women that participation was entirely voluntary, having the recording device turned off at any time and being able to withdraw their results from the study at any time and for any reason (see Appendix B). The participants were
provided with a signed copy of the consent form once they fully understood and agreed to the terms of the study.

During the semi-structured interviews, I often went back and forth when asking open-ended questions and included probes to draw out more details. Once the interviews were finished, I asked the participants to include any relevant information I did not ask them during the interview process.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was the foundation for data analysis. Thematic analysis was a method that aimed at identifying, analyzing, and recording patterns (themes) across data sets that were associated with a specific research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since this study focused on the perspectives of female bodybuilders, thematic analysis was used to locate any similar phenomena within the data. Thematic analysis does not take a direct linear path; instead, it involves looking for patterns of meaning and issues found within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis involved a six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first phase was familiarizing myself with the data, which required transcription, reading and re-reading the data, and noting initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, I listened to the interviews fully before transcribing. During the transcription process, I would stop the recorder and relisten to each statement made by the participant to make sure that I transcribed everything verbatim. The second phase generated initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second phase began once I read and familiarized myself with the data. During this phase, I coded any interesting features of the data across the data set and collated any data relevant to each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I wrote down the codes and cut out participant quotations that best
represented the code. Next, the third phase included searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This theme involved collating the codes into potential themes and gathering relevant data for each potential theme (Braun & Clark, 2006). During this phase, I went back and forth between the participants to find similar themes among the coded data. The fourth phase was reviewing themes, which involved making sure the themes were consistent and connecting with the researcher’s initial coded information to generate a map of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth phase was defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once I noticed a pattern emerge from the themes, I defined and named them. During the fifth phase, I generated definitions and names for each theme; this involved an ongoing analysis that refined the specifics of each theme and shaped the overall story that was told by analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, the sixth phase produced the report by tying together the final analysis of selected extracts with the research question and literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Three theories were used as lenses through which to view the transcripts while applying thematic analysis. While going through the six-phase process within thematic analysis, I independently considered each theory. These theories were self-determination theory (SDT), cognitive evaluation theory (CET) and social cognitive theory (SCT).

3.6 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the process used within qualitative research to describe the parameters of the results (Merriam, 2009). The components of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.6.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to how the research findings (i.e. interpretations) match reality (Merriam, 2002; 2009). Since “qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for data
collection and analysis, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through observations and interviews” (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). Therefore, the researcher’s interpretations need to be unbiased.

One strategy used to ensure credibility is member checks, which required me to ask the participants for feedback on the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2002). The purpose of member checks was to make sure that the interpretation of the data was correct and allowed for any fine-tuning to capture their experiences (Merriam, 2002). Throughout my interviews, this strategy was used to ensure interval validity (Merriam, 2002).

As a past female bodybuilding competitor, I re-evaluated my own experiences within the community to ensure that I grasped the full content of each participant’s unique individual experiences. However, I used this comparison loosely to avoid unnecessary biases when re-evaluating my past experiences. I recorded these recollections in a field notebook to prevent bias, further explained in the confirmability section.

3.6.2 Transferability

Researchers need to provide a detailed, thick description of the data collected (Merriam, 2002; 2009). The description includes providing enough description and information about the results so that readers can determine how closely their situations match and whether the findings can be transferred (Merriam, 2002).

3.6.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to how the research findings can be replicated (Merriam, 2002). However, no two studies will ever find identical results within qualitative research since numerous interpretations of the same data (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, to ensure reliability, I ensured that the results were consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2002). I checked in
with the participants to ensure that the data interpretation was correct and that the results were consistent. To do this, I made sure to ask follow-up questions during the initial interview. The follow-up questions allowed me to understand what the participant said. I also offered an optional follow-up interview, which was done through email or over the phone. All of the participants preferred the email option; therefore, I provided copies of the transcript for each participant. Only half the participants decided to go through their transcripts, which allowed them to change, elaborate, or omit any information from the initial interview.

3.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the neutrality and accuracy of the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). I kept a journal documenting my reflections and reactions throughout the research study. I started the journal once I began data collection and maintained it throughout the research process. Using a journal helped keep me separate from the participants by documenting my own experiences and preventing any personal biases from arising.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Board. Participating in this study was completely voluntary. The participants were asked to read the informed consent and confidentiality form, which were discussed thoroughly. After the participants read the informed consent and confidentiality form, I went through each point to make sure they fully understood what the study entailed, bringing up any questions or concerns they had before starting the interview. The informed consent and confidentiality form included details regarding the purpose of the study, the procedures that were used, potential risks and benefits of participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw.
I made sure the participants fully understood the form before signing it and reminded participants of their rights within this study and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. The participants were also informed about how data was collected and stored to maintain confidentiality. For example, no identifying factors were used in the study; each participant was given a pseudonym. Participants were also informed about the potential for any other risks associated with the study.

Participants were provided with my contact information and information regarding obtaining the results from the research study. As per the University of Saskatchewan guidelines and regulations, the participants’ data will be stored for five years in the office of Dr. Laurie Hellsten-Bzovey, which is in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education.
4. Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter is divided into two sections. Section one shared information about participants, provided details about each division within female bodybuilding, and introduced the eight participants who contributed to this study. Pseudonyms ensured the confidentiality of participants. Section two presented the themes: (1) Body shaping and training: Acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions, (2) Mental discipline and wellbeing: Exploring the mental and physical effects of participating in bodybuilding competitions, (3) Social life and extraneous impacts: Reflecting the impact that bodybuilding has on one’s social relationships, and (4) Changes and outcomes: Overcoming personal and social obstacles. Participant voices stemming from the transcripts were quoted within each of the themes to support the research findings. These quotations were modified to protect the participants’ identities and enhance readability. For example, specific names were changed or deleted, and unnecessary repetitive words such as um, yeah, like, and you know were omitted from the final transcript. This study aimed to understand the perspectives of female bodybuilders who have competed in a bodybuilding competition(s). The focus of the study was to explore both the empowering and disempowering aspects of competitive female bodybuilding.

4.1 Participant Information and Context of the Study

I collected information from eight female bodybuilders between 28 and 42 years old. All participants had participated in at least one bodybuilding competition, including various divisions such as bikini, body fitness, wellness, figure, glamour, and physique. The purpose of recruiting individuals from different divisions was to recognize the shared experiences within this sport.
4.1.1 Participant Background and Characteristics

There were eight participants interviewed. The participants were interviewed either face-to-face or via phone interview; they were also offered an optional secondary interview to review their transcripts and offer clarity, changes, and omissions. All the participants resided in Saskatchewan.

Mel, a 42-year-old figure and body fitness competitor, was the first participant interviewed. Mel’s bodybuilding journey started after she was in a car accident. During the accident, she endured whiplash and damaged the muscles in her back. When Mel decided to rebuild her body after the accident, she was so weak that she started using soup cans, reading Oxygen magazines, and finally made her way to the gym. Mel started to see the changes she could make to her body. Mel had never been to a competition until she was in one. She was fascinated by how her body changed and how she grew her body to become stronger. After the accident, Mel felt like her body failed her and decided to reconstruct herself through her body. During the interview, Mel was a personal trainer and a local gym owner in Saskatchewan. She has been competing in bodybuilding for the past six years and has participated in 13 shows. She has also earned her professional card in bodybuilding.

The second participant interviewed was Donna, a 37-year-old fitness instructor. Donna has competed in various categories, including bikini, figure, fitness model, and glamour. Donna’s bodybuilding journey started when she began training at home with some friends; one wanted to do a show and have Donna do one with her as a trainer. Donna had never done a show before. However, her friend placed second in the first show, and Donna did not place. Donna did another show two weeks later and placed first in her novice show for figure and second place in
bikini. For the past four years, Donna has been competing in bodybuilding and has participated in 11 shows; she has earned her professional card for glamour in Ultimate Fitness Events (UFE).

The third participant interviewed was Megan, a 36-year-old figure and physique competitor. Megan participated in sports her whole life; she was 14 or 15 years old when she started developing an interest in bodybuilding. She became interested in bodybuilding, and after that, she did some powerlifting and CrossFit. Megan has always been someone who has optimized her health and strength and appreciated the art and beauty of a well-crafted physique. Megan described herself as someone who likes to set big goals and try to achieve them. She has been competing in bodybuilding for the past ten years and has participated in nine shows; her highest ranking is winning at the professional level twice and competing at the national level.

The fourth participant interviewed was Andrea, a 31-year-old figure competitor. Andrea started lifting weights in high school; four to five years later, she challenged herself more. According to Andrea, female bodybuilding was new in the fitness world since few people participated in it. She had done a half marathon before and loved lifting weights, so she thought a bodybuilding competition in figure was the way to go. Andrea has competed in two competitions within two years but has since stopped competing for health reasons.

The fifth participant interviewed was Dana, a 31-year-old figure competitor. Dana decided to partake in a bodybuilding competition because she had always wanted to see her potential and make the best version of herself, to make the best body with movement. Dana always thought about competing in her early 20s but wanted to wait until she felt like she would not be affected by body image issues. Dana is motivated in knowing that she has the dedication and enjoys encouraging others. Growing up, she lived in a small town, so she was also involved
in dance, volleyball, curling, badminton, skiing, baseball, piano, and skating. Dana has done three competitions in one year; and is currently training to compete in wellness.

The sixth participant interviewed was Jennifer, a 34-year-old bikini and figure competitor. Jennifer played many sports, including hockey, basketball, volleyball, and then in university, she did not have a sport’s outlet, so she started going to the gym. Jennifer never became involved in strength training until after high school. She taught herself different exercises in the gym and became interested in fitness when she started reading fitness magazines and learned about bodybuilding. Jennifer was always in awe of female bodybuilders and how strong these women looked. She joined in on bodybuilding because she had a friend planning to compete for the first time. According to Jennifer, it was the second year for the bikini division, so she thought that was where everyone started. She started in bikini and decided that was the worst choice given her body type. Her first experience was awful. She swore she would never compete again, but she began competing in Figure and loved it a couple of years later. Jennifer has participated in eight competitions in seven years, where she placed first in Figure.

Diane, a 34-year-old figure and body fitness competitor, was the seventh participant interviewed. There were multiple motivations for why Diane began bodybuilding. First, Diane’s ex-husband became interested in the bodybuilding field, which intrigued her. Diane watched him compete with some friends back in 2010 and remembers thinking that there is a lot of work, motivation, and determination that goes into it, and she felt that she could compete too. She was always skinny growing up and was not an athletic person but a social activist. Diane also has Crohn’s colitis and was diagnosed at nineteen but recalls being sick for much of her life. Doctors said that children were not an option because she was too sick. Therefore, she needed something to occupy her time. Diane also competed in memory of her brother, who she lost back in 2001.
She said he was always into fitness, so her brother would be very proud of her for doing something entirely out of the ordinary for her. Diane has participated in eight competitions in eight years. Her biggest accomplishment was when she took the provincial title for a division and won overall. In 2018, she competed in the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness Elite (IFBB) and won her professional card.

Paige, a 28-year-old bikini and body fitness competitor, was the eighth participant. Paige became interested in bodybuilding because she wanted to see how far she could push herself. Paige played volleyball, basketball, badminton, track and field, and baseball in high school. Paige decided to compete in bikini because it fit well with her body type. Paige has competed in seven competitions in four years, and her highest ranking is second place.

4.1.2 Data Generation

Participants were eager to share their experiences regarding being competitive female bodybuilding competitors. Each participant shared similar experiences when feeling both empowered and disempowered by the sport. The themes were developed when viewing the transcripts by following the six steps identified in thematic analysis. I aimed to identify, analyze, and record themes across the data sets associated with the research question (Braun & Clark, 2006). When reviewing the transcripts, I familiarized myself with the data by transcribing each interview individually, reading and re-reading the transcripts, and noting any initial ideas about what was presented (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, I generated initial codes by coding any interesting features and organizing any relevant data to each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After this, I searched for themes, organizing the data into themes and gathering relevant data for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The next step involved reviewing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, I ensured that the themes were consistent and connected with the initial
coded data to generate a map of analysis. After that, I defined and named the themes, generating clear definitions and names for each theme to shape the overall story told by the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There were four themes developed, which are (1) Body shaping and training: Acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions, (2) Mental discipline and wellbeing: Exploring the mental and physical effects of participating in bodybuilding competitions, (3) Social life and extraneous impacts: Reflecting the impact that bodybuilding has on one’s social relationships, and (4) Changes and outcomes: Overcoming personal and social obstacles. These themes are ordered numerically for organizational purposes; this numbering does not indicate rank or level of importance. The last step involved producing the report, which consisted of tying together the selected quotations with the research question and literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.1.3 Consideration of Theoretical Underpinnings

SDT, CET, and SCT were considered while reviewing the analysis. SDT was developed in 1980 and focused on human motivation, personality development, and well-being by contending that humans have three fundamental psychological needs to foster well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). CET was developed in 1985 as an extension of SDT and sought to specify circumstances of variability within intrinsic motivation by investigating the need for autonomy and competence and how that influenced the effects of rewards, feedback, and other external events (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation was enhanced by positive performance feedback and diminished by negative performance feedback, facilitated by competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SCT was developed in 1986 and focused on exerting control over one’s life by analyzing three modes of agency: direct agency, proxy agency, and collective agency (Bandura, 2001).
SDT best represented themes one, body shaping and training: acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions, and three, social life and extraneous impacts: reflecting the impact of bodybuilding on one’s social relationships. CET best represented themes one, body shaping and training: acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions, and three, social life and extraneous impacts: reflecting the impact of bodybuilding on one’s social relationships. SCT best represented themes one, body shaping and training: acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions; three, social life and extraneous impacts: reflecting the impact of bodybuilding on one’s social relationships; and four, changes and outcomes: overcoming personal and social obstacles. The theories were acknowledged throughout the themes and addressed in detail within the summary section results chapter and the discussion chapter.

4.2 Themes

The transcribed interviews produced 82 pages (i.e., 42,255 words) that contained data that developed four themes. Eight participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity; the pseudonyms were Mel, Donna, Megan, Andrea, Dana, Jennifer, Diane, and Paige. Transcribed interviews ranged from six to 22 pages long. I chose the most information-rich excerpts to include, which best illustrated the overall picture in this section.

Thematic analysis of the participant transcripts resulted in four major themes. The four major themes also included 17 subthemes, 15 sub-sub themes and two superordinate themes (See figure 4.1).

Theme one had five subthemes: nutrition included three sub-sub themes which were preferred dieting lifestyle and experience with rebound weight gain, current relationship with
food, and everyday off-season diets, as well as two superordinate themes which were experimentation and development of diet and harmful; body image included two sub-sub themes which were empowerment and bodybuilding category decision; relationship with coach included two sub-sub themes which were coach's plan and experience with coach; goals within the sport included two sub-sub themes which were why participants began bodybuilding and past and future goals within bodybuilding; and steroid use. Theme two had four subthemes: physical health included two sub subthemes which were benefits and consequences; mental health; maintaining balance; and self-esteem included one sub subtheme, which was body image. Theme three had four subthemes: romantic relationships, family, friendships and co-workers, and children. Theme four had three subthemes: personal experiences while bodybuilding, social support, and social conflict.

**Figure 4.1**

*Major Themes*
4.2.1 Theme 1: Body Shaping and Training: Acknowledging the Importance of Nutrition and Training while Participating in Bodybuilding Competitions.

This theme includes 49 segments of data from the transcripts. Segments refer to parts of the data divided into sections or quotes (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008). Segments of data were distributed among five subthemes: (1) nutrition (22 segments) which included three sub-subthemes (preferred dieting style and experience with rebound weight gain, current relationship with food, and everyday off-season diets), as well as two superordinate themes which were experimentation and development of diet, and harmful; (2) body image (6 segments) which included two sub-subthemes (empowerment and bodybuilding category decision); and (3) relationship with coach (8 segments) which included two sub-subthemes (coach’s plan and experience with coach); (4) goals within the sport (11 segments) which included two sub-subthemes (why participants began bodybuilding and past and future goals within bodybuilding); and (5) steroid use (3 segments) (see Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.2**

*Subtheme, Sub Subthemes and Superordinate Themes: Nutrition*
Nutrition was the first subtheme within the major theme Body Shaping and Training (see Figure 4.1). According to the participants, nutrition is the most critical component of bodybuilding. The participants stressed that competitors would not train properly without proper nutrition or develop the preferred body shape and size for their specific categories. All the participants in this study discussed the different dynamics of the nutritional aspects of bodybuilding. These dynamics were organized into sub-sub themes, including the participants' preferred dieting styles and experiences with rebound weight gain, their current relationship with food, and their everyday off-season diets. There were also two superordinate themes: experimentation and development of diet and harmful.

*Preferred dieting style and experience with rebound weight gain.* Paige, Donna, and Megan explained the various dieting and preparation plans as female bodybuilders. Furthermore, Donna Andrea and Diane discussed their personal experiences with rebound weight gain after a bodybuilding competition.

*Experimentation and development of diet.* Paige talked about how she maintained her diet by using a more flexible method of meal prepping. The nutrition method entailed eating anything if it fits a specific proportion of calories, proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. She taught herself how to use this form of dieting, which was different from the mainstream dieting methods often used by bodybuilders:

> I do not know how people do meal plans. When I was doing a show, I made my meal plan, but if I wanted an extra tablespoon of peanut butter, I would figure it out in my day. I found it a little bit easier to stick to.

Similarly, Donna explained how she believed that she did not have to be on a strict meal plan, counting calories, or cutting out water to achieve her goals. She did not initially seek a coach to
provide a meal plan, as she already felt capable enough to formulate her meal plan. She was able to prepare for bodybuilding competitions by educating herself about healthy balanced eating:

    We did not count any calories. Instead, we did balanced meals, which taught us what to eat, what we need, when we are full, and on the weekends, we could cheat. We had tons of fruit and never depleted fruit. I had eggs and toast every single day, including the day of the competition.

Donna said that bodybuilding had provided her with an opportunity to learn about proper nutrition:

    With the food, I am still learning. I have tried everything, but when I first started this, I wanted to do things differently. So, learning different things like how your body reacts to food was huge for me.

Megan talked about how consistency had been working for her. She explained that her weight did not fluctuate like it did when she first started competing because she had learned how to develop a plan that worked for her:

    I maintain a very close weight composition all year round, and it has been consistent for three to five years. My body does not change how it used to when I was first competing; I do the same thing all year round. I have learned over the years to take a more mindful approach to optimize my health, and it feels a lot better to be consistent all year round.

Paige, Donna, and Megan all used different approaches towards nutrition while competing. Still, each of these women found a method that was best suited for them—having custom plans made the dieting portion easier and more sustainable once the competitions were over.
Harmful. After her first competition, Donna admitted that she had a rebound weight gain, which harmed her body. She was surprised with how she reacted towards food once the competition season was over:

I did my first competition, and then I went a little overboard in one month. It was like I could not stop myself, and I rebounded. And they talk about the rebound; that happened to me.

Donna said that bodybuilding had helped her navigate how her body responded to certain foods:

I gained a lot of weight. I was bigger than I was before I started bodybuilding, and I was stuck. I had a migraine for 36 days straight. I went to the hospital, and they said it was stress; I thought something was wrong with me. I can honestly say that sugar kills. I feel like bodybuilding is saving my life because it teaches me what I need for my body.

Andrea explained how bodybuilding had harmed her body. After competing, she struggled with getting her weight under control:

I was around 135 pounds; after the show, I made my way up to 180 pounds. It was squishy weight. I was so sick that I was not eating much, and I came back down to 135 pounds, but there was not much muscle there anymore. My body composition had changed. I feel like I still had not gotten back to where I was before I competed.

Andrea disclosed that she continued to battle with the bodybuilding mentality and found it challenging to go to the gym to exercise without having any specific plan in mind:

I got so burnt out. My body had so much stress. I lost all the muscle I had put on from bodybuilding because I was so sick from the food intolerances. I am still struggling with the relationship of going to the gym to work out. I am struggling with that mentality and that mindset. I am trying to tell myself that it is okay not to go every day.
Andrea's harmful experience resulted in negative consequences (i.e., weight gain and health problems). Similarly, Diane talked about how she had difficulty controlling her hunger after her first two competitions:

In my first year competing, I was 112 pounds, compared to my last, where I was 130-132 pounds with a ton more muscle. That will put things in perspective. I did two shows in that first year, and after each show, I ate more food than probably the whole country of Asia. I would eat so much food that I got myself so sick. I swore I would not do that again. Then after my second competition, I did it again. I struggled that first year.

Donna, Andrea, and Diane experienced a post-competition rebound weight gain after their first year of competing. These women admitted that it was difficult to regain control over their weight after rebounding, which caused issues such as migraines, water retention, and food intolerances.

**Current relationship with food.** Seven out of the eight participants talked about their current relationships with food and how bodybuilding had shaped that relationship. Mel discussed how bodybuilding had made her more aware of how different foods affected her body. She had become very attuned to her body cues and knew if she lacked a specific vitamin or mineral, was not getting enough rest, and how her training affected her:

The relationship I have with food now compared to before I was bodybuilding is that I am more conscientious of eating cleaner foods. My body can process them better. Because I have been doing it for so long now, I can feel the difference almost immediately. It is not just the food portion of it. It is your micronutrients, along with the food, how much training you are doing, how much rest you are taking, and how good you are sleeping. All those things must fit together.
Micronutrients refer to "a chemical element or substance required in trace amounts by living organisms" (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008, p. 1). Mel emphasized understanding how her body responded to specific foods and what vitamins and minerals to supplement as a vital component to keeping her nutrition on track while competing. Donna also highlighted the importance of ensuring she gets enough vitamins and minerals, even if needing to supplement. She acknowledged that she had always been a picky eater when it came to vegetables. However, she also understood the benefits of these foods and pointed out that her body felt better when it was appropriately nourished:

I think my relationship with food has just grown in a good way. I have never been a veggie girl, my parents always tried, and I did not like them, and I still do not like many veggies, but they have those drinks now. So, I have my veggie greens in the house. I feel fantastic when I drink my greens, and if I stop drinking my greens, I start to feel gross.

Megan explained the difference between her relationship with food when she was following a coach's plan compared to the relationship she has with food now that she made her meal plans:

My relationship with food has also gotten better. You get sick of eating food on the coach's plan, and after the competition, you cannot wait to eat something different when it has been months of the same thing. Doing my plan and eating the foods I wanted to be eating gave me the results I wanted.

Megan continued to say:

I was not eating anything different after a competition, so I do not feel I am missing anything. It was food that helped me mentally feel good with brain clarity but also training. I was not losing strength, and I still had really good endurance all the way through.
Andrea mentioned how she struggled with food after competing and was still struggling. She was trying to heal that relationship but did not find it easy:

Even years after competing, I still do not have a super healthy relationship with food. It is still restrictive through the week, and then you would want to binge on the weekend. Those are the behaviours that are ingrained in you when you compete. I am trying to trend towards intuitive eating, where if you want to eat something, you eat it. You do not go overboard.

Andrea followed a strict diet plan while actively bodybuilding and now struggled to transition towards an intuitive eating approach. In contrast, Jennifer used a coaching point of view when talking about her relationship with food. She had witnessed many competitors who struggled with food and stressed the importance of being okay with flexibility while making food choices:

I always tell whoever that it does not matter if you are a competitor or someone going into a healthier lifestyle; if I give you a meal plan, I stress that just because something is not on your meal plan does not make it unhealthy. It is a structured form for you to follow to know what you are eating and how many calories you are getting. You want to have a variety of foods in your diet. It is to learn portion sizes, what proteins are and what fats are. You must be able to work around that meal plan with your everyday lifestyle.

Jennifer’s opinion came from her experience as a coach working with other competitors and as an active competitor herself. Jennifer also admitted: “I experienced how reckless and sad it is not to enjoy food and affect you negatively.” Jennifer worked closely with her clients and provided them with meal plans as a guideline; however, this plan aimed to help them make their own decisions. Diane talked about how her relationship with food has evolved. She understood that food is fuel and used that to benefit her physical wellbeing. Diane mentioned that she had
Crohn's Colitis and that the food associated with the bodybuilding lifestyle helped soothe her chronic illness. She also mentioned the importance of balance and being able to relax if she wanted to eat a treat that day:

I think my relationship with food now is that I appreciate and am more cognizant of the food I am putting into my body. I am more aware of what makes me feel good and what does not make me feel good. At this point, I still measure out my food because it helps keep me in check, but I still give myself treats, and I do not reprimand myself if I have a treat.

Paige mentioned how she was pretty obsessive about ensuring all her food was precisely measured when she first started competing. However, she started to relax about portion sizes because she was confident enough to eyeball her food. She also had changed her eating style from being a meat-eater to a vegetarian, which had further positively affected her relationship with food. Paige said:

Bodybuilding did negatively affect me because I was obsessive for a while. I would only have a cheat on the weekend, and other than that, I would weigh every single food to the perfect gram. I do not eat meat anymore, but when I was, I started to eyeball it, and it just felt so good. I find it easier now that I do not eat meat because I eat so many vegetables and do not weigh them.

After competing for several years, Paige began to let go of some of her food obsessions and the need for constant control. The participants acknowledged that they were all obsessed with food at one point and how destructive that was during the bodybuilding process. They have transformed their relationships with food and have become more attuned to what their bodies need.
**Everyday off-season diets.** Mel, Megan, and Dana described how their specific diets had become part of their everyday lifestyles regardless of whether they were currently competing or taking a break. Mel explained the importance of always following the plan, all year round, even during her off-season:

I stay on plan all the time, so I do not have a gross rebound. Because I am older, I have to be able to maintain my muscle. I am not depriving myself of anything. I am almost at 5000 calories a day. Even when cutting calories, my coach never takes me below 2300 calories.

Mel preferred to keep both her on-season and off-season plans similar and only manipulated her caloric intake; this way, she had more control over her weight gain and weight loss to preserve as much muscle mass as possible. Mel also explained that she did not have an emotional relationship with food, which made staying on plan year-round accessible for her:

I do not have an emotional relationship with food. I never have. So, it is not a big deal to say no to having greasy burgers or whatever. I am always really prepared. I bring food with me if I need to. I am also not obsessive about it. If I am someplace and do not have food for longer than expected, I can find something to eat. You can get a salad anywhere.

Megan enjoyed eating the same types of food year-round:

Even when I am not competing, I just know what my body feels good on, so it is typical for me to eat clean whole foods most of the time.

Dana talked about how a vegan lifestyle had helped her physical wellbeing:

I went vegan before I started bodybuilding which was almost six years ago. I did not find it hard to change to be vegan because, at the time that I was not transitioning, it was more like stopping having meat and stuff anymore. I did not care for the meat taste. I felt like I
was forcing myself to eat something I did not want to eat. I never had issues but felt a
sense of improvement in my overall health and digestion and felt lighter on my feet as I

Five out of the eight participants explained that they preferred to keep their on-season and off-
season diets similar. There were no drastic changes when competing compared to not competing,
preventing rebound weight gains and food cravings. These competitors agreed that making
drastic changes to one's nutrition created difficulty maintaining the bodybuilding lifestyle long-
term and increased the chance for a rebound weight gain.

**Figure 4.3**

*Subtheme and Sub Subthemes Body Image*

Body image was the second subtheme within the overall theme of Body Shaping and
Training (see Figure 4.3). Three participants mentioned how bodybuilding gave them a sense of
empowerment in their body image and discussed their bodybuilding category decisions, two of
the sub-sub themes found within body image.

**Empowerment.** Mel, Dana, and Jennifer discussed how much they loved the bodybuilding
process, which gave them a sense of empowerment. Mel reported appreciating every step of the
bodybuilding process. She expressed how she loved her body during both her off-season and on-season phases. Mel described how she tried to keep everything in perspective and kept working with what she had:

I love my body. I love everything about it. I am happy with the way I look off-season and on-season. Yes, I am very critical when it comes to a show date, and I can pick out little things that you would never be able to pick out but overall, I am happy. I fluctuate about 35 pounds off-season, but I still wear the same size clothing. I keep working with what I have and enjoy every piece of the process.

Dana explained that she enjoyed watching her body progress and change depending on the training and nutrition methods. During her off-season, she also reported enjoying experimenting with different techniques for short durations to see how her body reacted to those changes:

It is empowering to know that you can change your body. The way you gain your body fat every time you do a bodybuilding competition can be very different. It is neat to see the manipulation change and the way your body adapts to changing fuel sources. There was a time in my off-season that I wanted to see what keto would feel like for ten days. Dana's empowerment reinforced her desire to experiment with different dieting styles during her off-season. Comparatively, Jennifer loved being fit but struggled with the negative aspects of not looking like your stereotypical woman. She recognized that she is more muscular than most women and talked about how she still found lifting weights empowering despite that. Jennifer explained:

I get attention everywhere I go because I am not your typical woman. People touch me when I do not want to be touched. They make comments, ask me questions that are off-sided and rude. But I will never give up lifting because it is a part of who I am, and it is
more than just the physique and the aesthetic side of things. It is therapy; it is an outlet; it is performance; it is empowering.

Mel and Dana were both happy with their bodybuilding physiques and found the entire process empowering. In comparison, Jennifer found bodybuilding empowering but struggled with being more muscular than most women.

**Bodybuilding category decision.** Dana, Jennifer, and Paige talked about how their body weight affected their bodybuilding category decision. Dana was excited to try out the new Wellness division because she found the conditioning that was necessary for figure to be exhausting at times:

> When I was doing figure, I did well, but I had a really hard time getting my conditioning down to what I need to for my lower body. I felt like if I was pushing myself too much, that Wellness would be a good category. I do not have to get as shredded, but I can still work towards something I will be good at anyway.

Jennifer initially competed in a division that was not best suited for her body type and had a negative experience, which resulted in her almost discontinuing the sport. Once she found her niche, she continued competing in a different division had a different experience:

> My friend was doing bikini. I did not have an eye for what my physique was supposed to look like yet. Once I got to the stage, I knew I was not suitable for this category. I was a lot bigger than the other girls, and I had a bad experience. I am very proportionate, so the figure category, where you must be symmetrical, was just a right fit for me.

Paige chose the bikini division partly because she did not have to make drastic changes to her body:
When I started competing, I just wanted to see how much my body changed minimally. I chose bikini because it was where my body was at. I needed to gain a little muscle in certain areas but mostly lower my body fat. I did not have to build a bunch of muscle. I just do not personally like a bunch of muscle on girls so, that was my preference.

Dana and Jennifer tried different divisions before discovering their preferred divisions, whereas Paige had only competed in one division. However, all three women agreed that they were happy with their changes over the years.

**Figure 4.4**

*Subtheme and Sub Subthemes Relationship with Coach*

Relationship with coach was the third subtheme within the overall theme of Body Shaping and Training (see Figure 4.4). Donna and Megan talked about the plans given to them by their coaches; Mel, Donna, and Diane described their experiences with their coaches, which were two sub-sub themes.

*Coach's plan.* For her last competition, Donna decided to hire a coach to help her alter her physique further. She explained how her coach's plan differed from her own:

This past show, my coach did deplete me of water. That was the worst thing I have ever gone through in my life. I am putting water in my mouth and just spitting it out.
Megan started with a coach who provided her with both her training and nutrition regimens. Even though she admitted that her coach’s plan worked for achieving a specific goal, it was not easy. After years of competing, Megan decided to stop using a one-size-fits-all approach for nutrition and explained how that had transformed her bodybuilding experience:

When I first started, I hired a coach who had probably a decade more experience than me, and it was helpful. She made all my nutrition plans and my exercise plan. The plan I had required not a lot of fat in my diet, it was high protein, low carb, and I was doing a lot of cardio, which was super time-consuming. It did not feel like it was something I could sustain all year round. You are pretty burnt out; by the time you get to the stage, you are tired.

Since Megan knew that this plan was not sustainable year-round because it could cause her body stress, she decided to try a different dieting approach:

Five or six years ago, I decided to do this on my own and see how it goes without having a coach. Doing that myself made all the difference in finding what nutrition feels the best, where I am not craving anything. Not everybody uses the same formula for nutrition, but I was glad to find something different, making it feel easy.

Diane revealed that she would have probably been best suited for the bikini division, given her stature when she started to compete. However, she shared that she enjoyed being a figure competitor and did not regret her decision to compete in that division at all:

I was always a skinny girl growing up, and I was not an athletic person. The decision to compete in the Figure category was because of my personal trainers. I worked five days a week one-on-one with my personal trainers. My female trainer at the time was a figure competitor as well. I would have probably been more appropriate for the bikini division
from the beginning just because of my stature at the time. Still, I do not regret jumping into this category. Diane trusted her trainer's decision to compete in a specific category and was happy to decide together.

**Experience with coach.** Mel had a negative experience with her former coach. However, after changing coaches, her bodybuilding experience improved:

I did not have a good experience with my coach. I used this coach for my first and second shows, which were novice and provincials. Then I went to nationals using the same coach, and the diet and the training were extreme. There was way too low of calories, too much training, and too much cardio, I was not healthy, and I had no reverse diet plan. The rebound was not even a rebound; I was sick almost immediately after competing because my body did not know how to adapt. My first coach was not supportive in a sense.

Despite initially having a negative experience with her former coach, Mel changed coaches. After changing coaches, Mel had a positive experience competing. Mel said:

The following year I had a different coach, and it was all about my health and wellness. There is constant communication with asking: Mentally, how are you feeling? Emotionally, how are you feeling? Physically, how are you feeling?

Donna reported that she never used a coach until her last competition and found that his technique was challenging, but he helped her make some improvements to her physique:

I have always been my own coach until this last competition in October. So, I got a coach, and you know he leaned me out a lot, and the work was hard.
Diane appreciated the support she acquired from her coaches over the years and depended on them for proper guidance and support:

Having my coaches in my corner was fantastic. I had my current coaches for years. They are the ones that will push you to get where you need to go, but they will also listen to you. They would never make me do something that I did not feel comfortable doing or want to do to my body. It is also about the accountability factor; I required my coaches for proper progression to the stage. Having them kept me motivated and on track, especially with weekly check-ins.

Overall, Mel, Donna, and Diane reported having positive experiences with their coaches. Mel initially had a negative experience with her previous coach. However, her experience improved once she switched coaches.

**Figure 4.5**

*Subtheme and Sub Subthemes Goals within the Sport*

Goals within the sport were the fourth subtheme within the overall theme of Body Shaping and Training (see Figure 4.5). Most of the participants explained how they began
bodybuilding. They had their own individual goals that led them to begin female bodybuilding and past and future goals within the sport, two sub-sub themes.

**Why the participants begin bodybuilding.** Mel said she had been interested in female bodybuilding for a long time before she finally dared to enter a competition. She explained:

Six years ago, I was in the best condition of my life. I wanted to do this competition. By that time, I already had more muscle than bikini but not big enough to do Women’s Physique.

Donna was influenced to start bodybuilding because one of her friends wanted to compete and asked Donna to be her coach and compete with her. Before that, she began her fitness journey by participating in fitness classes, then ended up doing fitness challenges:

I started to do a little training at home with some of my friends, and one of them said she wanted to do a show and wanted me to do it with her as a trainer. I have never done a show myself. She ended up placing second place in that show. In our first show, I did not place, but two weeks later, I did. She has never competed again; I have never stopped. So, this is how my bodybuilding had started.

Before competing in bodybuilding, Donna said that she was motivated to attempt a healthier lifestyle through fitness. She said:

After my second child's birth, I got a membership at the gym and started to do classes for fun; then, I became a fitness instructor. Subsequently, I found these online competitions, and you can make lots of money just by taking pictures; I attempted one, and I won. I was the first female that they have ever had win. That was in 2013. So, from 2013 to 2015, I had been discovering who I was. Then in 2015, I started to compete.

Megan is currently a Physique competitor; however, she started as a figure competitor:
I have done Physique, and if I do compete again, I will probably stay in that category because I enjoyed it. When I first started, Physique did not exist as a category. There was a figure and women's bodybuilding, and the differences between the two are that the figure was not as muscular, and you did not need to do an entire posing routine and have a choreographed routine to music.

Megan explained that after being in the sport for several years, she found the courage to enter physique:

When I was getting into the sport, it was a little bit scary for me to think of getting on stage in a bikini and putting together a routine. Over the years, they decided to phase out women's bodybuilding and created the physique category, which was a little more muscular look than figure, but you did not have to wear high heels and do a posing routine to music. After competing for several years, I was interested in that as the next challenge.

When Andrea became interested in female bodybuilding, it was relatively new:

I wanted to challenge myself further and advance my fitness. Not a lot of people were doing it. It was kind of the new thing coming out in the fitness world. I started lifting when I was in high school, and then it was probably about four or five years later that I wanted to up it. I have done a half marathon before, and I loved lifting weights, so I thought a figure competition was the way to go.

Paige decided to compete as a challenge to herself. She was a competitive person and thought a bodybuilding competition would be fun:

I think it was seeing how far I could push myself and seeing that full potential. I am competitive; it was kind of a fun thing to do.
All of the participants stated that they were already attempting a healthier lifestyle. Therefore, bodybuilding was the next step for them to continue challenging their fitness abilities.

**Past and future goals within bodybuilding.** Mel, Donna, Jennifer, and Diane explained their past and future competition goals. Each woman was very enthusiastic about their decisions to participate in female bodybuilding. Mel shared that she had some big goals for the upcoming years. She enjoyed the sport and looked forward to participating in more competitions in the future:

> I do not feel any pressure to go and do a show. I wanted to do a show. I am super excited about it, and I plan on it. I want to make it to World Cup. That is my big goal. And so, you work towards a goal with this enthusiasm, and now none of this is work. These are just all pieces of the puzzle to get to the end goal.

Donna pondered what her fitness achievements would have looked like if she were more active growing up. She enjoyed finding new challenges and partaking in other sports outside of the bodybuilding realm:

> I started with one, and then what can I do? After I started to compete, I thought, 'what more?' I did a Tough Mudder course. I am always looking for new challenges. Growing up, I did not do many sports besides track and field; that was about it. So, I wish that did more now. I wondered if I would have started when I was 15 and what I could have accomplished.

Jennifer's big goal was to earn her professional card, which opened more domains for competition. Jennifer understood that for her to earn professional status, she would have to compete with competitors that may use steroids; however, Jennifer was optimistic and believed that she was able to achieve that goal naturally:
To compete professionally or go for my pro-card, I do not think that I would be successful by being natural. I am stubborn. I want to compete with the girls that are not natural just because my mindset is that you can do it naturally. I am at the level now where that would be my goal. I have done international shows and big shows. If I were to compete, it would be for that pro-card.

Jennifer felt she was confident in achieving specific goals without resorting to drastic measures like steroid use. Diane competed in memory of her brother; therefore, it was vital to take these competitions seriously. She was very goal-oriented and wanted to be memorable in her achievements:

I am very stubborn, and if I have a goal, I will do whatever it takes to get to that goal. I am a high achiever. I compete in memory of my brother, so I put that extra pressure on myself to succeed. There might be an extensive history that nobody ever really knows about because they do not ever ask. I got into competing mainly because of my health. I am determined and goal orientated, and I want to leave a legacy. That is why I keep pushing myself the way I do.

Each participant had their own goal within bodybuilding. These goals helped the women maintain focus throughout their bodybuilding journeys.

**Figure 4.6**

*Subtheme Steroid Use*
Steroid use was the sixth subtheme found within the overall theme of Body Shaping and Training (see Figure 4.6). The participants mentioned that it was implied that steroid use happens, especially as the competitors move into more muscular divisions. Mel, Andrea, and Jennifer acknowledged that steroid use was not uncommon. To be more competitive, bodybuilders needed to be of a specific build and attain a significant amount of muscle mass. Each of these women provided their insights regarding the topic. Mel's decision to go into the figure division instead of a more muscular division was because she did not want to resort to steroid use to achieve her goals:

As you get farther up the ranks, the reality is that women going into Physique or women in Women's Bodybuilding are using drugs. They are using all sorts, whether it's peptides or natural. There are implications to your health, and I have zero opinion on whether anyone uses or does not. It makes no difference to me. I do not think they are any more or less of an athlete, but you must make that choice for yourself, and it just was not something that I wanted to do.

Andrea realized that it was almost impossible to reach a certain level of conditioning without using steroids. She still competed at the Provincial level but found it to be quite stressful on her body:

I did my second show. It was much more restrictive towards the end because I could not have gluten, dairy, or nuts. I was competing at provincials with girls on different kinds of steroids, so there was no way I could naturally reach that level. I was doing everything in my power to do it without that. I pushed my body.
Jennifer explained that she believed that the use of PEDs (Performance Enhancing Drugs) was not worth it. She shared how she had witnessed the detrimental health effects that these drugs can have on the female body:

Girls nowadays want success now, so they turn to PEDs. It is very sad what the girls go through to look good for one day. The idea of winning a show does not provide you with anything other than self-gratification. In the long run, the detrimental health factors are tragic. I will never go down that route because I have seen the alterations that happen to the female physique; their feminine make-up gets older, and that alone plays a lot on a woman's mindset and self-confidence.

In summary, bodybuilding is a sport that takes much planning and dedication (Andersen et al., 1998; Chananie-Hill & Garth, 2012; Halliday et al., 2016; Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989; Money-Taylor et al., 2021; Spendlove et al., 2015). All the participants agreed on the importance of proper nutrition and exercise to achieve a specific goal. Five out of the eight participants shared their preference to maintain very close on-season and off-season diets so that their body compositions won't fluctuate drastically within each season. However, these participants stressed the importance of balance and flexibility as well. Andrea, unfortunately, did not have a good experience while competing because bodybuilding created too much stress for her body to handle. She enjoyed her experience but had admitted that she would never compete again. Six out of the eight participants discussed their relationships with their bodies, how competing in bodybuilding had positively and negatively influenced that relationship, and how their body weights affected their bodybuilding category decisions. Mel, Donna, Megan, and Diane talked about their decisions to have a coach or self-coach and how that enhanced or diminished their personal experiences while competing. All the participants explained their decisions to begin
bodybuilding and their goals for the future. Mel and Megan gave insight into their unique preferred training styles while preparing for a competition. Lastly, Mel, Andrea, and Jennifer shared their opinions of steroid use among female competitors within the industry.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Mental Discipline and Wellbeing: Exploring the Mental and Physical Effects of Participating in Bodybuilding Competitions.

This theme includes 17 segments from the transcripts (see Figure 4.7). Segments of data were distributed among four subthemes: (1) physical health (6 segments) included two sub subthemes which were benefits and consequences; (2) mental health (5 segments); (3) maintaining balance (4 segments); and (4) self-esteem (4 segments) included one sub subtheme which was body image.

**Figure 4.7**

*Subtheme and Sub Subthemes Physical Health*

All participants (i.e., Mel, Donna, Andrea, Dana, Jennifer, and Diane) but two (i.e., Megan and Paige) discussed physical health within bodybuilding, the first subtheme within the overall theme of Mental Discipline and Wellbeing (see Figure 4.7). Within this theme, these
participants talked about the varying physical benefits and consequences to their bodies caused by bodybuilding, which are organized into two sub-sub themes. During the interviews, none of the participants mentioned acquiring any physical injury while training.

**Benefits.** Mel explained that she did not have any negative physical experiences when it came to being a female bodybuilder:

> When it comes down to its micro(nutrients), my bloodwork’s good, my digestion’s good, my skin’s good, my hair’s good, and I am not taking any drugs. Bodybuilding is very much about health and strength. I am stronger than I have ever been. I am in the best shape of my whole life, and I am as old as I have ever been. There is no negative to it for me.

Donna also mentioned that the main reason she competed was to benefit her health. She used to be addicted to sugar and realized that once she cut sugar out of her diet, her overall health improved:

> Mostly it came down to health. Growing up, I had three to five migraines per week, and I did not know why. I honestly thought I was going to die of an aneurysm one day. I started to get into nutrition and clean myself up. The first thing starts with sugar; you cannot compete when you ingest all this sugar, so that was one of the first things to go, which was hard, and my migraines went away. I did not have a headache for three years, three years.

Jennifer explained that health conditions ran in her family and that bodybuilding has improved her quality of life:

> I have an auto-immune disorder; I have a hyperthyroid. Cancer and everything run in my family. I have issues with my health, but not to the degree that my family does. If they
had lived a lifestyle like mine, a lot of those symptoms, a lot of their illnesses, would be a lot less detrimental, and their quality of life would be better if they lived any percentage of the lifestyle that I live.

Mel, Donna, and Jennifer agreed that bodybuilding had enhanced their health and wellbeing. They became more aware of how food and exercise affected the body.

**Consequences.** Andrea had a different experience while competing. She found that competition harmed her body. She ended up retaining a lot of water after competing and developed some food allergies. Although she reported loving competing, she shared:

> Competing wreaked so much havoc on my body. I have always had a sensitive stomach and some gut problems. After the first show, I became intolerant to gluten, and after the second show, I became intolerant to tree nuts and peanuts. I cannot have dairy either. I figured if I compete again, I would not be able to eat anything, so I figured it was time to stop. I did have headaches at the time. And later on, I found out that I had ulcers, so I could have had ulcers and leaky gut throughout the process, which was made worse with the dieting and exercise.

Diane said that bodybuilding takes a toll on one’s body. She had a chronic illness and said that it was vital for her to take time off so she could maintain her health:

> I have Crohn’s Colitis and was diagnosed at nineteen but recall being sick for most of my life. Competing took a toll on my body due to my Crohn’s Colitis, so health came first.

> After the show, I had to spend a few months just getting my health back on track.

Andrea and Diane had experienced some adverse health effects while competing. Andrea stopped competing due to these effects, whereas Diane still competed but took breaks to get her health on track.
**Mental Health**

Donna and Diane discussed the importance of taking care of one’s mental health while competing, which is the second subtheme of the overall theme of Mental Discipline and Wellbeing (see Figure 4.7). Donna admitted that exercise had benefitted her mental wellbeing:

I honestly feel like bodybuilding saved my life. I also have bipolar, so even with meds, the exercise is amazing. Cut the exercise out, and I am crazy. Exercise helps so much. I am a total advocate for exercise and mental health completely.

At the same time, Donna talked about how she had been struggling with her body image. However, she did not believe that bodybuilding had contributed to this:

Body dysmorphic syndrome is real. This last time on stage, I was the smallest I have ever been. I have been anywhere from 113 to 124lbs on stage. This last time I was 108lbs. I was depleted. I had no water. I had nothing left, but I looked in the mirror and still saw 122lbs. There are times where I do not understand what people see, but if I cut my head off and take a picture, I think, ‘wow,’ put my head on there, and it is body dysmorphic. It is an absolute disease, and I wish that I did not have to go through that. But it is something I am still dealing with all the time now. It is a horrible feeling, but I do not think that bodybuilding made anything worse. It still has helped me be more in tune with what I can do with food. I am trying to be happy with where I am today.

Diane talked about the post-competition blues and struggled after her first year of competitions because she was constantly yearning for the physique she had on stage. However, over the years, she had come to gain a different perspective when it came to weight fluctuation during bodybuilding:
It is not realistic to maintain that stage appearance 24 hours and 365 days in the year. Our bodies cannot maintain that. After my first year of competitions, I struggled. Moving forward, I think competitors will always compare themselves to the person that was on stage. I look at myself from time to time, and I wish I were leaner. I miss the vascularity, but I do not miss how I felt when I had so little energy and felt lethargic from being so lean. I can appreciate the way I look on stage, but I truly appreciate feeling good and being able to function.

Donna and Diane struggled with body image issues after competing. However, both participants agreed that competitors need to be realistic regarding weight gain post-competition since it is crucial to building muscle mass.

*Maintaining Balance*

Mel, Donna, Megan, and Andrea discussed the importance of maintaining a balanced lifestyle while competing, the third subtheme found within the overall theme of Mental Discipline and Wellbeing (see Figure 4.7). Mel asserted that having a balanced lifestyle was essential to her. She said that if she ever became out of balance, she would stop competing:

So, there is no negative to it for me. I am not losing my relationship over it, I am not losing my kids, and I am not losing my family. I maintain a really good balance. If I became out of balance, I would not compete anymore, and I would not hesitate. So as long as there is that balance, I always have the motivation to keep going on.

Donna realized that she needed some balance in her schedule after dealing with a workplace injury. This injury gave her time to relax and reflect, which ended up being mentally beneficial to her:
I got injured this last year from work. I got a tear in my shoulder. I am fine now, and I can train and do whatever, but I took eight weeks off and never did that. I could not move my elbow, and I survived. I still had muscle at the end of eight weeks. I needed that chill out a little bit, not be so anal. I have never been injured; I have never even broken a leg or any bone. So, this was my light to slow down.

Megan decided to add some flexibility in her social-training life when she noticed she was missing out on going on vacations:

In the earlier years, I had missed opportunities for going on vacations or taking time to go fishing or camping in the summer because I needed to be close to a gym. I needed to be there twice a day. So, the biggest thing for me was not having a great work-life balance, but it would be a training-social balance. Challenging the commitment needed to get ready for a show helped me have the balance I wanted in the long run.

Andrea found it difficult to maintain a training-social life balance while competing:

Competing takes so much of your life. It is every aspect. It is all day, every day for however many weeks that you are doing it. My boyfriend had to go through a lot; we had to sacrifice a lot in our relationship for me to compete.

Donna, Megan, and Andrea had found it difficult to maintain balance while competing. As a result, Donna acquired an unrelated injury that forced her to slow down, Megan decided to make some changes to her routine to enjoy family time, and Andrea stopped competing. In contrast, Mel stated that she never experienced difficulty maintaining balance and would change if she did come out of balance.
Donna, Megan, Jennifer, and Paige talked about self-esteem concerning body image, the fourth subtheme of the overall theme of Mental Discipline and Wellbeing (see Figure 4.8). Each participant had different experiences regarding their body image while competing, which is a sub-subtheme.

**Body Image.** Donna was surprised with how her body had changed while she was bodybuilding. She admitted that she did not start exercising until she was in her thirties. But she was pleased that she was able to achieve drastic results after having three children:

Growing up, I felt like I was the chubbiest one in class. I had very poor self-esteem. I never really did feel good about myself, to be honest. So, when I started working out, I saw my potential. I did not start doing that until after I had my three children. I never looked like that as a teenager; I never looked like that growing up. I had a six-pack after kids. I saw that I could have that discipline and how it felt.

Megan had always had a positive outlook when it came to her body but found it fascinating to see how the body changed while competing:
For me, body image was always pretty positive. It was interesting for me in my very first competition to see what the body is capable of and learn about the process of muscle building, leaning out and how the body can change so much.

Jennifer’s view of her body image fluctuated regularly. However, she admitted that she had a more negative outlook of herself than a positive one. She explained that the competitors were always trying to better their shape and form within the bodybuilding sport. This constant strive for perfection can create negativity for some competitors, especially since there seemed to be a lot of comparison within the community:

It is an individual sport, so you are always trying to be better than you were. Therefore, you have the mentality that you are never really good enough. You are putting people on a pedestal all the time, and then once you are successful, you are put on a pedestal, so you feel like you have to maintain your physique all the time. For the most part, I would say it is a negative body image just because you get used to looking a certain way.

Paige explained that there were times when she felt chubby but knew she was not. She stated that having a balanced outlook was important during both the on-season and off-season:

I feel so chubby, but you are not, and then it gets in your head, and then you look at yourself and think, ‘I am not chubby; this is ridiculous.’ I think just having a break and finding a balance with it was what I needed.

In summary, the participants talked about how bodybuilding had affected their physical and mental wellbeing. There had been primarily good experiences; however, Donna, Andrea, Jennifer, Diane, and Paige talked about how bodybuilding had negatively affected them. After her last competition, Donna struggled with body dysmorphia; however, she was the smallest she had ever been. She knew that seeing herself was skewed and kept that in perspective. Andrea had
been dealing with physical health issues since competing, which negatively affected her. She had been trying to find balance within her life but struggled to eliminate the bodybuilding mentality. Jennifer admitted that her perception of herself shifted all the time. Unfortunately, she stated that bodybuilding was a sport of constant self-improvement, so it was difficult to be happy with the results. Diane discussed post-competition blues and dealing with feelings of depression once she was finished her first year of competitions. However, after years of competing, she understood that weight gain post-competition was necessary to grow and improve oneself within the sport. Lastly, Paige explains that she would sometimes see herself as being larger than she was while actively competing. After having her second child, she realized that having a balanced perception is vital for mental wellbeing. Mel and Megan have had good experiences while competing; both stressed the importance of maintaining a balanced lifestyle. None of the participants mentioned acquiring any physical injuries while training for a competition.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Social Life and Extraneous Impacts: Reflecting the Impact of Bodybuilding on One’s Social Relationships.

This theme includes 21 segments from the transcripts (see Figure 1). Segments of data were distributed among four subthemes: (1) romantic relationships (9 segments); (2) family (8 segments); (3) friendships and co-workers (7 segments); and (4) children (3 segments).

**Figure 4.9**

*Subthemes Romantic Relationships*
Most of the participants talked about how bodybuilding affected their romantic relationships over the years, a subtheme of the overall theme of Social life and Extraneous Impacts (see Figure 4.9). Mel discussed her previous marriage. Her former husband also competed in bodybuilding, but these similar interests caused conflict in their relationship because he did not like having the spotlight taken away from him. Eventually, the conflict between them ended their relationship:

The disillusion of my marriage, I do not look at that as negative because of the sport. My ex-husband was a recovered addict who was very narcissistic and was not okay with the spotlight not being on him. So, I was in a situation where he felt it took away from him. I do not consider that the result of what I was doing, of bodybuilding. It would have been anything I was doing. So maybe that is the wrong way to look at that, but I do not consider that an issue because what happened with us would have happened no matter what.

Mel expressed that she would like to find a significant other but was, unfortunately, having difficulty finding someone to date:

It is hard for me to meet someone to date because I can bench press more than most guys, so they are not interested. I have a girlfriend who said, ‘you need to cover up so that men focus on your face and not your body.’ So, right now, I feel like a little bit of a fraud because in the gym, I am in tights and a top, and then suddenly, when I go out, I am wearing baggy clothes. Authentically, this is who I am. I want to date somebody, and I cannot find a boyfriend. There is a downside to it because there is still a lot of social stigmas.
Donna talked about how the support she received from her husband seemed to fluctuate. He tried his best to be there for her but sometimes competing resulted in some tension. Despite this conflict, he always tried to be at her shows:

   My husband supports me. I want to say that he is my number one, but he also tears me down too. He does not realize when he is doing it. It is kind of like high lows when it comes to him. Although, he is still there. He will not miss a show.

Andrea also experienced some conflict with her boyfriend while competing. She said that competing took so much time and energy that it got to be too much for her boyfriend to handle:

   It got to the point where my boyfriend and I could not go out and do many things anymore because it was more work for me to pack my meals and pack everything to go somewhere than to stay home. So, there was a lot of tension. He would have been fully supportive if it were only a one-time thing, but he just kind of got burnt out with it because it was over quite a few years. He wanted me around more and to hang out with me and do normal dating things.

Dana found her boyfriend was quite supportive and understanding during her competitions. He understood the process and knew that there would be good days and bad days:

   I found that my boyfriend’s support was probably the most important because he sees me every day, and he knows that there are days when you are struggling and days that you are doing good. Either way, he is not trying to sabotage my competition goals, so he is always mindful whether it is a rough day or hormones are in the way. He is not offended by that.
Jennifer experienced some issues when she dated someone while competing. This individual tried to live the bodybuilding lifestyle but decided it was not for him, which created some controversy between them when he tried sabotaging her success:

I met someone in the gym. He was enamoured with my discipline and my lifestyle. He started doing it, but then it got to a point where it was too much. He was not his own person; he was trying to live my lifestyle but not realizing that I would continue living my lifestyle. I did Nationals, and I placed top five, and then at that time, once you placed top five, you qualify for International shows. I qualified for the Arnold’s. Not many people from Saskatchewan have even gone that far. After I decided to go, he tried to sabotage me.

Diane had been in a new relationship for about a year. However, before this new relationship, she had some difficulty finding someone to date because others did not understand what it is like to date a competitor:

I am in a new relationship, and we have been dating for a year now, officially. I want to focus on our relationship and not be spending so much time in the gym. With my ex-husband, there was a strain on our relationship because he started the sport, I joined it. I excelled in it more so than he did, and that came between us. After I dated a gentleman who ended up not being supportive, I had to end that relationship. I had another relationship; he was into fitness but was not a competitor. He had a family with his exes, and it did not end up working out.

Paige felt some tension with her boyfriend while competing. She said that competing took a lot of time and preparation, so her boyfriend would often feel impatient if she needed to make all her meals before going out anywhere:
I would say my boyfriend and I had a little bit of tension. I think it was because if we were going out or we went to a hotel, I would have to prep all of my meals, and I still do that now because I know it makes me feel best, and I still have goals, but if I eat an extra tablespoon of peanut butter at breakfast, it does not matter anymore. I am more lenient, whereas if I am in prep, I cannot be that lenient. So, he would always get frustrated with that extra time I would have to do to prep. Probably about five meals if we were staying over.

Despite having negative experiences within their romantic relationships, Mel, Donna, Jennifer, Diane, and Paige continued bodybuilding, whereas Andrea decided to stop bodybuilding. However, with Andrea’s experience, adverse health conditions factored into her decision to stop competing. Megan and Dana had positive experiences within their romantic relationships.

*Family*

Family is the second subtheme found within the overall theme of Social life and Extraneous Impacts (see Figure 4.9). All participants mentioned the consequences and support they have received from their extended family units (i.e., parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins). Most of these participants had experienced conflict from their families when they decided to compete in female bodybuilding. Mel did not have any connection with her immediate family other than her two children before bodybuilding. She talked about how growing up in an abusive household negatively affected her self-esteem. Therefore, she used bodybuilding as a tool to mend the pain that she endured in her childhood:

I grew up with my mom, my brother; everyone in my family is morbidly obese. And I have never been overweight. I had never struggled with my weight. So, I cannot relate to that, but I have watched it. It was a tough childhood, very abusive. I had zero self-esteem.
Donna faced a lot of criticism when she started competing. The first negative response she received was from her mother, which deeply upset her:

When I first started, I had posted a picture on Facebook, and somebody had talked to my mom, and my mom had called me. She is ignorant of bodybuilding, and she instantly started coming down on me and told me that I look disgusting. My mom is overweight. I know that is probably jealousy shining out. She was not supportive of it at all. Even to this day, she does not get it. I have been doing it for four years, and my parents have never been to a show, so that was kind of tough.

Donna also experienced criticism from her extended family. However, overtime these responses diminished as other family members started exercising as well:

A few years later, two male cousins started training and are the only ones out of 36 of us. Once they started training, the rest of the family left me alone. Now they do not have anything to say. They did eventually have to realize that this is me now, and I am still me inside. When my uncle said I was not pretty, my jaw was on the floor. I did not know how to respond.

Donna explained that, unfortunately, those expected to be the most significant supports tend not to be supportive. Therefore, it is crucial to do the sport for oneself instead of looking for outside validation. Megan remembered receiving some criticism from her family when she became interested in bodybuilding. Her parents had a skewed perception of what a bodybuilder looks like and did not understand why she would want to look like that. However, after they realized that there are different divisions within the sport and that each division has its own look, her parents enjoyed going to her shows:
There is a certain perception about what a bodybuilder looks like. People have never seen all the different categories in the sport. The perception was that a muscular woman looks like a man; that is the only way people look at these categories. So, once my parents realized that this was not what I would look like on stage, they got pretty excited and enjoyed coming out to the shows and cheering me on.

Andrea said that her parents always tried to be supportive but still did not understand why she wanted to compete, especially if she was having a rough day:

My dad was always supportive, but he did not get it. My mom was supportive but would always ask, ‘why are you doing this? This seems like a lot of work, and do you want this?’

Dana received some positive support from her family, who understood that the process of bodybuilding was temporary:

In terms of family support, they understood that I was going through the process. There was even a week at Easter that I was home, but I did not exactly eat everything they had, so they understood that, and they knew that it was only a one-time thing in that Easter timeframe.

Jennifer explained that her family did not understand bodybuilding. However, she did receive a lot of support from her mother, who had never missed a show:

I would say my mom would be the most supportive. She took the trip with me to Columbus, Ohio, when I did the Arnold’s because that was my biggest show, and we spent that trip together. She has been to every show; she is very supportive, but she does not understand it. She does not work out. I think being so far removed from the sport yet still knowing how much I love it and how much I give towards it and still being there,
being my little cheerleader throughout the whole way, I think that has been the most supportive.

Diane said that there were some issues between her and her mother when she first started competing. Her mother was concerned that she was losing weight and did not realize that was a normal part of the process. However, with time, her mother learned that the weight loss was temporary, and things would resume back to normal once Diane finished her competition. Diane stated that her youngest brother was her most significant support and had been there for her through every competition:

My younger brother has always been a huge supporter, my rock, and if I ever needed something or had a meltdown, my younger brother was always there. There was some tension between my mother and I from the beginning. She would see me getting leaner and leaner. Eventually, my mom learned that ‘okay, Diane is going to get lean here for her show and then she is going to put the weight back on, and everything will be good.’

Donna, Megan, Andrea, Jennifer, and Diane initially experienced a lack of relatedness when they started bodybuilding and negative performance feedback. Many tensions experienced by the family arose initially, but eventually, these tensions faded away as their family members became used to their new lifestyles.

**Friendships and Co-Workers**

Mel, Donna, Dana, and Diane talked about how their friendships and relationships with co-workers evolved once they started competing in bodybuilding competitions, the third subtheme of the overall theme of Social Life and Extraneous Impacts (see Figure 4.9). Mel explained that she did not just go to the gym to exercise. She also had established multiple friendships with others at the gym:
Being in the gym is not just about my competitions; this is where my friends are, my social time, and where I destress.

Mel also talked about her friendships outside of the gym:

When it comes to my friends, there are two different sides. My friends are all quite supportive of me. A lot of them do not understand what I do but they just kind of accept it. I have explained to them that I do not drink, I will very rarely eat out with them, but I still want to go out with them. I do not refuse to go because of that. Part of the discipline is looking at it as a bigger picture.

Donna said that she began to lose her long-term friendships when she first started competing. Her friends stopped inviting her out and only supported her when she competed in her first competition:

When I first started, two of my main best friends came to my first show, and they have never come again. When I started competing, I stopped getting invited to anything and everything; then, you would see it on Snap and see it on Instagram. I tried not to let it get to me, but of course, it did. If you think that I cannot have fun because I cannot drink this or that, I can still have fun; I do not need to drink to have fun. Eventually, I had to let it go because it just did not happen. I still do not have much of a connection with those friends.

Donna realized that she was starting to make new friends with similar interests but admitted that she was struggling with the loss of her old friendships:

Along the way, I found that I am making new friends, but I am not holding onto those friends because I am getting stuck with relationships that I am losing. I do not realize that I am getting new friends that have the same goals, drives. They understand what I am
going through. So, along the way, things changed, and I have gained some really good friendships.

Dana had experienced an abundance of support from both her friends and her co-workers:

They were very supportive of knowing how things were going and how things were feeling or if I ever needed help with anything. They always welcomed the help. I remember a time that one of my co-workers even gave me a twenty-dollar gift card. It was nice.

Diane had experienced support from her friends, especially from her best friend. She appreciated that her friend was incredibly supportive and welcoming regarding her dietary needs.

My friends were also very good; they all respected me because I had competed for so long. My best friend and her husband, who have two little kids, were always there for me. I would go up and spend the weekend with them, and they would make space in the fridge just for me to put all my pre-packaged foods. They understood how important it was for me to complete my goal to compete, as it helped get me through some darker times.

Diane also talked about how it was challenging to adjust to a new work environment. Everyone knew she was a competitor at her old employment and supported her by ensuring she was properly nourished and rested. At her new employment, her co-workers did not understand that she was an active competitor:

One of the hardest parts for me would be working in a newer area because back in my hometown, everyone at work knew who I was; they knew I competed many times. If I were having a low-energy day, they would offer to help wherever they could. I would
always get my work done because I am very diligent about that, work comes first, and you cannot sacrifice that, especially being a nurse.

Unfortunately, the participants found that those who were not competitors did not understand the bodybuilding process and tended not to be very supportive of those in the process of competing. The lack of support resulted in a lack of relatedness, contributing to the breakdown of relationships (including romantic relationships, familial relationships, and friendships).

Children

Mel, Donna, and Diane gave some insight into how children affected their decisions to begin bodybuilding and continue bodybuilding, the fourth subtheme of the overall theme Social Life and Extraneous Impacts (see Figure 4.9). Mel explained that it was important that her children were proud of what she was doing. She had mentioned that if she were ashamed of the sport, then she would no longer compete:

I do not have any family at all; my children, that is it. And my kids are super proud of what I am doing. And that is important to me. I would not want to be ashamed of what I was doing, so they are proud of me.

Donna said that her middle son had been her most significant support throughout her bodybuilding journey. He kept her in check and made sure she was achieving her goals regardless of whether she was in her off-season or on-season:

I think that my kids and my husband have been my biggest supports. Even though it has been high lows, they are still riding the waves; but my middle son is probably my number one. My middle son is amazing. I will be eating something, and he will say, ‘Mom, you are not supposed to eating that.’ He is always there; he is my light.
Both Mel and Donna felt a sense of relatedness and were given positive performance feedback from their children. Diane disclosed that she used bodybuilding as a distraction from not being able to have children:

> It was not that we had to have a family, but I felt so terrible. I pushed myself away and then focused on my bodybuilding career because it distracted me from feeling broken.

In summary, the participants had experienced conflict from those around them regarding their decisions to compete in bodybuilding competitions. Unfortunately, this has resulted in the breakdown of romantic relationships and friendships and conflict among external familial relationships. Mel found that being a competitor had affected her romantic relationships because she could not find anyone willing to date a female bodybuilder. Donna experienced the most tensions with her external family, which decreased over time. Megan and Diane primarily had good experiences but received some stigma from their parents when they initially began competing. Andrea faced some challenges from others who did not understand why she wanted to compete. Jennifer experienced some challenges from a past significant other who tried to sabotage her. Mel, Dana, and Diane have received much support from friends inside and outside the gym. In comparison, Donna found that her friendships had evolved once she began bodybuilding. Despite these conflicts, every participant, except Andrea, continued participating in bodybuilding competitions or planned to compete in a future competition. Lastly, Mel and Donna found their children were proud of their competitions, whereas Diane began competing to distract herself from not having children. There was resilience among these women who stood in their power despite the lack of relatedness and negative performance feedback.
4.2.4 Theme 4: Changes and Outcomes: Overcoming Personal and Social Obstacles.

This theme includes 18 segments from the transcripts (see Figure 1). Segments of data were distributed among three subthemes: (1) personal experiences while bodybuilding (3 segments); (2) social support (9 segments); and (3) social conflict (6 segments).

**Figure 4.10**

*Subthemes Personal Experiences While Bodybuilding*

The participants explained that there are many ups and downs while preparing for a bodybuilding competition. Sometimes the emotions that arise can be overwhelming for the competitors and affect their personal experiences while bodybuilding, the first subtheme of the overall theme Changes and Outcomes (see Figure 4.10). Donna was confused about which division was a good fit for her when she first became an active bodybuilding competitor:

In my novice, I got first place figure, first place fitness, second-place bikini, and I won overall figure. After, I did not know what I wanted to do because I was just placed in three categories and was confused. In novice, you can do more than one category, but after that, you cannot. There was no competition for certain divisions in the lower levels, but you have to start here to work your way up to the Arnolds. I did not want to win because I went with the bikini division, so I went into figure and got second place. Then, I thought that I did not want to keep growing. I love the bikini look.
Donna also talked about competing for her Professional card, which she achieved in glamour but did not achieve it in fitness professional:

When it comes to the UFE, I did get my Pro card in the glamour division. I just missed my fitness pro by .25 of a point which is upsetting.

Jennifer had a negative experience her first time competing in a bodybuilding competition. She did not place well at all and contemplated on never competing again:

I thought I would have done a lot better than I did; I was not in the right category and was very amateur. I have never been to a show before I did one. I did not understand how they ran, what I was up against, what they were looking for so, I had minimal knowledge going into my first show. I placed dead last out of sixteen girls, and I remember sitting on the bathroom floor crying because I worked hard, not understanding why I did so poorly, and the shame of telling people. I switched gyms, started training, and my body flourished. My mindset flourished. I started looking more at my physique from this objective point of view. I talked with a coach, and I went from there and had a really good experience.

Donna and Jennifer had different experiences when they initially started bodybuilding. Donna registered in multiple divisions and placed well in all of them, which was confusing. However, she decided that bikini was the best fit. In contrast, Jennifer competed only in the bikini division, which was not suited for her. After self-discovery, she competed within the figure division and did well.

Social Support

Seven out of the eight participants talked about the different types of social support they have received while competing, the second subtheme in the overall theme Changes and Outcomes. Each of the supports has influenced these competitors differently and has shaped their
overall experiences. Mel had been receiving an abundance of support from those around her. She talked about her experience with others at the gym and with her followers on social media:

Going to my first Pro Show this past year, the store owner put up posters around the gym saying, ‘if you see her, congratulate her, she is going to her first Pro Show,’ which means a lot. I am very active on social media. I have a lot of followers who are very supportive of what I am doing. They are constantly commenting; do not get me wrong, it is not the affirmation I am looking for from them, but it is very nice to hear. My fit family around the gym are fantastic.

Mel talked about how she had a suit sponsor for the past three years who decided not to create a custom suit for this past competition. She was devastated because it affected her placing at the Professional Show. Also, purchasing a new custom suit is a significant expense. Despite these setbacks, she had been receiving a ton of support from others who were helping her raise money to afford a new suit:

I had a suit sponsor for the past three years who did not produce a suit for me. I was going to my very first Pro Show without a custom suit which is devastating. I tied for fourth place, and I was one point behind third place, which means I won part of the competition. What that means is when it comes to the judges, one had me in first place. That suit would have made the difference. So, I did not get a suit. I went to this competition without a proper suit, still won, still placed in the top five, still tied for fourth place. I am happy with that. But now I have to buy a suit; that is another $2,000 expense that I was not expecting to have this year. The outpouring of support that I have had from people helping with raffles and stuff to buy a new custom-made suit is unbelievable.
Mel said that she also received acknowledgement from one of the bodybuilding federations regarding her Professional Show. Therefore, it was vital for her to lead by example because she knew others were watching her:

When people see me and recognize me, I know that they are watching me. So that is important.

Donna discussed how her work environment had always been supportive while she was competing:

At work, everyone has always been supportive. When I was working at the front, and you could see that I was getting lethargic and needed to eat, they would stop me and say, ‘Donna, you need to eat. It is time for your meal.’ They are an awesome team; you cannot call this place work; they are more like family.

Megan had found that there was a lot of support between the competitors. From her experience, the competitors looked at each other more as allies to lean on than as competition:

From my experience, there is not a negative catty competitive nature between the girls on stage. I have even trained together with a lot of people that I have been on stage with. I appreciate someone to talk about what we are going through, normalize the challenges and share learning. So positively, it has been built on friendship circles and social supports. And that has been helpful.

Andrea said that her most meaningful supports were from individuals who were also going through the ups and downs of competing. However, her most meaningful support was from her sister since they competed during the same time:

The most meaningful was my sister because she had gone through it with me. She had bad competitions as well and rough times. The most meaningful relationships and
supports were the people who had gone through it or are going through it or other people at the gym who were supportive in that way instead of family members who do not fully understand. So, I would say the most meaningful was my sister because she competed twice as well.

Dana had always been a hard worker, so she had always received support from those around her:

I am typically a pretty hard-working person, but I always found that the gym and health are priorities. Even as a kid in high school, I had activities that I had to do, so I was never really hanging out with a bunch of people all the time anyway. Maybe on the weekends, but it has not pulled me away from being able to go out to a restaurant or if I want to hang out at a friend’s house. I did not feel like I was letting anyone down because of it.

Diane talked about how bodybuilding was a very selfish sport because it took a lot of time and energy. She stressed the importance of having an understanding support group while going through the process:

When I started my bodybuilding career, it was apparent that competing is very selfish. You must put your training, food prep, gym times above anything else. If you want to focus on getting to that end goal, you must be committed to it 110%. I took my training very seriously. If I had to go and get up for a twelve-hour nursing shift, I would be up at five o’clock, and I would do my hour of cardio, work twelve hours and come back to the gym and do an hour of training, and more cardio, then I would have to pose, stretch, shower. It takes a very understanding social circle to respect this process. Most of the time, my friends were incredibly supportive.

Paige found that her boyfriend had not been the most supportive. However, her mother had always been supportive of her goals:
Honestly, I feel like most people have been supportive. My boyfriend has not been the most supportive. He does not love it, but he does not necessarily say not to do it. My mom is always there supporting me. My favourite is when she comes to watch when I have a show and encourages me.

The participants mentioned someone significant who offered support while competing. Nobody mentioned not having social support. These supports were necessary for the participants because they gave them a sense of relatedness, understanding and connection while competing.

*Social Conflict and Stigma*

Mel, Megan, Andrea, and Jennifer mentioned the social conflict and stigma they have endured while bodybuilding, the third subtheme of the overall theme, Changes and Outcomes (see Figure 1). Mel said that when she was first thinking about participating in a bodybuilding competition, she was discouraged by the owner of the gym she used to train at:

> After the accident, I was getting strong. I was changing my body, and I wanted to compete. And the owner of the gym I was training at the time kind of caught wind of what I wanted to do. He said, ‘Well, unless you get your boobs done and start using steroids, you will not be competitive anyway, so do not even bother.’ I was 26 and said, ‘okay, I won’t,’ I ended up taking my fitness in a different direction, into policing and applied to the police and went into the RCMP, so I became a career athlete.

Mel talked about the stigma she had encountered while competing. She was aware that being a female bodybuilder goes against social standards and explained that this created some repercussions:

> There is a downside to it because there is still a lot of social stigmas. There are from guys and girls. I am still doing something as a woman; I am still going against social norms
being a bodybuilder. I have calluses all over my hands, I work around 90% of men all the time, and I am like one of the guys, which is not a social norm.

Megan expressed that there was a bit of awkwardness when she first started competing when it came to navigating social situations:

Early on, there was some learning on how to go through social situations like going to a social event. All of the foods on the menu might not fit you, so sometimes you do your own thing. You might not eat while you are there, you might bring your food along, or you might only eat some things. Being comfortable with committing to your goal and being open and communicating. It might be a little bit awkward, and I would see other people who feel way more awkward about it.

Megan said that most of the social conflicts she experienced were when she would miss out on certain events while competing:

With the social tensions, it was family, and family is really important to me. I appreciate spending time with family by camping, getting ready for birthdays, fishing, and that kind of stuff. The tension might be from me missing out on those things, and I am sure my family having me not there was a big thing. Family and health are my top two values when I compete in the future, so I want to find a way to have both and not choose one over the other.

Andrea said that the social conflict she often felt was around others who did not understand what she was doing. She talked about going out with her boyfriend’s friends to socialize but often dreaded it because she could not participate the same way:

There were not any social relationships competing. It tends to be whoever else was competing. Those were your friends. A lot of other friends do not understand why you do
it. It got to the point where I did not want to be around the people who did not understand because it was more explaining than anything else. There were times when I would go out with my boyfriend’s friends, and it would be nine o’clock at night, and I would have to go out to my vehicle to eat and then go back in and socialize. It got to the point where it was not worth it to go in and socialize.

Similarly, Jennifer said she had experienced a lot of conflict throughout her life, but she was grateful for that because it has set her on the path she is meant to be on:

I found there has been a lot of backlash throughout my life, but I am very grateful at the end of the day because it has attracted the right people into my life and got rid of the ones that were not meant to be in my circle. I find that the people that I lost were not the ones that were pushing me to be a better person; they were trying to hold me back. So, all in all, the sport has put me on a path of where I want to be.

Jennifer had a traumatic experience shortly after she won her first show:

The worst thing that ever happened was after I won my first show. I took a break and went up to a cabin at the lake with no service, and then once I had driven into service, my phone blew up from clients and friends. It was just flooded; my phone was flooded with links and all. Someone had gone onto a slander site and wrote this horrific article about me. So, that was probably the most horrific thing that has ever been done to me specifically.

In summary, all the competitors have experienced social support from their significant others, friends, family members, co-workers, or fellow competitors. These supports encouraged the competitors to continue participating in the sport despite some hardships they have endured through exhaustion from dieting and training and social stigmas. The standard social stigma
stemmed from a lack of understanding by those who do not understand the bodybuilding process. Therefore, these women often found comfort and support from fellow competitors who understood the sport.

4.3 Summary

This chapter revealed the bodybuilding experiences of Mel, Donna, Megan, Andrea, Dana, Jennifer, Diane, and Paige. These experiences included the challenges they have encountered while competing, how they could achieve success despite these challenges, and how these experiences can provide insight for others who want to compete. There were four themes identified in the participants’ interviews: (1) Body shaping and training: Acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions; (2) Mental discipline and wellbeing: exploring the mental and physical effects of participating in bodybuilding competitions; (3) Social life and extraneous impacts: Reflecting the impact that bodybuilding has on one’s social relationships; (4) Changes and outcomes: Overcoming personal and social obstacles.

The first theme focused on nutrition and conditioning while preparing for a competition. Participants talked about the importance of nutrition, including their relationships with food and experience with rebound weight gain, their perceptions of their bodies, and their specific bodybuilding goals. Mel, Donna, Megan, and Paige felt autonomy and competence when formulating a nutrition plan related to self-determination theory (SDT). Mel, Donna, and Diane discussed relationships with coaches, including support and conflicts utilizing a coach. The need for a coach is referred to as proxy agency, part of the social cognitive theory (SCT). Mel, Andrea, and Jennifer also gave insight into steroid use. Their insights provided information on how steroid use can be the determining factor for competitors to decide not to transition into
certain divisions and how steroid use can have devastating effects on the female body. All the participants stressed the importance of adequately nourishing the body while competing by eating a well-balanced whole food diet and not adding anything that would cause additional stress to the body.

The second theme focused on health, including physical and mental wellbeing, attaining balance, and self-esteem. Most participants talked about how bodybuilding benefited or harmed their physical health. Donna, Megan, and Diane stressed the importance of caring for one’s mental health while competing, which tied into maintaining balance while competing, discussed by Mel, Donna, Megan, and Andrea. Donna, Megan, Jennifer, and Andrea talked about how their body images have transformed while competing.

The third theme concentrated on relationships with others while competing, which focused on relatedness found in the self-determination theory (SDT) and collective agency found in the SCT. All the participants discussed their various relationships with others, including their romantic relationships, family, friends, and children. Most participants discussed the conflicts within their romantic relationships while competing. They mentioned some of the backlash and the support they have received from their extended family unit, which provided them with either positive or negative performance feedback found in CET. Mel, Donna, Dana, and Diane talked about how their friendships evolved once they began bodybuilding. Mel, Donna, and Diane gave some insight into how children influenced their decision to begin or continue bodybuilding.

Lastly, the fourth theme focused on supports, stigmas, and social conflicts that all the participants have experienced. All the participants talked about the most meaningful social support they have received while competing. These supports have influenced these competitors differently and have shaped their overall experiences, which gave the competitors a sense of
relatedness found in SDT. Mel, Megan, Andrea, and Jennifer discussed the social conflict and stigma they have encountered as female bodybuilders and how they could navigate those conflicts.

The final chapter discussed the participants’ bodybuilding experience concerning existing research literature, the practical implications of these findings, limitations and strengths of the study, and areas for future research.
5. Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter explored the empowering and disempowering aspects of female bodybuilding. This study aimed to understand the perspectives of female bodybuilders who have competed in at least one competition. This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section reviewed the study's main findings relating to the bodybuilding experience of female competitors. It discussed how these findings relate to the research literature and the self-determination theory (SDT), the cognitive evaluation theory (CET), and the social cognitive theory. Section two discussed the integration of the findings with existing literature. Section three mentioned the strengths of the current study. Section four discussed the limitations of these findings to give insight into areas of future research. Section five gave insight regarding the implications for future research. Lastly, section six concluded the current study by providing an overall summary of the findings.

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study aimed to understand the empowering and disempowering experiences of female bodybuilders who have previously participated in a competition and why these women continue or discontinue competing. All the participants (Mel, Donna, Megan, Andrea, Dana, Jennifer, Diane, and Paige) talked about various challenges and successes of bodybuilding. Apart from Andrea, all the participants have continued competing or planned to compete in the future. For these participants, the benefits of competing outweighed its costs. Even though Andrea decided to stop competing due to physical health concerns, she still enjoyed the process of competing.

I integrated three theories into the summary of the four themes. These theories included the self-determination theory (SDT), the cognitive evaluation theory (CET), and the social
cognitive theory (SCT). First, the SDT encompasses three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Second, CET focuses on the fundamental need for competence and autonomy by investigating the effects of rewards, feedback, and other external events on intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Third, SCT consists of three modes of agency: direct personal agency is when the individual has complete control over their own life; proxy agency is when the individual needs someone else’s agency to accomplish a specific goal; and lastly, collective agency is when there is the interdependent effort of a community or social structure (Bandura, 2001).

Suffolk (2015) used SDT to explore the positive aspects of female bodybuilding instead of focusing only on the negative aspects. Several social, psychological, and physical risk factors are involved in a bodybuilding competition, such as stigma, mood swings, and physical injury. Therefore, the goal of SDT is to understand why women would choose to participate in bodybuilding by understanding how the sport contributed to their well-being (Suffolk, 2015).

The CET explored the motivations for women to begin bodybuilding and why some will either continue or discontinue competing. If bodybuilding generates positive performance feedback, there will be enhanced intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the other hand, negative performance feedback will likely diminish intrinsic motivation, encouraging the individual to stop competing (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The SCT explored the three modes of agency applied to female bodybuilding. Direct personal agency was when the individual had control over decisions made within the sport (Bandura, 2001): what division to compete in, what type of bikini or costume to wear (i.e., cut, colour, decals), how to style hair, make-up, and nails, and whether to hire a coach or personal trainer. Proxy agency was when the bodybuilder needed another person’s agency to accomplish a
goal (Bandura, 2001): hiring a coach or personal trainer who provided nutrition and exercise plans, would assist in picking out a bikini, how to style hair, make-up, and nails, and would teach a posing routine. Lastly, collective agency involved an interdependent effort of a community or social structure within bodybuilding (Bandura, 2001). Bodybuilding has a community of individuals set out to achieve a similar goal. As such, there were opportunities to meet like-minded people and to gain sponsorships.

The first theme, body shaping and training: acknowledging the importance of nutrition and training while participating in bodybuilding competitions, focused on the participants’ viewpoints regarding nutrition, relationship with coach, and goals within the sport. Most of the participants (Mel, Donna, Megan, Dana, Diane, and Paige) talked about their preferred dieting methods. For example, Mel understood how her body processed the food she consumed, demonstrating her competence in her dietary needs. Donna talked about transforming her body by eating balanced meals and did not believe that anyone needed to be on a strict meal plan to achieve their goals. Donna displayed both competence and autonomy over her dietary decisions. Megan explained how she created her tailored nutrition plan, making it easy to maintain the plan all year round. Megan also demonstrated a good sense of competence and autonomy when regarding nutrition. Paige discussed her success using If It Fits Your Macros (IIFYM), which gave her the flexibility to tailor her diet each day, allowing her to feel competence and autonomy over her food choices.

Donna, Andrea, and Diane mentioned their experiences with rebounding post-competition. For example, Donna said, “I could not stop eating, and in one month, I rebounded.” Andrea said, “I gained so much weight. It was squishy weight and not good.” Likewise, Diane said, “I ate so much food that I made myself sick and swore I would never do that again.” These
participants talked about how they struggled immensely after their first year of competitions since they experienced rebounding.

All the participants explained their current relationships with food and how bodybuilding helped shape that relationship. For example, Mel and Megan stated that they were more attuned to how their bodies reacted to certain foods and knew if they lacked a specific vitamin or mineral. Donna stressed the importance of supplementing vitamins and minerals since competitors lack the required nutrients during the stricter dieting phases close to the competition date. These women have been competing for so long that they felt competent in their abilities to read body cues. Andrea attempted an intuitive eating approach but struggled with reversing the bodybuilder mindset of needing a specific meal plan despite it being years later. Jennifer, Diane, and Paige also pointed out the importance of being flexible and maintaining balance while making food decisions, which granted the competitors some autonomy over their dietary decisions.

All the participants talked about varying factors regarding weight composition concerning their body image and decision to compete in specific divisions. For example, Mel, Megan, and Dana enjoyed the entire bodybuilding process and had a positive body image no matter the stage of competition prep. Andrea had struggled with her body image post-competition due to rapid weight gain and food allergies. Jennifer enjoyed the bodybuilding process but often felt insecure about not looking like a stereotypical woman.

Dana, Jennifer, and Paige decided to compete in divisions that fit well with their initial body types. In contrast, Diane decided to compete in a division outside of her original body type. These women have been successful within these divisions, which gave them a feeling of competence while preparing for competition and on stage.
Mel, Donna, and Diane decided to use coaches to enhance their bodybuilding experiences, a form of proxy agency. These participants relied on their coaches to provide them with the information and tools to set them up for success. For example, Mel initially had a bad experience with a former coach but decided to utilize a coach who looked out for her best interests. Donna never used a coach until her last competition but found that he could lean her out more than she could do independently. Diane used the same coaches since her first competition and enjoyed her relationship with them.

Most of the participants (Mel, Donna, Megan, Andrea, Jennifer, Diane, and Paige) had specific goals that led them to bodybuilding or motivated them to continue bodybuilding. For example, Mel decided to begin bodybuilding years after a car accident when she was in the best shape of her life. She had been competing ever since and planned to do multiple competitions over the next several years. Both Donna and Jennifer became interested in bodybuilding when their friends decided to compete and asked them to compete with them; this is an example of collective agency; both participants worked with others who had similar goals. When Megan first began bodybuilding, she competed in the figure division, but she felt competent enough to transition into the physique division after some time. Andrea and Paige decided to participate in a bodybuilding competition to challenge themselves. Jennifer wanted to compete for her professional card eventually but knew that she would be up against competitors who used steroids. However, she felt competent in her abilities to achieve that goal naturally. Diane competed in memory of her deceased brother and used him as her primary motivation while preparing for a show.

Lastly, Mel, Andrea, and Jennifer briefly gave their opinions on steroid use within the industry. For example, Mel did not have many opinions on whether athletes use or do not use
steroids. Still, she made her bodybuilding division decision based on the notion that she did not ever want to feel pressured to resort to steroid use. Andrea talked about pushing her body to extreme measures because she competed against women using steroids. Jennifer explained the detrimental effects of steroid use and how it can drastically change a woman’s feminine makeup.

The second theme, mental discipline and wellbeing: exploring the mental and physical effects of participating in bodybuilding competitions, focused on the participants’ mental and physical wellbeing while competing in bodybuilding competitions. Most of the participants (Mel, Donna, Andrea, Dana, Jennifer, and Diane) talked about the benefits and consequences of bodybuilding on their physical wellbeing. For example, Mel, Donna, and Jennifer found that the lifestyle changes while preparing for competition have benefited their physical health, whereas Andrea found that bodybuilding created detrimental physical health effects. Dana had to take a year off from bodybuilding due to an unrelated physical health condition. Diane talked about the importance of taking a break from competing every so often to ensure her chronic illness was adequately managed.

Similarly, Donna, Megan, and Diane discussed the varying mental health factors while competing. For example, Donna dealt with conflicting thought patterns regarding her mental health. Since her last competition, she felt the benefits of exercise for her wellbeing but has dealt with body dysmorphic disorder. Megan expressed her preference to take a mindful approach while competing and keep a journal to keep her emotions in check. Megan felt competent in this non-traditional approach and often used it when coaching her bodybuilding clients. Diane explained that post-competition blues are common but often overlooked within the bodybuilding community.
Mel, Donna, Megan, and Andrea explained the need to maintain balance while competing. For example, Mel said it was essential to make sure she was always in balance, and if she ever became out of balance, she would stop competing. Donna realized the need for a break after enduring a workplace injury. After experiencing the injury, she started advocating for maintaining a balanced life. Megan noticed that she needed to change her training-social life balance when she stopped going on vacations with her family. Andrea explained that it was challenging to maintain balance while competing because it consumed so much of one’s life.

Lastly, Donna, Megan, Jennifer, and Paige talked about self-esteem concerning body image. For example, Donna admitted that growing up, she never felt good about herself but is pleased with the positive changes she has made to her body. Megan said she has always had a positive outlook on her body image. Jennifer disclosed that her perception of her body image often changes but noticed having a more negative outlook of herself than a positive one. Paige noticed that sometimes she would look in the mirror and think she looked chubby but knew that was not true.

The third theme, social life and extraneous impacts: reflecting the impact of bodybuilding on one’s social relationships, focused on how bodybuilding affected the participants’ social relationships. Most of the participants mentioned how bodybuilding had influenced their romantic relationships. For example, Mel, Donna, Andrea, Jennifer, Diane, and Paige have all experienced conflict within their romantic relationships, which resulted in negative performance feedback. However, Dana has had an incredibly supportive spouse, which resulted in positive performance feedback.

Similarly, most participants (Mel, Donna, Megan, Andrea, Dana, Jennifer, and Diane) discussed the supports and conflicts they had encountered by family when they began competing.
For example, Mel did not have a relationship with her family and competed to heal those wounds. Donna, Megan, Andrea, Jennifer, and Diane initially encountered conflicts among their family members, which resulted in negative performance feedback and a lack of relatedness. Still, those issues have dissipated over the years. Dana has only experienced support from her family, which enhanced her feelings of relatedness.

Mel, Donna, Dana, and Diane discussed how their friendships and relationship with co-workers had evolved or changed when they began bodybuilding. For example, Mel, Dana, and Diane have received support from friends and co-workers who have always offered encouragement during the process, increasing their sense of relatedness. Donna has experienced some lost friendships but has gained new friends along the way. Her new friendships provided her with a sense of relatedness, but she is still struggling with losing her old friendships.

Lastly, Mel, Donna, and Diane explained how children had influenced their decisions to begin bodybuilding or continue bodybuilding. For example, Mel and Donna stated that their children are very supportive of them and are proud that their mothers are active competitors, which provided a sense of relatedness and positive performance feedback. Diane cannot have children due to her chronic illness; therefore, she competed to occupy her time.

The fourth theme, changes and outcomes: overcoming personal and social obstacles, focused on the mental challenges, social support and stigmas experienced by the participants while competing. Donna and Jennifer both had a rocky start to their bodybuilding careers. For example, when Donna began bodybuilding, she placed well in several different divisions and was confused about committing herself. At first, she was convinced that she wanted to be a figure competitor, but she later decided that bikini was the better choice. Her decision to be an active bikini competitor instead of a figure competitor showed her autonomy over the
bodybuilding division decisions. Jennifer had an awful experience the first time she competed. She thought that the bikini division was entry-level for new competitors but did not realize that her body type did not fit well within that division. After taking some time off, she realized that she enjoyed the figure division much more, increasing her sports competence.

Most of the participants (Mel, Donna, Megan, Andrea, Dana, Diane, and Paige) mentioned the most significant social support they have received while competing. For example, Mel received much support from her followers from social media and those in her social circle. Donna’s work supported her by ensuring she was well-nourished and rested throughout the workday. Megan and Andrea have found that other competitors provided the best support. The social supports that Mel, Donna, Megan, and Andrea have received while competing is a form of collective agency, which provided them with feelings of relatedness. Dana and Diane found their friends were good at offering essential support while competing, and Paige’s mom gave her the support she needed. The support gave Dana, Diane, and Paige a sense of relatedness to those important to them.

Lastly, Mel, Megan, Andrea, and Jennifer talk about the social conflicts and stigma they have encountered while competing. For example, Mel stated that stigma is a normal part of being a female competitor since it goes against social norms. Megan said that there was an awkwardness around others when she first started bodybuilding, but once she was better able to navigate social situations, that awkwardness disappeared. Andrea explained that it was difficult being around others who did not understand the process of bodybuilding. Eventually, she did not enjoy being around others too who she had to justify her decisions. Being around others who did not understand diminished her feelings of relatedness while competing. Jennifer said that she had
to deal with a lot of conflict during her bodybuilding journey but is grateful for it because it brought her the people who were meant to be in her life.

5.2 Integration of Findings with Existing Literature

This section examined how the findings from this study related to the existing research literature by understanding the empowering and disempowering experiences of female bodybuilders, including challenges they encountered while competing, how they were able to be successful despite facing these challenges, and what motivated them to continue or stop competing. The research literature review focused on body image, including weight, nutrition, exercise, steroid use; resistance and compliance with standard feminist norms; the psychological effects of participation in bodybuilding competitions; and the social costs of competing, including voluntary social withdrawal and stigma.

Lamar-Hildebrand et al. (1989) found that bodybuilders will limit their food intake to a selected group of foods while preparing for a competition and typically avoid fats, combination dishes, soups, legumes, egg yolks, red meats, dairy, alcohol, and sweets. The typical bodybuilder diet consists of higher protein, low fats, and low carbohydrates (Spendlove et al., 2015). Post-competition, bodybuilders typically consume a wider variety of foods (Lamar-Hildebrand et al., 1989). However, since the typical bodybuilding diet can be pretty restrictive, Money-Taylor et al. (2021) found that bodybuilders were more likely to develop eating disordered when compared to non-athletes due to the nature of calorie restriction and food limitations.

The participants in this study differed in their preferred diet plans because they were diligent about being consistent all year round regardless of whether they were in pre-or post-competition, making them less likely to avoid certain foods. For example, Mel liked to stay on plan all year regardless of whether she would be competing or not. Mel said, “I stay on track all
year long because I know that is what feels best.” Donna did not believe that one needed to be on an overly restrictive meal plan that included counting calories or cutting out water to achieve her goals; instead, she incorporated the use of well-balanced meals. Donna said, “I did not track calories. I did balanced meals. Learning what to eat and when I was full.” Megan did not follow a traditional bodybuilding meal plan while competing. She preferred to follow a high-fat paleo diet with keto incorporated, which worked better. Megan said, “I wanted to be eating the same foods all year round that gave me the results I wanted.” Diane changed her approach to nutrition depending on social situations. She explained that sometimes she would bring her food and eat in her car, and other times she would bring her food scale. Diane also ordered everything without using any oils, sauces, or spices. However, she still maintained a very close dieting approach all year long. Paige preferred to take a more flexible approach with her nutrition by following IIFYM, which allowed her to eat almost anything if it fitted into her allotted calorie, protein, fats, and carbohydrate ratios.

Based on dietary preferences, participants did not all follow a one-size-fits-all approach to dieting. Even though the participants all agreed that their dietary preferences changed the closer they got to the competition date, most preferred to maintain a very similar diet during their on-season and off-season. Mel explained that bodybuilding has allowed her to become more attuned with her body. She became more aware of how her body reacted to certain foods and recognized if she lacked a specific vitamin or mineral. Mel said, “I am more diligent about eating cleaner foods because my body processes them better. I have been doing it so long now, so I feel the difference almost immediately. I am listening to my body more now.” Donna also stressed getting enough vitamins and minerals by incorporating supplements such as veggie greens into her diet. Donna said, “I have my veggie greens in the house. I feel fantastic when I take them,
and when I do not, I feel gross.” Similarly, Andersen et al. (1998) found that competitors were more likely to use nutrient supplements while preparing for an event. Commonly used supplements included amino acids, protein supplements, multivitamins, Vitamin C, calcium, and potassium (Andersen et al., 1998).

In terms of body image satisfaction, Andersen et al. (1998) found that most competitors (60%) were not satisfied with their weight, whereas 28% reported average satisfaction. Similarly, Money-Taylor et al. (2021) found that bodybuilders have a high preoccupation with their bodies, leading the obsessive behaviours to alter their physiques. Dissatisfaction with body image can lead to risky behaviours such as over-dieting and over-exercising, leading to a skewed perception of how one looks (Probert et al., 2007a, 2009).

This study also identified body image as a subtheme. For example, Mel stated that she loved her body no matter her stage of competition preparation. Mel said, “I do not do this because I hate myself. I do this because I love my body. Our bodies are amazing.” Donna preferred to maintain a consistent body fat percentage because that was where her body felt the best. However, after her last competition, Donna struggled with body dysmorphia, a mental disorder that inhibits individuals from accurately seeing themselves; instead, they focus on perceived flaws or defects in one’s appearance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Donna said, “This last competition I was the smallest I have ever been. I was 108 pounds. I had nothing left. There is nothing on me, but I look in the mirror, and I still see 122 pounds.” Despite her struggles with her body image, Donna believed that the benefits of bodybuilding still outweigh the costs.

Megan maintained very close on-season and off-season plans. Her body weight did not fluctuate like it used to anymore. Megan said, “I do maintain a very close physique all year
round, and it has been consistent for three to five years where my body had not changed how it used to when I was first competing.” Megan explained that she had a very positive body image even before competing. Megan adds, “For me, it (body image) was always pretty positive. It was interesting learning in my first competition what the body is capable of and learning about the process of muscle building and leaning out and how the body can change so much.” Andrea’s body weight increased once she stopped competing due to metabolic stress. Andrea said, “I struggled, and my weight increased to 180 pounds. Then I was so sick that I came back down to 135 pounds. But there was not much muscle there anymore. My weight composition had changed.” She struggled with her body due to the physical harm that bodybuilding has caused her. Dana enjoyed the entire bodybuilding process and seeing how her body reacted and progressed with different dieting techniques during her on-season and off-season. Dana said, “there was one season that I wanted to try keto for a week and see how that felt. I am glad I was able to do that.” Jennifer admitted that she had a more negative body image than a positive one. She explained, “bodybuilding is a sport of constant self-improvement; therefore, it is almost impossible to feel satisfied with one’s body weight.” Lastly, Paige said that there are times when she felt fat even though she knew she was not. Paige said, “I would look at myself and think that I was so chubby, but I knew that was ridiculous.” Half the participants seemed to accept both their on-season and off-season weight but preferred maintaining specific body fat levels, so there were no drastic weight gains between the seasons. The other half understood that their dissatisfaction resulted from high expectations regarding their body weight and size.

Worthen and Baker (2016) found that three components contributed to women’s motivation to compete within bodybuilding: activity, skill, and sensation. They found that the primary motivation was physically and mentally challenging oneself (Worthen & Baker, 2016).
The women in this study mentioned that they felt a sense of euphoria, empowerment, and catharsis while working out and training (Marshall et al., 2018; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). There were similarities between the Worthen and Baker (2016) study and the findings regarding the motivation to challenge oneself. Mel said, “I work hard. I train with a 260-pound man who is six foot four and ripped from his earlobes down. I can push the same weights as him. I am doing 50-pound dumbbell curls at 135 pounds. I am proud of that, but that does not show up on stage.” Donna said, “I started with one (competition), then looked for something more. I like new challenges.” Megan said, “I have always liked to set big goals and try to achieve them.” Mel, Donna, and Megan all reported participating in bodybuilding because they found the process challenging and rewarding.

Mel had some big goals for her bodybuilding career. She preplanned all her competitions and looked forward to them. Since bodybuilding, Donna felt more confident to embark on new challenges. She had competed in Tough Mudder challenges and had participated in fitness photo challenges. Jennifer’s big goal was to compete for her professional card. She knew that she would be competing with others who use steroids but was confident in her abilities to attempt this challenge. According to the research literature, Aspridis et al. (2014) and Marshall et al. (2018) found that competitors experienced more positive than adverse psychological effects while preparing for competition and described their experiences as empowering. By embarking on this journey, many competitors felt more mental and physical strength, achievement, personal growth, and accomplishing something never imagined (Aspridis et al., 2014; Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; Fisher, 1997). These experiences integrated into their personal lives by encouraging these women to partake in other challenging behaviours (Aspridis et al., 2014).
Bodybuilding can also have the opposite effect on the competitors. Shea (2001) found that female bodybuilders may also deal with negative self-image because becoming too strong or too muscular could threaten her as a woman. Likewise, Jennifer explained that she loved competing and seeing how her body progressed. She found lifting weights empowering but sometimes struggled with not looking like a stereotypical woman.

Mel explained that there are no negatives for her when competing. She competed to enhance her health and wellbeing and did not resort to extreme measures to achieve her goals. Unfortunately, Andrea had some negative experiences while competing. She was required to reduce her caloric intake drastically and cut out her water before her last competition. Bodybuilding harmed Andrea’s body, resulting in many food allergies and extreme post-competition weight gain. Shea (2001) explained that many bodybuilders would go to unhealthy extremes to attain the desired body. These practices may involve rigid dietary restrictions, continuous food monitoring, reducing carbohydrates and water intake, and engaging in anabolic steroid use (Probert et al., 2007a, 2009; Shea, 2001).

Mel, Andrea, and Jennifer acknowledged that steroid use was not uncommon among bodybuilding competitors, especially as competitors moved into divisions requiring significant muscle mass. Mel explained, “There are implications to your health. Doing drugs (steroids) was just not something I wanted to do, so that is why I went into figure.” Andrea said, “I was competing at provincials with girls on different kinds of steroids, and there was no way I could reach that level naturally. I was doing everything in my power to compete without that (steroids).” Jennifer said, “Girls nowadays want success now. So, they turn to PEDs (performance-enhancing drugs, also known as steroids), which is very unfortunate. I have seen the devastating effects on the feminine makeup.” These women chose their divisions based on
the premise of not wanting to engage in steroid use since it can result in devastating effects: facial hair growth, baldness, acne, lowered voices, breast shrinkage, masculinization of facial features, liver and kidney dysfunction, and clitoral enlargement (Shea, 2001).

Aspridis et al. (2014) found that feelings of depression typically occurred post-competition when the women began to see their lean and muscular bodies fade as they resumed everyday eating habits. These researchers found that during the post-competition phase, the competitors were battling conflicting feelings of empowerment due to achievement and craving societal acceptance within the bodybuilding world (Aspridis et al., 2014). One of the participants in this study, Diane, also reported struggling during the post-competition phase after her first year of competitions. She said she often yearned for her body on stage even though she logically knew that her onstage physique was not healthy to maintain long-term. Diane said, “I struggled that first year because I kept looking at the person on stage, even though she was super lean and frail. My mindset then shifted from feeling like I should not put on weight to knowing that this is fuel.” Diane had come to accept her post-competition weight gain and knew it was essential to build muscle during her off-season.

Aspridis et al. (2014) explained that most competitors found it difficult to maintain a social life while preparing for competition. Bodybuilding required a significant amount of the competitors’ time due to strict training regimens and the need for sufficient rest. Similarly, Diane explained, “Bodybuilding is a selfish sport because it takes up so much time. Therefore, it takes a very understanding social circle to respect this process.” She said that since the training, meal prep, and posing practice took a lot of time, she would often not make it to social events because she was too tired. Andrea explained, “It got to the point where I was not enjoying myself anymore when I went out to socialize. I would often have to eat cold food in the car, and there
was a lot of explaining about what I was doing and why I was doing it than social support.” After a while, she found that she would rather stay home. Aspridis et al. (2014) and Probert et al. (2007, 2009) found that most competitors voluntarily removed themselves from social situations while preparing for a competition, so their training and diet regimens were not interrupted. These studies found that most social relationships would normalize again once competition training was over (Aspridis et al., 2014; Probert et al., 2000, 2009).

Aspridis et al. (2014) and Chananie-Hill et al. (2012) found that female bodybuilders received different reactions when telling others about their participation in bodybuilding. Many competitors encountered stigma by people who perceived the sport as unhealthy due to its strict preparation practices (Aspridis et al., 2014). Several women reported that those within their social environments did not try to understand the process of competing and judged them based on competing requirements and scrutinized the changes in their physiques (Aspridis et al., 2014). Likewise, Donna, Megan, and Diane received some backlash from their families when they initially started bodybuilding. Donna experienced a ton of disapproval from her relatives. She said that the comments she received were so harsh that she had difficulty letting them go. Donna said, “My mother told me that I look disgusting word for word. You do not say that to your child.” Megan remembered getting some criticism from her parents, who made assumptions on what a bodybuilder looks like and did not understand why she wanted to look like that. However, after some education, they understood the process and enjoyed watching her competitions. Diane said a conflict between her mother and her arose because of her drastic weight loss during the competition. Diane said, “My mother just saw me get leaner and leaner. After some time, my mother realized that the weight loss was temporary and that I would put the weight back on.” After some time, her mother became accepting of her decision to compete. Mel said that she had
dealt with stigma while finding a romantic relationship. She said that, for the most part, men were okay with her competing. However, they were not interested in dating a woman who was more muscular than them.

There are some similarities and differences between the literature review and this study. The similarities found were regarding feelings of empowerment, going against social norms, and the social criticisms received. For example, most participants stated that bodybuilding enhanced their self-esteem and strength despite social criticisms. These women felt that their bodies were beautiful and enjoyed the physically challenging aspects of this sport (i.e., lifting weights and dieting down). The most significant difference from the literature review was dieting and exercise. Some of the participants in this study did not follow a traditional bodybuilder diet and training routine. Instead, most participants followed similar plans all year round with slight caloric manipulations as they got closer to the competition date. Maintaining a consistent year-round plan prevented food cravings and drastic weight fluctuation (i.e., rebound issues).

5.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study and Implications for Future Research

This study provided insight and understanding of the experiences of eight individual female bodybuilders competing in all different divisions. Since there was at least one participant to represent each division within the sport, the research was able to identify various aspects and issues common to the experience of female bodybuilding. The 15 studies of female bodybuilding completed between 1989 and 2021 focused on questions concerning women’s interest in competitive bodybuilding and hypothesized the positive or negative aspects of participating in the sport. None of the studies, other than Shea (2001), in the literature review, tried to understand both sides simultaneously or why these women continued competing despite the difficulties that arose.
There were eight participants and a limited number of participants within each division. Because of this, the data set did not allow for the analysis of more specific details within a given division. Future research should look deeper into women’s experiences within each given division separately to see if the experiences are different from those within another division since the research was scarce and focused primarily on the figure division ((Aspridis et al., 2014; Halliday et al., 2016; Probert et al., 2007a; Spendlove et al., 2015).

None of the participants in this study had competed in only one competition and decided never to compete again. All participants have competed in bodybuilding at least two or more times. Therefore, there was not any information gathered from this population. As a result, this study did not describe the experiences, potentially harmful experiences, of women who competed and then chose to withdraw from the sport. Future researchers should do a study that focuses on the experiences of females who have only competed in one competition.

The geographical scope was restricted since the participants all resided in Saskatchewan, which is not a limitation, but something I thought was important to point out. Since Saskatchewan consists of a smaller urban center with a smaller population, participants’ experiences reflected this. If the participants resided in different provinces or parts of North America, the results could differ. Future research should broaden the global scope of the participants across Canada since this study only focused on the experiences of Saskatchewan residents and did not consider the experiences of others who reside outside of Saskatchewan.

5.4 Conclusion

This study addressed the gaps in research by attempting to understand both sides (empowering and disempowering) of the female experience within a bodybuilding culture and understand why women would continue participating in competitions. In conclusion, the findings
from the study provided information regarding the benefits and consequences of participating in female bodybuilding competitions. Benefits included feelings of euphoria, empowerment, and increases in health and strength. In contrast, consequences included stigma, social isolation, and unhealthy obsessions with body image. Despite the consequences of this sport, most participants felt that the benefits of competition outweighed the costs. All participants except one were either preparing for a competition or planning to in the future.

As female bodybuilding has gained popularity among female competitors, the range of how one can prepare for competition has emerged. The participants in this study engaged in various dietary and exercise regimens. For diet, this included veganism, keto and paleo, and balanced eating; and for training, this included traditional bodybuilding, Crossfit and powerlifting, and group fitness classes. New bodybuilding divisions are replacing the original divisions allowing for more diversity in what was expected from the competitors. For example, there are different levels of musculature in the competitors’ physiques, different types of posing routines, and a vast selection of costumes to choose. As such, competitors have more flexibility to tailor routines to fit the bodybuilder’s lifestyle. This study found that despite the difficulties of preparing for a bodybuilding competition, most participants enjoyed the process and planned on partaking in future competitions.
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Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
University of Saskatchewan

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH IN: Exploring the Positive and Destructive Outcomes of  
Competitive Female Bodybuilding

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study regarding current and/or past experiences as a female bodybuilder.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to: participate in a confidential interview regarding your experiences as a female bodybuilding competitor.

Your participation would involve 1 interview session, which is approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour in length, and 1 follow-up session.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Caitlin Molloy  
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
Supervisor: Dr. Laurie-Ann Hellsten-Bzovey  
at  
Email: cam584@mail.usask.ca

This study has been reviewed by, and received approval through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.
You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: Observing the Positive and Destructive Outcomes of Competitive Female Bodybuilding

Researcher: Caitlin Molloy, Graduate Student, Department Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, cam584@mail.usask.ca

Supervisor: Laurie-Ann Hellsten-Bzovey, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, 306-966-7723, laurie.hellsten@usask.ca.

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this research is to gauge the perspectives of female bodybuilders when it comes to their own personal health and wellbeing. This study aims to discover reoccurring themes among those within the bodybuilding community, and to understand the empowering and/or destructive outcomes to those whom are competing in the sport.

Procedures: We are asking you to participate in a semi-structured interview based on a series of specific questions that will ask you to describe your experiences as a female bodybuilder. The interview will be approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour in length, and will be audio taped and transcribed. After being transcribed, you will be contacted for a follow-up interview to clarify the validity of the transcript. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role. Note: the participant has the right to ask for the audio-tape to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Risks and Benefits: The likelihood of any potential risks by participating in this research is minimal. The interview questions are based on one’s own unique experiences, therefore emotional and/or psychological discomfort may arise. This project will contribute to a greater understanding of female bodybuilding, and the experiences of those whom compete within the sport. If you feel any discomfort during the course of the interview or feel that you cannot continue, the interview will be stopped immediately.

Confidentiality: Any information derived from your participation will be kept confidential. The audiotapes and data collection will be stored securely, and will be only available to the researchers; these records will be destroyed in 5 years. Data from the interviews will only be used for the purpose of this research project. Names and other identifiers will be omitted or disguised in any presentations or publications of the analyses. All communications by email will be kept confidential, will be assessed only by the researchers for the purpose of the study, and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.
All paper documents will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Laurie Hellsten’s office and will be shredded 5 years post publication; all electronic data will be stored in an encrypted file and will be destroyed by using a program that will not permit its recovery. There are limited risks involved by contacting this secure and confidential email address.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason without explanation of penalty. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until August 2019. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data. You have the right to answer only the questions you feel comfortable in answering.

**Follow up:** To obtain results from the study or a copy of your transcription, please contact the researcher at cam584@mail.usask.ca

**Questions or Concerns:** This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office at (306) 966-2975 or by email at ethics.office@usask.ca. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

**Consent:** Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

______________________________  _______________________
Name of Participant                Signature                Date

______________________________  _______________________
Researcher’s Signature             Date

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
Interview 1 – Semi-structured Interview Guide

Date:
Participant Code/Pseudonym:
Age:
Ethnicity:
Sexual Orientation:
Number of Years Competing:
Bodybuilding Category (i.e., bikini, figure, fitness, physique):
Purpose: To understand the experiences of past and current female bodybuilders.

Semi-Structured Questions:

1. What was your biggest motivation to start bodybuilding?
2. Have you participated in other sports/competitive activities?
3. How many competitions have you competed in?
   a. What has been your highest ranking?
   b. Why did you continue to compete?
      i. Have you taken time off between shows?
   c. Why did you stop competing?
      i. Will you ever compete again?
4. What division(s) have you competed in?
   a. Why did you choose that category?
   b. Why did you decide to change divisions or stay in the same division?
5. How has bodybuilding affected your social relationships?
6. How have the important people around you (friends, family, coach/trainer, fellow competitors) supported you in your bodybuilding career? What supports were the most meaningful to you?
7. Have you experienced any tensions with the important people in your life with respect to your bodybuilding career? Can you explain? Why do you think that was?
8. How has bodybuilding fostered your relationship with your body shape and size?
9. How has bodybuilding affected your relationship with food?
10. Is there anything that you would like to share that I have not asked you?

Non-Verbal Cues: Phone interview
Counselling/Peer & Social Support Services

Saskatoon

CFS Saskatoon
- Individual, couples, family, and group counselling (free drop-in counselling at the Food Bank 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., some free groups, $25/individual counselling session for households with income $80,000 or less otherwise $110/session, open late Tuesday and Wednesday for counselling).
- https://www.cfssaskatoon.sk.ca/services/counselling/

Family Service Saskatoon
- Individual, couples, families, and group counselling (some free services, sliding scale fees, daytime availability).
- https://familyservice.sk.ca/programs

Mental Health and Addictions Services
- Individual and group counselling (free, daytime availability).
- https://www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/locations_services/Services/mhas/Pages/CommunityAdultMentalHealthServices.aspx

OUTSaskatoon
- https://www.outsaskatoon.ca/social_groups

U of S Psychology Clinic
- Individual Counselling ($25/session, daytime availability).
- https://artsandscience.usask.ca/psychology/programs/clinical-sub-pages/psychology-services-centre.php#PsychologyClinic

Regina

CFS Regina
- Individual, couples, and family counselling (free drop-in counselling Food Bank the 1st and 3rd Tuesday of every month from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.)
- https://www.cfsregina.ca/counselling-services

Family Service Regina
- Individual, couples, families, and group counselling (some free services, sliding scale fees, daytime availability).
- https://familyserviceregina.com/counselling/

Mental Health and Addictions Services
- Individual and group counselling (free, daytime availability).
- http://www.rqhealth.ca/department/addiction-services/addiction-services-in-regina

Online Therapy User
- CBT counselling courses for anxiety and depression through the Health Region (Free, flexible schedule).
- https://www.onlinetherapyuser.ca/

The Caring Place
- Individual, couples, and families counselling (sliding scale fees, daytime availability).
- https://thecaringplace.ca/