The Weight of Leaving: Gender, Identity Shifts, and Health Challenges in the Post-Competition Lives of Women Bodybuilders

by

Amarjit Matharu

A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Recreation and Leisure Studies (Aging, Health and Well-Being)

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2025

© Amarjit Matharu 2025

Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this dissertation. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	DR. KAREN GALLANT Associate Professor School of Health and Human Performance Dalhousie University
Internal-External Examiner	DR. LAURA MIDDLETON Associate Professor Kinesiology and Health Sciences University of Waterloo
Supervisor	DR. DIANA PARRY Professor Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies University of Waterloo
Committee Member	DR. COREY JOHNSON Karla A. Henderson Distinguished Professor Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism North Carolina State University Adjunct Professor Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies University of Waterloo
Interdisciplinary Member	DR. ELENA NEITERMAN Associate Professor School of Public Health Science University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Drawing from my own experience as a bodybuilder in the bikini division, the purpose of this research is to explore the retirement transition for women bodybuilders. More specifically, this study explores how women bodybuilders are influenced by gendered ideologies and how these ideologies affect their transition experience in relation to identity, health, and well-being. There is limited literature exploring bodybuilding retirement, and no literature exploring women's experiences during this transition. Guided by a sport feminism theoretical orientation, I conducted reflexive dyadic interviews with 15 women who retired, or were thinking of retiring, from bodybuilding. I used narrative inquiry to guide the methodological process and observed online spaces including Instagram and Reddit. I constructed five composite characters to represent the diverse experiences of my participants and to present the findings, I crafted a series of narratives, authored by these characters, while also including my own narration to provide context throughout the series of stories. The narratives are organized into two parts. Part one highlights the impact of retirement on the women's physical health, mental health, and well-being, while part two reveals the influence of gender ideologies on the retirement experience regarding gendered expectations both inside and outside of the industry. I conclude that gender plays a significant role in the retirement transition as gender ideologies are engrained deeply within the industry and society, leading to a dynamic experience impacting identity, health, and well-being during the transition, unique to women. This research is the first of its kind to address women's bodybuilding retirement in the academic literature, sheds light on an understudied topic and offers insights that may resonate and validate women who share this experience.

Acknowledgements

I started my PhD during the COVID-19 pandemic and although most of my degree was achieved through a screen, I still developed a social circle that made this process truly memorable.

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my incredible supervisor, Dr. Diana Parry. Diana, thank you for your endless support, guidance, and the opportunities that you've provided throughout my degree. You have always inspired me and encouraged me to think beyond my believed capacity. I appreciate your genuine interest in my thoughts and ideas that I only dreamed of writing about and exploring in this context. I'd also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Corey Johnson and Dr. Elena Neiterman. Corey, thank you for your unwavering enthusiasm towards my project, and your ongoing support in helping me grow as a scholar. From my very first day in this program, you created a culture of care and support that set the tone for the next few years. Elena, thank you for taking an interest in my work and offering infinite kindness and care in your feedback and in all our conversations. I am so thankful to have learned from you. Dr. Laura Middleton and Dr. Karen Gallant, thank you very much for serving as examiners on my committee and sharing your valuable insight and feedback on this project.

Getting to this stage would not have been possible without my wonderful PhD friends. Bronwen, you inspire me in so many ways that I could write an entire dissertation just based on your impact. I am eternally grateful for you, and I am honoured to have shared this experience with you. Jasmine and Eden, the two of you made doing a PhD during a pandemic as fun as it possibly could be, and I am grateful to have made life-long friends in you both.

Last but not least, I am eternally grateful for my parents, who for as long as I can remember, told me that "I can do anything I want to do." Thank you both for your unwavering support throughout my life—from moving to another continent, competing in seven bodybuilding shows, or deciding to do a PhD—you two have always had my back and encouraged me to try everything and anything. I'd also like to thank my partner Scott, my brother Devin, and my best-friend-since-kindergarten, Cindy. You three have been cheering me on every step of the way and I could not have done this without you. Lastly, to all my friends along for the journey, thank you.

Dedication

To any and every woman who see themselves in this work

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration iii

Abstract iv

Acknowledgements v

Dedication vi

List of Figures xiv

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

1.1 Study Purpose 11

Chapter 2 : Literature Review 14

2.1 Key Terms and Concepts 14

2.1.1 Sport 14

2.1.2 Gender 15

2.1.2.1 Gender Ideologies 16

2.1.3 Patriarchy 17

2.1.3.1 Gender, Patriarchy and Sport 19

2.2 Bodybuilding 21

2.2.1 Globalization, Capitalism, and the Bodybuilding Industry 23

2.2.2 Bodybuilding in the Literature 24

2.2.2.1 Relation to Gender Ideologies 25

2.2.2.1.1 Femininity: Resistance or Conformity? 26

2.2.2.2 Health Implications 33

2.2.2.2.1 Mental and Psychological Health Implications 35

2.2.2.2.2 Physical and Physiological Health Implications 36

2.2.2.2.3 Other Health Implications 38

2.2.2.3 Digital Technologies and the Bodybuilding Industry 39
2.2.2.3.1 Positive Roles of Technology 40
2.2.2.3.2 Negative Roles of Technology 42
2.3 Life Transitions 44
2.3.1 Overview of the Transitions Literature 44
2.3.1.1 Role Theory and Role Exit 45
2.3.1.2 Life Course Perspective 46
2.3.1.3 Psychosocial Transitions 47
2.3.1.4 Coping Strategies 48
2.3.2 Retirement 49
2.3.2.1 Identity and Retirement 50
2.3.3 Athlete Retirement 53
2.3.3.1 Unique Features of Athletic Careers 54
2.3.3.2 Athletic Identity 55
2.3.4 Unique Features of Athlete Retirement 56
2.3.4.1 Mediating Factors 58
2.3.5 Conceptualizations of Athletic Retirement in the Literature 59
2.3.5.1 A Theoretical Approach 60
2.3.5.2 A Representative Approach 61
2.3.6 Aesthetic-Based Sport and Retirement 62
2.3.6.1 The Transitioning Body in Sport 63
2.3.6.2 Influence of Gender Ideologies 64
2.3.6.3 Bodybuilding Retirement 65
2.4 Contextual Literature Summary and Research Gaps 66

2.5 Theory....68
2.5.1 Feminism....68
2.5.1.1 Truth and Knowledge....69
2.5.1.2 Identity and Representation....69
2.5.1.3 Power and Resistance....71
2.5.1.4 Social Justice....73
2.5.1.5 Waves of Feminism....74
2.5.2 Sport Feminism....75
2.5.2.1 History and Evolution of Sport Feminism....76
2.5.2.2 Sport Feminism Today....78
2.5.2.3 Key Considerations....79
2.5.2.3.1 Gender is Dynamic....79
2.5.2.3.2 Feminism is Inherently Intersectional....80
2.5.2.3.3 Lived Experience is Necessary....81
2.5.2.3.4 Digital Technologies are Assumed....82
2.5.2.3.5 Capitalism and Globalization....84
2.5.2.4 Sport Feminism and Bodybuilding....86
2.5.2.4.1 Topical Relevance....86
2.5.2.4.2 Personal Relevance....88
Chapter 3 : Methodology and Methods....90
3.1 Methodology....90
3.1.1 Narrative Inquiry....91
3.1.1.1 A Feminist Approach to Narrative Inquiry....93
3.1.2 Methodological Relevance for My Research....95

3.2 Methods 97
3.2.1 Participant Recruitment 97
3.2.1.1 Inclusion Criteria 98
3.2.1.2 Process of Recruitment 99
3.2.1.3 Participant Demographics 101
3.2.2 Data Collection Methods 103
3.2.2.1 Reflexive, Dyadic Interviews 103
3.2.2.2 Unobtrusive Observation of the Online Environment 105
3.2.3 Interview Experience 106
3.2.3.1 Interview Set-Up, Approach, And Dynamics 106
3.2.3.2 Interview Process 109
3.2.3.3 Interview Ethical Considerations 111
3.2.3.4 Interview Reflections 112
3.2.4 Online Observations 117
3.2.4.1 Ethical Considerations 118
3.2.4.2 Observation Process 119
3.2.5 Analysis and Representation 120
3.2.5.1 Initial Analysis 120
3.2.5.2 Representation: Creative Analytic Practice 123
3.2.5.3 Initial Representation 124
3.2.5.4 Composite Characters and Narrative Essays 127
3.2.5.4.1 Character Development 129
3.2.5.4.2 Narratives: Participant Profiles and Essays 131
3.3 Evaluation and Trustworthiness 134

Chapter 4 : Findings....137
4.1 Author's Note....137
4.2 Prologue: What is Bodybuilding?....139
4.3 Part 1: Participant Profiles....141
4.3.1 Lisa....141
4.3.2 Alanna....144
4.3.3 Rachel....148
4.3.4 Carol....151
4.3.5 Isabelle....154
4.4 Part 2: The After(math)....157
4.4.1 Bodybuilding Should Come with a Warning Label....157
4.4.2 If I'm Not Lean Enough, I'm Not Good Enough....160
4.4.3 Eating A Piece of Pizza Terrified Me....163
4.4.4 If I'm Not Achieving Anything, What's The Point?....167
4.4.5 From Bikini Competitor to Mom....170
4.4.6 Finding The Spark....173
4.5 Part 3: Reflections on Gender and the Body....175
4.5.1 Power And the Patriarchy Within The Industry....175
4.5.2 I Never Wanted to Compete In Bikini....178
4.5.3 An Impossible Standard....181
4.5.4 Bodybuilding As a Badge of Honour....184
4.5.5 Remember When You Were Fun?....187
4.5.6 Womanhood And Community: A Digital Dialogue-Based Essay....190
4.6 Epilogue: Would You Ever Go Back: A Dialogue-Based Essay....193

Chapter 5 : Discussion 197
5.1 Summary of Findings 197
5.2 The Retirement Transition: The After(math) 198
5.2.1 Identity 199
5.2.1.1 Identity Formation and Athlete Identity 199
5.2.1.1.1 Digital Identity 202
5.2.1.2 Identity Crisis and Negotiation 203
5.2.1.2.1 Athletic Identity 204
5.2.1.2.2 Digital Identity 207
5.2.1.2.3 Identity Role Shifting 210
5.2.1.3 Athlete Identity Foreclosure 214
5.2.2 Physical Health 215
5.2.2.1 Health Concerns During a Bodybuilding Prep 216
5.2.2.2 Transition Impacts 217
5.2.2.3 PEDs and Related Impacts 221
5.2.3 Mental Health 224
5.2.3.1 Body Image and Body Dissatisfaction 224
5.2.3.1.1 Division Differences and Conflicting Standards 226
5.2.3.1.2 Entanglement of Bodybuilding and Health 229
5.2.3.2 Body Dysmorphic Disorder 230
5.2.3.2.1 Digitized Dysmorphia 234
5.2.3.3 Disordered Eating 235
5.2.3.4 Achievement and Self-Worth 238
5.2.3.4.1 Everchanging Endpoint and Shifting Standards 240

5.2.4 Well-being 242
5.2.4.1 Leisure 243
5.2.4.2 Finances 245
5.2.4.3 Social Connectivity and Support 248
5.2.5 Factors that Influence 251
5.3 Part Two: Gender 255
5.3.1 Power and Patriarchy in the Bodybuilding Industry 255
5.3.1.1 Overarching Influence of the Patriarchy 256
5.3.1.2 Gendered Differences and Expectations 259
5.3.1.3 Male Domination in the Industry 262
5.3.2 Resistance and Empowerment 264
5.3.2.1 Division Differences 265
5.3.2.2 Transition Impacts 269
5.4 Summary 273
Chapter 6 : Conclusion 277
References 286
Appendix A : Women's Bodybuilding Divisions 323
Appendix B : Judging Criteria for Bikini, Figure, Wellness, and Physique 324
Appendix C : Participant Information Letter 326
Appendix D : Informed Consent Form 329
Appendix E : Interview Guide 331
Appendix F : Participant Letter of Appreciation 334

List of Figures

Figure 1. Screenshot of Instagram Profile Used for Recruitment.....100
Figure 2. Example of a Sequence Table 130
Figure 3. Bodybuilder Identity and Identity Theory Adapted from Davis (2016). 200
Figure 4. The Athletic Body Transition Adapted from Buckley et al. (2019).....226

Chapter 1: Introduction

I[1] *started competing in bodybuilding in 2016 at the age of 21. After spending a few years embracing the student lifestyle complete with weekends at the bar, pulling all-nighters, and ordering pizza whenever I felt like it, I started to feel unmotivated and lost. My unhealthy habits were starting to catch up to me physically and I was quick to notice my unintentional weight gain and decreased energy levels. I also felt lost in terms of my identity. I was so consumed with my undergraduate degree and going out with my friends that like many 20-somethings, I didn't quite know who I was outside of this student lifestyle. My goals of completing my degree and moving on to graduate school seemed so far from reach. I needed a new challenge, and something to work towards, that didn't involve unhealthy habits.*

*Around this time, the "#fitspiration" trend was growing in popularity with more and more women posting themselves on YouTube and Instagram lifting weights, building muscle, and for some, entering bikini bodybuilding competitions (*Santarossa et al., 2019). *This represented a stark contrast from the "#thinspiration" trend, encouraging thinness, limited food intake, and extensive cardio that I grew up with* (Slater et al., 2017). *The #fitspiration trend highlighted women's vlogs (video blogs) of their bikini competition preparation (prep), their workout routines, their meals, and posing routines in crystal-covered bikinis and four-inch heels. I was drawn to the disciplined lifestyles and strong, "natural," looking physiques of bikini competitors*

[1] Disclaimer: My personal narrative illustrated in italics throughout this section was written in Fall 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and about three years after my last bodybuilding competition (at that time).

in the industry such as Courtney King, Ashley Kaltwasser and Lauralie Chapados. I started following these competitors online and mirroring some of their habits. I started training my glutes multiple times a week, mixing my oatmeal with protein powder, and drinking caffeine before training. However, even with a history of competitive dance and a somewhat regular workout routine to provide a foundation, these new habits could not undo the damage of my constant binge drinking, misaligned eating habits, and chaotic sleep patterns. I soon came to believe that to find purpose in my life and achieve a body like the bikini pros I admired, I would need to drastically change my lifestyle and commit to a bikini competition. In January 2016 I hired my first coach and started training immediately.

Competitive bodybuilding gained popularity in the 1960s as a sport involving the judgement of men's muscle mass and symmetry (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996). Eventually, the sport expanded to include women, with the first publicized women's bodybuilding competition in 1979 (Klein, 1985). Since then, bodybuilding federations have introduced multiple new divisions for both men and women with varying criteria (NPC News Online, 2024a). In 1970, only one women's division existed, with the same judging criteria and expectations as the men's division. Today, however, there are six[2] different women's divisions: bikini, wellness, figure, fitness, physique, and bodybuilding, each with specific judging criteria and expectations[3]. For example, women's bodybuilding and physique divisions focus on muscle mass, shape, and

[2] In December 2024, the IFBB introduced a seventh division called "Fit Model," a division requiring less muscle than bikini, with an emphasis on a natural, attainable, "beach body." This division will debut during the 2025 season.

[3] For reference, Appendix A provides a visual representation of the division differences and Appendix B details the standardized judging criteria.

symmetry, while others, such as the bikini division, focus less on muscle mass, and more on overall body shape, stage presence and posing (NPC News Online, 2024a). A bodybuilding competition typically involves two judging rounds. The first round consists of an individual posing routine, where competitors enter the stage on their own, perform their individual routine consisting of mandatory, division-specific poses, and then exit the stage. The second round includes all athletes in a respective division, separated by height and/or weight. Athletes are required to line up side-by-side on stage and perform their mandatory poses, allowing the judges to compare the physiques of all competitors in that division. Competitors are scored against each other, meaning that a competitor may place first among one group of athletes, but could place last among another group.

Preparing for my first bikini competition was exciting and I completely threw myself into the bodybuilding lifestyle. Within a few days, I was following a regimented meal plan that consisted mainly of fish, egg whites, rice and vegetables. I weight-trained six days a week and spent hours in the gym doing cardio. While this prep was exciting, it was also very difficult socially. My friends and I began to grow apart since my lifestyle had shifted so drastically and some of my friendships even ended. However, with those losses, I also gained new connections through posing seminars, and my coach's network with others prepping or competing. We all bonded over meal prepping, fasted cardio (cardio performed before any food is consumed) and talking about all the food we were going to eat after our respective shows. I began to see growth in my social media accounts as I tracked my progress online and created connections within the online bodybuilding community as well.

As I neared my first bikini competition in August 2016, my prep got much harder. I was eating just shy of 1000 calories a day while engaging in extreme weight training and cardio protocols. For the first time in my adult life, I saw the scale drop below 100 pounds and eventually, I lost my menstrual cycle—an indication that I was "on the right path" according to my coach. I was constantly cold, irritable, and exhausted, but seeing my body change and start to mirror the ideal bikini physique, including a small waist, high/tight glutes, and capped shoulders, kept me motivated. I was constantly receiving compliments on my weight loss and physique, which further encouraged me to push through the difficult times. I was seeing my hard work pay off and I knew my goal was within reach. During my peak week (the week before a competition) my coach led me through an intense dehydration and carb depletion protocol including herbal supplements and an extreme reduction in my water intake. All I could focus on was food. I spent hours obsessing over restaurant menus, Pinterest recipes, and watching "full day of eating" videos on YouTube, but not eating much myself.

My first competition went by so quickly and I don't remember much as I was so depleted and dehydrated that I could barely see straight. I remember getting my spray tan, where I stood completely naked in a little pop-up tent while a woman sprayed me with what appeared to be a colour ten shades darker than my natural skin tone, and I remember being moved to the outside of the lineup during the actual competition. This position indicated that I did not place first, and I felt distraught and cried when offstage after placing fifth. This still warranted a medal and a photo-op that appeared on the federation's website, but I felt defeated, unsatisfied, and frustrated. I wanted to win so badly.

Following this self-perceived loss, I felt more determined than ever to compete again. I left my first coach after she insisted performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) were my next step to success and I spent the next few years training with a well-known International Federation of Bodybuilding professional (IFBB pro) and prominent figure in the fitness community. With her methods, I saw my body transform in ways I did not think were possible during my first prep. This time, I saw my weight drop even further and started walking away with higher placings at shows. I was starting to get recognized at local gyms and shows based on my social media presence and connection to my new, popular coach who featured me on her social media.

While this lifestyle was exhilarating, it also brought on many challenges. I was living with amenorrhea, disordered eating patterns, and anxiety. I woke up every day and weighed myself. The number on my scale determined my mood for the day. I checked in with my coach and took progress photos twice a week which I spent hours picking apart. I said no to birthdays, family dinners, and trips in fear that it would ruin my perfect bikini physique. Activities I once considered leisure, such as going out for dinner with friends or even trying a new fitness class, were now stress-inducing activities that I avoided. I was also working two part-time jobs, on top of being in school full-time, just to afford the lifestyle. I was emotional and on edge. I would lie in bed thinking "I wish I could go back to 2015 where I didn't know what I know now"—I felt trapped in an identity that I worked so hard to build.

As a result, I started to resent the sport and the industry. I started to feel that the industry, and particularly the bikini division, oppressed women. The bikini division requires high heels, a two-piece bikini, and a posing routine meant to show off an "hourglass" shape

emphasizing a small waist and full glutes. Without even realizing it, I let the bikini criteria dictate not only how I looked, but how I behaved and how I felt. I felt pressure to uphold a particular "bikini girl" persona in person, and online. Despite my resentment towards the industry, I qualified for Canadian Nationals in 2018, a goal of mine from the start. However, around the same time, I was also accepted into a graduate program in England, a goal I had before I started competing. With my acceptance, I felt like I finally had an "out" and a reason to move away from this suffocating lifestyle. I had the opportunity to move somewhere completely different where I didn't feel the need to adhere to this identity that I had spent years building.

Scholars often explore bodybuilding from sociological and feminist perspectives focusing on gender transgression, deviance, stigma, and identity (Chananie-Hill et al., 2012; Denham, 2008; McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009; Wesely, 2001; Worthern, 2006). Researchers in the field suggest that bodybuilding is a socially deviant pursuit because it relies on extreme diet and exercise practices to shape the body based on hegemonic gendered criteria. As a result, women and men competitors are held to different standards (Denham, 2008; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009; Worthern, 2006). Furthermore, many behaviours associated with bodybuilding, such as drug use and dieting or weight manipulation tactics, result in bodies that are not attainable for longer than a few hours (Aranyosi, 2018; Sparkes et al., 2005). Accordingly, scholars have started to explore the negative implications of these behaviours and suggest that bodybuilders are at greater risk for developing body and muscle dysmorphia (Selvi & Bozo, 2020), narcissistic traits (Dèttore et al., 2020) and eating disorders and disordered eating (Money-Taylor et al., 2021) when compared to both non-athletes and athletes in sports that do not rely on body shape or size. Furthermore,

contemporary scholars draw attention to the roles of technology in the sport (Coy-Dibley, 2016; Marshall et al., 2019, 2020; Wellman, 2020). Much of the bodybuilding community is structured through digital means such as online forums (e.g. Reddit) and social media applications (e.g., Instagram), allowing athletes to build online followings and generate income like more commercialized sports (Marshall et al., 2019, 2020; Sparkes et al., 2005). This recent research calls for further exploration into these topics, but scholars have yet to address how these implications may affect one's life after retirement—an experience that I personally believe to be more challenging than actively competing.

I took the year off from competing when I moved to England. I still worked with my coach during this period (what is considered an "offseason") but also used this move as an opportunity to explore the world outside of bodybuilding. Most importantly, I used this time to address the numerous mental and physical health issues affecting my well-being. Since I wasn't actively prepping, I had more leniency in my diet. I struggled mentally as I began to gain weight, but the good news associated with the weight gain was that my natural energy returned, my hormonal balance was restored, and I began repairing my damaged relationship with food. Even so, my disordered thoughts and ideas still influenced my behaviours. I planned my days around the gym, felt paralyzed at the thought of eating something off-plan, and packed high-protein meals while travelling due to fear that I wouldn't find anything I could eat at my destination.

My time in the UK went by quickly and as I prepared to move back to Canada, I also began planning my competitive season with my coach. Within days of moving home, I was asked "When is your next show?" during every conversation I had catching up with friends,

colleagues, and family. In 2020 I started prepping for a new show. Even with my time away from the sport and residual resentment towards the industry, I felt an attachment to the lifestyle and missed not only the adrenaline of competing but the feeling of accomplishment that comes with it. I also missed the community and the support from those whose lives also revolved around bodybuilding.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to step back from my prep as gyms closed and shows were cancelled. With so many unknowns, it did not make sense to continue dieting without an end goal in sight but, what I thought would be a few months of offseason, became an indefinite period of time. I've been in a liminal space between the extreme practices of bodybuilding and living life without restraint. I still work with a coach and adhere to a diet protocol and workout routine. I still weigh myself regularly and take progress pictures, but the severe anxiety and unhealthy patterns don't consume me like they used to. While I live in this space, I constantly wonder if I should just "let go" completely. I don't know if I will ever compete again, so why am I holding on to these habits? I realize even without the bodybuilding lifestyle, my identity and behaviours will always be attached to my time in the sport. Existing beliefs and behaviours are engrained in who I am and what I do. For example, going out to eat at a restaurant or going for a walk hold different meanings than they did before I started competing. Even how I carry myself and shape my appearance is rooted in the norms upheld by the bodybuilding industry. After spending so many years aligning my diet and exercise patterns with the "ideal" bikini physique, I sometimes feel that letting it all go would be doing myself a disservice based on all the hard work, time, and money I put into that lifestyle. I sometimes feel

that those who know me as the "bikini girl" will no longer accept me or will see me as a failure. I also feel ashamed for having these thoughts—I know I am strong and accomplished, but unlearning behaviours and thoughts that have dictated my life for so many years is difficult. As I consider leaving the sport, these thoughts and feelings cloud my judgement, but I know I am not alone. The confusion and crisis-like experience are common among competitors I know personally and though social media. I find comfort and validation in hearing other competitors' experiences transitioning into a "normal" or "balanced" life, but the sharing of these experiences is not common outside of these online communities, or the occasional article in a fitness magazine—that is, the transition to retirement is neither explored in-depth or through a critical lens with attention to the social and cultural factors that influence this transition.

Evidently, bodybuilding is complex, and retirement from the sport is no different. Components of bodybuilding, such as reliance on the body and adherence to disciplined protocols, align with other aesthetic-based sports often explored in the athletic retirement literature such as competitive gymnastics and swimming (Buckley et al., 2019; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Scholars suggest that athletes retiring from such sports often face challenges related to identity negotiation and confusion, body image, and reconciliation of diet and exercise patterns (Buckley et al., 2016; Papathomas et al., 2017). These challenges may be heightened when considering the intersection of gender. For example, Papathomas and colleagues (2017) proposed the *Retired Female Athlete Paradox,* suggesting that the interplay between Western gender ideologies and sport culture influences women's athletic retirement causing unique challenges related to their bodies and

identity. However, beyond Sparkes and colleagues' (2005) life history account of one male bodybuilder, touching upon the athlete's retirement transition, bodybuilding retirement has not been explored, and women's experiences are largely ignored in the existing literature.

Women are uniquely situated in the bodybuilding subculture, often in tension-inducing positions, where they must choose to defy or comply with cultural and subcultural norms related to their actions and appearances (Bordo, 1993, Bunsell, 2013; Wolf, 1990). While there are notable similarities in athlete retirement experiences from sports that heavily rely on an athlete's shape and size, bodybuilding also offers many unique features that set it apart not only from aesthetic-based sports such as gymnastics but all sports in general. First, bodybuilding specializes in exhibiting the body as an object, as the focus of bodybuilding remains on aesthetics rather than athleticism (Aranyosi, 2018). While bodybuilders are required to train at high intensities, they are only judged on their appearance. Therefore, loss of muscle and changes to one's appearance may affect their well-being since their identity and notions of success become reliant on their appearance (Sparkes et al., 2005). Second, the behaviours required to achieve such physiques may make it difficult for these athletes to retire, as the focus of the sport—the body—will always be tied to the competitor's mind. This increased awareness may carry over into retirement, resulting in health ramifications such as disordered eating, obsessive behaviours, and depression as competitors strive to maintain physiques that were built with extreme, unsustainable practices (Buckley et al., 2019; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Third, bodybuilding competitors must adhere to judging criteria in their respective divisions rooted in hegemonic standards of masculinity and

femininity (Denham, 2008; Tajrobehkar, 2016). Historically, women were not welcomed in the bodybuilding industry, and despite their inclusion, women competitors face an array of reactions, such as scrutiny, objectification, and celebration, in response to their bodies and adherence to, or disobedience of, these judging criteria (Chananie-Hill et al., 2012; McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009; Wesely, 2001; Worthern, 2006). For example, the bikini division requires a level of musculature that adheres to Western norms of the ideal feminine body, while the physique division requires an extreme level of musculature that directly opposes those ideals. Accordingly, upon retirement, women may face a period of negotiation and crisis in terms of their identity as an athlete, and the gendered expectations placed upon them both inside, and outside of the sport (Bunsell, 2013; Tajrobehkar, 2016). Finally, bodybuilding is notoriously known for performance enhancing drug (PED) use, which can lead to health ramifications even after their use ceases (Ainsworth et al., 2022; Sparkes et al., 2005). Retired competitors may struggle with their decreased muscle mass and associated identity upon retirement, while also managing long-term health impacts and ongoing symptoms from their engagement with these substances (Ainsworth et al., 2022). Given the unique factors listed above and the lack of exploration on this topic, the bodybuilding retirement experience requires further attention, especially from women's perspectives.

1.1 Study Purpose

This research is inspired by my experience and the current negotiation of my position within the sport of bodybuilding. While my story shared above is likely unique compared to a non-competitor, the highs, and lows that I experienced are not uncommon for others in the

bodybuilding industry (King, 2018; Scafoglio, 2022; Star, 2021). Choosing to leave bodybuilding is more complicated than simply moving on from the sport as competitors may struggle with negotiating their identity and dealing with various mental/physical health ramifications (King, 2018; Scafoglio, 2022; Star, 2021). As such, the purpose of this research is to explore the retirement transition for women bodybuilders. More specifically, this study seeks to explore how women bodybuilding competitors are influenced by gendered ideologies and how this affects their transition experience in relation to identity, health, well-being, and leisure. The purpose will be addressed with the following research questions:

1) How do women bodybuilding competitors experience the retirement transition?
    a. In terms of identity?
    b. In terms of health/well-being?
2) How are gendered ideologies experienced, reproduced and/or maintained after leaving the sport?

The subsequent chapters describe this project in detail and offer novel findings to address the purpose and research questions. First, in chapter two, I include a review of the literature relevant to my research with topics including the bodybuilding industry, life transitions, and athlete retirement. I conclude this chapter with a discussion covering feminism and feminist theory which provides the foundation for the next chapter. In chapter three, I outline the methodological framework that informs this study—narrative inquiry—and detail my methods to conduct this research including my recruitment strategies and process for data collection and analysis. This chapter continues with a discussion on my process for choosing narrative essays

and composite characters to present the findings, and finally, ends with a discussion on my reflexive practice throughout the process. Next, in chapter four, I share my findings in two parts with part one describing the various challenges and negotiations associated with one's health, well-being, and identity during this transition, and part two illustrating the ways gender ideologies impacted this transition regarding the participants' gendered expectations, their bodies, and how they were perceived by others in both in, and outside of the industry after leaving the sport. Then, in chapter five I critically examine my findings and bring meaning to the stories shared in connection to the existing literature, while also contributing new insight to address my research questions. Lastly, in chapter seven, I start by summarizing the implications of this study, note the limitations of this study, suggest areas for future research, and conclude by sharing some insight into my personal growth and position within the bodybuilding industry today.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I provide a review of the literature related to bodybuilding and life transitions with a focus on retirement, as well as a discussion on feminism and feminist theory. First, I discuss key terms and concepts to provide context. Next, I share an overview of the bodybuilding literature with attention to three main areas: gender ideologies, health implications, and the roles of digital technologies. Then, I briefly outline the life transition literature including discussions on retirement, identity and coping strategies. This leads to a review of the athletic retirement literature where I focus on aesthetic-based sports. Lastly, I address the research gaps in the literature, discuss how my research will address these gaps, and conclude with a discussion on feminism, the guiding theory for my research.

2.1 Key Terms and Concepts

This section provides an overview of key terms to help the reader understand the foundational concepts that underpin my research.

2.1.1 Sport

Various definitions of sport are influenced by cultural, political, and social factors. In 2009, Coakley and Donnelly defined sport as "institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by participants motivated by internal and external rewards" (p. 4). A more recent definition considers sports as physical activity-related challenges or competitive contests that often involve rules, organization, and a form of comparison (Coakley, 2021). Sport participation can be taken up in various forms,

whether directly (i.e., as an athlete) or indirectly (e.g., coaching, administration, spectatorship) (Canadian Heritage, 2013). Furthermore, sport can be taken up at various levels, whether that is informal (e.g., intramural, community sport) or formal (e.g., professionalized leagues or colligate sports). Sport, in various contexts, is often explored by leisure scholars as sport can fulfill multiple definitions or understandings of leisure—from leisure as free time, to leisure as an activity, to serious leisure (Heintzman, 2013). It is common for scholars in sport-related research fields to use broad definitions of sport that are flexible and inclusive (Coakley, 2021).

Although there is debate on whether bodybuilding is truly considered a sport (Aranyosi, 2018; Kind & Helms, 2023; Liokaftos, 2019), for my research, bodybuilding will be defined as a sport based on its proximity to leisure, organized competitive nature, and requirement for physical exertion (throughout the *entire* competitive process). Further discussion on the unique nature of bodybuilding and the existing debate will be covered in section 2.2.

2.1.2 Gender

Although sometimes used interchangeably, sex and gender are different concepts. Sex is rooted in biological differentiations while gender is socially constructed and influenced (Gayle, 1975; Sedgewick, 1990). Sex and gender interact in what may be referred to as the sex/gender system: "the system by which chromosomal sex is turned into, and processed as, cultural gender" which can "minimize the attribution of people's various behaviours and identities to chromosomal sex and to maximize their attribution to socialized gender constructs" (Sedgewick, 1990; p. 28). In a Western context, however, there is an ongoing acceptance that gender is not binary. While there was once a close association with sex/gender, genderqueer or non-binary may refer to those who

may associated with both or neither male/female social scripts (Richards et al., 2016). With emerging presence and advocacy, the wide spectrum of gender identity is becoming increasingly recognized and accepted in legal, medical, and psychological fields (Richards et al., 2016). Before moving on, I must first clarify, that when using the terms men and women in this dissertation, I am referring to anyone who *identifies* with these categories, as I acknowledge that gender is not binary. The social construction of gender is dynamic. That is, the social scripts assigned to certain genders can change over time and vary depending on the context, further understood as gender ideologies.

2.1.2.1 Gender Ideologies

Ideologies describe a set of beliefs and perceptions that influence how one understands their world (Shaw, 2001). Ideologies can therefore impact how one views the world, as well as their behaviours and actions. These views are not necessarily fixed, but rather dynamic in response to the ever-changing social climate (Vallet, 2017). Ideologies may lead to benefits for some groups over others based on social and/or cultural factors which can in turn, normalize existing power inequities and promote exclusion and/or oppression for some groups (Shaw, 2001). Ideologies can describe various social elements including gender. Gender ideologies consist of "interrelated ideas and beliefs that are widely used to define masculinity and femininity, identify people as male or female, evaluate forms of sexual expression, and determine the appropriate roles of males and females in society" (Coakley, 2021, p. 15).

Generally, Western perspectives use masculinity and femininity to prescribe the "appropriate" ways men and women should think, behave, and present themselves (Stets &

Burke, 2000a). For example, women should be emotional, submissive, and caring to be considered feminine (Stets & Burke, 2000a). In contrast, a stereotypical masculine man is confident, aggressive, competitive, and dominant (Stets & Burke, 2000a). Beyond actions, these gender ideologies also prescribe how one should physically appear. For example, increased muscle mass is often associated with masculinity. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that these prescriptions are often built on the assumptions of White men and women in Western society. Gender ideologies may differ depending on the socio-cultural climate. The socially constructed views that are often imposed on both men and women, and then conveyed within gendered ideologies, are perpetuated, and amplified within sport culture. These oppressive norms that are perpetuated within the sport culture are a product of gender ideologies, and ultimately, patriarchy, a social structure that influences the gendered participation in sport.

2.1.3 Patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to the dominance of men's perspectives, identity, and opinions, and the associated power relationship in which men are viewed as superior to women within society (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Hunnicutt, 2009; Ortner, 2022). Patriarchal organizations appear in various social contexts from small-scale sites such as families to larger institutional contexts such as the military, law enforcement, and religious organizations (Ortner, 2022). While patriarchy is often understood as an imbalance of power favouring men over women, patriarchy also disfavours men with certain intersecting identities. That is, patriarchy is entangled with other dominant social systems such as White supremacy, ableism, and heteronormativity (Crenshaw, 1989; Hunnicutt, 2009; Ortner, 2022). Patriarchy notably oppresses women, but also oppresses men of

colour, gay men, and men with disabilities as they do not fit the cis-White men role that dominates these oppressive social structures (Johnson & Parry, 2022). Leisure, and particularly sport, represents an important site to explore the influence of gender and power as "women's leisure is often a reflection of their oppression in the patriarchy" (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 8).

Patriarchy is incredibly influential within the sport culture for not only women but all genders. Hegemonic masculinity, according to Johnson (2013) is "the configuration of male gender practices that serves to legitimize patriarchy and heterosexuality" (p. 250) and ensures that power remains with ci-gender, typically White, men. As such, hegemonic masculinity may be difficult for men to challenge resulting in hypermasculinity as evident in traditional and social media (e.g., the jock, the cowboy) (Johnson, 2013). Challenging and confronting hegemonic masculinity is an important component of feminist research by calling attention to power dynamics in society that impact women and men with varying identities. According to Coakley (2021), sports not only celebrate masculinity but also reinforce male power and dominance. This creates an environment harmful to those outside the bounds of the patriarchy, and to those who feel pressure to uphold traditional beliefs or hierarchical gender ideologies, as Coakley highlights: "gender equity in sports is not just a woman's issue. It involves creating options for boys and men to play sports based on pleasure and participation more than power and performance" (p. 235).

While some aspects of sport culture have become more accommodating (e.g., the creation of the Special Olympics and Paralympics), sport culture is still subject to excluding those with identities that do not serve the patriarchy (DiCaro, 2021; Roth & Basow, 2004). For example,

Black women athletes are often criticized and held to different standards compared to not only men, but White women athletes too (DiCaro, 2021) and gay men athletes are often subject to criticism, unfair treatment, and ridicule within certain sport culture such as the American National Football League (NFL) (de la Cretaz, 2021).

2.1.3.1 Gender, Patriarchy and Sport

Leisure, and particularly sport, is a common site for socially constructed gender roles to not only be learned, but reinforced (Henderson, 1994). Many sport organizations are often sex-segregated with a binary understanding of gender (i.e., men and women). This dates to the mid-ninetieth century when men developed sport with the understanding that sports were for men, and sport was not a place for women who were expected to adhere to the gender ideologies prescribed to women (i.e., non-aggressive, timid, etc.) (Coakley, 2021; Roth & Basow, 2004). Eventually, with the global women's rights movement promoting gender equality, the health and fitness movements in the 1970s promoting exercise for health benefits, and increased media coverage of women's sports, women's sport participation became more accepted (Coakley, 2021). Women, however, were often encouraged to participate in sports with less emphasis on masculinist characteristics, such as gymnastics and figure skating which emphasize artistic ability, poise, and grace (Reimer & Visio, 2003). Given the association of muscularity and physicality with sport, women were historically not included in sports that exhibit a masculinist structure or traits (i.e., highly physical sports such as hockey, football etc.). Some women broke through the glass ceiling and entered men's sport, while others succeeded within women's sport and fought back against oppressive norms of what women's sport should be (Roth & Basow,

2004). Even with the advances in women's sport participation and the increased attempts to make sport inclusive for all (Coakley & Donnelley, 2009), it is evident that the industry is both continuously evolving and not devoid of injustice.

Today, various issues surrounding gender in sport continue to surface. For example, in 2021, former sports media journalist, Julie DiCaro, published a book called *Sidelined: Sports, Culture, and Being a Woman in America,* which exposed the great inequalities that exist in all realms of the Western sports industry including athletes, journalists, and fans/spectators. DiCaro's (2021) second edition features an author's note highlighting the backlash, particularly from men in the industry, she received for publishing such a book, further proving the deeply rooted issues within the sports industry. In her book, DiCaro highlights recent examples in the industry indicating a need for change:

> The Norwegian women's beach handball team was fined for refusing to wear skimpy bikini bottoms at the European Championships, opting instead to wear the same shorts as the men's teams… It was a fight they continued to wage during the Summer Olympics in Tokyo, where swim caps designed for and to protect natural Black hair were also disallowed…. And while we saw Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka hailed by some for choosing to put their mental health first and drop out of huge competitions, there were also plenty of detractors, both on social media and in the press. (DiCaro, 2021, p. viii-ix)

These examples highlight some of the many existing issues within the sport industry today and even so, the sports industry continues to evolve. In summary, patriarchy influences sport culture

in terms of engagement, experience, and participation. Bodybuilding in particular has been explored in the literature for its gendered nature and influence from the patriarchy. The next section provides an overview of bodybuilding followed by a discussion on the key bodies of literature exploring this sport.

2.2 Bodybuilding

Competitive bodybuilding, initially a sport comparing and judging men based on their muscle mass and symmetry, gained popularity in the 1960s (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996). Eventually, the sport expanded to include women, with the first publicized women's bodybuilding competition in 1979 (Klein, 1985). Over the years, bodybuilding federations have introduced new divisions for both men and women to include those with different levels of muscle mass and varying physiques (NPC News, 2024b). Women's competitive bodybuilding has evolved to include different divisions known as bodybuilding, physique, fitness, figure, bikini, and wellness[4](NPC News, 2024b). Men's competitive bodybuilding includes divisions known as bodybuilding, classic physique, and physique. These divisions have different judging criteria. For example, women's bodybuilding and physique divisions focus on increased muscle mass and significantly decreased body fat, in contrast to the bikini division, where the judging criteria are less focused on muscle mass and more focused on stage presence and posing (Suffolk, 2015). Bodybuilding federations often have an all-ages category called 'open', as well as age-specific categories for teens (ages 18 to 19), masters (over the age of 35), grandmasters (over the age of 45), and in

[4] In December 2024, the International Federation of Bodybuilding introduced a seventh division called "Fit Model," a division requiring less muscle than bikini, emphasizing a natural, attainable, "beach body." This division will debut during the 2025 season.

some cases, super-grandmasters (over the age of 50) (NPC News, 2024b). Women's divisions are most often separated into height classes, while men's divisions vary (e.g., bodybuilding is separated into weight classes, classic physique is separated into height and weight classes, and physique is separated into height classes) (Connolly, 2001). Additionally, men's bodybuilding divisions in the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) often include a wheelchair division. Some federations are strictly drug-free (e.g., World Natural Bodybuilding Federation), some offer both "natural" and "open" competitions (e.g., The Canadian Physique Alliance), and others such as the professional stream of the IFBB, do not have any restrictions on drug use or drug testing.

A competition, or show, typically involves the comparison of athletes performing mandatory poses set by the federation and depending on the division, may include an individual posing routine (NPC News, 2024b). Posing routines and comparison rounds are judged with strict judging criteria that are determined by the federation and disseminated across all shows within that federation (NPC News, 2024b). Generally, competitors must compete in a regional show in their chosen federation to qualify for a national show. In some cases, competitors must even place in the top three or five of their height class to qualify for a national show. Depending on the federation, winning an overall place at a national show often results in a "pro card," (i.e., professional status), which allows the competitor to compete in professional-level shows. For competitors in the IFBB, winning a pro show qualifies an athlete for the Olympia, an annual event that is considered the most prestigious and competitive in the world (Vallet, 2017).

2.2.1 Globalization, Capitalism, and the Bodybuilding Industry

While bodybuilding has grown in popularity, compared to other sports industries and federations, it is often considered a "forgotten" sport that operates differently compared to multi-billion-dollar federations such as World Cup soccer (Vallet, 2017). For example, many regional shows in North America are hosted by an individual or a small group of people who invest their own time and money in the show upfront and then rely on registration to earn an income with larger shows potentially sponsored or supported by other organizations (Canadian Physique Alliance, 2024). As a result, promoters and those working for bodybuilding federations must often ensure that their events are attracting competitors, sponsors, and attendees to be profitable (Boyle, 2005; Vallet, 2017). The introduction of women's divisions beyond just bodybuilding was a direct response to the lack of competitors and attendees for women's bodybuilding shows (Boyle, 2005). That is, the ongoing introduction of divisions (e.g., bikini) with a focus on femininity aims to bring more interest to competitors and attract others to the sport by abiding by socio-cultural trends, norms, and expectations (Boyle, 2005; Vallet, 2017). Furthermore, the inclusion of hair, makeup, and tan in all women's division judging criteria was introduced to offset the masculinity depicted by increased musculature (Boyle, 2005; Connolly, 2001; Vallet, 2017). Bodybuilding competitors must financially invest in their competitive careers. A cost breakdown conducted by a Canadian coach suggests that an enhanced athlete (PEDs included) will spend between 6345 and 16 830 Canadian dollars, and a natural athlete (no PEDs, drug test fee included) will spend between 5145-13 630 Canadian dollars, on a four-month prep including one regional competition (Sequin-Morin, 2024). These figures include all costs associated with competing such as federation registration, coaching costs, attire, and groceries.

Globally, multiple bodybuilding federations exist, however, in 2018 the IFBB pushed for global dominance resulting in the termination and/or restructuring of smaller, geographically specific federations (Vallet, 2017). This occurred worldwide and reinforced the global permeance of Western popular culture through global standardized judging criteria. Furthermore, while much of the existing literature focuses on the Western bodybuilding industry (typically America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand), bodybuilding cultures outside of the Western world are becoming of interest to researchers in the field (Rahbari, 2019). Most notably, Iranian bodybuilders are at the forefront of these interests—illustrating the interconnectedness through globalization within the industry. The sports culture in Iran is dominated by men. Women are limited in sports participation and spectatorship due to Iranian regulations of women's attire leading to women being banned from taking part in international events (Rahbari, 2019). Despite the ban, multiple women continue to compete in bodybuilding at international events resulting in the prosecution of at least one competitor who was arrested for posting pictures without her hijab online (Rahbari, 2019).

2.2.2 Bodybuilding in the Literature

Bodybuilding is a dynamic sport that is everchanging in response to social, political, and cultural factors. Early research in the field often explored bodybuilding with a focus on biology and physiology. For example, scholars focused on topics such as anabolic steroids (Haupt & Rovere, 1984) and the effects of weight training (Gaines & Butler; 1980). Furthermore, given that the sport was dominated by men in its early years, much of the literature only explored the perspectives of men (e.g., Klein, 1993). For the few scholars exploring the perspectives of

women, focus was placed on those with extreme muscularity (e.g., St. Martin & Gavey, 1996). As the bodybuilding industry grew in popularity scholars expanded their focus onto more socio-cultural aspects of the sport. This review will cover three main bodies of literature within this field including (a) the relation to gender ideologies, (b) health implications, and (c) the roles of digital technologies in the sport. These topics will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

2.2.2.1 Relation to Gender Ideologies

Bodybuilding emphasizes body appearance and aesthetic (Aranyosi, 2018), and to succeed in the sport, the body must be shaped to fit standardized criteria, often based on Western gender ideologies (Tajrobehkar, 2016). According to Tajrobehkar (2016), "bodybuilding subculture does not exist in a social vacuum; the broader social and cultural attitudes around femininity, masculinity, and muscularity operate in complex ways to influence (and be influenced by) [the sport]" (p. 302). Generally, Western norms encourage men to attain muscular physiques with emphasis on their chest, shoulders, and abdomen, and encourage women to achieve thin, athletic physiques with modest muscle development (Musolino et al., 2021). The IFBB judging criteria mirrors these norms as competitors in the men's divisions require large, symmetrical, masculine frames. Conversely, women's criteria may conform to the feminine ideologies mentioned above in the bikini division requiring a feminine shape, or resist these ideologies in divisions such as physique or figure that require increased muscle mass (IFBB, 2024). The criteria also mirror behaviours associated with masculinity or femininity. For example, women competitors are typically required to curtsy after their posing routine, while

men simply wave or nod their heads to the judges[5]. As a result, many scholars have explored this phenomenon from the perspectives of both men and women regarding the ideologies of masculinity and femininity. There is an abundance of literature exploring men's perspectives related to muscularity, masculinity and "manhood" with scholars emphasizing the connection between muscle and masculinity resulting in bodybuilding acting as a site for men to adhere to hegemonic expectations of masculinity (Denham, 2008; Klein, 1993; Murtha et al., 2021; Sparkes et al., 2018; Wiegers, 1998). Women, however, are not all granted the same space to conform to hegemonic expectations of femininity in the bodybuilding industry. Given the scope of this research, the following section will focus on women's perspectives related to gender ideologies in the bodybuilding industry.

2.2.2.1.1 Femininity: Resistance or Conformity?

Much of the early literature on women's bodybuilding experience focused on those competing in divisions requiring significant muscle mass (e.g., women's bodybuilding) since many of the new divisions (e.g., bikini), requiring less muscle mass, were not introduced until the 2000s (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996). Early feminist scholars (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Bartky, 1990) aimed to understand how women competitors negotiated their body shape and size with power dynamics and societal expectations. Sandra Lee Bartky's (1990) feminist Foucauldian analysis suggests that women's bodybuilding is an oppositional practice to the disciplinary power influencing women to work towards bodies of the appropriate shape and size with attention to

[5] As per my personal observation, it appears that the "curtsy" is naturally phasing out of women's posing routines and is replaced by simply raising one's arm in acknowledgment.

posture, gestures, and movements. She suggests that a woman shapes her body not for herself, but to be seen by "an anonymous patriarchal Other" (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996, p. 34). Bodybuilding, and particularly building muscle mass, directly opposes these expectations.

In contrast, Susan Bordo (1993) suggested that dieting acts as "one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms" that aims to produce "self-monitoring and self-disciplining docile bodies sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of those norms" (p. 186). Bordo (1993) notably compares the idea of women's bodybuilding to eating disorders and challenges the idea that bodybuilding is a feminist practice. She argues that both bodybuilding and anorexia involve exercising extreme control over one's body to perpetuate norms and expectations of an Other—whether that be oneself, or a panel of judges (Bordo, 1993; Richardson, 2008). The extreme self-control involved in a bodybuilding prep aligns with the idea of self-management in eating disorders to control and shape one's body into one that is ideal, or one that takes up less space—a characteristic of a feminine woman (Bordo, 1993).

These early contributions provided a foundation for scholars to continue exploring the unique position of women in the industry. Tanya Bunsell's (2013) ethnographic work, *Strong and Hard Women: An Ethnography of Female Bodybuilding,* was one of the first comprehensive accounts of women's bodybuilding subculture. Bunsell (2013) integrated herself into the bodybuilding subculture for two years in England to understand how women in the sport resist restrictions of imposed femininity and the reactions they receive from others. Like most early

work in this area, Bunsell generally focused on competitors in classes requiring significant muscle mass. Her (2013) intentions were as follows:

> The controversial nature of female bodybuilding has caused significant rapture on feminist ground. Whilst proponents claim that female bodybuilding is a way of empowering and liberating women, others see it as a form of corporeal entrapment. This book investigates the controversy. Do women who pump iron resist physical restrictions of imposed femininity, or are they engaged in an ultimately oppressive quest for 'perfect bodies'? (p. 6)

Bunsell (2013) described women's bodybuilding as the "antithesis of femininity" and provided an in-depth account of perspectives and reactions of the hyper-muscular woman that describe how the sport can be both empowering and restrictive due to the sport's reliance on hegemonic gender ideologies. Along with Bunsell's (2013) account, scholars also explored the relationship between muscularity and femininity in terms of deviance and stigma.

According to Howard Becker (1963), deviance refers to behaviours, beliefs or actions that break social rules and fail to align with social norms. Early deviance literature suggests that competitive bodybuilders are deviant and therefore receive negative reactions from others since their actions or behaviours do not align with what is perceived as normal in society (Becker, 1963). Scholars also described deviance as a 'curve of conformity' in which individuals on opposite ends of the curve both exhibit deviant behaviours but receive different reactions from society (Winslow, 1970). Heckert and Heckert (2002) expanded on this concept and described

four distinct types of deviance. These include (a) negative deviance, aligning with traditional views of deviance in which individuals perform actions that do not align with social norms and receive negative social reactions, (b) positive deviance, occurring when an individual also performs actions or behaviours that do not align with social norms, however, receive positive social reactions, (c) rate-busting, referring to positive deviance with negative reactions from society, and (d) deviance admiration, referring to negative deviance with positive reactions from society (Heckert & Heckert, 2002; Spreitzer & Soneshein, 2004).

Chananie-Hill et al. (2012) applied Heckert and Heckert's (2002) typology of deviance to an ethnographic exploration of women's bodybuilding. The authors interviewed 10 amateur women bodybuilders between the ages of 21 and 37. The authors determined that different aspects of being a bodybuilder can be classified within the four different types of deviance with positive deviance and negative deviance being the most prevalent. For example, (a) dieting and/or following a nutrition protocol, (b) building strength and muscle, and (c) following an exercise routine, were three components associated with bodybuilding that when not perceived as extreme, trended in the direction of desirable social norms and led to positive reactions from others (Chananie-Hill et al., 2012). However, bodybuilding often takes these components of fitness to an extreme, leading to a negative response from others. For example, women bodybuilders may display negative deviance through the defiance of gender norms including the loss of feminine characteristics such as breast tissue, and extreme muscle development (Chananie-Hill et al., 2012). Overall, the authors found that reactions towards women's bodybuilding were not uniform or static and were often contradictory depending on the audience, context, or environment (Chananie-Hill et al., 2012).

Shilling and Bunsell (2009) also conducted an ethnographic study with 26 women between the ages of 23 and 48 who considered themselves bodybuilders (based on their diet and exercise patterns), however, did not participate in competitions. The authors focused on negative deviance and how it can result in the stigmatization of a population (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Deviance and stigma are closely linked, however, depending on the type of deviance, an individual may or may not be stigmatized (Heatherton et al., 2000). The authors found that women bodybuilders may be viewed as deviant by society in general but may also face criticism and negative reactions from those close to them such as friends, family, and co-workers (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). The authors concluded that female bodybuilders are a stigmatized group and can be considered '"gender outlaws" by defying the gendered order of social interaction (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Importantly, these studies focused on those competing in categories requiring increased muscle mass or did not consider the competitive aspect of bodybuilding at all (Chananie Hill et al., 2012; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Given the significant growth of the bodybuilding industry and the introduction of the bikini division in 2009 and the wellness division in 2020, scholars are now expanding their focus to account for these divisions that appear to be built around conforming to gender ideologies rather than resisting them.

Recently, the discourse has shifted as scholars offer differing perspectives on how women competitors resist and/or conform to existing gender ideologies depending on one's division (Tajrobehkar, 2016; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Scholars are starting to recognize the permeance of socially constructed gender ideologies in the industry with the IFBB acting as a governing body to enforce and control how women competitors look and even behave through the performance elements of the sport (Tajrobehkar, 2016; Vallet, 2017). For example,

Tajrobehkar's (2016) exploration of women's bodybuilding explicitly focused on bikini competitors and how they negotiated femininity as she argued that hegemonic ideals of femininity are reinforced and reproduced by bikini competitions. Participants in her study expressed mixed feelings regarding the division with some positive, in terms of being able to participate without the extreme levels of muscle required for other divisions, and some negative, suggesting that the posing routines, high heel requirement, and focus on appearance (including hair, makeup, and tan) take away from what the sport traditionally represents (i.e., muscle mass and symmetry) (Tajrobehkar, 2016). Some participants even described the bikini posing requirements (i.e., model walk and emphasis on performance rather than flexing) as degrading and inappropriate (Tajrobehkar, 2016). Tajrobehkar (2016) further speculated that those who may have negative views of the bikini division, yet still compete in that division, may do so because of the lack of other options. That is, it may be very difficult for some women to biologically, physiologically, and genetically, achieve the physical requirements to compete in another division without the use of extreme measures (e.g., PEDs).

Additionally, Musolino and colleagues (2021), acknowledged the contrast in women's divisions by showing photographs of women bodybuilders with differing degrees of muscle development (i.e., low development in bikini competitors, moderate development in figure competitors, and high development in physique competitors) to a sample of 263 participants. Participants were asked to share their perceptions of the women depicted in the photographs. The authors concluded that the increased muscularity of the women influenced perceptions of physical attractiveness, expected positive life outcomes, gender role traits, and sexual orientation

(Musolino et al., 2021). Regardless of gender, participants in this study perceived those with more muscle as unnatural, and unrealistic, and suggested that their appearance defied normative gender expectations for women's appearances (Musolino et al., 2021).

Again, given the recent introduction of these new bodybuilding divisions for women, the academic literature is quite limited with few scholars exploring experience. However, the emergence and popularity of these newer divisions must not be ignored. Based on the evolution of bikini Olympia winners, one may argue (and many judges and coaches do), that the bikini division is the most dynamic in the industry with expectations changing yearly (Clawson, 2022). IFBB Pro League Head Judge, Becky Clawson (2022) even stated on her Instagram:

> Bikini is our gateway division. A look that is meant to be attainable and sustainable. A fit physique you can maintain—and then jump into a show without an extremely long or miserable prep. I can tell you that this ideal is front of mind for those at the top—and you can see that the league holds the line on conditioning and muscularity to keep this division accessible and appealing to not just our community, but the general public.

Although Clawson's comment states that this division is meant to be "attainable and sustainable," the ideal "bikini physique" may represent the current stereotype, trend, or new norms for women's bodies and not necessarily what is "attainable and sustainable" (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996). Failure to adhere to these criteria would lead to an unsuccessful career. However, to achieve this ideal physique, or the physique required to be competitive in any division, athletes must undergo an extreme, regimented diet and exercise protocol. The subsequent section

will provide an overview of the literature regarding these extreme protocols and resulting health implications.

2.2.2.2 Health Implications

Bodybuilding is well known for the extreme dieting and exercise protocols required to achieve the lean physiques that are expected. While non-competitors who are attentive to their dieting and exercise practices may exhibit healthy, attainable physiques, bodybuilding competitors take these practices to an extreme, unattainable level, often resulting in negative health implications. An excerpt from Maureen Connolly's (2001) semiotic phenomenology account describes the extremes required to compete:

> For the past three days I have consumed nothing but protein and about 10 oz. of water and black coffee, which I sip in paced and controlled intervals in order to make it last over time. I have trained and dieted my way down to 114 pounds and have spent enough time in the sauna to sweat out what little water remains in my muscles. (p.229)

This section will provide an overview of the existing literature regarding bodybuilding prep protocols and their associated negative health consequences. Before delving into the literature, it is important to note that while competitors may prep themselves, the majority will hire a coach (Alwan et al., 2022; Mosley, 2009). There are numerous coaches and coaching teams across the globe, and these individuals or teams are not regulated by any federations. That is, coaches work independently of the federations, and while there is certainly some political crossover (i.e.,

coaches may sponsor a show, or may have relations with the judges), the federation is not responsible for a coach's actions, and vice versa.

As shown by Connelly's (2001) account above, extreme measures are often taken to achieve competitive physiques. Given the variability of everyone's biology, physiology, and genetics, along with variability in coaching techniques and styles, it is difficult to define an exact weight loss or training regime that applies to all competitors (Alwan et al., 2022; Chapell & Simper, 2018). Furthermore, although Fagerberg (2018) suggests that it is difficult to consolidate bodybuilder diet and exercise experience when considering confounding factors such as PEDs, there is evidence to suggest general patterns. For example, in a sample of 158 women-identifying competitors, 94% used gradual dieting, 64% restricted food, 84% performed excessive exercise, and 73% used a method of body water manipulation to prepare for a competition (Alwan et al., 2022). Problematic tactics such as laxative use, diuretic use, and withholding food are common amongst competitors without regard to gender and/or division (Alwan et al., 2022; Fagerberg, 2018) and regardless of one's specific protocol, there are numerous documented health consequences that may result from these extreme practices. It is important to note that these consequences are not absolute or guaranteed to affect every competitor. For example, an individual may choose to compete as a "bucket list" item knowing they will return to their previous lifestyle and never compete again. This individual may not be as impacted as someone who competes regularly. The following sections provide an overview of potential consequences that are documented in the literature pertaining more to serious competitors, or those who

compete frequently and invest their livelihoods in the sport again, with emphasis placed on women's experiences.

2.2.2.2.1 Mental and Psychological Health Implications

Mental and psychological health ramifications are well-documented in the literature for active competitors. First, disordered eating and eating disorders are often cited in the literature as implications related to bodybuilding for competitors of any gender (Alwan et al., 2022; Coy-Dibley, 2016; Dèttore et al., 2020; Devrim et al., 2018; Fagerberg, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017; Mosley, 2009). In Alwan's (2022) sample of 158 woman-identifying competitors, nearly 40% reported disordered eating symptoms, which may include, but are not limited to binge eating, food preoccupation, laxative use, and self-induced vomiting. These habits are likely tied to the extreme focus on one's diet, and the associated body ideals within bodybuilding subculture (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019). Second, eating disorders may also encompass dysmorphic disorders, whether muscle or body dysmorphia. Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) or body dysmorphia, is preoccupation and/or extreme concern with an aspect of one's appearance often leading to anxious or obsessive behaviours (Coy-Dibley, 2015). Muscle dysmorphia, once described as "reverse anorexia," is the "preoccupation with the idea that one's body is not sufficiently lean and muscular" (Mosley, 2019, p. 192; Pope et al., 1997). Both body dysmorphia and muscle dysmorphia can cause distress, anxiety, and missing events, and may lead an individual to take unorthodox measures to address their preoccupation (e.g., cosmetic surgery, PEDs etc.) (Alwan, 2022; Mosley, 2019). Scholars speculate that competitive bodybuilders are more susceptible to these dysmorphic disorders with body dysmorphia affecting more women

(Coy-Dibley, 2015) and muscle dysmorphia affecting more men (Mosley, 2019; Pope et al., 1997). Third, as briefly mentioned, mental health implications such as anxiety, depression, and narcissism appear common among competitive bodybuilders (Mosley, 2019; Dèttore et al., 2020; Hurst et al., 2000). While these implications may stem from overarching food or body image related conditions, they may also originate from the high level of perfectionism and self-policing required to succeed in the sport (Hill & Madigan, 2017). The strive to constantly improve can become obsessive, leading to decreased self-esteem, increased exercise dependence, and burnout (Hurst et al., 2000; Rao, 2018). These mental consequences overlap with the physical and physiological effects experienced by bodybuilding competitors.

2.2.2.2.2 Physical and Physiological Health Implications

Given the focus on one's body within the sport, it is of no surprise that active competitors may face challenges related to their physical and physiological health while competing. First, numerous negative health consequences may result from PED use (Ainsworth et al., 2022; Andreasson & Johansson, 2019). This is not to say that PEDs cannot be used effectively, however, if the drug source is unknown, or a competitor is following a problematic protocol, there is an increased risk of negative health implications (Mosley, 2009; Havnes et al., 2021). Commonly used PEDs may include anabolic-androgenic steroids known for improving muscle mass and strength, human growth hormone, often contributing to muscle growth, and various drug "cocktails" from both categories (Birzniece, 2015; Havnes et al., 2021). Much of the literature examines men's experiences with and related consequences from PED use (Mosley, 2009; Pope & Brower, 2000) but some scholars also explore the implications women face from

PED-related protocols. For example, women taking anabolic-androgenic steroids reported unwanted masculinizing effects such as a deepening voice and increased hair growth along with other side effects such as acne and clitoral enlargement (Havnes et al., 2021). Many of these side effects are irreversible even after drug use ceases and may lead to feelings of shame and regret (Havnes et al., 2021). Secondly, and in relation to PED use, bodybuilders are prone to cardiovascular-related issues such as cardiomyopathy which can lead to fatal outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2009). Currently, some bodybuilders and coaches with significant social media followings are speaking out against the excessive use of PEDs, and the dangers of continued use (Ayotte, 2022; Saini, 2022). These athletes and coaches address how many competitors struggle with their decreased muscle mass and associated identity upon retirement, often leading retired athletes to continue unhealthy and dangerous protocols to maintain a physique that is simply unattainable (Ahmed et al., 2019). Thirdly, hormonal imbalance and dysfunction are common among competitors. For some, these consequences may be related to PED use (Havnes et al., 2019), however, natural competitors still face these implications. According to Alwan et al., (2022), restrictive diets and excessive exercise protocols can affect metabolic and endocrine health leading to side effects such as menstrual dysfunction for people who menstruate. For example, amenorrhea, the absence of mensuration, is common for athletes in sports requiring high levels of exercise and low body fat percentages such as bodybuilding, which can influence hormonal balance and fertility (Alwan et al., 2022; Star, 2021). Lastly, in relation to all the implications mentioned above, competitors are more prone to relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S) and low energy availability (LEA) (Alwan et al., 2022; Fagerberg, 2018). Given the low caloric intake and excessive exercise protocols required to reach such a low body fat percentage, low

energy is not uncommon and can result in increased muscle loss, hormonal imbalances, mood disturbances, and poor cardiovascular health (Fagerberg, 2018).

2.2.2.2.3 Other Health Implications

The previous two sections highlight an abundance of commonly cited health-related issues that bodybuilding competitors may experience. Competitors may also face other health implications such as digestive issues and hyponatremia (from diuretic use and electrolyte manipulation) as well as non-health implications such as identity crises, income loss, and shifts in social networks that are less discussed in the academic literature (Alwan et al., 2022, Devrim et al., 2019; Scafoglio, 2021; Star, 2021). As mentioned, while many of these implications may be confounded by PEDs, they may also be confounded by other factors such as age and genetics. For example, due to age-related biological changes, women competitors often face additional hardships in prepping as they age related to both their psychological and physiological health (Newmire & Webb, 2021; Matharu, 2019).

There are numerous health implications competitors may face, whether they are well-documented in the literature or spoken about "off the record." To account for the abundance of implications, Maier and colleagues (2019) attempted to classify excessive bodybuilding "as a pathological syndrome based on two different theories: bodybuilding as dependency or as muscle dysmorphic disorder" (p. 626). The authors are the first (to my knowledge) to attempt to classify bodybuilding as a pathological phenomenon, and although the results were inconclusive, the authors suggested that their study provides a foundation for others to continue this exploration. Furthermore, the fact that bodybuilding is recognized in the literature for its extreme, and

potentially dangerous practices, speaks to the importance of understanding more about this sport and its implications.

In summary, there are numerous negative health effects that bodybuilding competitors may face as a result of their participation in the sport. The following excerpt from a social media post by IFBB pro, Gina Scafoglio (2022) speaks to the accumulation of these effects, which can deter some competitors from ever wanting to compete again:

> Many people finish competing and end up with nutrient deficiencies, hormonal imbalances, dysfunctional thyroids, extremely slow metabolisms, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and then end up gaining so much weight post-show that they wish they never competed in the first place.

As such, it is important to consider what happens after an individual stops competing and how these negative health implications impact their lives moving forward. The next section will cover the roles of technology in the bodybuilding industry, a fairly new area in the literature, before moving on to a discussion on life transitions and retirement.

2.2.2.3 Digital Technologies and the Bodybuilding Industry

According to Mosley (2009), "the introverted nature of the bodybuilding community means that outsiders have obtained only a glimpse of a significant underground subculture" (p. 193). However, online platforms (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, TikTok), create a space for competitors to share their experiences with a broader audience and as a result, bodybuilding may be becoming more mainstream with this increased exposure (Wellman, 2020). As such, there is a growing body of literature exploring the roles of digital technologies in the bodybuilding

experience. The growing use of technology may lead to both positive and negative consequences as discussed in the following subsections.

2.2.2.3.1 Positive Roles of Technology

Technological mobilization plays a significant role in the bodybuilding industry. Instagram is especially popular within the community and is often used to share progress during one's competitive career (Wellman, 2020). This can be helpful for (a) career growth and development, (b) community building, and (c) raising awareness to motivate social change.

First, social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube provide a space for individuals to share their lives with others and create connections through digital means. These platforms allow others to "follow" or "subscribe" to the user to access their content (Wellman, 2020). Large social media followings can attract sponsors and other career-related opportunities. As mentioned earlier, bodybuilding is built upon donors and sponsors to operate (Vallet, 2007). Growing a following on social media may be a successful method for competitors to generate a career out of their participation in the sport.

Second, these social media platforms are often used as community-building tools for competitors in all stages of their careers, whether they are prepping, in their offseason, or distancing themselves from the sport. Instagram can also be used to prevent perpetuating norms of bodybuilding culture such as maintaining a lean physique year-round. For example, campaigns such as '#gainingweightiscool,' promoted weight gain in women and encouraged both former and non-competitors to share their transformation photos of weight gain rather than weight loss. This social media movement was recently explored by Hockin-Boyers and

colleagues (2021) who suggested that engaging with social media through transformation photos offers a unique qualitative approach to understanding how digital technology can mediate our lives. Scholars are beginning to recognize the importance of social media and digital culture in communities centred on fitness, health, and bodybuilding, further reinforcing the value of technology and social media. Marshall et al., (2019; 2020) explored the negotiation of femininity and masculinity in both female and male bodybuilders on Instagram, providing evidence that technologies such as Instagram are extremely influential in both perpetuating and resisting hegemonic norms of femininity and masculinity through photo and video sharing in a digital space. Furthermore, "new digital spaces could play a role in creating visibility and accessibility to non-mainstream discourses not only about women's bodies and physicality but also about fundamental concepts such as femininity and masculinity" (Rahbari, 2018, p. 598).

Third**,** social media applications are commonly used in the industry and can act as a vessel for social change and resistance through online movements (i.e., #strongernotsmaller; #gainingweightiscool) (Hockin-Boyers, 2021). More recently, the bodybuilding industry and online community have shown a rapid and multivocal response to not only sexual violence but also the manipulation and unethical practices of coaches and other competitors in the industry (Grech, 2021). The #MeToo movement was recently adopted by women sharing their stories of emotional abuse, sexual abuse and manipulation within the industry (Soucie et al., 2012). In August 2021, the online fitness community re-ignited #MeToo in a fitness context as former and current competitors called out past coaches for unethical practices such as pushing steroids, extremely low-calorie diets, and extremely high cardio protocols for competitors with a

movement called #eyeswideopen (Grech, 2021). The movement within the industry paralleled that of #MeToo, as competitors rapidly banded together to share their experiences with former coaches resulting in consequences for the coaches (i.e., lawsuits, bans from competitions, loss of business) (Soucie et al., 2012). This movement is especially critical in the topic of bodybuilding as one's experience with their coach will likely play a large role in their experience competing. Furthermore, the topic of coaches is tied to a conversation on power and how coaches can manipulate their clients for financial gain without considering the client's mental and physical well-being (Owton & Sparkes, 2015). Without technology and social media, these movements and resulting attention may not have come to fruition.

2.2.2.3.2 Negative Roles of Technology

While the growth of technology use in the bodybuilding industry provides many positive opportunities, this newfound growth may also lead to increased (a) the spread of misinformation and (b) digitized dysmorphia.

First, social media platforms provide competitors with the opportunity to develop new or sustain existing identities, blurring the boundaries of reality (Wellman, 2020). As such, competing in bodybuilding may seem more accessible than it truly is, as many portray this lifestyle in a manner that seems attainable (Star, 2021). As a result, some may enter the sport without accurate knowledge of the challenges they may face. Furthermore, Wellman (2020) expressed that the growth of fitness "influencers," especially those without certifications, may lead to the spreading of misinformation. According to Wellman (2020), influencers "accumulate audiences on social media platforms by posting textual and visual narrations of their personal,

everyday lives, upon which advertorials for products and services are premised" (p. 274). Given their drive for social and cultural capital, influencers may present inauthentic, and potentially harmful depictions of health, fitness, and bodybuilding (Wellman, 2020). This causes concern when an influencer has a significant following without appropriate credentials to support their information sharing.

Second, Coy-Dibley (2015) coined the concept of *Digitized Dysmorphia* to account for the extreme editing and photoshop that can occur with photos and videos online. The concept is further described below:

> Nowadays, particularly in Western culture, we can digitally alter ourselves through Photoshop…producing our own notions of normativity. Not only do we critique our bodies in mirrors, but now we can digitize our dysmorphia by virtually modifying what we dislike, creating "perfect" selves instead. (Coy-Dibley, 2015, p.1)

The author questioned whether the act of altering one's image is an act of defiance or an illustration of how social norms regulate our lives whereby technology assists us in achieving our normative, but perhaps unattainable, ideals (Coy-Dibley, 2015). One of the dangerous impacts of digitized dysmorphia in bodybuilding is that to achieve this digital ideal, some may take drastic health-related measures to alter their physiques as the boundaries become blurred between one's online person and their true physique. The blurring of boundaries may be harmful to competitors in the sport and those either thinking about competing or thinking about leaving the sport, as the online community may not accurately depict the true experience.

The roles of technology and social media in the bodybuilding industry is a growing field that requires further attention. Furthermore, retirement from bodybuilding has not been considered in all three areas reviewed above (i.e., gender ideologies, health implications, and technology). Understanding how the documented experiences of active competitors translate into their retirement experience is still unknown. The next section of this review will cover psychosocial transitions including retirement before moving on to discuss athlete retirement specifically.

2.3 Life Transitions

Transitions are inevitable during the life course. While previous generations often spent less time transitioning through life events (i.e., spending the majority of their life in one career, marriage, and/or geographical location), people are now experiencing more transitions than in the past (i.e., an increase in divorce, mid-life career changes, re-location) leading to an increased interest in exploring these transitions from psychosocial perspectives (George, 1993).

2.3.1 Overview of the Transitions Literature

Life transitions encompass entry into and exit from various life roles or stages and can range from significant life events such as divorce, marriage, and retirement, often inducing a high-stress level, to less significant life events such as changing social activities or moving schools, often accompanied with relatively less stress (Hutchison, 2018). Furthermore, how the individual copes with the loss will depend on various factors such as attitude, type of transition, and/or support (George, 1993; Schlossberg, 2011). Transitions have been explored from various

perspectives, with notable work in role theory, life course perspectives and psychosocial perspectives.

2.3.1.1 Role Theory and Role Exit

Role theory was initially theorized by Linton in 1963 with the introduction of the concepts of: *status*, referring to a position in a social structure, and *role*, referring to the expected behaviours of the individual holding a specific status. Since then, the meaning of *role* has expanded, and role theory has evolved. More recent iterations of role theory suggest that role can describe behaviours and status associated with the role, whether expected or observed (George, 1993). Additionally, the dynamic nature of one's role was accounted for within this theory with *role allocation* referring to "the processes by which roles are assigned to individuals and the related dynamics of role entry and exit" and *socialization* referring to "the processes by which social structure transmits to individuals the skills and attitudes compatible with the roles that they enact" (George, 1993, p. 354). Social and cultural norms mediate both role allocation and socialization. Role theory posits that individuals go through role entry and exit, therefore experiencing a transition. However, while role theory proved helpful in understanding timing and methods to navigate transitions, the transitions explored were often normative, or anticipated, events.

Based on role theory, Helen Rose Fuchs Edbaugh's (1988) notable work *Becoming an Ex*, was one of the first pieces to investigate role exits during life transitions. As a former nun, Edbaugh reflected on her experience becoming an "ex" and connected her experience to a diverse range of "exes" such as ex-alcoholics, ex-convicts, and retirees to position their

experience socially as these groups all share the loss of a social role with which they once identified. Edbaugh (1988) defines role exit as "the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and the re-establishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role" (p. 1). Edbaugh's (1988) definition of role exit highlights not only the changes and adjustments an individual faces during a transition but also the role of the individual's significant others and their position in society. She considers becoming an "ex" to be sociologically unique as the transition involves various elements such as disengagement, disidentification, categorization, and dealing with role residual, therefore contributing to the unique nature of this social process (Edbaugh, 1988).

Although Edbaugh's research is credited for advancing role theory and the life transition literature, scholars criticized early work on role theory for being too broad, and for lack of attention to the various social, cultural, and historical factors that may influence transition timing (George, 1993). However, role theory provided the initial insight for scholars to continue studying life transitions from various perspectives.

2.3.1.2 Life Course Perspective

A life course perspective looks at how "chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change shape people's lives from birth to death" (Hutchison, 2018, p. 8). This broad perspective connects life transitions and events to *turning points*— "a time when major change occurs in the life course trajectory" (Hutchison, 2018, p. 17). While life transitions may not always lead to a turning point, Rutter (1996) suggests that three types of life events often serve as turning points: (a) life events that either close or open opportunities, (b) life events

that make a lasting change on the person's environment, and (c) life events that change a person's self-concept, belief, or expectations. A life course can involve multiple turning points, and turning points can vary based on the individual's characteristics and environment. This perspective is broader compared to role theory and can be applied to populations or individuals (George, 1993). Population-based approaches may focus on the general timing or sequence of life events, while individual approaches typically explore how specific events are linked to outcomes in various stages of one's life (George, 1993). Despite the flexibility of this perspective, scholars often critique the longitudinal nature of studies applying this perspective for being both timely and costly.

2.3.1.3 Psychosocial Transitions

The field of psychosocial transitions emerged from the fields of stress research, crisis studies, and loss research (Parkes, 1971). While early crisis scholars explored disruptive emotions (i.e., guilt, anxiety, helplessness) during crises, or periods of disequilibrium (Moos & Tsu, 1976), Parkes (1971) notably defined "psychosocial transition" to distinguish that these periods of disequilibrium can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Despite this variability in transitions, Brammer (1992) suggested that "the net effect of most life transitions is an experience of loss," even including positive transitions (e.g., a promotion) as they require individuals to change and adapt to new situations" (p. 240). Schlossberg (1981; 2011) made notable contributions to this field by highlighting the idiosyncrasy of psychosocial transitions and the factors that may influence one's perception of, and adaptation to, a particular transition. Schlossberg (2011) further deconstructed life transitions into three categories: (a) anticipated

transitions, which are expected life events such as graduation, marriage, and/or retirement, (b) unanticipated transitions, which are unexpected events that are often disruptive such as illness or being laid off, and (c) non-event transitions, which are anticipated transitions that do not occur such as financial strain delaying retirement. Schlossberg (2011) highlighted that "it is not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 159), explaining why unanticipated transitions can also trigger feelings of grief or loss.

While all three of these perspectives contribute to our understanding of life transitions, Gairdner (2015) critiques these perspectives for exploring transitions as a static concept versus a process. Despite this critique, these perspectives offer insight into how normative and nonnormative transitions are experienced. Regardless of perspective, scholars tend to agree that transitions are an inevitable part of the life course and warrant further exploration, especially when considering nonnormative events. Furthermore, scholars also explore coping strategies individuals may turn to when experiencing life transitions.

2.3.1.4 Coping Strategies

As mentioned at the forefront of this section, psychosocial transitions are often met with feelings of loss and are accompanied by feelings of stress (Schlossberg, 2011). As such, scholars have explored the various coping mechanisms one may engage with as they move through a life transition. Coping is defined as "action-oriented and intrapsychic efforts to manage the demands created by stressful events" and has been recognized for "both its significant impact on stress-related mental and physical health outcomes and for its intervention potential" (Taylor &

Stanton, 2007, p. 377). Strategies to mitigate stress and cope with life transitions may include social support, optimism, psychological control, and improving one's self-esteem (Taylor & Stanton, 2007; Schlossberg, 2011; Armstrong-Stassen, 1994). In contrast, some individuals may also take up coping strategies with negative implications such as under-eating, binge eating, and turning to addictive substances such as alcohol and drugs (Spoor et al., 2007; Ponizovskiy, 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). These coping strategies, whether positive or negative, typically work by generating a protective effect on the individual and/or generating a sense of agency or control amidst the feeling of loss (Taylor & Stanton, 2007).

Coping strategies may also vary in effectiveness depending on individual differences (e.g., baseline level of stress, personality traits) and type of transition (e.g., normative, or non-normative). With that in mind, scholars have focused their efforts on exploring the effectiveness of transition-specific coping mechanisms. For example, how individuals cope with leaving their job whether normative (i.e., planned retirement), or non-normative (i.e., being let go) is often explored in the literature (Lowis et al., 2009; Armstrong-Stassen, 1994). In this case, scholars noted that the job or career itself may influence how one copes with retirement and as a result, scholars further focused their exploration of retirement transitions, with a significant body of literature focusing on retirement from sport.

2.3.2 Retirement

Retirement broadly refers to the act of withdrawal from any position one may hold, whether that be a short-term position or a lifelong endeavour, with the expectation that one will not return (Denton & Spencer, 2009). While initially referred to as leaving one's lifelong career, the

definition of retirement is becoming more subjective (Newton, 2021). For example, retirement in an economic sense may refer to one forgoing paid employment (Atchley, 1989), while retirement in a psychological sense may refer to one mentally withdrawing from their job (Wang & Shi, 2014). Denton and Spencer (2009) describe modern retirement best: "retirement can be voluntary or involuntary; it can be gradual or sudden; and it can be temporary or permanent… retirement is complex and no one definition will satisfactorily represent all situations" (p. 64). The following sections discuss various elements of the retirement transition explored in the literature.

2.3.2.1 Identity and Retirement

During the retirement transition, one may forgo their career (or activity) related identity and gain new identities through identity negotiation. Identity is defined as a "multidimensional view of oneself that is both enduring and dynamic," (Gairdner, 2015, p. 30; Lally, 2007) and often shifts during life transitions (Newton, 2021; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Identity has been theorized from various perspectives. For example, two dominant theories in the field of social psychology are (a) social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and (b) identity theory (McCall & Simmons, 1978). Both perspectives suggest that "the self is reflective in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories and classifications" through self-categorization (social identity theory), or identification (identity theory) (Stets & Burke, 2000b, p. 224). That is, society (including social structures and norms) can shape a person's sense of self, which then may influence how they think, act and behave. Furthermore, social identity theory emphasizes the role of intergroup relations—that is, how people come to see themselves as members of one group/category (the in-

group) in comparison to another (the out-group)" (Stets & Burke, 2000b, p. 226) whereas identity theory focuses on "categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, or the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance (Stets & Burke, 2000b, p. 225; Burke, 1991; Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Identity theory posits that a person develops an identity through social interactions (Davis, 2016; Stets & Burke, 2000b). This identity could be a role identity (i.e., mother, athlete etc.), a social identity (i.e., cultural or race), and/or a person identity (i.e., personal characteristics such as disciplined, moral etc.) which operates across both role and social identities (Davis, 2016). Once a person associates with an identity, they work to verify this identity in social situations. That is, a person will act in alignment with their identity, gauge social reactions which they compare to their identity standards and then adjust their actions and behaviours accordingly (Davis, 2016). Any non-verifying reactions can cause tension in an individual as they come to believe that their behaviours, thoughts, and appearance are not aligning with their actions potentially causing them to change these patterns to realign and re-verify that identity. This tension may encompass a period of identity negotiation.

Identity negotiation permeates the retirement literature and is especially prominent in the athletic retirement literature (Osborne, 2009; Whitbourne, 2002). One's career is a fundamental source of personal identity. As a result, retirees may feel that their identity shifts or is even sacrificed upon retirement (Newton, 2021). While many existing theories can be applied to explore identity and retirement, Erikson's (1980) theory of psychosocial development and ongoing reiterations are most prominent in the retirement identity literature as they emphasize

the social and cultural nature of identity (Osborne, 2009; Whitbourne, 2002). Erikson's (1980) theory proposes eight stages of development with each stage involving a developmental task one must complete during that stage of their life. Stage five focuses on the development of identity and roles, and typically occurs during one's adolescent years (Erikson, 1980). Building on Erickson's initial theory, Marcia (1980) proposed four stages of identity formation including: (a) identity confusion/diffusion, where the individual neither explores nor commits to an identity, (b) identity foreclosure, where an individual commits to an identity without exploration, (c) moratorium, where an individual explores identities without commitment, and lastly, (d) identity achievement, where the individual has explored their options and makes a commitment (Marcia, 1980). This perspective offers insight into identity negotiation, however, does not account for the number of identities one may possess or the strength in which one associates with a specific identity (Marcia, 1980). These models originally addressed adolescent identity development but have permeated the retirement literature as retirees typically reach identity achievement during earlier stages of life and retirement leads to a loss of contributing factors (i.e., work) to that achievement. As a result, retirees often re-develop their identity based on this role loss and often seek out new roles (Newton, 2021). Some suggest that retirees experience Erikson's stage five again during their later years of life, especially considering the increased life expectancy and increased functional/physical health of older adults now when compared to the initial conception of this theory (Newton, 2021).

Although not explicitly explored in the retirement literature, the rise of technology and the entanglement of social media with our day-to-day lives may lead to the creation of online

identities. Scholars have started to explore how identity influences our interactions with digital technologies, and as a result, how we develop "digitally mediated identities" (Davids, 2016, Wellman, 2020). In the offline world, individuals can mediate their role identities (e.g., their employee identity enacted at work vs. their mother identity enacted once they get home), however, the network expansion and overlap seen in social media causes "context collapse" (boyd, 2010), which is "the blurring of network walls and, in particular, the intermingling of identities such that a situation calls forth multiple identities at the same time, eliciting a range of behavioural expectations" (Davis, 2016; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014, p. 477). Users who experience these collapsed contexts or blurred networks must navigate their identities without knowing who is viewing their data (and how they interpret it). This context collapse has ramifications for the individual when considering identity theory as it "affords an opportunity to receive affirming feedback on identity claims in an efficient manner, thereby actively pursuing identity verification" (Davis, 2016, p. 143; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). The immediacy of social media also means that these reactions can occur at a quicker rate (e.g., seconds to minutes after a photo is posted). This perspective is important to consider as technology continues to advance and integrate itself with our lives and, eventually, retirement experience. One avenue demonstrating this entanglement is athletic careers as described in the subsequent sections.

2.3.3 Athlete Retirement

Retiring athletes may share similar challenges during the retirement transition with non-athlete retirees. Retiring athletes, however, may experience these challenges at a heightened level and potentially face distinctive challenges due to the unique nature of athletic careers. In this section,

I first discuss the unique features of athletic careers and athletic retirement. Then, I outline the existing literature on reasons for athletic retirement including mediating factors. I conclude with a summary of the existing literature exploring athlete retirement from aesthetic-dependent sports.

2.3.3.1 Unique Features of Athletic Careers

Athletic careers differ from non-athletic careers in multiple ways. First, many athletes spend most of their lives acquiring expertise in their specific sport (Gairdner, 2015). Their career becomes intertwined with their day-to-day life "as they nourish themselves, hydrate, get adequate rest, practice their chosen sport, build strength through conditioning, travel and compete, all in alignment with their sporting goals" (Gairdner, 2015, p. 25). An athlete's entire being, including their mental, physical, physiological, and social network, is influenced by their sport and as a result, athletes often entangle their identity with their sport (Sparkes et al., 2005). While connection to some of these elements (e.g., social networks) is common with non-athletic careers, the entanglement of all elements is unique to athletic careers (Lally, 2007).

Second, entry into an athletic career is typically sought during the earlier years of one's life. For example, individual, performance-based sports such as gymnastics and figure skating require training during one's developmental years (Gairdner, 2015). Furthermore, during their careers, athletes are expected to uphold a certain lifestyle based on training and competition which is often regulated by a team of coaches (Cosh et al., 2013). In some cases, many years of an athlete's life, often including developmental years, are dictated by others, and as a result, upon leaving the sport, athletes must make decisions and structure their lives without

assistance—potentially resulting in negative effects on one's health and well-being during this transition (Cosh et al., 2013).

Third, athletic careers often include some level of social valour or glory which has increased in recent years due to the commercialization and globalization of the sports industry (Donnelly, 2012; Gairdner, 2015). Some athletes are seen as celebrities or role models by others, and as a result, some athletes may link their own identity and self-worth to their level of social valour (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Furthermore, with the increased presence of social media, athletes can build a following through digital platforms and may connect their life satisfaction and well-being to their social media success (Wellman, 2020). Social media can also influence an athlete's identity by increasing social recognition and valour (Cosh et al., 2013; Gairdner, 201), therefore increasing one's risk of experiencing challenges when leaving sport. This differs from traditional occupations as social valour does not play a significant role, if any at all, in one's career-related identity. All three of these factors (entanglement with day-to-day life, early entry, and social valour), contribute to an athlete's *athletic identity (*also referred to as *athlete identity).*

2.3.3.2 Athletic Identity

As discussed, identity and identity negotiation are of central focus in the retirement literature. Athletic identity specifically, is a central focus in the athletic retirement literature. Athletic identity refers to "the degree to which an athlete identifies with the athlete role" (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008, p. 3). The strength of one's athletic identity can vary based on many factors such as abundance of social recognition, success in the industry, and intensity of training.

For example, a professional gymnast who began training full-time at a young age may possess a stronger athletic identity compared to an amateur gymnast who trains part-time while participating in other fulfilling activities. Furthermore, scholars suggest that those who participate in sports that rely on specific ideals of body shape and size such as gymnastics, diving, and ballet may also possess a stronger athletic identity than those in sports with less reliance on the body's shape and size (Gairdner, 2015; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; Wylleman et al., 2014).

2.3.4 Unique Features of Athlete Retirement

Athletic careers differ from non-athletic careers so naturally, the retirement experience will likely differ for multiple reasons as well. First, retired athletes are particularly vulnerable to experiencing mental health challenges as they adjust to life after sport. For example, stress, depression, alcohol/substance abuse, decreased self-confidence, and anxiety are common among athletes during retirement (Newman et al., 2016; Ponizovskiy, 2013; Wylleman et al., 2014). While there is no consensus for why a retired athlete may experience psychological distress, much of the literature centers on coping with the loss of their athletic identity (Pica et al., 2019). During this coping period, one may struggle to leave behind their previous lifestyle, social network, and social valour that often comes along with an athletic career (Pica et al., 2019). With the increased permanence of social media attention for athletes, sports fans now have the power to express their opinions on online platforms which may in turn affect how a retired athlete perceives themself during this transition (Marshall et al., 2019; 2020). A retired athlete may struggle to accept that they are no longer viewed the same by others, not just themselves.

Second, athletes typically follow a regimented protocol involving their training, eating, and overall lifestyle. Upon retirement, athletes typically forgo their coaching team and take control of their own lifestyle choices (Cosh et al., 2013). As a result of new routines and habits, retired athletes may experience changes to their physical and physiological functioning in terms of how they look and how they perform. This further connects to health challenges such as body and/or muscle dysmorphia, eating disorders, amenorrhea, and chronic pain from previous injuries (Sparkes et al., 2005; Wylleman et al., 2004). Furthermore, natural physiological changes with age may affect one's appearance and abilities. For example, a natural decrease in metabolism with age means bodybuilding competitors often must diet on lower calories as they age, resulting in residual negative health effects after leaving the sport (Sparkes et al., 2005).

Third, many athletes spend most of their lives training and working towards a narrow goal. As a result, many retired athletes forgo academic and/or career pursuits outside of their sport (Cosh et al., 2013). As the average age of athletic retirement is around 30, many retiring athletes are in a unique life course stage where non-athletes in similar life stages may have already advanced academically or career-wise (Cosh et al., 2013). While notions of work throughout the life course have shifted in recent years, a mid-life career change may still be an overwhelming and psychologically tasking endeavour for a retired athlete (Pica et al, 2019; Cosh et al., 2013). Upon retirement, this group may be faced with the challenge of switching careers mid-life without any prior education or experience and/or adjusting financially to a new income and lifestyle. The three reasons described above may be influenced by a variety of mediating factors.

2.3.4.1 Mediating Factors

So far, this discussion suggests that athletic retirement is unique from non-athletic retirement, however, the athletic retirement literature is also divided in how an athlete may experience this transition (Lally, 2007; Gairdner, 2015). Some scholars believe that athlete retirement is just another life transition that has no determinantal impact on one's life (Perna et al., 1999; Webb et al., 1998). In contrast, many scholars believe that athlete retirement is unique (Cosh et al., 2013; Drummond, 2010) but may be dependent on factors such as, (a) the reason for athletic retirement, (b) the strength of one's athletic identity, and (c) one's retirement planning.

First, the reason for retiring from sport may influence one's retirement experience. Cosh et al. (2013) identified three types of retirement from sport including, retirement in relation to age, in relation to injury, and active choice to retire. In the realms of professional or elite sports, factors such as contracts, drafting, and qualifying to compete may also impede one's career leading to an involuntary retirement (Cosh et al., 2013). Athletes who retire due to injury are at higher risk for psychological distress and physical health challenges in later life, while those who choose to retire and create an adjustment plan often experience none, or at least less, of the potential challenges discussed earlier (Pica et al., 2018). Scholars consistently note that athletes, particularly young athletes, with strong athletic identities experience heightened difficulty managing their identities and well-being during their transition out of sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007).

Second, athletes who possess a strong athlete identity often face more challenges during retirement than athletes who are less connected to their sport (Pica et al., 2019). Those with

strong athlete identities are commonly elite or professional athletes and/or participate in high-performance and/or embodied sports (Gairdner, 2015). Athletes who participate in sports that heavily rely on their body shape and size (e.g., gymnastics, bodybuilding) further associate their self-identity with their body and are more likely to face challenges when transitioning out of their sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). For example, bodybuilders may believe that "they *are* their bodies, and that changes in their bodies can bring about changes in their sense of self" (Sparkes et al., 2005, p. 132).

Lastly, like non-athletic retirement, retirement planning helps mediate this transition, especially for elite or professional athletes (Pica et al., 2018). As such, some athlete retirement programs have been developed to assist athletes in their transition out of sport such as the NFL Player Engagement program for professional football players (NFL Football Operations, 2021) and the Athlete Career Programme (International Olympic Committee, 2018) for Olympic athletes to support their career transitions and provide resources to further develop one's skills outside of their sport.

2.3.5 Conceptualizations of Athletic Retirement in the Literature

Over the past few decades, scholars have started to explore the unique nature of athlete transitions (Park et al., 2013). Generally, the athlete transition literature is very diverse with some scholars focusing on developing theoretical models to explain this transition (e.g., Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) while others focus on representing the experience itself (e.g., Wainwright & Turner, 2006). Both approaches are described next.

2.3.5.1 A Theoretical Approach

Like non-athletic retirement, many scholars use theory to explain athlete retirement with some scholars attempting to integrate athlete retirement into existing theoretical models. For example, Tarver (2017) applied Donald Super's (1980) career development theory, which posits that one's sense of self develops over time in relation to their experience of athletic career retirement but focused on collegiate athletes only. Furthermore, Blinde and Stratta (1992) applied Kübler-Ross's (1969) five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) to athletic retirement. However, this conceptualization did not account for those who experienced positive effects from the transition. In contrast, Coakley (1983) described athlete retirement positively, as a rebirth, but like non-athletic retirement, there lacks consensus on whether this transition experience is negative or positive for the well-being of the retiree (Gairdner, 2015). To account for the nuanced experience, Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental perspective suggested that a synergetic relationship exists between four levels of the athlete's life including, the athletic, the psychological, the psychosocial, and the academic vocational levels. While these four levels exist for non-athletes, athletes transition through them differently (Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004).

Whether already existing, or developed specifically to explain athletic retirement, these theoretical approaches highlight the uniqueness of athlete retirement compared to existing conceptualizations of retirement. Theoretical perspectives are certainly helpful, particularly when considering athletes sharing a common experience (e.g., collegiate athletes). However, overarching paradigms may not apply to all athletes, and while some athletes may categorize their own experience as positive or negative, doing so on a broader scale "would do little justice

to the complexity of phenomenology of such a dramatic life change" (Gairdner, 2015, p. 29). As a result, many scholars turn to methodological tactics to represent the unique experience of retired athletes rather than focusing on explaining why or how it occurs.

2.3.5.2 A Representative Approach

The previous section highlights the challenges in understanding athlete retirement as a shared experience. Thus, scholars often turn to approaches that can represent experience in an engaging, creative, or evocative manner to attend to the nuanced nature of this phenomenon (Cooper et al., 2017). For example, Drummond's (2010) autoethnographic account of athlete retirement explored how he negotiated his identity and masculinity during his retirement to produce a heartfelt and captivating account of the struggles he faced during this transition. For sports reliant on the body particularly, representative methods appear common and appropriate. For example, Gairdner's (2015) use of vignettes to represent her experience as a retiring Olympic gymnast explored topics such as identity and body image, while Wainwright and Turner (2006) used powerful quotations to represent the influence of injury, self-care, and coping for classical ballet dancers in relation to their career trajectories.

Furthermore, representative methodologies allow for the nuanced nature of each story to be told and can attend to sensitivities within the stories. Sparkes (1998; 1999; 2005), often explores athlete experiences and touches on sensitive topics related to athlete retirement such as injury, body image, and masculinities. Sparkes (2000) advocates for autobiographical and narrative methods of inquiry within the sports management field to account for the unique nature of athlete retirement and the social, cultural, and political factors that may influence it. For

example, Sparkes et al. (2005) explored the career of a black, male bodybuilder while addressing topics such as race, identity, and masculinity during the athlete's retirement transition. Thus, further emphasizing that this experience is extremely dependent on personal and situational factors, especially when considering embodied sports like bodybuilding. While not entirely generalizable, these creative accounts provide insight into the complexity of these experiences, experiences that are not in fact, generalizable in the first place. Many of the narratives mentioned above are not often present in mainstream sports media and may encourage change at both individual and institutional levels (Owton & Sparkes, 2015).

2.3.6 Aesthetic-Based Sport and Retirement

According to the National Strength and Conditioning Association (2017), "sport performance is highly dependent on the health- and skill-related components of fitness (power, speed, agility, reaction time, balance, and body composition coordination) in addition to the athlete's technique and level of competency in sport-specific motor skills" (para. 1). However, body composition (i.e., shape and size), may play a crucial role in (a) one's success in some sports and activities such as gymnastics, diving, ballet, and bodybuilding and (b) the formation on one's athlete identity, especially for those who participate in aesthetic-based sports such as those previously mentioned. In some cases, this extreme attention to and control over one's body can exemplify "the value that the athletic body holds, not only in the sporting realm but in the context of greater society" (Gairdner, 2015, p. 35). As a result, transitioning out of an athletic career can disrupt one's body shape and size, therefore influencing their identity and well-being during this transition.

2.3.6.1 The Transitioning Body in Sport

Given that athletes typically reduce training resulting in a decrease in muscle mass and altered body composition upon retirement, athletes often face challenges negotiating perspectives on their bodies after retirement (Buckley et al., 2019). In many cases, this negotiation affects their nutrition behaviours and relationship with food as "athlete retirement is a disruption to this already complex relationship that provides an environment to precipitate compensatory behaviours" (Buckley et al., 2019, p. 2). Buckley and colleagues (2019) identified 16 studies in a systematic review that explored retired athletes and touched on the intersection of food and the body. The findings from the majority of these studies suggest that retired athletes are faced with body dissatisfaction and grief, disordered eating and compensation habits, and are influenced by the sporting culture long-term (Buckley et al., 2019). The authors notably coin the term *Athletic Body Transition* which "is best described as the body image or body dissatisfaction a retired athlete experiences based on a number of active and passive factors" (p. 9) with factors including sporting culture, former athletic body ideal pressure, genetics, and/level of athletic identity (Buckley et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Buckley and colleagues (2019) position athletic body transition within the social climate. The authors propose that upon retirement, an athlete's body composition will change. If that athlete has a strong athletic identity or, their body changes in a way that does not align with the societal ideal, the athlete will experience less body acceptance. If that athlete's body changes towards a societal ideal, they may experience more body acceptance (Buckley et al., 2019). Buckley et al. (2019) further theorized that those with higher body acceptance are more likely to participate in adaptive behaviours, while those who experience lower body

acceptance are more likely to practice maladaptive behaviours such as compensatory exercise, restrictive eating and binge eating. This model builds on the *Retired Female Athlete Paradox* proposed by Papathomas et al. (2018), which focuses on the influence of Western gender ideologies and sports culture on women's athletic retirement experience. While this perspective emphasizes food and body image, the influence of social forces is not lost. These societal ideals may include gender ideologies and may be further upheld and perpetuated through media sources that present retired athletes' bodies in a certain way (Buckley et al., 2019; Krane et al., 2004).

2.3.6.2 Influence of Gender Ideologies

Scholars have explored the influence of gender ideologies and expectations on athletes' experiences and how they translate into retirement. Athletes identifying as women are in a unique position as "Western culture emphasizes a feminine ideal body and demeanor that contrasts with an athletic body and demeanor" (Krane et al., 2004, p. 315). Upon retirement, the changes in one's body and alignment with societal norms may impact the perceptions of oneself and their well-being during the retirement transition. For example, Buckley et al. (2019) suggest that athletes adhering to the thin, ideal body type, such as runners, may struggle with their appearance as their body composition changes during retirement. In contrast, swimmers, or those with significant musculature, may ease through the transition and encounter fewer body image issues as their physiques begin to mirror that of the societal idea. Given the strong association between masculinity and muscle mass, men may also face similar challenges as they transition out of sport based on hegemonic understandings of masculinity. In Sparkes et al. (2005) life history account of a bodybuilder, Jessenka, the authors described experiencing losing his muscle

after a career-ending injury. Much of Jessenka's muscle atrophied, leading him to feel inadequate, and inferior, and reminded him of his past self before he started bodybuilding (Sparkes et al., 2005). Also, given the close association between muscularity and masculinity, Jessenka felt his hyper-masculine identity disappear. He reported hiding behind cars when he saw friends from the industry, so he did not have to face them with his new appearance which left him feeling embarrassed and ashamed (Sparkes et al., 2005). Although Jessenka's account reflects a man's perspective, this crisis-like experience warrants further exploration, especially from the perspective of women in the sport.

2.3.6.3 Bodybuilding Retirement

While Jessenka's account (as told by Sparkes et al., 2005), offers insight into the retirement experience for bodybuilders, there is still much more that needs to be explored. Although only one account, Jessenka's emotions during this transition are notably similar to retired competitors' self-reports on social media. For example, a former National bikini competitor posted about post-competition body dysmorphia: "I also think it's important to recognize that the stage can skew your perception of what a normal, healthy, physique looks like – that not having a six-pack year-round is not only ok, but normal for many of us…" (Star, 2021). Furthermore, many competitors discuss how the health implications mentioned earlier (i.e., eating disorders, decreased mental health, hormonal imbalances etc.) carry over into their retirement experience and some who have taken years off from the sport express how they have spent ample time and effort to "rebuild" their relationship with food while also addressing various health issues that carried over (Collette, 2022; Star, 2021;2022, Ruban, 2020). Decreased

muscle and/or increased weight may affect one's identity as their identity may be closely linked to their appearance potentially resulting in identity crisis or confusion (Sparkes et al., 2005). Overall, the bodybuilding literature and athlete retirement literature along with off-record accounts found on social media offer insight into the retirement bodybuilding experience, however, this experience requires further critical investigations to fully understand how it is situated amongst the existing literature. The final section of this review highlights the gaps in the reviewed literature and addresses how my dissertation research will address them.

2.4 Contextual Literature Summary and Research Gaps

This chapter provides an overview of several bodies of literature covering topics relevant to his project including bodybuilding, life transitions, and athlete retirement. All three bodies inform the purpose of this research: to explore the retirement transition for competitive women bodybuilders. More specifically, this study seeks to explore how these athletes are influenced by gendered ideologies and how this affects their transition experience in relation to identity, health, well-being, and leisure. This review reveals two major gaps in the literature that will be addressed with my research: (a) the lack of consideration given towards bodybuilding in the athletic retirement literature and (b) the lack of attention given towards retirement in the bodybuilding literature. My research will also introduce women's perspectives to the bodybuilding retirement literature and contribute to the growing body of literature exploring women bodybuilders in general. These gaps are significant given the dynamic socio-cultural factors that influence the sport and the abundance of personal accounts describing the unique

nature of this experience that appear "off-record" (i.e., in digital communities) but have not been explored in-depth. These gaps are further detailed below.

The first major research gap in reviewing the literature is a notable lack of recognition of bodybuilding in the athletic retirement literature. Except for Sparkes et al.'s (2005) life history account focusing on one individual, scholars have yet to explore bodybuilding retirement as they have with similar sports (e.g., gymnastics) (Gairdner, 2015). Furthermore, Sparkes et al.'s (2005) example explores the experience of one man meaning that no literature focusing on women's experience during this transition exists. My research will address this gap with the hope that the subsequent results will also inform athlete retirement in other aesthetic-based sports. The extreme nature of bodybuilding and the socio-cultural climate in which it is situated will likely lead to a unique experience by many accounts, however, given the increasingly capitalistic nature of sport industries and the growing use of digital technologies, the results may provide insight into how retirement is experienced for all athletes in the everchanging sport climate (Vallet, 2017).

Second, my research will address the lack of attention given to the transition to retirement in the bodybuilding literature. While this review details sociological, psychological, and physiological consequences that bodybuilders negotiate while actively competing, there is a substantive gap in understanding how these consequences impact a competitor's life once they leave the sport—an experience that I personally believe to be very challenging. Beyond addressing gaps in the literature, this research will also provide an opportunity for retired competitors to share their experiences and inform others beyond the digital, and oftentimes

hidden, means in which these experiences are often shared now. This experience may be empowering for participants and may further inform prospective competitors, the bodybuilding industry, and coaches in the sport. Furthermore, existing bodybuilding literature is often siloed, as scholars focus their efforts on specific sub-topics (e.g., gender, PEDs etc.,) without recognition that these sub-topics are connected. My research brings together these siloed topics (e.g., health, globalization of the industry, and gender ideologies) while using a feminist qualitative approach to explore lived experiences when introducing retirement to the literature. Sport feminism is ideal to explore this topic and is discussed in detail next.

2.5 Theory

A theoretical perspective, or theory, is "the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing the context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). Theory provides an overarching framework that influences every step of the research process to ensure the meaning being made is aligned with its respective onto-epistemological beliefs by considering and justifying assumptions to guide inquiry (Berbary & Boles, 2014; Crotty, 1998; Tracy, 2010). My research is informed broadly by feminist theory with attention to sport feminism as described next.

2.5.1 Feminism

Feminism is complex and can shift traditional boundaries of research, expand existing knowledge, and emphasize the importance of sociopolitical influences in practice (Parry et al., 2018). In this section, I provide a brief overview of feminism with attention to how feminism

engages with truth, knowledge, identity, representation, power, resistance, and social justice, before focusing specifically on sport feminism.

2.5.1.1 Truth and Knowledge

In general, feminist perspectives challenge traditional research paradigms that assume an absolute, unified truth (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Feminist inquiry recognizes that multiple truths can exist and are shaped by power dynamics and social structures, (i.e., patriarchy) (Hesse-Biber, 2012) and feminist scholars illuminate how common methods of inquiry and conceptualizations of truth may reinforce the patriarchy rather than capturing truth and knowledge from various perspectives. Feminist inquiry is rooted in the notion that women's experiences differ from commonly accepted knowledge and therefore aims to place women's "lives, experiences, and perspectives at the center of analysis [to] correct the distorted, biased, and erroneous accounts advanced by men" (Hawkesworth, 2012, p. 92). Today, the need to question accepted beliefs, challenge shared assumptions, and reframe research questions with not only women, but anyone marginalized by a patriarchal structure, remains at the centre of all feminist inquiry (Frye, 1993). This need is guided by the acknowledgment of "androcentric 'ways-of-truth'" that generalize experiences for all based on power dynamics that generate dominant, yet unrepresentative, accounts (Hawkesworth, 2012).

2.5.1.2 Identity and Representation

Gender identity provides the foundation for feminism. Early Western feminist scholars suggested that oppression unites women based on their assumed, shared identity (hooks, 2003).

Liberation movements rooted in this perspective allowed women to share their isolated and individual experiences and come to realize that their experiences were not due to their personal nature, but rather the social system around them (Charles, 1995). This led to the construction of the slogan "the personal is political" (hooks, 2003). However, it soon became apparent that these Western liberation movements were based on a *specific* identity—that of young, White, middle-class, and often heterosexual women, and that the goals of these movements had been in *their* interests instead of the interests of *all* women (Charles, 1995). As such, the universal nature of liberal feminism was called into question by women whose identities were not represented in these movements. hooks (2003) challenged the slogan "the personal is political" suggesting that grouping all women together illuminates an incomplete experience by not giving attention to all individual experiences within the collective.

Identity is closely tied to representation as "the recognition of women's vastly different experience then led to the development of new modes of feminist authority, representation, and rhetoric" (Roof, 2012, p. 533). Political discourses, known as identity politics, emerged as individuals with similar identities developed political agendas based on their shared experience to advocate for equity and social change (Roof, 2012). Crenshaw (1991) commends identity politics as it appreciates difference and brings individuals together to seek social change, however, Crenshaw also critiques identity politics for sometimes combining or disregarding intragroup differences. In response, Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality when suggesting that multiple oppressions are not experienced independently, but rather synthesized into individual, nuanced experiences. Dill and Kohlman (2012) describe intersectionality as:

> A conceptual tool [that] has become integral to both theory and research endeavors, as it emphasizes the interlocking effects of race, class, gender, and sexuality, highlighting how categories of identity and structures are inequality are mutually constituted and defy separation into discrete categories of analysis. (p. 154)

Further concerns arose as feminists started to explore intersectional perspectives beyond race and class regarding sexual identity, (dis)ability, and nationality with further attention to women's global experiences regarding imperialism, colonialism, and national identity (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Cultural influence further alienated women around the world as patriarchy may have different meanings, expressions, and implications for women's lives depending on the cultural and geographical context (Freysinger et al., 2013). Post-colonial feminist, Mohanty (1988) called on Western feminists to examine their influence in a global political framework as failure to do so "would be to ignore the complex interconnections between first-and third-world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in all countries" (p .64). Evidently, recent feminist perspectives aim to engage with identity at an intersectional level to represent the incredibly nuanced nature of women's worldviews. Intersectionality will be discussed further in the social justice section (2.6.1.5).

2.5.1.3 Power and Resistance

Like identity, power is central to feminism as scholars seek to understand how asymmetrical power relations subordinate people based on their identities (Charles, 1995; Johnson & Parry, 2022). In general, feminist research aims to uncover the way in which

individuals—often women—are systematically disempowered due to intersectional inequalities, however, within feminist scholarship, power has been conceptualized in a variety of ways (Charles, 1995; Johnson & Parry, 2022). For example, power has been conceptualized as repression (de Beauvoir, 1952) and as a practice (Foucault, 1977). Even with the understanding that power can be practiced or exercised, Hartsock (1990) argued that failure to account for resistance, and social factors that construct gender, leads to an incomplete understanding of women as objects of power rather than individuals with the capacity to resist.

The shift from women's victimization to women's resistance to oppression is explored in varying forms with much debate surrounding identity politics (Rajan, 2000). Resistance can range in meanings, from attitudes and behaviours of an oppositional nature to a rejection or counterforce in the form of activism by those subordinated by the dominating power (Rajan, 2000). Foucault's later work (1982) touched on resistance and identity as he suggested that one's identity is tied to disciplinary power in a way that is constraining and limiting, and to resist oppression, one's identity must shift. The idea of fluid, dynamic, identities was advanced by Butler (1990) who suggested that early conceptualizations of power and resistance further excluded those who may not identify with one side of the sex/gender system and that the focus on identity within discussions on power may constrain the individuals hoping to be liberated. Butler (1990) suggested that gender is a performance influenced by cultural norms and expectations, again, influenced by those in power.

2.5.1.4 Social Justice

Social justice is rooted in the notion that everyone deserves equal rights and opportunities, whether economic, political, or social (Johnson & Parry, 2022). Social justice movements and theories call out systems of power that oppress groups of people by taking away their rights, opportunities, and freedom (Johnson & Parry, 2022). Feminism is associated with social justice by (a) calling attention to the collective disadvantages of individuals in a patriarchal society and (b) acting or proposing solutions to irradicate these disadvantages. Regarding power and oppression, Collins (1990) highlights what she calls the 'matrix of domination' suggesting that people experience and resist oppression on: (a) a personal level, (b) a group or community level and (c) a systemic level. Given that oppression occurs at multiple levels, feminism links the everyday experiences of individuals to larger social injustices to call for justice at a systemic level (Johnson & Parry 2022; hooks, 2003). In doing so, this call for justice involves "envisioning and creating a society that is outside the bounds of patriarchy" (p. 28) and emphasizes equal rights for anyone disempowered by the patriarchy, not just women (Johnson & Parry, 2022). While many feminist scholars advocate for the varying identities a woman may possess, men also possess intersectional identities that may lead to oppression in a patriarchal society. For example, gay men and men with mental health challenges are groups not served by the patriarchy (Johnson & Parry, 2022). As mentioned, intersectional perspectives also play a vital role in social justice initiatives (Dill & Kohlman, 2012). Intersectional approaches continue to grow with recent scholars attending to sexuality/queer studies and transnationalism(s) among other identity constructs (Butler, 1990; Johnson, 2013; Mohanty,

1988). As such, feminism is inclusive to all genders and seeks to end injustice for those not served by the patriarchy while paying attention to human rights at a global level (Dill & Kohlman, 2012).

In summary, feminism is diverse, however, all perspectives aim to uplift, empower, and promote sociopolitical equity for those who have historically been disempowered or left out of dominant discourses and meta-narratives. Feminism would not be what it is today without historical advancements in thought, which are often contextualized with a wave metaphor summarized in the next section.

2.5.1.5 Waves of Feminism

The first wave of feminism emerged in the 19th century and focused on women's suffrage (hooks, 2003). Feminists of this wave advocated for equal rights for men and women with a focus on legal and political issues (i.e., the right to vote) (Munro, 2013). The second wave, emerging in the 20th century, is associated with more a radical movement (Parry et al., 2018). Feminism took a more political standpoint as increased protests and movements took place that were focused on women's liberation and emancipation. The first and second waves are often critiqued for their disregard for BIPOC women's rights and their focus on White, middle-class heterosexual women. Questions were raised regarding how one can protest against all men when black men are also being oppressed by the patriarchy (Collins, 1990; hooks, 2003). In response to this critique, the third wave of feminism focused more on inclusivity and diversity of sexual/gender identity and race, however, this wave is also critiqued for its lack of collective action (hooks, 2003; Munro, 2013). Some scholars (Munro, 2013; Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019)

suggest a fourth wave of feminism is occurring now with a widened scope focusing on four key tenets: blurring boundaries, technological mobilization, interconnectedness through globalization, and multivocal response to sexual violence, often occurring through technological platforms (Munro, 2013; Parry et al., 2018).

These waves highlight key shifts in feminist thinking but are critiqued for focusing on American/Western societies, reducing the vast scholarship into distinct categories, and the potential to mislead some to view the most current wave as the most valid, or true, perspective (Nicholson, 2010). Despite these critiques, if the waves are understood as an evolution rather than distinct categories, this metaphor helps think through feminism and understand the perspectives that are prominent today (Reger, 2017). The next section will provide an overview of sport feminism, including its history, notable advances, and a discussion on where sport feminism stands today. I then propose a series of considerations for sport feminists and address why sport feminism is ideal to explore both bodybuilding and my dissertation research.

2.5.2 Sport Feminism

Sport feminism is difficult to define (Birrell, 2000, DiCaro, 2021; Hargreaves, 2004). According to Hargreaves (2004), there is not one cohesive or coherent definition of sport feminism, but rather various understandings, discussions, and manifestations of what sport feminism is, or what it could be. Sport feminism goes beyond theories and academic discourses and has been taken up through political action and social movements addressing governing bodies and sports organizations. As with all feminist research, simply including women's perspectives does not inherently make one's research feminist (Birrell, 2000). Sport feminists act under the assumption

that the patriarchy and associated power oppress individuals with certain identities (whether that is being a woman, being racialized etc.), and are committed to changing those conditions within sport culture —a culture that thrives and grows in alignment with the patriarchy (Birrell, 2000). The next section will provide an overview of the history and evolution of sport feminism.

2.5.2.1 History and Evolution of Sport Feminism

Sport feminism emerged and has evolved with the historical waves of feminism. During the second wave, some sport feminists pushed for equality of sport-related opportunities for men and women, assuming a gender binary (Hargreaves, 2004). At the time, sports were often dominated by men with little to no encouragement for women's participation. Still, within the second wave era, other sport feminists emphasized the limited opportunities for women and highlighted the "powerfully patriarchal character of, and the centrality of sexuality to, women's oppression in sport" (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 187). Sport feminists also emerged from various other perspectives highlighting the roles of class, power, and agency within sport culture. These efforts lead to increased women's participation in sport and the creation of women's specific leagues (Coakley, 2021). Despite a resulting influx of women's sport participation, dualistic views (i.e., gender binary) were often left untouched, with an ongoing assumption that men were/are physically stronger and more mentally capable in sport context compared to women (Roth & Basow, 2004).

As feminists shifted their ways of thinking in the third wave, sport feminists followed suit. Sport feminists started calling attention to intersecting identities such as race, sexuality, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, and age while also calling out notable differences within

Western sport culture and between Western nations and other worlds (Hargreaves, 2004). Some sport feminist scholars explored sports culture and identity politics to understand the differences in individual experiences as not all women share the same experience whether that is in sport or any other context. For example, Roth and Basow (2004) highlight the intersection of gender and sexual identity with sport culture. For women in particular, "the fear of being labelled or outed as lesbian can lead to an even greater emphasis on femininity by female athletes either to prove that they are not lesbians or to hide the fact that they are. And these fears, of course, are justified given the level of homophobia in society" (Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 253). Furthermore, postmodern feminists explore sport with attention to the body, sexuality, and identity (Hargreaves, 2004). Two feminist scholars in particular, Judith Butler (2000) and Susan Bordo (1993) explore the relationship between power, gender, and the body. Their work is often picked up by sport feminists who focus specifically on the body, with bodybuilding being a common sport of interest.

Beyond the relation to the waves of feminism, sport feminism can also be defined or described by common areas of interest. That is, sport feminists may focus their efforts on certain aspects of, or populations within, the sport culture. For example, some scholars focus their efforts specifically on men and masculinities, exploring how sport acts as a site for masculinist hegemony, while others find their views aligning with that of early second wave feminists to increase women's participation in sports that remain dominated by men, even in recent years. Other scholars explore how sport reproduces gender relations, how sport acts as a patriarchal practice, and how masculinity and femininity are conceptualized within the context of sport

(Birrell, 2000; Roth & Basow, 2004). Without a doubt, there are multiple angles, perspectives, and/or positions sport feminists may uphold. As such, sport feminism continues to be a relevant and important perspective to explore sport culture as Birrell (2000) highlights:

> As long as a culture is characterized by gender privilege and as long as sport remains a preferred site for the reproduction of that privilege—and there is no prospect of those fundamental relationships changing in the foreseeable future—feminist theories will continue to make a fundamental contribution to our understandings of the meanings of sport in culture. (p. X)

The next section will discuss where sport feminism stands today and justify the need to update this theory in alignment with the current sport culture.

2.5.2.2 Sport Feminism Today

Sport feminism is diverse with no cohesive theory, but rather various branches related to a diverse range of feminist thought. This is not necessarily an issue as the ultimate goal remains the same – to decrease oppression and increase accessibility, inclusivity, and equity within sport for any/all genders with attention to the marginalization and/or exclusion of those with intersecting identities. However, Hargreaves (2004) highlights that "the most important single issue is to reconfirm, by whatever means, the humanism and moral base of sport feminism" (p. 203). As described in section 2.1, the sports industry is not devoid of injustice and is constantly evolving. Given the social justice foundation of feminism, sport feminism can be updated to critique the current industry and call for change (and act on it!) to empower those marginalized by the patriarchal sport culture.

Next, I describe a holistic, updated version of sport feminism that accounts for the ongoing advances and evolution of both feminism and sport culture. My goal is to also answer Hargreaves's (2004) call for an updated version of sport feminism: "sport feminism is manifestly muddled, complex, and full of contradictions but certainly not dead! The quest is to nurture sustainable forms of sport feminism, which can tackle the needs of our times" (p. 202). I now describe the key considerations to update sport feminism, and in turn, guide my research.

2.5.2.3 Key Considerations

Based on the key tenets of feminism, and the existing patriarchal influence on the sport culture, I am proposing five considerations below that describe an updated view of sport feminism: (a) gender is dynamic, (b) all feminism is intersectional, (c) lived experience is necessary, (d) digital technologies are integrated into society and sport culture, and (e) sport culture is influenced by social systems such as capitalism, globalization and patriarchy. To clarify, while these considerations appear in various feminism(s), I personally believe these ideas may become "taken for granted" when applied to the sport culture. That is, the sport culture is historically known for being exclusionary (Coakley, 2021), and to specifically address the problematic environment, these considerations need to be specifically considered and applied within a sport context.

2.5.2.3.1 Gender is Dynamic

The first consideration highlights that gender is a dynamic construct. My personal critique of sports culture and previous iterations of sport feminism is that some may waver in *who* feminism is for. That is, the sport culture, especially within women's sport, supports a

discourse surrounding the exclusion of transwomen from women's sport (Coakley, 2021). While the majority of the arguments stem from an understanding of hormone levels, muscle mass, and training ability, many of these arguments are difficult to prove (Ivy & Warren, 2018). Although concerns are often raised in terms of abilities and elusive advantages for trans-athletes, these discussions should not take away from one's identity (Ivy & Warren, 2018; Linghede et al., 2022). This consideration highlights that transwomen are women, and transmen are men—the sport culture or athlete role does not change that.

As more trans-athletes enter sport, sports organizations and the overall industry should pay attention to the discourse surrounding athletes and ensure inclusive policies are created with merit, rather than influenced by societal pressures and assumptions. This consideration is not to say what is fair and what is not, but rather to emphasize that sport feminists should work towards eliminating the stigma and harmful debates that perpetuate transphobia through the guise of sport/performance. This consideration aligns with the thoughts of third-wave feminists in that gender is fluid and feminists should fight for all those marginalized by the patriarchy, not just women, but those with varying gender identities often excluded from the meta-narratives and discourse in sport.

2.5.2.3.2 Feminism is Inherently Intersectional

The next consideration emphasizes that feminism, and in this case, sport feminism, should always be intersectional. Feminists explore intersectional perspectives beyond race and class including sexual identity, disability, and nationality with further attention to women's global experiences regarding imperialism, colonialism, and national identity (Hesse-Biber,

2012). These intersecting identities may lead to oppression and/or exclusion within the sport culture specifically. As mentioned, sport culture celebrates masculinity and promotes an environment where men hold the power (Coakley, 2021). As a result, anyone outside of the "cis-White man" identity may be subject to harmful treatment or exclusion within the industry (e.g., gay men in the NFL and black women athletes as described earlier). As mentioned, sport feminists have a history of calling attention to intersecting identities such as race, sexuality, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, and age while also calling out notable differences within Western sport culture and between Western nations and other worlds (Hargreaves, 2004). It is important to always consider intersecting identities given the historically oppressive nature of the sports industry.

2.5.2.3.3 Lived Experience is Necessary

Thirdly, feminist research often relies on lived experience to develop counter-narratives contrasting the experiences of dominant groups (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Lived experience can describe one's immediate experience rather than interpretations or conceptual knowledge of that experience (Wertz et al., 2011) and involves asking individuals to narrate their own stories with their own voices to account for their perceptions, emotions, and thoughts, rather than describing simply what happened.

While many sport organizations and committees aim to be inclusive, whether that be through statements of support or formal policies, the only true way to know what is happening is by hearing from those who experience oppression within the industry. For example, Lia Thomas, a trans-woman swimmer who competed in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

women's division was met with criticism and transphobic remarks at her first publicized event (Steinbuch, 2021). Although the NCAA policies allowed Lia to compete in the women's division, many other cis-women who competed against Lia were outraged with this decision and took to social media (i.e., Twitter, Reddit) to argue why Lia had an unfair advantage that affected their experience and ability to succeed in the sport (Steinbuch, 2021). As such, it is important to consider the lived experience because even if policies are in place to encourage inclusivity, they may not represent the experience of all athletes. Furthermore, Quinn, one of the first trans athletes to represent Team Canada on the women's soccer team at the Olympics spoke out specifically regarding the disregard for marginalized athletes' lived experience: "in a statement, Quinn said that sports policy often 'does not reflect the lived experience of marginalized athletes and that's especially true when it comes to transgender athletes and athletes with sex variations'" (Mcmorran, 2018, para. 9). Despite policies in place to promote or encourage inclusivity, lived experiences may tell a different story which is important to consider when striving to make a real change.

2.5.2.3.4 Digital Technologies are Assumed

The next consideration highlights the understanding that digital technologies are becoming increasingly integrated into our day-to-day lives. Digital technology is rapidly expanding (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Tinder) and these technological methods allow individuals to interact with others and create various, potentially contradictory, identities online (Parry et al., 2018). These advances also create a space for feminist mobilization for individuals to call out sexism, misogyny, and sexual violence (i.e., the #MeToo movement) (Parry et al., 2018). Fourth

wave feminists argue that the prominent shift to digital technology may be enough to warrant a new wave (Parry et al., 2018).

Much discourse, debate, and activism has transitioned to an online environment therefore increasing its reach to a global level that was not seen in previous waves (Solomon, 2009). Hargreaves (2004) called for more attention to activism within the sport feminism field as she suggests,

> Sport feminists are products of their circumstances as well as producers of their circumstances. Much academic research relates to the lives of the privileged. There is very little research on the underprivileged, marginalized, forgotten women in sport whose voices and ideas have been suppressed. Making the invisible visible by allowing more and more women to talk about their oppressions is an important first step in understanding the structured relations of inequality in sport" (p. 201).

The increased use of digital media may act as a platform to increase this activism. Sports media and journalism have notably been called out for the sexist culture. In 2004, Creedon mentioned that women's sport coverage is often sexist and inequitable. While media (i.e., sports journalism) has always been an important component of the sports industry, social media has led to an increase in digitization and globalization of sports coverage (DiCaro 2021; Creedon, 2004). The increased use of social media within the sports industry coincides with the acknowledgment of increased social media and technological mobilization in the suggested fourth wave of feminism. That is, users are taking to social media to bring up the concept of gender equity,

encourage activism and publicly call out instances of sexual violence. The consideration highlights the assumption that social media is integrated into society and will remain a part of our interactions. Sport feminism must attend to the evolving and increasing use of social media as Birrell predicted in 2000: “in the future, new cultural conditions that we cannot yet even envision will challenge us to provide new forms of understanding” (p. 71).

2.5.2.3.5 Capitalism and Globalization

Finally, although it may seem obvious, the last consideration highlights the influence of capitalism and globalization on the sport industry. While many of the examples of injustice listed throughout this section are oppressive, it is important to understand that many of these issues are systemic. The sports industry is influenced by greater social systems such as capitalism, the patriarchy, and globalization and these over-arching systems of power influence athlete experiences. For example, compared to men in sports, women in sports do not receive a near comparable amount of money, media coverage and respect (Roth & Basow, 2004). However, the “obvious” solution (i.e., increased salary and media coverage of women’s sports) may simply not be viable within the current social climate (DiCaro, 2021). While there are many benefits of sport participation (i.e., mental and physical health benefits, social networking, community engagement etc.), the role of capitalism in sport organization and management is often invisible and therefore rarely questioned or challenged by scholars in the field (Chen, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, the bodybuilding industry exemplifies how these global systems of power influence sport participation. In response to the growing muscularity in female competitors, the IFBB included the “formalization of femininity” as a judging criterion once they

realized that women with muscular bodies were resisting the norms of femininity resulting in decreased spectatorship and participation leading to financial loss for the organization (Boyle, 2005). These systems also impact men as sports culture is dominated by patriarchal thinking and men after often expected to uphold a certain level of masculinity within that culture (DiCaro, 2022). Roth and Basow (2004) highlight how this way of thinking affects both men and women:

> Masculinity is often associated with being physically strong and aggressive. Men who do not demonstrate these qualities to a sufficient degree may be ridiculed if the greater strength of other men were not privileged (over the strength of women). If women become and are recognized to be strong, even if not in every way *exactly as strong as men*, there will no longer be stigma associated with men being bested physically by women. (p. 257)

The role of men in feminist movements has been addressed by feminist scholars in both a third and fourth wave context, with both often recognizing the power men hold in patriarchal systems (Johnson & Cousineau, 2018).

In summary, these five proposed considerations provide a moral base for an updated version of sport feminism. These considerations coincide with what we have learned from third wave feminism (i.e., all feminism is intersectional, and gender is not binary) while also attending to the rapid social changes (i.e., technological mobilization, capitalism) proposed by fourth wave feminists. These considerations are merely a foundation to begin exploring sport through a modern feminist lens while also attending to the rapid evolution of the sport industry.

2.5.2.4 Sport Feminism and Bodybuilding

Given the close ties between bodybuilding, gender, and sport (as demonstrated in chapter two and the previous sections), it naturally makes sense to consider sport feminism to explore bodybuilding. The five underlying considerations for sport feminism can serve as the foundation when exploring bodybuilding and bodybuilding retirement. Furthermore, none of the existing bodybuilding literature (to my knowledge) explores the sport through a sport feminist lens. This lens is ideal to account for the influence of power and patriarchy on the sport while ensuring all voices are included. My research will address that theoretical gap by contributing to both the bodybuilding literature and the sport feminism literature. The following sections will briefly highlight the topical and personal relevance of this theoretical orientation.

2.5.2.4.1 Topical Relevance

As discussed in chapter two, bodybuilding is often explored from a feminist perspective with attention given to gender ideologies and/or body image/physicality (Denham, 2008; Tajrobehkar, 2016; Worthen & Baker, 2016). This focus results from the importance of aesthetics rather than athletic performance in bodybuilding. Furthermore, the bodybuilding subculture is unique due to its close-knit community and reliance on social media. Since sport feminism attends to aspects of the sport industry, this perspective is ideal to explore how gender is exploited in this specific context.

In terms of the considerations suggested above, bodybuilding is a sex-segregated sport with both a men's and women's division. These divisions are further broken down into different categories with different judging criteria stemming from patriarchal and capitalist power (Boyle,

2005). Roth and Basow (2004) emphasize that women's sport participation is controlled by the extent to which a sport is deemed feminine or masculine and "because sports offer women the 'potential for reducing physical power imbalances on which patriarchy is founded and reified' (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998, p. 13), one way to limit and deemphasize women's physical power and capabilities is to associate female athleticism with female sex appeal" (p. 252). There are clear links between larger social systems/powers and the employment of judging criteria based on masculinity and femininity.

Another focus of the bodybuilding literature centres on digital technology (as explained in section 2.2.2.3). The bodybuilding industry heavily relies on social media for promotion, connection, generating a community, and potentially even starting one's career. Without a doubt, the bodybuilding industry, as with other sports organizations, would not be what it is today without the power of social media. This aligns with the proposed consideration that digital technologies are integrated into our day-to-day lives and must be considered when exploring the sport through a sport feminist lens. Furthermore, social media can both promote and impede the sharing of lived experiences. While some may choose to share their true lived experiences within the sport, others may choose to generate an identity online that masks their true experience (i.e., photoshopping etc.) (Coy-Dibley, 2016). Regardless of one's motives, lived experience should remain central to exploring sport. Again, what separates bodybuilding from other sports is that the ultimate focus of bodybuilding is how you look, not how you perform.

As mentioned throughout chapter two, apart from one life history account, bodybuilding retirement has yet to be explored in the literature. Sport feminism can provide a foundation that

accounts for both a feminist orientation and understanding of the sport industry to explore how retirement is experienced within bodybuilding as a sport, and potentially other sports too.

2.5.2.4.2 Personal Relevance

In addition to a potential theoretical contribution and usefulness to study my topic, sport feminism and feminism, in general, resonate with my viewpoints and beliefs. Feminism has always played a role in shaping my thoughts, opinions, and beliefs, and I identified as a feminist long before I even knew the term feminism existed.

Sport feminism especially resonates with me as I grew up as a sports fan and enjoyed recreational hockey and competitive track and field. I have vivid memories of teachers in elementary school dismissing my thoughts on hockey players in favour of boys' opinions in my classes. I even remember a teacher questioning why I was wearing a sports jersey instead of a dress when I was selected to present my speech (on a hockey player from the team) in front of the school during an assembly. These memories stuck with me even as my interests shifted to competitive dance—typically perceived as a more "acceptable" activity for young girls, and I continued to resist some of the ideologies that followed me (e.g., wearing shorts instead of a skirt to ballet class). Eventually, as I started competing in bodybuilding, I learned more about what patriarchy is and how gender ideologies play a significant role in the sports industry. Feminism, and sport feminism, have honed my own beliefs and experience with sport throughout my life.

My choice to develop an updated version of sport feminism was built on the idea of "theoretical transgression" (Johnson, 2014) which involves "taking what is useful from different theoretical frameworks and putting it to use in others" (p. 395). As mentioned, existing iterations

of sport feminism are muddled or siloed with no distinct or direct propositions. Hence, I chose to embrace the idea of theoretical transgression and pull together a list of considerations loosely based on third and fourth wave feminism that are directly relevant to the sport industry. These transgressions "are not situated within inconsistent or contradictory epistemologies or paradigms, but rather, encourage us 'to 'know' beyond our most comfortable theoretical homes and…take up thinking in different and more critical ways" (Johnson, 2014, p. 395).

In summary, this section outlined the critical role of theory in the research process and highlighted the theoretical orientation that will guide my research. After a call to further explore feminism in sport culture (Birrell, 2000), I proposed five considerations that provide a foundation for an updated version of sport feminism. My proposed considerations are simply that—proposed, and I anticipate greater developments within this proposition with feedback, criticism, and the everchanging sports industry. The next chapter highlights my purpose statement and research questions followed by a discussion on my methodology and methods.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This chapter details the methodology, and methods that informed my research. The purpose of my research was to explore the retirement transition for competitive bodybuilders in the women's divisions with attention given to gender ideologies, identity, health, and well-being. The purpose was addressed with the following research questions:

1) How do women bodybuilding competitors experience the retirement transition?
    a. In terms of identity?
    b. In terms of health/well-being?
2) How are gendered ideologies experienced, reproduced and/or maintained after leaving the sport?

A sport feminism theoretical orientation, as described in the previous chapter, underpinned this research and informed the exploration of the topic. To begin, I describe my methodological choice to guide this inquiry, narrative inquiry. Then, I outline the methods I used to conduct this research starting with recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and representation, and then end with a discussion on evaluation.

3.1 Methodology

Feminist methodologies "challenge the status quo forms of research by linking theory and method in a synergistic relationship that brings epistemology, methodology, and method into dynamic interaction across the research process" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 176). Beyond theory and activism, feminism also translates into the research process. Key tenets of feminist research praxis include, (a) practicing reflexivity through self-awareness during the entire

research process, (b) following an ethical protocol with attention to the participants and their perspectives, (c) aiming to collect subjugated knowledge, and (d) working towards the common goal of social change (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Feminist praxis goes beyond simply engaging with feminism as a theory, and instead, involves conducting all steps of the research process through a feminist lens with attention to the tenets mentioned above. In the following section, I describe my chosen methodology, narrative inquiry, with attention to how it engages with these tenets including a description of this methodology and the methodological relevance to my research.

3.1.1 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is both a way of understanding experience and a methodology for inquiring into experience through storytelling (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). As a methodology, narrative inquiry intimately studies an individual's experience to develop a narrative, which is then situated within social, cultural, and historical contexts (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry emphasizes relational engagement between the researcher and research participants and "aims at understanding and making meaning of experience through conversations, dialogue, and participation in the ongoing lives of research participants" (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 542). Narratives can be oral, written, or heard through interviews or conversations (Chase, 2005). Qualitative researchers may use the term "narrative" quite broadly, to refer to any data or information elicited through an open-ended question, however, various types of narratives exist (Chase, 2005).

Firstly, narrative perspectives can be biographical by exploring the experiences of others, or autobiographical, where the researcher explores their own experience (Creswell, 2007). These

perspectives can be applied to the second variation, temporality. Narratives can be categorized broadly into (a) a personal narrative or life story, which portrays a specific event such as an athletic event, or group of events such as one's experience as an athlete, and (b) a life history account which portrays an individual's entire life, from birth to present (Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2007). Both focus on specific events or experiences often related to moments of clarity, life transitions, or turning points in one's life (McAdams et al., 2001). My research explores personal narratives and life stories concentrating on participants' experiences before their bodybuilding career began, during their time competing, and after they left. Secondly, narratives may be broadly categorized into meta-narratives and counter-narratives. Meta-narratives often share over-arching, culturally dominant discourses of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Meta-narratives often align with social, cultural, and political narratives as they describe experience according to the status quo and often fail to recognize or account for those who are not within the dominant groups. In contrast, counter-narratives often share an opposing view to meta-narratives and highlight subordinated or oppressed voices that are not often included in the meta-narratives (Creswell, 2007). Counter-narratives usually result from social justice informed research which aims to critique dominant discourses influenced by social, cultural, and political factors (Johnson & Parry, 2022). Thirdly, while some scholars may refrain from "explicit theoretical analysis preferring instead to allow evocative narratives 'to speak for themselves'" (Dowling & Garrett, 2016, p. 2), various theoretical approaches (i.e., feminism) can also become entangled with narrative inquiry as outlined next.

3.1.1.1 A Feminist Approach to Narrative Inquiry

Storytelling may provide a sense of agency, control, and/or empowerment, especially for individuals who are often not included in dominant discourses (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Johnson & Parry, 2022). As such, feminist researchers have historically used narrative inquiry when exploring the perspectives of women to challenge dominant ideologies and meta-narratives influenced by social forces such as patriarchy (Reinharz, 1992; Reinharz & Chase, 2002). Women's liberation movements beginning in the 1960s prompted the uptake of narrative inquiry to promote personal narratives that go beyond sharing information, and instead offer perspectives that challenge and critique dominant, and often androcentric, assumptions (Chase, 2005; Reinharz, 1992). A feminist lens coupled with narrative inquiry can amplify the voices of not only women, but all marginalized/equity-deserving groups on topics such as power, gender, race, and class, to share stories that challenge and critique dominant cultural and social ideologies to initiate social change (Hesse-Bieber, 2012). In terms of sport feminism, Hargreaves (2004) highlights the importance of storytelling methods to initiate change:

> More research is needed to help us understand the realities of injustice and discrimination in sport, the lived social experiences of oppressed groups… stories can be used as an aid for change, stories can persuade others of beliefs and notions of value, they can act as arguments, and they can influence public opinion. But to nurture the potential we should also link personal, individual, 'different' accounts to wider social circumstances. (p. 199)

Furthermore, narrative inquiry is attentive to reflexivity and ethical proceedings throughout the research process—both key tenets of feminist research praxis (Preissle & Han, 2012).

Since narrative inquiry is a relational methodology (i.e., the researcher co-constructs/constructs the data), researchers must be aware of how they position themselves within the research process (Johnson & Rose, 2024). This self-awareness and critical reflection encompass reflexivity (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012; Johnson & Rose, 2024). While reflexivity is not a new concept within qualitative research, a feminist approach to reflexivity "exposes the exercise of power through the entire research process" to deconstruct power and cocreating knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 559). While reflexivity is important in the knowledge production process, it is also essential for ethical practice. Feminism, as it is attuned to power and social justice, places utmost emphasis on ethical practices throughout the research process. As a result, "reflexivity at this level fosters sharing, engaged relationships, and participatory knowledge-building practices, hence producing less hierarchical and more ethical, socially relevant research" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 560; Johnson & Parry, 2022). My reflexive process is detailed in section 3.3.4.

Additionally, all qualitative research should attend to ethical concerns including informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, protection from harm, avoidance of conflict of interest, avoidance of deception, and debriefing (Smythe & Murray, 2000). Narrative inquirers, however, must also be attentive to specific ethical considerations. First, narrative inquiry entails specific attention to relational ethics which "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities

in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). Second, narrative inquiry requires participants to share experiences. These experiences may include sensitive and potentially traumatic accounts that may in turn cause an emotional reaction from the participant(s) while sharing (Preissle & Han, 2012). The researcher must remain attentive, and prioritize participant well-being throughout the entire process through accommodations such as offering breaks during and assessing body language during interviews (Preissle & Han, 2012). Third, ethical tension may arise in the process of analysis and representation. Narrative inquirers may face tension between creating a coherent narrative while also honouring the voices of their participants. This is discussed further in 3.3.5 Analysis and Representation.

3.1.2 Methodological Relevance for My Research

Narrative inquiry was particularly applicable to my research based on, (a) the development of meta- and counter-narratives, (b) the mutual focus on lived experience, and (c) alignment with existing literature.

First, narrative inquiry is particularly useful in the development of meta-narratives and counter-narratives. For example, within the existing bodybuilding literature, narratives have been influential in telling a counter-story to the negative aging stereotypes and ageism (Phoenix & Smith, 2011). Phoenix and Griffin (2013) suggest that narratives of older athletes can also inspire younger athletes by opposing meta-narratives of a "declining" aging body. Furthermore, from my observations, social media users often portray curated images and stories regarding their bodybuilding preps and post-competition lives that may depict an alternative reality. Sharing counter-narratives may expose the realities of these experiences and generate awareness

and understanding of the challenges that oppose these curated images. While the development of counter-narratives aligns with feminist praxis, it is also important to note that there is generally no research on retirement from bodybuilding. This means that this methodology may also prove useful to develop some meta-narratives on this experience and contribute to this non-existent body of literature.

Second, narrative inquiry focuses on lived experience. As highlighted in Chapter 2, exploring lived experience is essential to collecting subjugated knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2012) and athletes have specifically called for more attention to lived experience when developing policies meant to generate inclusive sport environments (Mcmorran, 2021). Narrative inquiry requires participants to share stories about their lives that may not be known if assumptions are made, or if their voices are not considered in decision-making processes. The use of narrative inquiry aligns well with sport feminism, and under-researched topics such as bodybuilding retirement by starting with lived experience to generate knowledge. A feminist approach to narrative inquiry is often used when conducting research in the field of leisure, particularly in sport (Fisher et al., 2008; Adams & Leavitt, 2016; Linghede et al., 2016) as "leisure spaces are not void of such patriarchal gender expectations, especially those grounded in notions of appearance, sexual attraction, and general worth connected to body image" (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 478).

Third, the only existing study that touches on bodybuilding retirement, employs a life history narrative inquiry methodology to explore the lived experience of a retired bodybuilder (Sparkes et al. 2005). Not only has narrative inquiry been successfully applied to sport research

(Jewett et al., 2019; Smith & Sparkes, 2009) and bodybuilding research (Sparkes et al., 2005; Phoenix & Smith, 2011), but it is also a prominent methodology in the life transition literature (Nyikach & Hansen, 2024). Scholars may select narrative inquiry as a guiding methodology for these topics given the focus on the dynamic nature of personal identity during transition periods (Chase, 2005). In summary, narrative inquiry aligns well with a sport feminism theoretical orientation and appears methodologically relevant to explore the bodybuilding retirement experience. The next section outlines the methods for this study.

3.2 Methods

This section outlines the methods protocol for this research including my reflections on the process. First, I outline my process of recruiting participants, discuss my inclusion criteria, and share some demographic data. Next, I summarize my data collection methods including reflexive dyadic interviews and unobtrusive observation of the online environment. Then, I provide some reflections on the data collection process including my feminist underpinnings, and ethical considerations. Finally, I discuss the details of my data analysis and interpretation protocol and end with a discussion on my decision to create composite characters and write narrative essays to represent my findings.

3.2.1 Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment took place between September 2023 and June 2024. I used a combination of purposeful and snowball recruitment strategies to recruit participants for this project. While these "non-probability" recruitment approaches are informed by post-positivist perspectives, the practice of each approach is inherently relational, and have been used within similar feminist

qualitative research projects (McKeown, 2015). To be considered for this study, participants were required to meet certain inclusion criteria.

3.2.1.1 Inclusion Criteria

Participants were invited to participate in this study if: (a) they had competed in any division of women's IFBB bodybuilding, (b) they did not believe they would compete again, *or* they were actively deciding whether they would compete again and, (c) their last competition was within the last ten years. Participants must also have been at least 18 years of age. These criteria were determined strategically. First, to account for the division-specific differences in women's bodybuilding, I recruited across all divisions to account for the varied perspectives. Second, given the exploratory nature of this study, I did not want to define retirement or label someone's experience. As such, I broadly sought out participants who knew they would not compete again or those who were seriously considering it. Third, the ten-year window was simply a suggestion based on the timing of the International Federation of Bodybuilding's control over smaller federations, and the COVID-19 pandemic influencing competitors' potential plans. Importantly, when I initially proposed this project, the criteria also included competitors in men's divisions, and I intended to interview both men and women. After starting the data collection process with women, I made the methodological decision to only include women in this study and to specifically explore women's experiences. This decision and its impact are discussed further in section 3.3.3.

3.2.1.2 Process of Recruitment

As mentioned, I began recruitment with a purposeful recruitment method. I contacted those I knew or suspected to be suitable and interested in participating in the study. Knowing or suspecting a potential participant's suitability was determined by their publicly posted Instagram content (i.e., photo captions, reels, and stories) and/or my knowledge as someone involved in the sport. This stage of recruitment was conducted via Instagram direct messages (DMs). I sent DMs to those who I suspected fit the inclusion criteria briefly explaining the purpose of my study and the time required to participate. I only used Instagram for initial contact with the participants, unless they preferred that method of contact to continue. If the potential participant showed interest, I asked for their email and shared the study information letter (Appendix C). I started with participants I knew personally and then reached out to those who I knew through online connections such as Instagram. After the first few participants were recruited, I turned to a snowball recruitment strategy. This approach involved asking confirmed participants to reach out to those in their network who met the inclusion criteria and might interested in participating in the study. Given the culture and tight-knit community within the bodybuilding industry, this recruitment method was appropriate.

When reaching out to participants on Instagram. I used my personal Instagram account, which featured a stage shot as my profile photo and included "bikini competitor" and "researcher" in the profile bio (Figure 1).

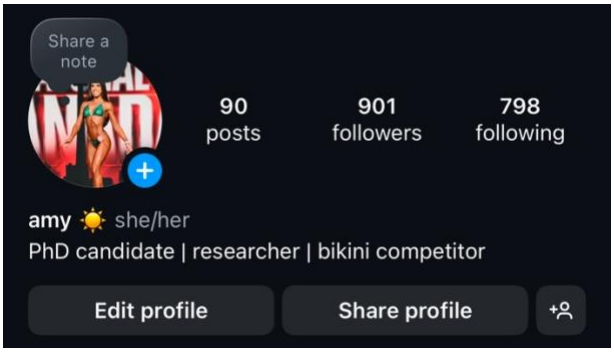


Figure 1. Screenshot of Instagram Profile Used for Recruitment.

My personal Instagram account was set to private, meaning that when reaching out to a potential participant through either method, they would need to request to follow me, and have their request approved by me. I chose to use my private, personal, Instagram for two reasons. The first reason was for my safety as I wanted to ensure that I was in control of who was contacting me. The second reason was for relatability and authenticity. Potential participants were able to see mutual followers as well as my athletic background illustrated on my profile, which likely built some trust and credibility in my proposal to participate. Given the online popularity of some potential participants, these users may receive a magnitude of messages, however, some participants mentioned they read my message and chose to reply based on my "insider" presence on Instagram, or the known mutual followers (e.g., Participant: *I saw your profile picture and all of our mutual followers, so I knew your message was legit*).

In total, I recruited 15 participants. Published studies using similar methodological approaches include variable sample sizes. For example, Wesely (2001) interviewed six participants, while Phoenix and Smith (2011) interviewed 13 participants, in their explorations of bodybuilding competitors. Out of the 15 participants, 11 were recruited with purposeful methods, and four were recruited through snowball methods. Additionally, eight other women expressed

interest in participating after reviewing the information letter but did not participate for reasons related to scheduling (four participants), health (two participants), or lack of follow-up (two participants). I also reached out to four other women who did not respond to the initial inquiry. The participant demographics are outlined next.

3.2.1.3 Participant Demographics

The 15 women included in this study ranged from 24 to 61 years of age (mean= 34.6; median= 29) at the time of their interview. All divisions, except for women's fitness, were represented. For reference, Appendix A provides a visual representation of the division differences, while Appendix B details the standardized judging criteria. Fitness was not included because this division uniquely includes a performance element in which the competitor is on stage twice, once to be judged on their physique, and once to be judged on their fitness routine, which includes regulated movements and tricks like that of a gymnastics or cheerleading routine (CPA, 2024). This added element requires a unique protocol in terms of dieting, and training, and given these differences, was not included in this study as I believe specific, dedicated attention should be given to the experience of fitness competitors.

For this study, eight women competed exclusively in the bikini division, two women primarily competed in the bikini division but also tried the figure division, one woman competed in both the figure and bikini divisions, one woman competed exclusively in the wellness division, one woman primarily competed in the figure division but also tried the bikini division, and two women primarily competed in the physique division but also tried the figure division. The dates of their last shows ranged from 2015 to 2024. All competitors resided in Canada and

competed with the Canadian Physique Alliance, or the now obsolete Ontario Physique Alliance, with one competitor also competing internationally at the Arnold Sports Festival in America. All competitors were amateurs. Importantly, one competitor was included as an exception to the inclusion criteria as she had intentions of competing the year of her interview. She was included after an initial conversation in which she reflected on her post-show experience and contemplated her next steps. Including her also offered additional layers to the sample (e.g., PED use, and geographic location). Furthermore, of the 15 participants, two participated in my Master's research, three I considered to be in my friendship circle, seven were acquaintances, and three I had no contact with before the study.

The participants included in this study were diverse in terms of competition history, which was my intention for recruitment to adequately address my research questions. However, upon reflection, I find it important to further justify this decision in terms of other demographic factors. During the interview process, probes for demographic factors such as race/ethnicity, and sexual identity were included in the first interview question, "Tell me about yourself", however depending on the flow of the conversation, these identifiers were not always explicitly captured. Considering the feminism I take up assumes intersectionality, I interacted with my participants accordingly and noted any of their reflections based on how their various identities shaped their experiences. For example, one participant reflected deeply on their Eastern European cultural background, while others did not bring up personal identities and instead, focused on the influence of their bodybuilding division. The purpose of my project was to provide a space for women in this transition period to share their stories, regardless of their background, since such

space does not formally exist. Furthermore, my participant group remains explicitly diverse in age, which aligns with my expertise and background in exploring the intersection of gender and age within sport.

3.2.2 Data Collection Methods

This section describes my two data collection methods including reflexive, dyadic interviews, and unobtrusive observation of the online environment including a description of each, and my rationale for choosing these methods.

3.2.2.1 Reflexive, Dyadic Interviews

Narratives can be collected through oral, written, and conversational means (Chase, 2005). In qualitative research, interviews are often used to generate conversation. Generally, interviews refer to the practice of producing knowledge through conversational interactions between an interviewer and participant(s), which are guided by the interviewer with specific goals in mind (Brinkmann, 2008).

Given my lived experience with the topic and in many cases, existing relationships with participants, I wanted to ensure that my interview methods incorporated my perspectives and embraced the relational nature of narrative inquiry. During my Master's research, I employed a phenomenological interviewing method, which directed me to "bracket" my thoughts and perspectives when speaking with women bodybuilders over the age of 50. This impeded the quality of data generated as I was unable to connect and build a relationship with the participants during their interviews. For that study, I felt my natural conversations with participants before, during, and after their interviews were much more organic and insightful as I shared my

background, and we bonded over mutual acquaintances and experiences. Despite these challenges, my known "insider" perspective promoted a comfortable environment encouraging participants to openly share their experiences. With this experience in mind, I turned to an in-depth style of interview referred to as reflexive, dyadic interviews for this research (Ellis, 2004).

In-depth interviews are often utilized to collect narratives (Chase, 2005). Moreover, in-depth interviews align with feminist research praxis—with shared aims to collect rich accounts of lived experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2012—and are commonly used in sport-related narrative inquiries (Jewett et al., 2019; Phoenix & Smith, 2011). While dyadic interviews collect data via the interaction of two individuals (a dyad) (Morgan et al., 2008), reflexive, dyadic interviews consider the relationship and interaction between the two individuals, which in this case, are the researcher and the participant (Ellis, 2004). A reflexive dyadic interview extends beyond the interviewer simply asking questions, and instead, embraces and encourages the researcher to share their personal experience, reflections, and perspectives on the topic (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Holstein and Gubrium (2003) describe the interview as "more as a conversation between two equals than a distinctly hierarchical, question-and-answer exchange, and the interviewer tries to tune in to the interactively produced meanings and emotional dynamics within the interview itself" (p. 478). Furthermore, Ellis (2004) emphasizes that while the focus of the interview remains on the participant and their story, the researcher's insight may offer new ideas for the participant to reflect on regarding their shared experience.

The relational nature of reflexive, dyadic interviews aligns with narrative inquiry in that knowledge is co-created and aligns with feminist praxis by attending to power differentials that

may exist in a researcher-participant relationship (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Furthermore, based on my experience as an "insider", it is extremely difficult to withhold my perspectives given my close relationship with the topic. Instead, this method allowed me to harness my experience in a manner that builds rapport, generates conversation, and promotes an environment of comfort, care, and safety. Given that many conversations regarding bodybuilding retirement occur online, or within the community, my participants were open to sharing with me based on my position within the culture. Beyond reflexive, dyadic interviews, I also sought to address the pervasiveness of social media within the bodybuilding industry. As such, I chose to observe the digital culture and landscape within the bodybuilding community.

3.2.2.2 Unobtrusive Observation of the Online Environment

Unintentional unobtrusive observation of the online environment coupled with my personal experience leaving bodybuilding generated the foundation for this research project's purpose. Accordingly, I aimed to ensure that the online environment (i.e., social media) was considered in some capacity during the data collection process. While participant observation typically involves a researcher accessing or engaging with their phenomenon or topic of interest, Salmons (2015) describes unobtrusive observation as a process in which the researcher collects "posted but not personally identifiable information or looks for patterns in such posts on websites, blogs, or social media sites, or in discussion group interactions" (p. 152). With this method of observation, the researcher does not interact with the online community through posts or questions and instead, focuses on observing the existing interactions. For this project, I observed Instagram posts, stories, and reels (including comments), as well as discussions on

subreddits such as *r/bodybuilding* focusing on bodybuilding in general and *r/bikinitalk* focusing namely on the bikini division but also includes discussion on women's divisions in general. I chose these two subreddits given their high user activity. I also asked participants in this study to share their Instagram accounts and observed their social media platforms. I archived and saved content as I organically came across it to understand patterns and group dynamics/interactions. In both cases, I did not actively post, or prompt for information. I simply observed the landscape to understand patterns in of support the interview data. During the study, I also remained active on my own Instagram, which favours an algorithm in line with my study purpose. Furthermore, this method acted as a verification process to further strengthen the trustworthiness of the interview data. I now turn to a discussion on the data collection process.

3.2.3 Interview Experience

I conducted interviews between October 2023 and June 2024. Since I have highlighted my positionality and relation to bodybuilding throughout this chapter, it is also important to note that when I started interviews in October 2023, I was about 10-12 weeks post-show myself, and as I continued interviews into 2024, I entered another prep in February 2024. Given the relational nature of reflexive, dyadic interviews, my positionality is important to highlight as I describe this process (Johnson & Rose, 2024).

3.2.3.1 Interview Set-Up, Approach, And Dynamics

During the initial contact and recruitment process, I screened participants to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. To do so, I emailed potential participants to confirm their eligibility in line with the inclusion criteria (highlighted previously in section 3.3.1.1). Once confirmed, we

proceeded with scheduling their interview. Participants were given the option of an online, or in-person interview (if they were within driving distance). Of the 15 interviews, 13 were conducted online via Zoom and two were conducted in-person. The in-person interviews were conducted in locations agreed upon by both the participant and researcher with both ending up at cafes.

During the initial stages of this project, I proposed collecting interviews through one-on-one reflexive dyadic interviews, and potentially group interviews consisting of 3-5 participants (from the same participant pool as the one-on-one interviews). I started with one-on-one interviews, and asked participants if they would be interested in a group interview however, participants shared that they did not have much else to add to their stories, or did not know what else they would contribute. As a result, only one-on-one interviews were conducted. This decision did not impact the research questions, or study purpose as I only suggested a group interviewing method in my proposal if it proved necessary to supplement the reflexive, dyadic interviews, or if there was interest amongst my participant group. Another change that ensued during the interview process was the study population and scope of my research. After completing eight one-on-one interviews, I realized that I wanted to shift the scope of my research to only focus on women's experiences exclusively. The following is an email sent to my committee explaining my decision:

I am now at a point where I would like to alter the scope of my research to only focus on women-identifying competitors. I talked through my decision with Diana and now I am just looping in my committee as a whole. Given that I proposed to include 15-20 participants (12-15 women, and 3-5 men), I am realizing that I am collecting more data than I anticipated, and the

women I am speaking with are providing such in-depth, personal accounts about their experience in connection to their gender, that I would like to focus my efforts on women and their varying intersections. As you may remember, there are 6 women's divisions (compared to 3 for men) with varying judging criteria based on muscle mass, posing, and femininity. As such, I'd like to make sure ALL women are represented across divisions with a variety of identifying characteristics. For example, I spoke with a 26-year-old former bikini competitor and a 62-year-old former bikini competitor who, although shared some similarities, also had very unique circumstances in terms of their age and associated health.

While I see so much value in exploring men's perspectives, I don't think interviewing 3-to 5 men would do this topic justice. My goal is to narrow my scope to highlight the experiences of women within the male-dominated industry and the associated power dynamics both in, and outside of, the industry. I feel a connection with my participants given our shared experiences, and many of them have highlighted how important they think this work is, and how happy they are to be a part of it. I think focusing only on women would honour their voices/stories while also allowing me to more fully embrace my own feminism as I feel like I am creating something with/for a community of women who feel their voices are not represented. I have attached my updated purpose statement and research questions in light of this change. I am also aware that I will need to adjust my literature review and other elements within my proposal for the final dissertation.

To update my purpose statement and research questions, I changed "bodybuilding competitors" to "competitive bodybuilders in the women's divisions" and "women bodybuilding competitors"

respectively to shift the focus to women's experiences only. The purpose and research questions remained the same outside of this adjustment. My committee was receptive and supportive of my decision, so I continued with this approach. The following section highlights the interview one-on-one reflexive, dyadic interview process.

3.2.3.2 Interview Process

At the start of each scheduled interview, I obtained oral consent as recommended by the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board. The oral consent script (Appendix D) was read out loud to the participants along with three consenting questions they were required to answer. The consent script also covered access to their personal Instagram profiles for review, with a note that they may be contacted for the use of specific quotes.

Once consent to participate and audio-record the interview was obtained, the interview began. An interview guide (Appendix E) was used to guide the conversation, however, the goal of reflexive dyadic interviews is for the conversation to flow naturally between the researcher and participant so I encouraged the participants to share their stories at their own pace, and with their comfort in mind (Hesse-Biber, 2007). I used the interview guide to stay on track and ensure I was still attending to the purpose of my research project amidst the conversation. As the interviews went on, I found myself turning to a few additional probes including:

1) Did you ever think about leaving, or your last show? Did you do anything to prepare or set yourself up for success?
2) Had you known the challenges, would you have done anything differently

3) How do you spend your time now? Have you replaced your time spent on prep/offseason with other hobbies or activities?

In line with feminist research practice, I approached these interviews with care as I knew from my own experience, that reflecting on this period is difficult, and might bring up harmful memories. With this approach, I practiced active listening (i.e., focusing on the participant with attention to both mine, and their body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice), offered breaks throughout the interview, and provided a list of supports in my information letter (Preissle & Han, 2012). My relation to the topic and shared experience with the participants also provided a sense of understanding, safety, and comfort, according to many of the participants (e.g. Participant: *I know you get it because you've done it too*).

The interviews typically started with gaining some background and insight into the participants' time competing, including what motivated them to start bodybuilding, and why they decided to keep going. They were then asked to describe the shift or experience that caused them to leave the sport. From there, the remaining conversation focused on their experience after leaving the sport and included reflections on gender while they competed and how that impacted their leaving. I shared my thoughts, experiences, and reflections with each participant as they arose in the conversation. In some interviews, participants asked me questions as well (e.g., What was your coach like? How many shows have you done?) as they related to the conversation. Each interview lasted between 60 minutes to 180 minutes (average= 90 minutes). After the interviews were complete, I often had a brief conversation with the participant thanking them for their participation and reminding them of the ethics protocols for data retention. I

emphasized that participants could reach out via email with any questions, concerns, or afterthoughts regarding their interviews or the study in general. Lastly, I followed up via email once again thanking them for their participation and sharing a formal, ethics-approved, feedback letter (Appendix F).

3.2.3.3 Interview Ethical Considerations

All ethical protocols were followed as outlined in the approved ethics application from the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (#45221) regarding data collection, confidentiality, and data storage. All participants were assigned a numerical code for confidentiality, and I stored all personal information (including signed and dated oral consent forms) based on the University of Waterloo data storage and retention guidelines. Participants were informed their names would not appear in any final documents produced or published from the data. Generally, when asked if there were any questions regarding the ethical protocol, the majority of participants expressed their openness, and willingness to share, with many participants even saying things such as "*You can add my real name for all I care!"* Despite this openness, I made sure to reiterate the confidentiality piece and reminded them that they could follow up after the interview if they felt like they had over-shared or were uncomfortable with what they shared.

The interviews were audio-recorded either through Zoom, or on my personal device, and then transcribed (transcription process detailed in section 3.3.5 Analysis and Representation). I sent completed transcripts to each of the participants via email to verify the interview content and address any concerns (e.g., adding, changing, and/or removing any part of the conversation

within the transcript). Participants who reviewed their transcripts expressed no concerns with the transcripts except one who reiterated the importance of removing specific names/Instagram accounts from the conversation. This verification process addresses the co-construction of knowledge in a reflective dyadic interview by giving the participant a chance to review the conversation after completion (Birt et al., 2016). This process further enhanced trustworthiness, a key element in conducting quality qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016; Carter et al., 2014).

The transcriptions and audio files were stored anonymously on my OneDrive, a password-protected, encrypted drive housed at the University of Waterloo. All copies of the data were deleted from my personal device once moved to the OneDrive. Originally, participants were assigned a pseudonym for the analysis, however, after much consideration on protecting the participants' identities, the data were represented with an amalgamation of the pseudonyms, as composite characters (discussed in section 3.3.5) to further protect their identities.

3.2.3.4 Interview Reflections

The interview process was perhaps the most fascinating, yet mentally taxing element of the research process for me. This process of reflexivity is a key practice in feminist qualitative research (Hess-Biber, 2007, Jonson & Parry, 2022) and remained attentive to the analytic lenses proposed by Chase (2005) for scholars using narrative inquiry in their research. Three lenses were particularly helpful. The first lens: sharing a narrative is not simply a factual recall of events (Chase, 2005), served as a helpful reminder when conversing with the participants to ensure that their emotions and perspectives were captured, rather than just the chronological events in their lives. The second lens: narratives as socially situated performances, attends to the

influence of environment, audience and setting in which a story is told (Chase, 2005). This lens was essential to consider when setting up, and conducting the interviews to ensure participants were in an environment they felt comfortable in. The third lens: narrative researchers are the narrators, accounts for the researcher's interpretations and understanding of the narratives shared by others (Chase, 2005). I was attentive to this lens as I collected and analyzed data by practicing reflexivity. After each interview, I spent time—ranging from hours to days—reflecting on the conversation and journaling my thoughts in various forms. I took written notes, recorded audio notes to myself, and documented my thoughts in real time in the Notes app on my phone. This reflexive journaling process was particularly essential as I reflected on my connection to the sport, my experience of leaving the sport, and my connection to the participants in varying capacities (e.g., friend, acquaintance, stranger etc.).

My positionality caused a lot of tension for me during data collection and even in the final stages of my dissertation writing. When I proposed this topic of exploration in 2022, I thought I had left bodybuilding for good. Much of this work is inspired by my own experience, and I felt an immediate connection to the topic. I knew, based on my previous research, that my position would allow for connectedness with the participants. However, in 2023 I decided to compete again after five years away from the stage. My return to the industry impacted how I continued this research. Before I began interviews, I questioned if I lost credibility as a researcher exploring this topic knowing that I no longer identified with the group I was seeking to explore. I also wondered whether I would be seen as trustworthy, and because of that, I felt like a bit of a fraud. My interviews began after I competed in three shows in 2023. I had posted

quite openly on my social media accounts, and since Instagram was my primary form of recruitment, all of my participants were aware of my position in the sport. I used my reflexive journaling to document my current position (e.g., how many weeks post-show/how many weeks in prep) in the sport and what I shared as one of two in the "dyad" interview. This helped me understand my mindset and mental state during the interview. My thoughts on appearing as a fraud quickly disappeared as I began the interviews and was met with positive responses from participants. There was still very much a feeling of "we" and "us" as the post-show experience is bonding, whether or not one chooses to compete again, or quit for good. Furthermore, I think my decision to compete after five years increased my ability to reflect critically on the sport as I was able to take the knowledge gained (both personally, and academically) during my five years away, and apply it to my prep, and competition experience on my return. I was also able to dive back into the culture and witness the shifts in the industry after being away for so long.

I also faced tension when considering the participant-researcher relationship. I had varying levels of interaction and pre-existing relationships with my participants. For example, I knew some participants personally, whether they were friends or acquaintances (e.g., met once or twice, online interactions, shared the same coach etc.) and for others, I had unique relationships such as an existing researcher-participant relationship (i.e., they participated in my Master's research), or no pre-existing relationship at all. In terms of friendships, it took some time for me to find the balance between probing for details and letting the conversations flow organically. In many cases, I was familiar with the friend/participant's story given our history and previous experience sharing stories with each other. In those cases, the participants often shared stories

but omitted details that I was aware of from our previous conversations. As such, I had to balance my ability to probe for those details as I did not want them to share something they were not comfortable sharing in the researcher-participant relationship, however, I was also aware that their omission may have been from them assuming I already knew. To achieve this balance, I found myself using phrases such as "for the sake of the interview, can you please elaborate…" or "Is there anything else you can add?" which came off as neutral probes in which they could decide how much detail they wanted to add. I found that I had to spend more time journaling and reflecting on the conversations with friends/participants to ensure I understood any omissions or potential influences from my side. In contrast, the participants who were strangers to me shared their stories in vivid detail, and I faced no barriers in probing for further details. In terms of the acquaintance-like relationships, I found the interviews to be quite personal, and in a sense bonding, as the participant and I likely shared some similarities, but never took the time to sit down and hear each other stories. For example, some participants shared the same previous coach with me, and while I knew who they were, I did not know that a lot of their experiences were similar to mine. These conversations ended up being very validating for both of us (E.g., Participant: *I love that you're doing this. I think it brings so much light to the industry…I think it's easy to talk about the positives and I think it's a lot harder to talk about the negatives and try to balance the two out. So, I think what you're doing is just so huge and to be able to share that with the world and do something that you're passionate about that you've experienced as well in your life, I think is amazing*).

My reflective practice benefitted me personally, and my methodological process. After my 2023 season, I decided to compete again in 2024, and my mindset shifted from post-show to prep. During prep, I was mentally and physically exhausted from the process itself, but journaling, and reflecting on the experience felt very therapeutic. Writing down and recording my tensions, emotions, and thoughts throughout the process provided me with a sense of peace and often closure. Typically, during prep, I do not pay attention to the emotions I experience, and instead just focus on "checking the boxes" and making it through each day. Forcing myself to slow down and think about how I was feeling, and how this was impacting my research ended up having a very positive impact on my mental health. Furthermore, the process of reflection allowed me to gather a sense of how this project would unfold. Since the interviews took place from October 2023 to June 2024, I was able to continue improving my interviewer role (i.e., appropriate time to probe, methods of probing, strategies for sharing information etc.) and understand the similarities and differences in the stories being shared. By being meticulous with my reflexivity and journaling, I found the analysis process to be much less daunting because I took the time to process my thoughts and perspectives and also reflect on the conversations as they were occurring. Beyond the practice of reflexive journaling, conducting these interviews uncovered the true meaning of feminist qualitative research for me, as detailed next.

When I was about halfway through my interviews, I met up with a friend in my program who was also conducting a feminist qualitative research project for her dissertation. She asked how my data collection was going, and I shared that my interview conversations exceeded my expectations. By that, I meant that my interviews became such genuine, vulnerable, and

courageous conversations in which both the participant and I confided in each other and shared stories of our time competing in a way that built a connection and a bond. There was a sense of respect and reciprocity during the process. In that moment of reflection, I realized that this experience was more than a research project, and I said to my friend, "I really feel like I'm *doing* feminist research". I felt like everything I had read about in terms of the participant-researcher relationship, and the relationality of feminist qualitative work had come to life for me during the data collection process. After the interviews, every single woman thanked me for the opportunity and expressed how they were grateful to have a space where they could reflect on their time in the industry and have someone listen to their stories who understood what they experienced without judgement (e.g. Participant: *I think the research is great…I'm glad you like approached me and I definitely wanted to help… You're like deciding to kind of spearhead and be like, "no, like there should be academic literature on this." … So yeah, I was happy to help)*. Many never had an opportunity to do this, and described the process as healing, and empowering as they were able to reflect on how far they had come (e.g. Participant: *I've never really fully talked about competing from start to finish so it was nice to reflect and just see how far I've come from [my experience]*). The empowerment and gratitude were genuinely mutual, and I felt a sense of pride in accomplishment that I was able to create this space.

3.2.4 Online Observations

While the interviews provided in-depth accounts of the participants' experiences, the social media posts observed during the research study added another layer of validation to the stories

shared in the interviews. Observation of the online environment (Instagram and Reddit) began in June 2023 and continued until December 2024.

3.2.4.1 Ethical Considerations

As described earlier, this method was used to observe patterns and interactions in the online environment. In 2017, the Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) published ethical guidelines for research involving social media. According to these guidelines, although social media posts exist on "a seemingly public social media platform," researchers are not free to use the data as they wish and must abide by legal requirements and privacy restrictions of the apps they intend to use (p. 5). In this case, if I wanted to engage with the data in these spaces beyond observation, I would need to seek consent from the users posting the information shared in these spaces. Furthermore, TMU (2017) cautions researchers aiming to collect on public platforms to be cognizant of the risks associated with the participants (i.e., the data may not belong to them, they may not have the right to share the data, and/or potential to cause harm) (p. 5). These guidelines were brought up by the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board when I originally submitted my application. Given the scope and timeline of this project, I opted to proceed with observations only. The following is an excerpt from my ethics application for further context:

The other procedure is an unobtrusive observation of the online environment. This means that the researcher will observe data shared publicly on social media sites such as Instagram and Reddit. The researcher will not engage with any of the posts. The data observed will be from public Instagram accounts and/or accounts the student researcher follows and/or accounts of

participants (who have provided their account information). Two main Reddit subthreads will be observed - r/bodybuilding and r/bikini talk which are both public subreddits. Observations will consist of types of posts focused on the study topic (i.e., bodybuilding retirement, gender/bodybuilding, post-show experience etc.) to understand the conversations occurring in these spaces. Quotes will not be collected from these spaces unless they are from a participant who has provided their account information and given consent for the researcher to use quotes from their accounts. The next section details the observation process.

3.2.4.2 Observation Process

With this approved protocol in mind, the process was rather organic, as I often observe social media multiple times a day, and my algorithms align with this study's purpose. As such, there was no specific time frame, or dedicated time designated to these observations as the goal was not to seek out information but rather observe how it naturally appears in these spaces. As I engaged with Instagram, and Reddit, made notes of the patterns and occurrences of the posts that offered insight into the retirement transition and aligned with my research questions.

In total, I noted approximately 70 Instagram posts and 10 Reddit threads related to this topic. The topics covered in these posts/threads aligned closely with the first research question covering the retirement experience in relation to health, well-being, and identity (60 Instagram posts/6 Reddit posts) with less attention observed towards conversations on gender (5 Instagram posts/2 Reddit posts), and broad discussions on bodybuilding retirement (5 Instagram posts/2 Reddit posts). I also noted the interactions on the posts (e.g., comments and engagement) to

understand group dynamics within this online community to further inform my analysis and representation style. Once the data collection was complete, I turned to analysis.

3.2.5 Analysis and Representation

A key feature of narrative inquiry analysis is the constant negotiation between the researcher and participant(s). Ethically, the researcher must ensure that the research texts represent the voices of the participants while also creating a cohesive narrative (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Furthermore, narrative designs are often grouped into one of two categories of analysis: analysis of narratives which focuses on analyzing, deconstructing, and thinking about stories, and narrative analysis which focuses on conveying experience, constructing, and thinking with stories (Linghede et al., 2016). Narrative analysis is more common in social science research as it allows for more fluidity and creativity in the re-storying process rather than separating the data into discrete categories (Creswell, 2007).

I decided to share my process of analysis and representation, as the process seemingly blurred together and involved much trial and error, re-writing, and reflection. I loosely followed a narrative analysis or re-storying analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), however, I have detailed my full process below to emphasize how my process truly unfolded including the (a) initial analysis, (b) representation style, (c) representation attempt one, and (d) representation attempt two including the development of composite characters and narratives.

3.2.5.1 Initial Analysis

To begin my analysis, I first transcribed the interview data. Initially, I proposed transcribing the data myself. I planned to listen to each audio-recorded interview at a reduced

speed and type out the conversation. I followed this process for the first eight interviews, and although I found it helpful to fully immerse myself in the data, it was also time-consuming, and the drawbacks of this method outweighed the benefits. After a conversation with my supervisor on how to use my time effectively, I decided to transcribe the remaining interviews using a combination of the original method and an AI transcription service (otter.ai). To do this, I uploaded the audio to this software and then listened to the audio while reviewing the generated transcription and editing accordingly. This method also allowed me to immerse myself in the data by re-listening to the audio to ensure that the generated transcription was accurate. Each transcription was completed within a week of the original interview, while the conversation was still current.

As mentioned in the previous section, the analysis process started organically as the data were being collected. That is, with my reflexive journaling, and interview schedule, I was able to see similarities, differences, and connections in the data being generated at this early stage. Additionally, while I was transcribing, or reviewing each interview, I made notes of themes, quotes, or stories that stood out to me, or seemingly related to the research questions and made notes of how these ideas related to the literature I was familiar with and my personal knowledge of the industry. Hesse-Biber (2017) refers to this as the "iterative process" of analysis as it occurs simultaneously with the data collection. This iterative process allowed me to fully immerse myself in the data as I became familiar with the participants' stories and the emerging themes as they related to my research questions and the new insight that might be generated. As mentioned earlier, the final transcriptions were also sent to participants for verification.

Once the iterative process of analysis and final transcriptions were complete, I applied a narrative analysis that allowed me to examine and interpret the participants' stories with attention to the content, structure, and social/cultural context in which they were situated. To do this, I followed the following steps:

1) I uploaded the transcriptions to nVIVo and read through each transcript while copying over my initial notes into the software. After this process, I gathered a stronger sense of overlapping themes, similarities, and differences among the interviews.
2) I applied both a structural and a content thematic analysis to the transcriptions using nVIVo to code the data. To start, I reviewed each transcription and highlighted sections that were relevant to my research questions under very broad content-related themes (e.g., health, body image etc.) to get a sense of the overarching themes in each of the transcriptions. Then, I reviewed the transcriptions again to better understand the structure of each story. By this I mean, I coded events such as "prep," and "pivotal moment" to get a sense of the order of events in how these experiences unfolded.
3) I then went through all the transcriptions for a third time with a more critical lens and started breaking down the broad themes into subthemes. For example, physical health effects were broken down into subcategories such as hormones, weight gain, PED-related effects etc.
4) I referred to my observations of the online environment as a form of confirmation. I reviewed the saved Reddit threads and Instagram captions from anonymous users, and the participants, to again, search for similarities and differences in the stories. I also

reviewed the Instagram captions for format and content to generate a sense of how stories are shared (in terms of content, and structure) in a more public format.

5) Once I finished coding all of the transcriptions, I wrote out a brief "sketch" for each participant, which included their timeline of events, and the main themes they touched on as they related to my research questions. For example, some participants experienced more challenges related to their mental health, so they mostly shared stories related to those experiences. I also assigned each participant a pseudonym.

After these five steps, I felt comfortable starting to write my first findings draft. When considering how to represent my findings, I knew I wanted to apply a form of creative representation to ensure my findings were presented in a captivating, yet accessible, manner that would land well with the participants/bodybuilding community, and the academic community. This process involved perhaps the most trial-and-error, frustration, and re-writing during the development stage. This research topic is very personal to me, and I wanted to ensure that I was representing the participants' story in a way that would make the impact I feel it deserves. To achieve this, I turned to creative analytic practice (CAP)

3.2.5.2 Representation: Creative Analytic Practice

My choice to use a creative representation of data aligns with my theoretical and methodological perspectives and is inspired by my appreciation and captivation by feminist scholars who have used similar methods for their PhD dissertations (McKeown, 2015; Mulcahy, 2018). Noting the roles emotions play in understanding experience allows narrative inquirers to express embodied experiences in ways with more creativity compared to more conventional

methods (Linghede et al., 2016). For example, scholars using CAP in sport research may represent data through short stories, or vignettes (Fisher et al., 2018; Gardiner, 2015), or creative dialogue (Berbary, 2011; Linghede et al., 2016) to engage the reader and encourage the reader to immerse themselves into the story being told. While it may not be possible to recreate an experience, feminist narrative inquirers strive to find balance during the research process and represent the results with meaningful and engaging methods that evoke emotion and share stories that oppose cultural meta-narratives to initiate social change (Johnson & Parry, 2022).

The goal of CAP is to represent experience both with attention to social and personal meanings rather than generalizing or summarizing (Parry & Johnson, 2007). Given the uniqueness of each story and journey shared by my participants, a method that avoids generalizations and compacting experiences into overarching themes or ideas would not align with my research goals. CAP instead, captures the individuality and complexity of experience as it is situated within social, cultural, and political contexts. CAP may include various forms of representation such as art, fiction, poetry, and performance (Mulcahy, 2018). While various forms of CAP exist, I first explored using the online environment and social media to creatively represent my findings.

3.2.5.3 Initial Representation

Knowing I was going to use a form of CAP to represent my findings, I first worked on representing my findings through Instagram captions and Reddit threads in which the participants, as pseudonyms, interacted with each other. I was inspired by the CAP practice of using dialogue-based vignettes, which I had seen in similar feminist work (McKeown, 2015;

Nijjar, 2018). I wanted to use this approach but translate it into an online environment where I could show participants interacting with each other and engaging with each other's posts on Instagram and Reddit. To do this, I used each of my character sketches and wrote out different captions/threads in relation to my research questions to show the similarities and differences in the experiences. I developed a series of posts based on my first research question to highlight how the retirement transition was experienced in terms of health, well-being, and identity and shared part one with my supervisor for review. My supervisor reviewed the first draft and agreed that the content was captivating, however, the formatting and overall representation came across as fragmented as some of the key themes were being overshadowed by the representation method. My supervisor also shared that the reader may benefit from more knowledge and understanding of what bodybuilding is and what it entails to grasp the impact of leaving the sport. With this feedback, I began my revisions on part one and also worked to address my second research question, exploring the role of gender ideologies on the transition experience.

As I worked on revisions, I noticed that while this approach worked for more descriptive representation (e.g., highlighting the physical health implications faced during this period), it did not quite translate into the topics requiring more depth (e.g., discussions on gender in the industry). I struggled to capture the discussions on gender in this pseudo-digital format, as these deep, reflective conversations appear less in the online spaces and as a result, felt less authentic to be represented with this method. I opted to represent the second research question as a separate section using broad themes in line with a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once complete, the findings draft felt very disjointed with a mix of representation styles. I shared

this draft with my supervisor again, and she agreed that this draft was difficult to follow and that many of the key themes were lost in the various modes of representation. We met to discuss the next steps. I shared that I felt conflicted to represent every voice and include every participant with a pseudonym, however, I also realized that this strategy may not add as much value when compared to focusing on one voice and letting that voice shine to draw the reader in. Furthermore, we discussed the importance of providing context and background for the reader as I realized that my position as an active competitor (I was about 10 days out from nationals at this point) led me to write with many assumptions about the industry since I was so heavily involved with it, and forgot that many of my taken-for-granted assumptions are not common knowledge. I was also encouraged to include my own voice within the representation given my position and involvement with the sport. I sat with this feedback for a few weeks as I pondered a more effective, and captivating method of representation.

Although I was initially drawn to a pseudo-digital representation with Instagram captions and Reddit threads, I came to realize that there are so many assumptions, and "givens" in these environments (i.e., the audience of these digital environments are mostly those who are also in the industry), and the process of explaining, or providing context might be too convoluted and confusing for the reader, taking away from the meanings of the stories. Instead, I thought back to what moved me or inspired me in the past. During the collection and analysis process, I spent a lot of time reading autobiographies written in essay formats, particularly those that chronicle the

significant events and reflections that impacted the author's worldview to that day[6]. What I liked most about these essays is that they spoke to a significant moment or experience and drew me in to understand how they were feeling and how that instance impacted their life going forward. Although many of these experiences were unfamiliar to me (i.e., ranging from sharing the experience of a miscarriage to sharing the experience of being sexually assaulted on the set of a music video), the essays were able to draw me in and impact me emotionally. They allowed me to connect with the author, despite our lack of shared experiences. Similarly, many women bodybuilding competitors use their social media accounts, mostly Instagram, to share their stories competing, or post-show in a similar essay-like format. Long captions are quite common. For me, I found these long, essay-like captions to draw me in similar to the non-fiction, autobiographical essays I was also reading. The difference was, I could relate to these experiences, and I found them extremely validating. Given my connection to this representation form, I decided to leave my previous attempt behind and instead, turned to the development of composite characters to author narrative essays related to their experience in a similar format.

3.2.5.4 Composite Characters and Narrative Essays

Luckily, with the analysis and an attempt at the representation completed, I had a strong foundation to work from in the development of the final version of my findings. However, I had to return to my data to develop the composite characters and piece together the associated narrative essays. I was always drawn to the idea of developing composite characters and

[6] Some of my favourites include Rockettes, Rockstars & Rockbottom by Keltie Colleen, My Body by Emily Ratajkowski, Well, This is Exhausting by Sophia Benoit and The Wreckage of my Presence by Casey Wilson.

proposed this CAP method in my dissertation proposal. According to Arjomand (2022), composite characters are "fictional characters [that] represent aggregations of multiple real-world people who informed research" as the author "remixes data from multiple study participants to tell a coherent story of a character that could have but did not, exist in the real world" (p. 2). I was particularly inspired by Janet McKeown's (2015) development of composite characters to represent her identified five phases of singlehood women may experience. These characters were represented with made-up dating profiles and the characters conversed with one another through dialogue-based vignettes created by McKeown.

Scholars using this representation method attest that composite characters further anonymize participant experience, which was a concern for my study (Arjomand, 2022; McKeown, 2015; Willis, 2019). Since the results and photos for all bodybuilding competitions are public, and during the interviews, the participants shared direct references to dates, coaches, placings and/or show names, a reader could deductively attribute a story to the actual participant. Although altering some information to prevent this deduction might offer a solution, many participants are also active on social media and have open profiles, meaning that anyone can view their photos and captions. As such, the similarities in the stories might reveal their true identities, especially if the reader is associated with the online bodybuilding community. Furthermore, since a snowball sampling method was used, and the community is very tight-knit as-is, there was some risk of participants identifying each other. Given that much of this identifying information was necessary to provide context for their stories, composite characters

acted as productive outlets to maintain anonymity while still maintaining the integrity of the stories (Arjomand, 2022; Willis, 2019).

I also found that developing composite characters allowed me to centre the experiences in a meaningful way. Many participants, or groups of participants, had very similar experiences. I originally felt the need to represent each voice (as with a pseudonym) but came to realize that quality is more important than quantity. By focusing on one voice to represent all of those who shared the same thoughts, or perspectives, I was able to shape and define the experience in a meaningful, and captivating way. I also felt I was able to build on the characters to create more connection with the reader as I was fully developing five voices with sufficient context, and background, rather than engaging all 15 voices (and my own!). To shape the characters, I returned to the participant sketches and categorized them structurally and contextually (e.g., similar demographic characteristics and experiences competing). I loosely followed Arjomand's (2022) Sequence-Based Composites (SBC) method to develop my characters. This method involves two steps: a) compression, which involves "deciding how to compress or cluster individual research participants into characters" and b) remixing, which involves "deciding which data to attribute into composite characters in a way this enriched rather than impoverished analysis" (p. 3). These are detailed next.

3.2.5.4.1 Character Development

I first used my structural analysis to determine similarities and differences in the participants' overarching stories (i.e., the before, the during, and the after). I mapped out similarities to find which participants aligned most with others and then shaped their profiles

based on their interview data. Arjomand (2022) calls the process the "sequence table" which consists of a chronological summary of the research participants' experiences. The entries, in my case, were based on the structural and contextual coding I conducted earlier in the analysis process. Figure 2 presents an example of a sequence table I created. With these tables, I was able to cluster participants into composite characters and then build their narratives around their creation (Arjomand, 2022). For example, based on Figure 2, I was able to include participant one and two in the creation of one composite character based on the similarities in their structural and contextual sequence. In contrast, participant three ended up being a part of a different character due to the differences in their sequence.

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Started competing in early 20s	Started competing in early 20s	Started competing in late 30s
Inspired by a woman in the gym	Inspired by a woman on Instagram	Inspired by a woman in the gym
Competed in bikini	Competed in bikini	Competed in physique
Did multiple shows	Did one show	Did multiple shows
Social media following	Social media following	Social media following
Left because health/burnout, poor coaching relationship	Left because health/needing a break	Left because of injuries
Faced challenges related to gaining weight, body image, online following	Face challenges related to online following, gaining weight, body image	Faced challenges related to losing muscle and identity
Found balance after leaving	Found balance after leaving	Still feels sense of loss

Figure 2. Example of a Sequence Table.

I categorized the 15 participants into five characters. Inspired by McKeown (2015), who based her characters on five phases of singlehood, I also provided my characters with an overarching character title to represent their journey, using the participants' words. These included (a) Lisa, the seasoned physique competitor, (b) Alanna, the young impressionable bikini competitor, (c) Carol, the coach, (d) Rachel, the mom, and (e) Isabelle, the existing athlete. Additionally, there were some instances where the participants did not fit squarely into the characters I was developing. For example, some participants had a different background, but similar outcomes after leaving. As a result, some participants bridge multiple characters (Arjomand, 2022). For Lisa, I used the data from five participants, for Alanna, I used the data from six participants, for Carol, I used the data from five participants, for Rachel, I used the data from five participants, and for Isabelle, I used the data from six participants. These characters represented all 15 women, and my goal was for participants, and others reading this work, to see themselves somewhere in these characters, whether that was in one, or all five. For me personally, I found myself associating and connecting with two of the characters.

3.2.5.4.2 Narratives: Participant Profiles and Essays

I first started by writing out the "participant profiles" which highlight the character's experience before competing (e.g., what motivated them to get started), during their time competing (e.g., what their preps were like etc.), and introduced the "after" which hints at the shift, or breaking point in which they realized they were leaving the sport. To do this, I followed along with McKeown's (2015) process which involved making "each of the profiles messy, weaving together stories and experiences shared by the women" in their interviews, and in their

online accounts. Arjomand (2022) calls this process “remixing” as the goal is to take the various data and combine it “into a fictional narrative in a way that is not arbitrary and that forces the author to question a priori assumptions” (p. 4). Generally, I used stories, quotes, and phrases from the participants who were combined into one composite character to represent that character’s stories. Arjomand’s (2002) method offers some insight into the decision-making process where some of the participants’ stories show differences. The author suggests using casual inferencing about how the data are selected for each participant. That is, using a statistical approach (e.g., most of the participants were bikini competitors, therefore the composite should be a bikini competitor), might not align with all elements of the story and the author must make decisions that align with the temporality and structure of the story. Once the participant profiles were developed, I turned to writing my narrative essays.

With the major themes connected to my research questions, I had an idea of which character would speak to each theme. I returned to the first draft of my findings and documented the stories, phrases, and/ or insights that spoke to me or moved me. I then paired down my broad themes from the first draft into 12 main topics that address my research questions (e.g., physical health impacts, identity, power and patriarchy) and assigned them to a composite character. I separated the narrative essays into two parts: 1) exploring the challenges related to health, identity, and well-being, and 2) reflections on gender and the body. Beyond the typical storytelling format from one character, I also included two dialogue-based essays that include a conversation between the five characters, and one essay told by me in reflection of all the characters. I wanted the participants, and those who may relate to this experience, to not only see

themselves but also see the interactions they have with others. I was drawn to the interaction piece between participants in McKeown's (2015) work and wanted to include a version of this as well. Arjomand (2022) cautions researchers writing composite narratives to be mindful of temporality and sequence as the author must carefully balance the data they are selecting with (a) what actually occurred in the real world (i.e., interviews) and (b) the more "creative exercise of creating sequences that never occurred" (p. 5). Once the narratives were complete, I turned to my online observations for guidance on how to share these stories through other voices. I was cautious that my writing style and tendencies would affect the tone and the voice in the stories. Using my observations served as a helpful tool in determining the structure and flow of the stories, and added another layer of validation for me as wrote, knowing that these stories were similar to those shared by others not included explicitly in this study as well.

Lastly, to add my voice into the process, I considered myself the "narrator" and used my voice, perspectives, and experiences to introduce the sections, and also provide context into the bodybuilding industry as a prologue. While I did not necessarily identify with the participant group while this study took place, I did relate to this group at one point, and I took on a hybrid researcher-participant role as I wrote the narrative essays given that I could shape the composite narratives through the eyes of the participants while also adding context and background to the stories, and as stand-alone sections with my voice.

Each of the profiles and their associated narrative essays use words directly from the interviews, and my own words to fill in any gaps. As such, my perspective can be considered as part of each composite as well. I originally wrote my first findings draft with a mix of italics to

represent the participant data, and regular font to represent my own words. However, with much thought and discussion with my supervisor, I moved away from this approach and represented each narrative essay in one font style. I felt that this added to the flow and made the stories easier to follow in their true form. As McKeown (2018) also mentioned, composite characters are not meant to be an all-inclusive representation of the shared experience but help to "illustrate the complexity and diversity amongst participants' stories and experiences" (p. 71). While I was very careful and attentive during this process to ensure the characters and stories I created were mirrors of the participants, I was also mindful of ensuring what I was doing was methodologically sound. As such, I employed various tools and strategies throughout the process to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings.

3.3 Evaluation and Trustworthiness

In general, qualitative methods of inquiry are assessed using criteria for trustworthiness including (a) credibility, referring to the alignment of truth between the participant and the interpretation and representation, (b) transferability, referring to the application to other settings, (c) dependability, referring to the similarity and consistency of findings, and (d) confirmability, referring to transparency in procedures (Schwandt et al., 2007). While the goal of feminist research is not to generate generalizable results given the focus on subjugated knowledge, these tenets provide a basis for assessing the quality of research and ensure some form of standardization and consistency across the methodological process. Credibility and dependability rely on the coherence of the story and whether that story evokes an experience that is lifelike and believable (Cooper et al., 2017). Furthermore, attaining transferability is marked with the reader

comparing the researcher/participant's story to their own experience, noting the similarities and differences, so that the "I" becomes "We" (Cooper et al., 2017). Lastly, the transparency of data collection and analysis methods further justifies the confirmability of this methodology. These four criteria were addressed by using two sources of data collection to verify accounts and also sharing transcriptions with participants for verification (credibility), using an accessible method of representation in the form of composite characters and narrative essays (transferability), and reflexively tracking and following a consistent protocol for the entire research process (dependability and confirmability). Narrative inquiry is further troubled by the crisis of representation as any attempt by scholars to represent experience may be incomplete or written to advance a personal agenda, whether knowingly or unknowingly (Loh, 2013). Critics may question the authenticity of the narratives generated from narrative inquiry as they are often developed through the re-storying process (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). To address these concerns, the following steps were taken.

First, my background and connection to the topic offer some credibility in the building of the composite narratives as Willis (2019) suggests those engaging with this method need "a level of understanding and familiarity with the context of the study, in order to judge what makes a meaningful composite" (p. 278). Bodybuilding is a unique sport with a tight-knit community and sub-culture. To accurately explore and represent this industry through composites, my position within the industry was essential to ensure a true depiction. Second, participants shared their social media accounts as a form of member-checking. This provided access to their past and future thoughts related to this topic and provided insight into how they engaged with this topic

online. Participants were sent their transcriptions for verification and were given the opportunity to follow up in the future as well. Observing their social media accounts provided an additional layer of verification to review their competitive history as many of the participants actively engaged with social media while involved in the sport. Third, in the development of the study, I was attentive to both method triangulation in involving both one-on-one interviews, and online observation, and as a result, data source evaluation as two kinds of data guided this study (Carter et al., 2014). While the one-on-one interviews provided the most content and context for the representation, the online observations acted as a foundation and also a "control", during the analysis, interpretation, and representation process as I was able to access similar stories and perspectives as a way to validate and guide the process. Lastly, I just want to highlight that this interpretation may not represent every experience of women who leave bodybuilding and is not necessarily meant to be entirely generalizable. These characters represent a group of women who experienced leaving bodybuilding with the goal of offering them a space to have their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences validated and shared with those who do not know these experiences exist.

Chapter 4: Findings

All narrative inquiries begin with an autobiographical inquiry into who the researcher is in relation to the phenomenon under study, which helps to get the personal, practical, and theoretical/social justifications and shapes the emerging research puzzle. – D. Jean Clandinin[7]

4.1 Author's Note

Amy

As I write this chapter in 2024, I am about 10 weeks post-show. This means that I am currently in the exact position in which I asked all my participants to reflect on during their interviews, and also what I refer to as the "after(math)" in the bodybuilding transition. Furthermore, I interviewed these women in 2023, when I was also in this same position as I just finished my three-show season as a bikini competitor, and I was unsure if I was going to continue. During the interviews, and now, as I write my findings, I felt and still feel an overwhelming sense of community and understanding with these women. I don't see my participants as "them," but rather as "us" or as "we" because we have all experienced or are currently experiencing this mind-altering, life-changing, and confusing transition out of sport that most people either lack understanding of or hold misconceptions on. I am highlighting my positionality and relationship to the sport here as I have chosen to write through the voices of my participants and also share some of my own thoughts throughout this chapter.

This chapter includes a series of narrative essays with my own moderation and narration throughout to provide context and background for the reader. I start by briefly describing the bodybuilding industry and culture including the "prep" process and the competition experience. Next, in part one, I share the profiles of five composite characters. These voices represent the 15 women involved in the study. Their profiles highlight three key elements of the retirement transition: a) the before, referring to what motivated the competitor to get started, b) the during, referring to the competitor's experience while they were actively competing, and c) the after,

[7] Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Left Coast Press, Inc.

referring to the shift, or moment where they decided to leave, or retire from the sport. I write through the voices of the participants with names, dates, and other identifying information removed or altered to protect their identities. Next, in part two, I share twelve narrative essays written from these five different voices, and some as a collective dialogue. The narratives begin with a reflection on the immediate effects of leaving the sport—the after(math)—and conclude in part three with reflections on gender and the industry.

As you read these stories, you may not see yourself in them or understand some of the concepts if you haven't competed yourself. Some of the concepts may seem foreign and it may take some time to picture this world if you haven't seen it before. As such, it may not be clear how to "evaluate" these essays as you read them. When told by others, narratives, or stories are unique. Stories may change in relation to the world around us and how we choose to share information is impacted by temporality and social/cultural factors (Clandinin, 2013). Some scholars offer criteria to evaluate evocative inquiries such as this. For example, Richardson (2000) proposed five criteria including substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of reality. While these may be helpful for some, I instead turn to Mulcahy's (2022) proposal for evocative inquiry evaluation which focuses on the ability for the work to move the reader(s) to feel, think, change, reflect, act, and moves the reader into "new and different positions and perspectives" (p. 163). Furthermore, I take ownership in the fact that these narratives involve my own imaginative interpretation to produce *emotional truth*, an "authentic representation of feeling states rather than a strict adherence to narrative truth," which captures the stories shared so courageously by 15 women (Orbach, 2000, p. 197). As such the narratives described below are composed of both the participants' true words with my own words to add context and background to enhance readability. I hope that you maintain an open mind and allow the stories to draw you in as the thoughts and perspectives being shared are not often included in general discussions about the sport but take a significant amount of bravery and trust to share.

4.2 Prologue: What is Bodybuilding?

Amy

When you think of a "sport," I don't think bodybuilding is the first thing that comes to someone's mind. Bodybuilding is truly like no other sport, and many people don't even consider it a sport to begin with. Athletes, or competitors, push themselves to extremes over some time before their show, or competition, which is referred to as "prep". A prep includes a series of protocols that help the athlete achieve an extreme level of leanness to present themselves in line with the division-specific, aesthetic-based, criteria set out by the bodybuilding federation (Appendix A-B). For example, I've only ever competed in the bikini division, and the Canadian Physique Alliance (2024) scores bikini competitors based on a) balance and shape and b) overall physical appearance including complexion, skin tone, poise and overall presentation.

Competitors follow very strict training and diet protocols, which may include high-intensity/volume cardio, weight training, and severely low levels of calories to reach their peak appearance highlighting their muscle mass and symmetry. The protocol is athlete-dependent, however, it is not uncommon for a competitor in prep to spend upwards of 3-4 hours a day in the gym, and that does not include the time spent meal prepping and practicing the mandatory posing routines either. Competitors might also use some unique strategies (some, science-based, and others, more so based on experience) such as fasted cardio, which is performing your prescribed cardio (e.g., Stairmaster, incline walking, elliptical) before consuming any food or using various supplements to reduce inflammation and water retention. Some competitors may choose to use performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) to push their physiques to the next level. This is allowed in a competitive stream called "open" where drug tests are not performed. Those who do not engage with PEDs are considered "natural" and typically compete in the "natural" stream wherein competitors are subject to a drug testing fee and random drug testing during the competition. When not in prep, competitors often follow similar regimes (i.e., training multiple times per week, tracking their food etc.) to put on more muscle to prepare for their next prep. This is referred to as the "offseason" or "improvement season."

A bodybuilding competition involves competitors in each division being compared side by side by a set of judges and often, depending on the division, an individual posing routine. The poses are mandatory and set by the federation (Appendix A-B). Competitors are scored on their look at that moment. This is often referred to as the "peak" as competitors spend the week before their show in "peak week" where they may manipulate water, salt, electrolytes, diuretics, and carbohydrate intake ("carbs") to ensure they have the best look for the day of the show. Competitors are also expected to get a spray tan to highlight their musculature, and women's divisions also consider the suit, hair, make-up, jewelry, and overall appearance in many categories. Bodybuilding athletes often hire coaches, who are typically former or current competitors themselves. Bodybuilding coaching is not regulated and many coaches market themselves through social media platforms such as Instagram. Competitors may also hire separate coaches for training and/or posing. When considering all the expenses just mentioned, as well as groceries, supplements, show registration, federation membership, and hotel/travel costs, a single regional show costs about 5000 Canadian dollars. I could tally up the total costs of all the shows I've done, but honestly, seeing that number would be a bit scary. Immediately after a show, competitors typically follow a "reverse diet" which involves slowly building calories up while decreasing cardio and weight-training volume to regulate one's metabolism and hormones to gain body fat and return to a more balanced, sustainable physique.

Bodybuilding requires a significant investment in time, energy, and money. So, what happens if you win? Regional shows (i.e., shows held locally that anyone can enter) typically offer medals for the top three athletes in each division/category and a qualification for nationals. Most national shows in Canada offer an opportunity for a "pro card" which is professional athlete status and allows you to compete amongst other pros in shows across the globe. Beyond the potential qualification and pro card opportunity, competitors do not receive much other than a medal (if they place) in return for their hard work and investment. So how does someone even get started in bodybuilding? And why do they keep going? To provide some insight, the next section highlights the stories of five women as composite characters who dedicated part of their lives to bodybuilding.

4.3 Part 1: Participant Profiles

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. - Maya Angelou[8]

I now introduce five composite characters: Lisa, Alanna, Rachel, Carol, and Isabelle. These characters share how they were introduced to bodybuilding, what (or who) motivated them to compete in the sport, their experience competing, and lastly, the moments they decided to leave.

4.3.1 Lisa

"The seasoned physique competitor"

Age: 55

Last show: 2015

Before. How did I get started in this sport? Oh, my goodness, I love sharing this story. First of all, I'm a mom and after I had my third child, I became super concerned about my health. It takes a lot of energy looking after three kids! I joined the local chain gym and just started walking on the treadmill. I had a few injuries that would sometimes flare up, so I was nervous to try anything else at first. I knew nothing about bodybuilding, and honestly, my only goal at the time was to be able to go faster than my two-year-old. The gym had a daycare, which was perfect since I was with the kids all day and eventually, I started to notice changes in my body. I was happy with the changes because if you've had kids, you'll know what your body goes through to make that happen. The changes were great and so was being able to keep up with my toddler, but I knew I was capable of more. Once I was more comfortable in the gym, I started chatting with more people there and eventually, I met a trainer who was involved in women's bodybuilding.

This woman was putting in the work and she was obviously getting the kind of results that I was yet to see in myself. Her body was everything I wanted. She had really nice capped delts and her legs were magnificent. I wanted to look like I could lift a truck if I needed to…she just looked powerful, and I craved that aura of personal power with my own body. Like I said, I really knew nothing about women's bodybuilding so after chatting a few times, she invited me to

[8] Angelou, M. (1969) *I know why the caged bird sings*. Random House

watch her show. I went to watch her, and I was absolutely amazed. I didn't know women did this…I thought this was just a guy's thing. I didn't know that women could build that kind of muscle and display it on stage the way I was seeing it. My only comparison was a fitness magazine with a really jacked guy flexing on the cover with all the veins, which I thought was gross. I didn't know this was a sport that women could get involved in, but I knew immediately I wanted to do it….and so I did.

During. I started working with that trainer within days of seeing her at the show. I just knew this sport was meant for me. At first, it felt like a whole new world because you're taking everything you ever thought you knew about food and your body and breaking it down to just such small bits. As women, we're always told to be small; to take up less space. Bodybuilding kind of breaks all of that down and forces you to look at yourself in a different way. For one, I didn't realize that you had to eat that much, and it was upsetting to be constantly eating throughout the day and then the leaning down for stage was something else… you're hungry and crabby but you see the results ever so slowly and there was magic in knowing that you could go through that cycle and come out a better version of yourself… at least physically? In terms of the preps I did, they were hard but the more shows I did, the easier it became.

Although it became easier for me, I still needed to make sacrifices. When I was in prep, I had no life outside of the gym and the kitchen and honestly, even in off-season, I treated those times like a prep. I was always on my diet and training with the same level of discipline and focus. In prep, I had no energy for anything else, and I had to say no to so many family events and birthdays or I'd say yes and then bring my chicken and rice in a container to eat there. That was a whole other issue because then you have the people that say, "why would you want to do this?" or "one piece of cake won't make you gain weight." Eventually I learned to just block out those comments. I was confident and secure in my goals, so it didn't really bother me. They were the ones eating McDonalds and cake without a second thought for their health and well-being. I don't know if I mentioned it, but I competed in physique. Physique requires a higher level of leanness and dryness compared to the other divisions, so the last few weeks were extreme, and I guess I should also mention I was using performance enhancing drugs too. I had those veins I

mentioned earlier, and you could see every muscle in my body just popping out. I became a spectacle at my local gym, and I've had both men and women staring at me while I trained. It really didn't bother me. I'm a very secure woman and I was happy with how I looked.

I ended up doing quite a few regional shows and went to nationals a few times too. As much as I loved prep and the grittiness of working hard and pushing myself to an almost inhumane extreme, being on stage and the whole show day experience was my favourite part of the process. It was the act of going on that stage and performing and being judged. I like standing on the stage and being judged because at the end of the day, no matter what they say to you, you're on that stage, and they're sitting on their butts in chairs so I guess there's a a feeling of like accomplishment, but it's also a bit of a cockiness or a feeling of superiority like, "I'm up here, and I did it." It's just a big confidence boost and it wasn't even the prep at this point… that prep was just the means to get there to that stage. After every show I did, I knew I was going to do another one, but my last show ended up being in 2017 when my body just shut down.

After. I had started a prep, and about six weeks into it, I had to pull out. I'm in my 50s so a lot of those old injuries came back with a vengeance as I got older. With the intensity of my training, I never really took the time to rehab them or focus on recovery. I had torn ligaments in my ankle, hip dysplasia and my hip joints were not agreeing with me anymore. I could barely do my cardio without breaking down in pain. I remember the morning it all went downhill, and I reached my breaking point. I had kinesiotape on my leg, my hip, my lower back, my shoulder, and my elbow, for the last few months. That morning, before I started my fasted cardio, my partner had to keep taping my leg for me because it was giving me so much grief. The piece of tape kept coming off on my pants, and I had to rip it off my leg, and I hurt my leg even worse, and I just dissolved. I looked at him and said, "I can't do this anymore." I knew I had to exit from competing…and that was hard. That was really, really hard.

I knew I had to leave competing because my body was literally breaking down and I knew that I couldn't push as hard as I would need to be competitive…and I certainly wasn't going to go on that stage doing anything half assed. There was no way if I was going to do that… But you still have that competitive mindset of like, "yeah, it's okay to take five Advil and get on the

treadmill" but no, it's really not. My body was telling me it was time. It wasn't just telling me; it was screaming at me. I was hurting myself more trying to fix things that couldn't be fixed this way. I knew physically I needed to stop, but I had to get my mind to follow because I think I had put so much of my identity into being a women's physique competitor and that's just who I was. In my mind, I was like, if I don't have that, then, who am I? Who am I like for myself? Who am I outside of bodybuilding? Yes, I am a mother. Yes, I am a wife. Yes, I am a friend…But who am I outside of all that? For me personally, that was the hardest part because I still wanted to be that person. I liked it. I liked *her*. You know, you walk in the gym, and you feel like a God in there. I worked so hard to be her. I didn't want to let her go but I had to because it was breaking me down. And I didn't want to keep going through that. I was afraid to leave because if I didn't have that, what did I have? Who was I?

4.3.2 Alanna

"The young and impressionable bikini competitor"

Age: 27

Last show: 2018

Before. It's been a while since I've reflected on my time competing. I know I'm young, but it really feels like another life to me. I started going to the gym in my early 20s for quite a few reasons, but really, I just wanted to improve my mental health. I was really depressed and just dealing with a lot of stress and anxiety. I was even prescribed anti-depressants at one point, but the side effects were too much for me to handle. I saw a lot of talk online about how exercise can help depression, so I just thought I'd give it a go. I started with what most girls usually do: cardio, abs, and some bodyweight exercises for my glutes…you know, the things that won't make you "bulky" or "look like a man" as they said 10 years ago. Eventually I started getting into true weight training with a plan I found online with squats and all that.

Working out and going to the gym gave me an outlet to push myself and better both my body and mind. Within a few months, I felt more like myself again, so I kept it up. I loved the drive to be better every day, and I loved increasing my weights each week and just seeing that

measurable progress. I'd wake up every day looking forward to my gym session. Eventually, I started to notice results in my body and apparently so did other people at the gym because they would often tell me I should try doing a show. I wasn't really into the idea at first, and I didn't know much about it, so I started looking online on Instagram and talking to some girls at the gym. I was mesmerized by the culture. I loved the bikinis, the heels and the posing. Soon I started posting more and talking with more girls online who competed. From everything I saw online or at my gym, the next step for me just seemed to work towards a bodybuilding competition. It just seemed like what people did…you get a consistent routine, you build some muscle, and then you go and compete…and then, you can go and do it again and again and again. It just felt natural.

During. Looking back now, I wasn't training long before I did my first show. I hired a coach based on the recommendation of some girls I knew from Instagram. I didn't know much about this coach, but I figured if other girls were using him and doing well, then I probably would too. After I hired my coach, my lifestyle completely changed. I was in school at the time, so my schedule looked something like this:

4:30 AM: wake up and head to the gym for 60 minutes of fasted cardio

6:00 AM: eat, shower, check-in with my coach

7:00 AM: head back to the gym (one closer to my school) for 90 minutes of weight training and posing

9:00 AM – 4:00 PM: attend all my classes while getting my meals and daily steps in

4:00 PM- 8:00 PM: work at my part-time job

8:00 PM – 9:30 PM: head back to the gym for another 60 minutes of cardio and posing

9:30 – 11PM: catch up on schoolwork/emails, and pack meals and gym clothes for the next day

And that was just for the first 3 months because my cardio went up to three hours a day and by the end, I was posing three times a day which included recording it and sending it to my coach. I also did all of this while eating, I don't know, like 1000 calories a day. It sounds crazy when you

write it down like that, but I fell in love with it, and I was good at it. I loved the whole show-day experience. I loved getting my hair and makeup done and just prancing around in my sparkly bikini. I started winning shows right away and I got a ton of sponsorships which means companies were paying me to promote their products on social media and paying for me to fly to different cities and represent them at expos and conferences. I was pretty young, and I just got so caught up in the image, or the façade of everything like the influencer trips and photoshoots… it was all the attention I received that made me love it so much if I'm really being honest.

I loved the lifestyle so much but with my history of mental health and anxiety, some negative thoughts started to creep back in during that time. For years, my mindset was really just, "If I'm lean enough, then I'm good and people will like me and want to work with me". I did that for four years straight without a break. I was always dieting, even in between photo shoots and competitions. I never took a true offseason because I was addicted to winning, to being asked to represent these companies, and to the idea of being lean and getting attention from others online and in person. My Instagram account was out of control at this time with thousands of followers. With that added on, the pressure really started to build.

I went to nationals a couple of times, and I even won my class in nationals a few times. I was a runner up from my pro card every time too, which just motivated me to keep going. Seeing how close I could get just pushed me to work harder because the voice in my head would tell me 'I'm not good enough until I'm holding that pro card on stage.' At this point, I was with the same coach, and he was basically just starving me. Like yeah, I definitely looked like a pro, but I was eating 800 calories a day and taking a bunch of different PEDs and steroids. The starvation diet and all the drugs were really messing with my metabolism, my hormones, and my mental health but I just didn't care. All I cared about were my Instagram likes and my pro card. I really thought I was going to continue on this track, and I was registered for another pro qualifier show in Las Vegas. I had everything booked and I was ready to go but then last minute, they changed the rules for the show to be for American competitors only…and that's when things went downhill.

After. I decided to still go to Las Vegas since everything was booked and paid for. I figured I deserved a bit of a break after basically four years of non-stop competing but at the time I didn't

realize how truly messed up I was—both mentally and physically. I ended up basically binge eating the entire trip. If you've been to Las Vegas, you know that place is all about the food. When I came back, I obviously gained a ton of weight which I know was mostly just water weight and inflammation, but I just looked puffy. I still wanted to compete, and I still wanted that pro card. I had so many people messaging me on Instagram asking what happened to my show and when I was competing next so I felt like I had to get my health back on track so I could start another prep soon. Even though I knew I had to do some damage control, and that my body was not in great shape, I messaged my coach about getting back on track. I sent him some updated photos and admitted to all the mistakes I made. He didn't respond. I tried reaching out on Instagram in case there was an issue with his email, but I realized he unfollowed me.

I think for me, that was kind of like the breaking point. I was on so much stuff at this point and then also dealing with the aftermath of my vacation binge. I was just looking for some support and guidance to get out of it and, instead, he just treated me like I was disposable. I just knew this man had no integrity and he didn't care about my well-being. I did everything he told me to do, and he used me to promote his business all over his Instagram, and as soon as he couldn't use me for that, he was done. It was kind of like being blindsided in a breakup or catching your boyfriend cheating…I had that same feeling.

It felt like everything I worked so hard to build was crashing down, and what I once thought saved my life, was now killing me. I was just burnt out from everything. I don't even want to talk about what happened after. I was so embarrassed and ashamed of what happened to me. I felt like I let everyone down. I hated myself as a person and I hated what I looked like. I started getting awful comments on Instagram about how I "let myself go" and I just went back to that dark place I was in before I even stepped foot in the gym. It was my sign that I needed to go on my healing journey because something was wrong, and I needed a break from the sport and the industry. If I didn't, I don't know if I'd be here today.

4.3.3 Rachel

"The mom"

Age: 35

Last show: 2019

Before. Oh wow, it's been a while since I thought about my competing days. It really feels like a lifetime ago since so much has changed since then. Let me think….so I wasn't an athlete before I started competing, but I got into the gym because I wanted to learn more about nutrition and exercise science. I think I was in my early 20s? Like most women in their 20s, I just wanted to get fit and lose a bit of weight. I wasn't overweight or unhealthy, but I just wanted that "tone" you'd see on the fitness magazines. I didn't really have a consistent routine and with my work schedule, I found myself just eating whatever was convenient. I did have a history of some eating disorders, so I was smart enough to not jump into a crash diet or start restricting my food like crazy. I just decided to start working with a local personal trainer to learn the basics and put together a routine I could follow. I loved training and feeling strong in the gym, but I knew if I really wanted to see results, I would have to be a bit more mindful about my food. My trainer suggested reaching out to a bodybuilding coach. He said I had a lot of potential and that I should just give it a try. I remember thinking, "Oh hell no. Do you want me to look like one of those manly women?" I still laugh so hard when I remember that.

Eventually, I ended up coming around to the idea. I started looking at photos and videos online and I realized that bodybuilding wasn't really what I thought it was. I was immediately drawn to the bikini division because it seemed the most attainable and I just thought I'd be kicking myself later if I didn't try it out now. I was already putting in the work so I didn't think starting a prep would be too different than what I was already doing but spoiler…it was very different.

During. When I started working with a bodybuilding coach, my lifestyle completely changed. I'll be the first to admit that I am an "all or nothing" type of person, which is kind of what you need if you want to do well in the sport. My routine became very rigid. I was following a meal

plan 24/7 and spending all of my time at the gym. I had quite a bit of cardio during all of my preps and with my regular weight training I would be at the gym at least two times a day…at least two but usually three because I would pose at the gym too. Obviously, with a schedule like that, I didn't really have time for anything else, so I ended up losing a lot of friends. At the time a lot of my friends just wanted to drink or go out to eat and none of those were an option for me.

Near the end of my preps leading up to show day, I was a disaster mentally and my mood was just insane. I didn't want to be around people and during my preps I was living at home with my parents, so they had to put up with me when I was hangry and cranky. I had such a short fuse. I was with my now husband at the time and even at our wedding my mom made a joke about how him sticking by my side during prep is proof that he will be by my side forever. It's funny looking back on it but I also had no energy. I was addicted to caffeine for sure, like, multiple coffees a day just to keep myself running and that's if I wasn't already taking caffeine pills as a fat burner. And I mean, as for sex drive, I had absolutely no sex drive. It was completely gone. Mentally, I felt so bad that that just wasn't there for me with my partner because I just had no energy. That affected our relationship for sure. I genuinely had nothing to give to anyone. I was so energy-deprived, running on like 1100 calories while burning most of those. It was exhausting.

I did multiple regional shows where I usually placed in the top three, and then I even did provincials, when that was a thing, and nationals as well as one international show too. I would have loved to go pro, but I just really liked competing. I think maybe I liked it too much because I ended up doing almost 15 shows in just two years…yeah, it's pretty crazy to think about now. I was constantly doing shows, which wasn't the smartest thing because I was always in prep. I just had tunnel vision, and it became my whole identity. I was so obsessed with the rigid lifestyle I wouldn't allow myself to do anything outside of my routine. It ended up impacting me a lot mentally with my previous history of eating disorders. I think bodybuilding kind of just masked my underlying issues because I found myself developing food fears and avoiding any social events that involved food because I just couldn't look at it or think about it with associating the calories or the macros. And then, of course, there's your changing body, right? It ends up

affecting your mental health… well, my mental health at least. I just constantly felt like I wasn't good enough. I did so many shows and I probably would have kept going if I didn't have an appointment with my doctor.

After. Things started to change a bit when I lost my cycle and started to worry about my fertility. I always knew I wanted to be a mom; I wanted it more than I ever wanted to compete. I started worrying if I was even going to be able to conceive because I hadn't had a period for so long, and I knew that with how lean I was, it wasn't coming back anytime soon. When I had a check-up with my doctor, I was told what you'd expect:

You are severely underweight for a woman looking to conceive. Your body fat is under 10% and if you continue on this path, you will continue to disrupt your hormones. You will be physically unable to carry a baby being this lean, and that's even if you are able to conceive.

It really bothered me at the time because they didn't understand that it was just a temporary thing. I tried to tell them it wasn't realistic, and I'd only be like for this a short period of time. I think I was like one week out from a show? Then they started asking me more about steroids and other drugs. I was a lifetime natural athlete, and I told them that, but it just seemed like they didn't believe me. I wouldn't have ever done any drugs for this sport, and I wouldn't want to jeopardize my health in any way with that either. I remember feeling a bit angry but also scared. The whole appointment kind of scared me a little bit, and all the warnings they gave me were getting to me. They talked about all the difficulties I might face becoming a mom and by the time I got home, I broke down. I kind of realized that even though I was natural, I was still doing things to my body that weren't healthy. That was a huge wakeup call for me and I knew I'd need to start considering when I'd leave the sport…and that was only the beginning.

4.3.4 Carol

"The coach"

Age: 40

Last show: 2016

Before. I feel like I share this story at least once a day! I guess that's just because I'm still so involved with the industry but anyways, here it is…I remember walking into the gym and seeing a girl who was clearly training for a competition. She came in with a matching gym outfit, a huge water jug, and like three different bags with her. I loved how she looked…she just had that feminine muscle definition, which is what I was trying to achieve for myself. I had been going to the gym for a bit on my own at that time and I knew I looked pretty good, but I wanted more. I wanted to look like that girl. Even then, I knew I could achieve that. I knew if I gave myself the time, I could look like that, but what I was most drawn to was watching her do all of the "prep" things, you know? I was mesmerized watching her pose in the yoga studio, eat her meals between cardio and training, and just completely exhaust herself during her workouts. I could see the satisfaction in her eyes when she left the gym and while I certainly wanted to look like her, even more, I think I just wanted to feel like that. I was quite young when I started so there wasn't much online about fitness like there is today. This was the first time I'd ever seen a woman with muscle, still eating food, and pushing herself with her weight training instead of just the bodyweight exercises I often saw other women doing. It was the process that drew me in to the sport, first, as a competitor myself, and then eventually, as a coach. I followed that gut feeling I had that "I was meant to do this" and reached out to the coach of that girl I idolized.

During. I got started right away. Like I mentioned, I was quite young and not completely inexperienced when it came to working out, so I was able to make some big changes right away. Seeing those changes in my body was what I dreamed of when I started. My coach and I quickly realized that I had the genetics for this sport—I was able to put on muscle quickly and in all the right areas, and my metabolism was in a great spot to keep adding in food to my diet. I loved every second of my first prep. I truly loved it. The moment I stepped on stage, I knew I belonged

there. I did a few regional shows where I placed well but I still wasn't satisfied. I was young and I just didn't have the amount of muscle or posing experience to really win a show yet. I took a few years off to do a proper offseason with my coach, which paid off. I got a little chubby, which made me insecure, but I was pushing hard. I was training hard like the guys you see grunting and throwing around weights at the gym. People, both women and men, would come up to me in the gym and comment on how strong I was. I was just so obsessed with the process, and I wanted to win something so badly. At that point, I kind of felt like I could push myself further on my own and decided to stop working with my coach. I took my own training and nutrition based on everything I learned and decided to start coaching myself. They usually call that "self-coaching".

Self-coaching was the best and worst decision I ever made. I ended up winning my next few shows, including the overall in figure. Everyone I talked to was shocked that someone so young could self-coach and look the way I looked. I looked so fucking good. The head judge of the federation even came up to me and told me I had all the potential to go pro. I was finally achieving what I dreamed of. With my success, a few girls at my gym reached out for advice and I ended up starting to coach others too. I didn't think I'd love anything more than competing but coaching really gave me that same sense of purpose and satisfaction because I got to help someone else achieve what I personally lived for. The coaching was also great because I was able to make some money on the side, and it also allowed me to attend more shows and meet more people in the industry. I soon became a sponsored athlete for a huge supplement company, and they were flying me to expos around the world. I felt like such a badass. I was making a ton of money, coaching girls, travelling, and winning shows but I also felt a ton of pressure to keep achieving more. After my last overall win, I was like really hungry for it, and I really went hard but I started to push myself a little too far. I should have just taken the break at that point and done a healthy off-season, but I didn't.

I became addicted to it. My body was wilting away and telling me to stop but I was like chasing that high constantly. I didn't care that I was dying. I didn't care that I was waking up so hungry that it would make me get sick and I would still go to the gym. I'd literally just puke and go to the gym. I've done things that like I don't want to talk about. I pushed myself to a point that

I would never push any of my clients and that I would never want to promote or ever want to recommend. I would never wish that on my worst enemy. I wouldn't want my worst enemy to do what I did to myself. It eventually caught up to me and I didn't place at nationals. I felt like a failure. I hated the way I looked. I was so depleted, and my body was completely drained. I was scared to post on Instagram or for anyone to see me in public after because I just felt like a loser. I knew I needed to take a break and just get my health back on track before my next show.

After. The way I prepped myself led to a very hard transition after because I was so used to being in control of myself. I really struggled. I knew I needed guidance from someone else because I was just running myself into the ground. I started working with a coach who immediately put me on PEDs. At that point, I was still willing to do anything to succeed but those drugs really fucked with me. My hormones and mental state were already messed up and the drugs just made things worse. I knew I needed more than an offseason…I knew I needed a real break…but I was scared. This was my entire life. My whole identity was based around not just being a winning competitor but being a coach. I knew I had to let go of the competitor side of it, but it wasn't like I just moved on from the industry. I was still attending shows, and coaching girls. Everywhere I went, whether it was the gym, or an expo, or a local show, someone would ask me when my next show was. I didn't know how to answer because, honestly, I just didn't know. It wasn't a clean break for me, and I don't think it'll ever feel that way.

4.3.5 Isabelle

"The athlete"

Age: 30

Last show: 2022

Before. Growing up, I was always an athlete. I played soccer, I danced, and I was even on the varsity cheerleading team in university. I was always surrounded with like-minded girls and, honestly, I know body image is a huge issue for girls, but it wasn't for me. I think that was all because of the people I surrounded myself with and the coaches I had. I never really felt pressure to look a certain way. For me, it was always about my performance in my sports. I loved scoring goals, or watching my points rack up. I loved going to practice and nailing new skills. It was all about the athleticism and the reward for your hard work that drew me into sports to begin with.

My bodybuilding career started during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, I was in prep for a powerlifting meet. Powerlifting is a completely different sport because the focus is on your strength for three major lifts (squat, bench, deadlift) and although you do need to make weight to fit into a certain category, there is no emphasis on what you look like. I was loving my powerlifting journey but during the pandemic everything shut down and my upcoming meet was cancelled. As an athlete, I felt lost. Without a goal, I wasn't quite sure what to do with myself, and with the pandemic, I just had so much more free time. I was looking for a new challenge and I just figured, it's time to try something new and I wanted to try and get shredded. I knew I had a pretty solid foundation from my powerlifting and sports growing up so I was curious to see what my body would look like completely shredded. I was also interested in the exercise science aspect of bodybuilding…I had heard about things from other athletes in my circle like how to "peak" and how to manipulate your water and carbs, so I just figured, why not?

I knew a few people who competed, so I just asked around about coaches. I ended up working with a coach who also has a powerlifting background. I did my research though. I wasn't just going to work with any coach or the most popular coach. I knew there were local coaches, but honestly, they just seemed creepy. I also saw some of the protocols the girls in prep

at my gym were doing and I was not about to be starving myself or crying in the changeroom for a show. I think having that athlete/exercise science background was my true motivation for just trying something new, almost like a bucket list item. Once I did my research and decided who I wanted to work with, I just got started.

During. Like I mentioned, my preps were all during COVID-19. Luckily, I already had a lot of those prep habits in place from my background in sports. I had access to quite a bit of exercise equipment, and I knew how to meal prep so I could make my food in advance without multiple trips to the grocery store. I kind of just put my head down, and did it? Like, I feel like I should have something more profound to say…I mean, it was definitely hard, don't get me wrong, but it just felt like a sport to me—I knew what I signed up for and I was just executing the plan. At the time, I was still very much involved in the fitness community, and I had a significant Instagram following from my powerlifting and fitness photoshoots. It felt like I had a community around me in person and online just rooting for me and supporting me. After my first show, I qualified for natural nationals and decided to do it the following year. I figured my prep wasn't that bad…like yeah, you have your tough times, but it wasn't really until, the very like end where you're like okay, I'm exhausted. I don't think my calories ever dipped below 1000, which is so like insane to say but for women in the sport, that's pretty good.

My prep for nationals was a little bit different. Since I had already been through it before, I knew kind of what to expect but in a way, the novelty kind of wore off and I was starting to see more of the "dark side" of the sport. I was hearing so many awful stories from the girls around me about their coaches abusing their power or starving them or even just asking them to do really weird shit…like it's not that complicated. At this point in my life too, my career outside of fitness was starting to take off and I felt like I was being pulled in so many directions. I really wanted to invest my time and money in my career, but I wasn't going to give up or give any less to my prep. I started building a bit of resentment towards the whole sport, which influenced my prep for sure. By my peak week, I was honestly so over it. I just wanted to go back to lifting heavy, fueling my body, and working on other parts of my life but I'm not a quitter and I knew I

needed to see it through. Nationals was fine…I don't know what else to say. I did well, and I was proud of myself but when I woke up on show day, I didn't feel excited. Instead, I felt relieved.

After. After my show, I knew I was taking a break. I wasn't convinced it was my last show because I knew I took on a lot during my prep with my career and my personal life, so I didn't want that to influence my decision. My coach and I decided to get judges' feedback to see what I needed to work on. This is where things changed for me. I was told that I would have placed higher if I had a breast augmentation…a boob job. Even after my long ass prep, years of building muscle, and everything I put myself through mentally, physically, and financially to get to that stage, I was told I would have done better if I had a 10-thousand-dollar surgery. Before that, I did have other comments about my hair and my tattoos—some posing coaches suggested that I get hair extensions or cover up my tattoos but that didn't influence my placing on my first show so I didn't think any of that would be an issue now. It was kind of fucked up, honestly. Hearing that feedback and just thinking about all the awful things I heard from others really turned me off from the industry in general…like I just didn't want to be a part of it anymore. I didn't want to give my energy to a space like that when I have so much going for me outside of that…so yeah, that was it for me

4.4 Part 2: The After(math)

Bodybuilding is just not a bucket list kind of goal. You shouldn't go into it with a laissez faire attitude. It will interfere with your life. You will need to make sacrifices…Ones you are cognizant of, then ones you are not aware of until you're out of the trenches. – Chanel Collette[9]

Now that I have provided some background on the bodybuilding industry and introduced the five women, we will dive deeper into what happened after they decided their time competing was over, or what I am calling the "after(math)." During this time, one's mind and body are typically in a vulnerable state (for reasons we will get into) as they transition out of this extreme, regimented lifestyle and watch their body change all over again. For me personally, this period of time was equally as exhausting as a bodybuilding prep, but for different reasons, and like many of the woman shared in their profiles, the decision to stop competing was only the beginning. The following narratives share the changes and challenges we experienced during this time.

4.4.1 Bodybuilding Should Come with a Warning Label

Amy (on behalf of the Collective)

You know when you get a new medication, whether it's just something like Advil, or a prescription for someone, and you read the label, it tells you a long list of potential side effects? They could be minor things like dizziness and fatigue, or more serious things like losing consciousness and death. I really think it would be helpful to have a list of potential health side effects for competing in women's bodybuilding. As a collective group of women, we experienced varying physical health impacts shortly after leaving the sport. For some of us, that is the reason why we left the sport, and for others, symptoms and impacts persisted for years after we left. Many of us shared that we went into the sport blindly, or without full context of knowing what we're getting into or what would happen to our health when the show was over. It

[9] Collette, C. [@chanelcollette]. (19 September 2023). *Unpopular opinion with bodybuilding* [Instagram Post]. https://www.instagram.com/share/BAI8-lcOHM

would have been nice if we were given that same disclaimer you receive when you get a new medication. It might look something like this:

Drug Facts: Bodybuilding Prep

Uses: A bodybuilding prep is meant to be short-term (usually about 12-20 weeks) where an individual reduces their body fat mass significantly through diet, exercise, and occasionally the use of PEDs to achieve a lean physique that should not be maintained in the long-term.

Warnings

Caution: participating in a bodybuilding competition may result in the following short-term and long-term physical symptoms when it is over:

1. **Unwanted, rapid, weight gain.** When your body reaches the required level of leanness to be competitive, your metabolism becomes downregulated to account for the low amount of food you're consuming up until the show. After a show, you are more susceptible to rapid weight gain (likely inflammation) from eating what would be considered a normal amount of food as your body is used to processing a limited amount. This weight gain may be uncomfortable and lead to further mental and physical health issues.
2. **Water retention and inflammation.** This can vary from pitting edema (i.e., such a large amount of internal swelling that when you touch your skin, you can leave imprints) to just feeling bloated all the time. You may feel uncomfortable and mistake this as weight gain.
3. **Arrythmias** (irregular heartbeat) due to use, misuse, and abuse, of fat burners, caffeine, and ephedrine during prep. This can occur for both natural and enhanced athletes. This may occur if the use of such drugs is not tapered off once prep is over.
4. Digestive/gut complications. If you follow a meal plan, introducing new foods can cause complications with reports of long-term effects such as food intolerances and chronic bloating persisting (2-3 years after leaving the sport).
5. **PED-related side effects**. Side effects could be physical like unwanted hair growth, voice changes, and acne or mental like depression and anxiety. These effects can occur while someone is actively prepping but can worsen once removed from protocol when one is done competing.
6. **Hormonal shifts**. Typically, estrogen and testosterone, two hormones required for function are downregulated at a certain level of leanness, and become very difficult to regulate after prep. This can also influence the remaining symptoms listed below.

7. **Amenorrhea (loss of menstrual cycle).** This typically happens when one reaches a very low body fat percentage. It can take weeks, months, or years to come back after one leaves the sport. This can also lead to number eight.
8. **Loss of fertility and/or fertility complications.** This can occur for both natural and enhanced athletes and can range in timeline.
9. Decrease in libido. With a decrease in energy and functioning hormones, libido is typically reduced or non-existent. This is typically noted as a short-term effect.
10. **Changes in mood/irritability.** Again, this is tied to hormone dysfunction and/or energy downregulation. Mood typically stabilizes once bodyfat increases.
11. **Loss of hunger cues.** This makes it difficult to determine when/if you are genuinely hungry or if your hormones are telling your body, you are hungry since you have been deprived for so long. This can lead to binge eating or overeating, which can then lead to 12.
12. A wide range of mental health complications that will not fit on this drug label.

Consult a practitioner or medical professional before beginning a bodybuilding prep and to review the possible risks of competing.

4.4.2 If I'm Not Lean Enough, I'm Not Good Enough

Alanna

A warning label is such a smart way to describe the physical effects we all experienced, and are probably still experiencing, after leaving the sport. I find it ironic that a sport where you are supposedly the image of a healthy, fit, woman, can cause so much harm and internal damage. I definitely experienced a lot of physical symptoms when I decided to leave the sport that took years to manage, and honestly, I'm still dealing with some weird hormone and gut issues. For me, however, I think the mental part was the hardest; particularly the body dysmorphia that still creeps in and haunts me to this day.

I was pretty young when I started competing…young and impressionable. I created this image in my head of what the industry was, like the social media, the trips, the photo shoots, the sponsorships and I just wanted to be a part of it. Competing, and everything else in the industry really, is very much just about what you look like so for a while, my mindset and self-worth were completely tied to my weight and my appearance. I believed that if I gained weight, or I lost that "bikini competitor" look, everyone would drop me, and I'd be alone.

A photo memory came up in my phone this morning from when I was in prep a few years ago. Looking at myself in that photo completely threw me. My face was so gaunt, and I was just so lean. I had pretty much no body fat to the point where I remember it even hurt to sit down. I remember being so weak in the gym, and I could barely walk up a flight of stairs without having to stop and catch my breath. Even though I felt that way, I remember constantly thinking, "you're not lean enough." Even when I could see my ribs through my clothing, and my leggings hung off my body, it wasn't enough for me. I'd keep telling myself, "You're not lean enough, you need to get leaner." It seems so ridiculous to say but, in the moment, I didn't really see it. I didn't really think that I was unwell.

When you're in it, and you have your coach, and the judges are telling you you're not lean enough, and "you need to lose some body fat" …well, you just believe it. Yeah, you'll do well in shows, but what about after? You can't sustain that. When you compete, you see a body

you've never had before, to the point where you just constantly want to hold on to it…but you can't hold onto it. It's impossible to hold onto that. When I started to gain weight, my mental health took a huge hit because I expected myself to always be lean and I put pressure on myself to look a certain way. When the weight started coming back, I felt like a failure. I wasn't really familiar with body dysmorphia until I left the industry and started my healing journey. I just looked up the definition on my phone and this is the first thing that came up:

> *Body dysmorphic disorder is a mental health condition in which you can't stop thinking about one or more perceived defects or flaws in your appearance — a flaw that appears minor or can't be seen by others. But you may feel so embarrassed, ashamed and anxious that you may avoid many social situations. When you have body dysmorphic disorder, you intensely focus on your appearance and body image, repeatedly checking the mirror, grooming or seeking reassurance, sometimes for many hours each day. Your perceived flaw and the repetitive behaviors cause you significant distress and impact your ability to function in your daily life. You may seek out numerous cosmetic procedures to try to "fix" your perceived flaw. Afterward, you may feel temporary satisfaction or a reduction in your distress, but often the anxiety returns, and you may resume searching for other ways to fix your perceived flaw.*[10]

Reading this definition kind of gives me the chills. It's so scary to think what your mind is capable of. I would look in the mirror for the first few months after my show, and although I could see my abs and a ton of definition in my body, I would think I was fat….and then I'd step on the scale. If that scale was anything above what it was the day before, even 0.2 pounds, it would ruin my mood for the entire day. I was so embarrassed. If I went out in public or to the gym, I'd wear massive hoodies and sweats so no one would see my body. Otherwise, I just didn't go out. I stopped posting on Instagram and I was dropped by a lot of my sponsorships. These companies pay you to post a certain amount per month, but it was just hard for me to post

[10] Body dysmorphic disorder. (2022). Mayo Clinic. https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/body-dysmorphic-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353938

because I didn't look the same…the clothes they wanted me to advertise didn't fit the same, and I was scared of the backlash I'd receive from gaining weight.

Social media didn't help. When I competed, I was very open on my Instagram about wanting to go pro. I'd document everything from my check-in photos, to which shows I was doing, to what I was eating for each meal, but then I just stopped. I couldn't post if I didn't fit that image anymore. I'd see other girls living out my dream and it would just make me so mad because I failed. I remember one day; I woke up feeling pretty good and I just thought I'd post a photo of me in a bikini with a caption about self-love to kind of get myself back into it. Within minutes the DMs came flooding in. Honestly, a lot were positive in response to my post, but one stood out to me. It was someone with a random username, and no profile picture who just said, "Wow, you've really let yourself go." I remember that so clearly. I deleted the picture immediately. It's like as soon as you put on weight, you are fat. I went through this whole phase of feeling lost, because now I'm just the bikini competitor who let herself go. I felt worthless. I felt like because I was "fat", no one was going to follow me, companies weren't going to sponsor me, and really, I just thought that no one would like me. I think there's a lot of guilt and shame associated with rebounding and feeling like you're out of control with your food and your training and everything because you have been in control for so long.

Now, when I look back on my time competing, I'm like, what was I thinking? I thought I was fat? I looked unwell! You're your own worst enemy. I feel like this is only something that someone who competes will understand. I knew I wasn't overweight when I gained weight after my show, but I just felt it because I was going from one extreme to the other. It's so crazy how it just like warps your sense of self. I wish I could say that I don't experience this anymore, but I do. I think it will take a long time for me to fully accept my body. Seeing yourself in such an extreme is something you can never unsee and knowing you're capable of achieving something like that is incredible but also terrifying because no matter what you do, it's somehow still never enough.

4.4.3 Eating A Piece of Pizza Terrified Me

Lisa

Last night, I went out with my partner. We were just running errands and kept adding things to our list. We ended up getting stuck in traffic on the way back and then realized we needed gas too. We were both starving at this point and decided to pick up a pizza and eat it in the car on the way home. That's a normal night for us now, but there was a time where I was absolutely terrified to eat a piece of pizza…and that wasn't even the worst of it.

When I competed, I was intense. I didn't do it half-assed, and I treated my off-seasons like a prep. I tracked my food 24/7 and I wouldn't eat anything processed or outside of meal plan. If I ever went out to eat, I'd only go to places that posted their nutrition facts online, or I would just bring my own food and eat it at a restaurant…and that's if I even went! Most of the time I just avoided social events if they involved food. I always had my goals in mind, and I just knew every time I said "no" or ate out of a container at the Keg, I was getting one step closer to my goals. When I stopped competing, I lost that goal, that reason, and I just spiraled.

Do you know what disordered eating is? It probably makes sense from the name, but to be clear, it's not an eating disorder. Yes, I was underweight during prep, but in my off-seasons, I wasn't. Disordered eating is more about the habits and behaviours you do that are tied to food. I didn't necessarily want to be lean, or lose weight all the time, but I had these obsessive habits tied to food that pretty much paralyzed me and controlled my life for years. Let me give you some examples:

1) I had these crazy rules and rituals surrounding my food. For one, I could only eat with certain cutlery, for example, a baby spoon. If you've competed, you're probably laughing right now. A lot of competitors eat with a baby spoon so that they can take smaller bites and have their food last longer.
2) I would only eat at restaurants that posted their nutrition facts online, and even then, I'd usually bring my food scale with me in case something on the plate looked off. I had no shame in measuring food right on the table in front of everyone.

3) I had a long list of foods I wouldn't eat unless I prepared them a certain way. I couldn't eat whole pieces of fruit like an apple or banana without cutting it up and weighing it. I wouldn't eat anything out of a package unless I took it out and weighed it to check for accuracy. I even weighed my rice cakes.
4) I had periods of binge eating, compulsive eating, and using exercise or restriction to make up for "slip-ups" or even just what I considered a slip up…like when my food scale malfunctioned, and I ate five more grams of peanut butter than I was supposed to.
5) I could only drink my coffee black. I wouldn't trust a café or a Starbucks to measure or weigh out the exact amount of sweetener or milk, so I just stuck to drinking it black at all times.

Looking at this list now is hard given how much time has passed. A lot of these habits are tied to prep—you need to be that intense and follow your protocol, but my issue was it took a long time to unlearn these behaviours, and they impacted my life for a long time after leaving the sport. I knew when I was done, I was done. There was no grey area for me in terms of thinking I'd do another show, but I was really strict with my diet even after I stopped competing. It took me a long time to stop weighing food. It took a really long time to just be comfortable eating something that didn't touch the scale before eating it. It's ridiculous really because I can probably eyeball it to the gram, quite honestly. I can probably eyeball anything within three to five grams. It was never that I was restricting myself. I didn't have any issues with eating but there was a certain mental comfort in that food scale. It was thinking in my head "this is 85 grams" and then seeing it on the scale as 85 grams. There was some mental satisfaction and validation that I just couldn't let go of. There was a certain mental comfort that I was in control of my food and my food was not controlling me.

There were times, however, when I felt out of control. I thought after my last show I wouldn't feel guilty. I thought, finally, I could allow myself to go out and have a drink with friends. Instead, I ended up starving myself all day so I could go out for dinner or else I would feel guilty for eating, or I'd go to the gym after and do cardio. When I left, I still had no understanding of how my eating was not balanced because I was restricted to certain foods, and

then on the weekends I was allowed a cheat meal. I felt like I had to eat everything in sight, which turned into a binge. For years, I found myself in a cycle of binging and restricting. I felt guilty if I didn't do my cardio, or get my workout in, or if I ate something I hadn't planned on. There was a lot of guilt associated with food. It took me a long time to figure out my balance and focus on nourishing my body. I had to throw out my lunch bag, and all of the Tupperware and containers I used during prep. Just looking at those things brought me back to a disordered mindset. I just knew there had to be a balance between this intense tracking/weighing and going out to eat and drink whatever you want.

Finding that balance was hard mentally. I'd still wake up and make eggs and spinach in the morning with everything weighed to the gram. I just wanted to be normal. I use the term "normal" very loosely because obviously I wasn't hitting up McDonald's three times a week or anything like what other people consider normal. I started small, like, it started with going to Starbucks and getting the egg white bites. That may not seem like a big deal, but that was something I'd never allow myself to eat. I started doing little things like that and in the past two years, I think I've made a ton of progress. I'll be honest, I still kind of loosely track things because it's still in my head. It's not necessarily a bad thing to eat this way but it can become very obsessive if you let it. To this day, I can still tell you the macros of any kind of food. I could probably slip back into prep with little difficulty because I've always got those macro goggles on. It's hard to shake but I can tell you, it's certainly not disordered anymore.

There are so many things in life that you cannot control, or you don't have a say in the outcome. Food was one that you can control. It's a very empowering feeling to me because if you can control what goes in your body, you're doing something that most people can't. A lot of people binge eat, and they eat emotionally, or they have eating disorders. You're actively making these decisions, and you have the proof, or the confirmation, right in front of you…like it was 110 grams of chicken, it wasn't 111 grams. That's all I needed. Now that I'm saying that out loud, that sounds actually batshit crazy, but I see so many people with their eating out of control and they have zero control. I think this is the complete antithesis of that, where it's like you have extreme control over what enters your body.

So, it took me a long time to let go of that control. I still have my food scale in my kitchen. I don't use it, but it's there. I haven't weighed anything for quite a while. That took a long time. It wasn't even a negative thing. I was eating the same amount whether I weighed it or not…I didn't feel like I trusted myself. As much as I appreciate gaining that greater flexibility, I know I also lost something. There's also a lack of something and I don't quite know how to describe it. I guess, in a sense, you have more control without the structure because you can make every choice but there's something about the comfort of that structure that that goes away as well. It's like a trade-off. You gain something but you lose something at the same time. I equate it to maybe someone that's in the military, where they follow a certain regiment for literally their entire lives including when they eat, when they sleep, and everything that they do….and then when they leave, they can do whatever they want. It's again, it's that feeling of the loss. There is comfort in your structure and being aware of what you're eating…and is that a bad thing? I don't know.

On the other side, restaurants don't scare me anymore and I don't feel the need to analyze the menu and starve myself all day to "earn" my meal. Taking these past couple of years off was a million times harder than pushing myself through the prep because I had the reward of how it looked and now, I've had to find that reward in other ways, but the reward is much healthier. The difference is though, I don't get the same rush from it… like now my reward is:

1. I don't feel paralyzed by the thought of going to a restaurant
2. I don't carry a food scale in my purse
3. I don't do 2 hours of cardio do make up for eating a muffin
4. I can go to family events and enjoy food with my loved ones
5. I don't wake up and open my macro tracking app
6. My life isn't controlled by food

Yeah, I might not get the same rush from these things, but I'm certainly happier and healthier now.

4.4.4 If I'm Not Achieving Anything, What's The Point?

Isabelle

When you meet a competitor, or a former competitor, they don't often tell you about the dark side of bodybuilding right away, or, if they do, it's almost like a badge of honour like, "Yeah, I'd be up at five in the morning doing two hours of cardio" or "I was so lean that I lost my period for months but I was just working that hard." It's an extreme, and when you're in it, you don't really realize that, especially if you're surrounded by the culture or you grew up in the sports world, like me. I'm an athlete and competitor at heart so even though I started to resent the industry, that resentment was mostly rooted in the culture, and the way women were treated. Luckily, being an athlete also gave me enough background knowledge to avoid those disordered eating habits, or like, understand that my body will change and will continue to change whether I'm competing or not. Where I struggled mentally was tied to the discipline and perfectionism involved in bodybuilding.

Like I mentioned, I decided to compete because I needed a goal. With the pandemic, I felt a bit lost, and I needed a clear goal with clear steps and checkboxes that I could work through to achieve it. There's a fine line in bodybuilding in terms of how much you put into it and, to be honest, I was addicted to the gym, like straight up addicted. Not everyone is going to drive themselves to that level like I did and that's just part of my personality…go big or go home. The external rewards in bodybuilding are obvious: it's your body. It's not like school, or a career, where when you meet someone new, they won't know how smart you are or what you do for a living unless they ask. With bodybuilding, your achievements are on display, so I pushed myself to the limit with the pressure I put on myself and the pressure I felt from the external world.

When you leave, I feel like I usually hear competitors talk about the diet, and their reverse diet, but reducing my cardio and training volume was the hardest part for me. I struggled a lot at the gym. I wouldn't talk to anyone because I was so focused on my heart rate. I was obsessed with calories and hitting PR on my lifts. I would even get anxious before my training because I knew I had to increase my weights or improve in some way from the day before. It's

like I felt I constantly had to one-up myself, even though my standards were already so high. It became exhausting…mentally and physically exhausting. I started to believe that if I'm not doing enough, or if I'm not achieving enough, I'm just worthless.

I know a lot of those thoughts aren't true. I know I'm strong, and I know I'm worthy but when you're in the culture and the industry where that's all people care about, it's hard to not let yourself think that way. It didn't help that it was during the pandemic too where everyone was on their phones. Social media, well just Instagram, made this worse. I felt like if I wasn't posting or showing how great I looked, or my progress, or my workouts, then people weren't interested anymore. People just liked me more when I showed that side of me but then when I post a picture of my face, or an actual career accomplishment, nobody cared…and if you're not getting enough likes, enough shares, enough reposts, then it doesn't matter to you and like you feel like you don't matter.

I slowly started to realize that all these followers I had were following me because they liked the way I look, and they wanted to see my training routine and watch me do these crazy lifts, or post stage photos. The issue was, it's not everything about who I am. I don't love being the centre of attention anyways and then when I left the sport, I found that I was more driven on my career and my values and the things I cared about, like social issues and my own accomplishments. Anytime I started posting about things that I cared about, I'd lose hundreds of followers because no one gave a shit about my thoughts. They only cared about seeing me in this light that I didn't want to be seen in anymore. After a while I realized I need to take a break, from both social media and this lifestyle of going hard all the time. I just knew it was going to be hard to do that. The hardest thing I ever did was take time off. I ended up putting on quite a bit of weight, probably about 20 to 30 pounds, just from not going as hard as I was, and I feel like slowing down allowed more time for personal reflection and healing. I needed to shift my relationship with exercise to be something I got to do or wanted to do versus something I had to or needed to do.

I went through phases of deleting my Instagram or not posting because I just couldn't be that person. I couldn't be the person everyone thought I was or thought I looked like. Actually,

just last year I decided to drop all of my sponsorships. I just felt fake. I was promoting these companies that I didn't even really believe in anymore. They would send me a shit ton of clothes each month and, most of the time, I'd just give them away or donate them. I lost a lot of followers and, honestly, I don't care. That's the thing with social media, so much of it is fake. You can edit photos, you can literally lie about your daily routine, and young impressionable girls will buy into it. I didn't want to be a part of that. I didn't want to sell a story to other women that just wasn't true.

After I left, so many of those people in my bodybuilding circle kind of dropped off too. It's like we were only friends because we were all competing. My circle is a lot smaller now, but I know everyone in it cares about me as a person and what I am accomplishing. I love my life, and my career, and I'm just kind of grateful that I was able to leave that other life behind because I know it's not what I want. It's been years since my last show, and it's been a process of unlearning but also learning how to just like "be" rather than like doing all the time. I've realized that you don't always have to work so hard and achieve all the time to be valued. With so much time away from the sport, I've realized that I'm valued for just being me. I don't know if I would have come to that realization if I stayed in it.

4.4.5 From Bikini Competitor to Mom

Rachel

I know so many women who come into this sport as an athlete, or they're a personal trainer or something, but that wasn't me. I came into this as just an average girl wanting to lose weight and then I got completely sucked in. Because of that, what I did when I competed was so different from the people around me in my day-to-day life. When I competed, I became really rigid with everything. I ended up doing 13 shows in like, two or three years so I was constantly doing shows and because I was always in prep, I had tunnel vision and that was my whole new identity. It got harder the longer I pushed, and my body was breaking down. I felt like I was forcing myself to do this, and it was very, very difficult to stop for me. My whole identity became this, and, in my head, I felt like people relied on me to do this and this is who I am – Rachel, the bikini competitor. I felt like I had to follow that, and I had to give people what they want even though no one actually cared. I had this idea of what everyone thought of me, so I put a lot of pressure on myself to maintain that identity.

I did a lot to maintain that identity too. At the time, I was living with my parents, which was helpful, but competing in 13 shows is not cheap. If you have that kind of money to spend on this, good for you, but it's a lot…especially as a girl in her early 20s. I felt like I had no other option and with each show, I just spent more money. I probably spent 9k on my first show if you think about everything involved. There's the coaching, the posing, shoes, your suit, registration fees, federation membership, hotels, tan, hair/makeup, and of course all the groceries and supplements on top of that too. It's honestly out of control, and I know for a fact it's more expensive now than when I competed. I don't know how girls do it. Looking back, it's so hard, because I had invested so much in that life and creating this persona of 'Rachel the bikini competitor,' that I just felt like I was disappointing everyone, including myself, by choosing to move on…. but for what? I spent tens of thousands of dollars for a few medals and some high fives?

After my last show, I was really hard on myself. People would ask me where my prepped meal was if I went out for dinner or if I ordered something other than a Diet Pepsi someone

would make a comment about how, “Oh she’s finally eating now”. Sometimes I’d just flat out say, “Yeah, I'm done competing. I can live my life now.” Other times, depending on just how I was feeling that day, it wouldn't bother me. Or it would send me into an emotional spiral. I’d think “so people are definitely looking at me” and I felt judged like, “oh, wow, you're eating regular food…shouldn't you be in prep or shouldn’t you be getting ready for your next show?” I felt like I kind of boxed myself in. I felt like I was kind of caged in and I just had no idea how to get out. Even just trying to go back to the gym was hard for me because then I didn’t know who I was anymore. I didn’t know what my purpose was there but at work, that’s all everyone asked me about. It was always “when’s your next show? Or how many weeks out are you?” It seemed like that’s all people wanted to talk to me about. I think too, some people just don't know what else to talk to you about if that’s all you’ve ever showed them. When I started telling people I was done, or I was taking some time off from the gym, they’d ask me why…and I'd have to just completely change the subject or sometimes I kind of kept it just to myself because I started feeling disappointed in myself. I believed that people thought I just let myself go. I felt like I was always just the girl who competed or like just the bikini competitor but there's more to me than that.

It took a lot of time to accept letting go of competing and that I may never compete again - it took years. When I got pregnant, everything shifted for me. I had always dreamed of being a mom, and giving up competing meant I’d regain my health, and focus on investing in the life I always wanted outside of competing. Now, I’ve had my daughter and I’m a mom. I have another on the way this year too. That shifted a lot of my perspective. Even like in terms of my labour, I always say like competing is the reason I was able to give birth, because it really gave me the mental self-discipline and power and physical strength. Since I'm a mom, I have no downtime, but I still make time for the gym, and we live a healthy lifestyle at home. My daughter is very energetic and my history competing and training motivates me to keep going to the gym and because of that, I’m able to keep up with my daughter too.

Being a mom is everything to me. I love my daughter, and I love my family. I feel like I am Rachel, the mom, and Rachel, the wife, and there’s no one else I’d rather be. Becoming a

mom gave me an outlet for that spark and drive I had from competing. I've put so much of my focus into that, and I'm just obsessed with my life as a mom. I feel that same level of dedication and I take so much pride in like, keeping my house clean, doing my laundry and keeping my babies happy. I know it sounds different, but the mindset is similar. You commit to something you're dedicated to and you're going to do whatever you got to do to get to that end goal.

I also want to make sure I'm sending the right message to my daughter. Obviously, she's still young but as she grows up, I don't want her to have the body image issues that I had or the food issues that I had. I don't want to pass that on to her. I'm really trying to not push any of that on to her even just at a young age because she absorbs everything. Having that in the back of my mind has also just helped me like stay focused, because you have someone else now that depends on you and is learning from you. That's been huge for me. It's helped me stay focused and on track because I'm having to be a role model for someone else, you know? If I were to meet someone today and they asked about me, competing might come up in the conversation, but I wouldn't say "I compete and I'm a bodybuilder" like I would back in 2017, like that's just what I do. Instead, I'd probably say, "I'm a mom" and then start showing them family photos.

4.4.6 Finding The Spark

Carol

When we think about post-show, we often think about the reverse dieting, and the body image issues that usually come with it. I don't think we talk about the identity piece as often, so I appreciate when people do. As women, we take on so many roles in life, and for some of us, those roles become so engrained in who we are that we lose sight of our true selves. As a competitor myself and as a coach, I really struggled with my identity, not only as an athlete, but also as a coach, when I left the sport. I put so much of my identity into being a bodybuilder so when I left, I had this overwhelming feeling of like what do I do now? What's my purpose, my motivation? All I knew was growing and shrinking in the gym, there was no other reason. I was feeling burnt out and lost when I left and that was a real that was a mental struggle.

My time as an athlete was amazing. I was winning so many big shows and I had so many people in the industry telling me how much potential I had. My business was blowing up too because of it. I had girls and even some guys across the country and in the States reaching out to me for coaching. I had this identity as a top athlete and coach in the industry. It was everything. When I eventually decided I was done, it was hard. It was really hard to make that decision because it wasn't just competing that I loved, but it was also my job. It was my career. I was earning an income, as a young single woman and supporting myself through this. At the time, there were few female coaches who were successful. Most of them were men, or like, big name teams led by men with women as their assistant coaches. I worked hard to prove myself in this industry and I was scared I would lose some of that credibility if I stopped competing myself. I was also worried about my coaching abilities.

When I left, I had this entire crisis asking myself "Can I still be a successful coach and have something to give to my athletes?" and "Am I even a coach if I'm not going through the process alongside them?" A large part of my success as a coach was due to my own experience and going through the process with my athletes. When I took that part away, I really doubted myself, like "can I still be who I am without getting on that stage myself?" To be honest, it almost felt fake at first but then I realized, you know, football coaches don't get on the field and

play football, right? Olympic coaches aren't out there competing for the gold medal either. They're coaches because of their experience and love for the sport. I reflected on that a lot, and I just knew I could still coach, I could still teach posing, and I could still be an ambassador for the federation. I thought everything was going to be okay from there. I had a great team of athletes, and they were all doing well. I still had a role in the industry, but once I kind of settled into the routine of coaching, that feeling of emptiness started to creep back in. I felt like I was pouring so much into my athletes and the industry that I was losing my sense of self again. Yeah, I was a good coach, yeah, I was making money, but that just became my job, you know? It was great to have ties to the industry and that definitely helped me with my competitor identity, but I was lacking a clear goal for myself. When I was competing, or when I was in prep, I was a guided missile. I had a very clear destination. I lacked that. I tried to find something that would give me that same drive that bodybuilding gave me. It was like chasing a high. I haven't really found anything that big. Life is not as black and white in this stage so I'm searching for a target to land the missile.

Once you compete, I think it's in your blood. It's there. I don't know if it even matters what sport you're in. Like once it's there, it's there. You'll always have this desire to have something to work towards, to chew away at, and without it, you kind of feel lost. You need to be able to put that competitive fire and that passion towards something or you feel like you're spinning your wheels. People like us need to compete, we need to feel competitive, we need to have a goal, and we need to always be working away at something or we're not happy. Bodybuilding taught me that if there's something I want to do, then it will get done. Even now, I'm about a year into an online diploma I just decided to do. I've taken up other sports and hobbies too. I have that knowledge that if I decide to do something, I have the tools and the inner strength to make it happen. I will say, I've tried all these new things, and it's been fun, but nothing compares to bodybuilding. You need something to give you that dopamine, that reinforcement and validation. If you don't have that or when it's gone, I think you start searching for it elsewhere, and I'm still searching for that.

4.5 Part 3: Reflections on Gender and the Body

What's the greatest lesson a woman should learn? That since day one, she's already had everything she needs within herself. It's the world that convinced her she did not. - Rupi Kaur[11]

The After(math) affected us all in so many ways. For some of us, it was mental, with an upward battle to regain our mental health and sense of self, and for others it was physical with emphasis on regulating hormones and almost starting a new life. There are so many similarities and differences in our journeys and experiences, but what bonds us is our womanhood and our experience as women in the industry. As time passes, and we move on from the immediate effects of post-show, we have more time to reflect on our time in the industry and our experience as women within this culture.

4.5.1 Power And the Patriarchy Within the Industry

Carol

I've been coaching for years, decades even. I've coached both men and women, so I really have seen it all. In the industry, gender isn't discussed much, and if it is, it just comes down to masculinity and femininity…you know, those comments like "you look like a man" and all that. The gender aspect of bodybuilding that people might talk about is very much tied to how someone looks on the outside, not how they act on the inside. As a coach, I'm able to dig a little deeper, and this is what I've observed:

I've yet to meet a woman that competes for shits and giggles. I've had hundreds of female clients. What I see is that women compete for reasons that aren't just related to how they look. There's more to it than the appearance for them. I've always found that women compete to regain something that they feel they've lost, usually that was taken away from them. They compete to get back some confidence and self-esteem, to figure out who they are or to have something that they can control that's theirs, that someone isn't forcing upon them or holding them back from. Whatever their intention is, they get personal self-validation out of it. The irony

[11] Kaur, R. (2017). The sun and her flowers. Simon & Schuster

of that is they're standing on stage presenting themselves and being judged outwardly. Only the outside is being judged but the real win is what they grow on the inside, how they evolve, and how competing gives them back a piece of themselves that they feel they lost or was taken from them a long time ago.

I have my clients over to my house to pose. I have the whole set up with mirrors and everything. When I have clients over for the first time, I always ask them, “why do you want to compete?” and they always say, “oh, it looks like a good challenge. I think it'd be really fun.” When they say that, I think to myself: No, it’s not fun… sitting on the patio, drinking beer is fun. When they say something like that to me, I tell them, “This is going to be the hardest work you've ever done in your life but you're going to get so much more out of it than you think.” A lot of the time when we have these conversations, they'll start crying. As a coach, I’ve come to realize that these moments are crucial. If I can get in the women’s head and understand their intentions, I have an easier time programming their prep. If I can figure out what they are trying to get out of this, I can understand their mindset more during the process. A lot of it comes down to them feeling like something was taken from them or was missing at some point in their life, whether that was childhood or adulthood. A lot of the time it’s self-esteem, or feeling lost, or that they don’t have something to call their own. A lot of the time it’s a therapeutic thing for them to do for themselves to regain self-control. It’s like they turn to bodybuilding because if they can control what goes in their body and control how they move, then they can control themselves and not feel like they had their control taken away from them. It’s amazing to watch how women evolve, and blossom during a prep from that crying woman in my basement to a woman standing on stage with all her power on display. It’s the reason why I do this.

Like I said, I have mirrors everywhere here. Women often look in the mirror and they either don't want to look at themselves, or they pinch and poke the parts they don't like. They look at their body in their bikini and say, “I don't like this, I want to get rid of this and this” and they tell me how much they hate what they see and what they want to change or what they want to get rid of. Now let’s talk about the men. I have men come over for posing too. Men come over here and stand in front of these 14-foot mirrors. They stand there and then pace the room flexing,

just looking at themselves. I usually just sit here and watch them for the first few minutes. Then they'll start talking. They're like, "I got this, I think I do this really well" and they peacock—they strut around here just flexing and talking about how good they look. I usually just sit here, and I just let them go for a few minutes. Eventually they turn to me, and they ask me if I think they're going to win first place. I usually look them up and down, and them tell them no. Now that's when things get fun. They start to get big-headed, and say "What do you mean 'no'? I've worked really hard." I always tell them I know they've worked hard, but there are still things you need to work on. From there, sometimes they'll listen and take in what I say and other times, I can tell they're not truly listening, and they will just continue to pose and train the way they have been.

The point is that they're coming in here, thinking that they are everything to the industry, to the sport, to the world already. They think they are better or that they're already champions and this is what their mindset is when they walk in here before they even train properly, meal prep or hit a stage. On the flip side, women come in, looking to be brought up doing something for themselves because they feel like they've been squashed down through society whether it's their family, their job, social media, or a partner. Society has already built men up. We live in a patriarchal society that already spends all of its time, resources, and systems granting and building men up their entire lives. I just don't think a man needs to go on stage and compete to get that same feeling of success and that feeling of accomplishment because they already have it just from existing in our society. I think when they're done competing, and when they're ready to leave the sport, I don't think that they start questioning their identity of who they are the same way that women do.

I'm thinking a bit bigger now and just how these observations fit in the world. I am so sick and tired of women trying to take up less space in this world while men try to take up more. I see it from the top down in that it's literally systemic. It's not an individual's fault. It's literally systemic. It's like, are men really that threatened by a woman taking control of her own body… think about Roe v. Wade, right? It's why we need the world to crash and burn.

4.5.2 I Never Wanted to Compete In Bikini

Isabelle

I never wanted to compete in bikini. Bikini is supposed to be the gateway division, or at least the most attainable division as a natural athlete. It's funny though because you can do everything you are supposed to, in terms of diet and training, but not place because you're not pretty enough, or because your boobs aren't big enough. That's kind of messed up. It's not like that in the other divisions.

My preps weren't easy, and I really put in work at the gym. I was happy with how I looked but there were so many things that came up near the end that made me feel completely defeated. One area that was weird for me, was my hair. I don't have long hair, and my coach told me I should get extensions to have the "bikini hair", which is that long, wavy thick hair. I even went for a consult for a full set of extensions, but my hair was so short that they couldn't do it because there's not enough hair to blend in. My coach told me that having my short hair might work against me, but I didn't care. I remember thinking, "If that's what they're going to dock marks on, then I'm not going to do this again." It wasn't just the hair length either…I was also told what colour to dye my hair, which I went against because I didn't want that hair colour that time.

There were other small things too, like my coach even debated having my tattoos covered up. I didn't want that. My tattoos are a part of me, and I wanted them in my stage photos. That was an eye-opener for me that I didn't want to fully conform into that bikini standard. I loved my short hair and my tattoos. I didn't want to give that up, so I don't know if that was me rebelling against the judges and the criteria, but I don't think it mattered in the end. I know hair is a big element of a woman's femininity, and a lot of the way people view femininity is that you need to have long hair or do your nails or whatever and I just don't conform that way. I'm actually okay owning that on stage as well and I think it actually gives me a bit of an edge because it's different and it's not the same as the other 12 women standing up there. It was just a little bizarre that this is a BODYbuilding competition, yet the only thing that people were concerned about were my hair and my tattoos.

I did well at my shows regardless of my “less feminine” features but what really put things in perspective for me was when the judges told me I didn’t place higher because I didn't have a breast augmentation. It was really messed up. I remember feeling so angry because it has nothing to do with how I did my prep or how I work in a gym. It’s a 10-thousand-dollar surgery, which I would never do. There are other things too that are maybe more unspoken within the industry. I know they don’t say it explicitly, but your appearance plays into it as well. From what I’ve seen, you could have the most amazing body, but if your face isn't attractive, you might not place well because you're not the total package. I hate it. Why do my earrings matter? Or whether I have earrings? Like why does that play into it? Or if you can see a tattoo, why is that taking away from my muscle composition? It's part of my body. It's not part of my size or what I worked on. You can work your ass off for months and sacrifice so many things in your life but then it will come down to all stupid, superficial things that don't have to do with your actual body composition. It's all about the total package. I just felt that if I wanted to be successful in the sport, I would have to fully conform to these criteria, or I would have to move up and eventually turn to PEDS, which, again, I would just never do.

I have nothing against women who are on PEDs, but it’s not for me. I think a lot of the PEDs women are taking were designed to build men's physique, not women's physique. So, there’s a chance that taking them makes women look less feminine, even if they compete in ultra-feminine divisions, like bikini. If you look at bikini athletes now, they have these massive shoulders, and massive biceps, and even like their jaws are starting to become square. It’s a lot of the pros we look up to—you see their jaw has squared right out, and they have a bigger Adam's apple, and their voice has deepened, and yes, they’re beautiful, there's no ifs/ands/buts about that, but I just think if you push the PEDs too hard, you change the way you look. If you’re okay with that, then good, but not every woman wants that. I just found other ways to resist conforming through my hair, my tattoos, and just knowing what my stopping point was.

It's hard not to compare this to the men’s divisions either. We have to do so much more just to meet the baseline criteria in terms of physique and they we have the heels, the hair, the makeup, the jewelry, and all the other things like boob jobs, Botox, and filler so that we look

young and feminine. And then the men, obviously they get a tan and stuff but their posing routine, it's all about being very strong and stuff, which again shows off their physique. Men get to create their own routine and their own poses and their own music. They get to do all these things whereas women are shuttled, like cattle, in a group and we all have to do the same routine. Looking back at it now, I see how the lines are so clearly drawn between what is expected from men and women. I think I've always been a bit resistant to those criteria as an athlete but competing gave me a chance to resist, and to own my resistance as a woman. That is something that I will always carry with me.

4.5.3 An Impossible Standard

Rachel

> *"It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow, we're always doing it wrong."*[12]

Did you see the *Barbie* movie? I feel like that's all everyone was talking about for a while. There's one part in the movie where that quote is from where one of the characters talks about all the expectations placed on women and that, somehow, no matter what we do, it's never enough. I've been reflecting a lot on that and just my experience in the sport and then leaving and having my kids. I feel like no matter what I did, or what phase of my journey I was in, I was never enough, or I was always doing something wrong…

As a bikini competitor, you have to be lean, but not too lean where you can see any veins or striations. You have to look healthy, but not too healthy or you'll be called out-of-shape, or even worse, fat. You have to follow your meal plan and workout program but also be mindful of your hormones and your bloodwork, or else, you're just irresponsible. You have to embody the look and lifestyle of a feminine woman, but also lift heavy, go hard in the gym, and sometimes take PEDs. You have to spend quite a bit of money on your tan, hair, and makeup, but not talk about it or you will be called vain and selfish. You have to be confident and sassy on stage to get the judges' attention, but also quiet, demure and dainty so you look classy. You have to have a winner's mindset and focus on yourself or else you're not taken seriously but still be nice, kind, and considerate or else you're called a bitch. You're not allowed to complain because you signed up for this, but you have to be transparent about how difficult it is or else you're seen as fake. You have to listen to what your coach tells you, even if it goes against your morals and beliefs, but also stand-up for yourself and set boundaries even though you'll be seen as un-coachable and hard to work with. And it's like they say in the movie:

[12] Gerwig, G. (Director), (2023). *Barbie* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

"But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So, find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful."

It feels like a balancing act. When I left the industry, I thought maybe this would stop and I could just be myself, but that's not really what happened. It felt like because I competed, I somehow had to uphold this bikini competitor identity for the people around me, even if that's not what I wanted for myself anymore…

You have to gain weight, but not too much weight because you're still the "bikini competitor." You have to regulate your hormones, and get your period back, but you can't gain too much body fat, or you'll be called fat. You have to go out and eat with your friends but also make up for it with hours of cardio afterwards to stay fit. You have to pack your meals because if you don't, someone will comment on the fact that you're not eating from a container. You have to be honest about the difficulties of your prep, but not too honest, or you'll be questioned why you competed in the first place. You can't talk about what you loved about it, or you'll be told you're showing off. You can't wear tight clothes, crop tops, or short skirts, or your friends won't take pictures with you since you "make them look bigger". You have to post online, but not too much or you'll be called obsessive or self-centred. You have to post your best, or you'll just be "the bikini competitor who let herself go".

The list goes on and on. It's exhausting. On top of that, I just can't help but think how we work just as hard as the men, yet they are afforded different privileges. Women are critiqued harder. I think we're all judged the same, like based on the criteria, but it's like the women are under a stronger microscope which can see every little flaw. There's always an "add on" with women…big but not too big, lean but not too lean, pretty but not too pretty that it distracts from your body. It's an impossible standard to achieve in my opinion, and to even try to, you need to make hard decisions and sacrifices.

There's also the judgement from everyone else too. You're not just standing in front of the judges; there's a crowd of people in the audience and most of them are coaches or other competitors. I just think, if I was to throw on my competition bathing suit right now get tanned, and walk up on that stage, I would be ripped to shreds by everybody. Everyone there would be

like, “what are you doing? You don’t belong.” I think if a man were to do that, the reaction would be be, “Oh good for him, he’s trying” and just because he’s a man, he’d belong. It just feels like no matter what we do, we will never have that same privilege as the men because we are women trying to be included in something that was never meant for us. I get that it’s all part of the sport, to be better and keep improving, but that carries over after we leave. It’s like we are expected to be exceptional, and perfect, and disciplined all the time just because we spent a few years of our life in the sport. It’s like we are not allowed to make mistakes or, like, eat a cookie, because at one point in our life we participated in this sport and because we’re women.

4.5.4 Bodybuilding As a Badge of Honour

Lisa

When I competed, and especially when I was in prep, my body was a spectacle to others. I could be at the grocery store minding my own business and another woman would tell me "I would never want to look like you*"* or I could be at the gym, again minding my own business and have a man joking that I have more muscle than they do. My favourite comment of all is from those randoms on Instagram that will comment on your photos and say, "you look like a man." Being a physique competitor and having the amount of muscle that I do has forced me to think quite a bit about my own gender and gender in the industry. In short, the industry blurs gender.

It blurs it just like the blur filter on Instagram. Stereotypically, women are not muscular, and men are. Yet, bodybuilding is a way where we can blur this together and it creates an opportunity to explore your preconceptions of what feminine looks like and what masculine looks like. I remember growing up and being told first, that I don't need to go to the gym, and second, that if I do go, I should only be doing cardio. I was always told that women don't lift weights, women don't want muscles, and muscles are for men. After I had my kids, I just started going to the gym because I wanted to improve my health and again, as a woman, you're just expected to be skinny. I just went to the gym and started lifting weights because I enjoyed it. I remember one day; my mother-in-law came over to visit and asked me what I was doing for exercise to lose the baby weight. When I told her I was lifting weights, she started laughing and saying: "oh, you better be careful, you don't want to get muscles do you?"

I've always liked to challenge gender roles and assumptions. I've always had jobs in male-dominated fields. Challenging those norms has always been a part of me. When it comes to bodybuilding, I didn't even know women could do it. I didn't think it was allowed. The moment I learned there were women's categories, I wanted it. Women's bodybuilding was made for me. It was just another way of expressing that women can do anything that guys can do. It truly was just a natural fit and I slipped into it very, very readily. For me, bodybuilding was both empowering and an act of resistance. It was absolutely both and it soon became a badge of honour.

I'm a small woman, but bodybuilding gave me a physical authority that I don't possess as a small woman. Having the muscularity allowed me to demonstrate resistance absolutely and to take pride in in my femininity and in my strength at the same time. Beyond just the body, it taught me that I can do whatever the hell it is I want to do just one bite at a time. Prep taught me very clearly that our limits or where we think our limits are, is utter bullshit. Those limits might be placed by society or our parents or our partner or the media, but we get to challenge all of the rules and all the boundaries around us.

My only issue with women's bodybuilding is that I only associate myself with physique, but I don't like what happens in other divisions like bikini. Don't even get me started on bikini girls taking up as little physical spaces as possible to stay alive on stage to get the validation of men. As a physique competitor, the overtly sexualized aspect of the bikini girls always bothered me. Everything about the division is just not for me. The posing especially makes me uncomfortable…there's that one pose where you're spreading your ass cheeks to the judges. What is that even showing? Bikini in particular is heavily sexualized and the higher you get in classes like figure and all that, is less sexualized. That's why I love physique. On the other hand, you get kind of more masculine as you go on that scale. For me, physique was enough of a distance from that overly sexualized bikini. Even if I didn't have the genetics, or the drive to do physique, I wouldn't have never done bikini even if I had that kind of body. It did not call to me at all. I was meant to compete in physique.

I was drawn to more than the muscle of women's physique. I tried figure for a bit but even in figure you have to wear those heels. With physique, I got to ditch those heels and what I think is the prop of femininity that they represented and that forced helplessness. The heels took away from the power I was displaying with my muscle. I've never enjoyed heels as a woman in any condition. There's just something incredibly powerful as a physique athlete to be standing on your bare feet on the stage on the ground, like just it's very grounding and solid.

Thinking about that now just makes me realize how much that perception has changed over time. I think bodybuilding is a wonderful way to almost level the playing field among genders. We all have the same muscles regardless of gender, but you get to decide what you are

going to do to develop them and create an aesthetic that you want. Bodybuilding gives women the power to take control of their body, their femininity, and their muscle. It's an avenue where women can get as strong or as big as they want, and in whatever way that they want, but they can still look feminine at the same time. I don't think every woman wants to walk around with her veins popping out like the top bodybuilders but again, it's their choice. I mean, you already have women injecting testosterone to grow the muscle that men have. It's funny that we live in a world where we're okay with women taking male hormones to grow muscle faster, but we're not okay with men softening their features with estrogen. That's discrimination right there. Drugs allow you to manipulate and blur those lines even further and gives us whatever advantage we wish to have and become whoever we want to be. You don't need to go to that extent if you don't want to and women will always fight estrogen and there will always have a certain layer of fat over their muscles which makes it much harder to achieve that, but you can if you wanted to. It's a choice. I feel like bodybuilding is an area where you can bounce around on that line of what is masculine and what is feminine.

I've always felt empowered, but bodybuilding reminded me that I can be whoever the fuck I want to be. For us, since we have so much muscle, we look like freaks when we're shredded and that's when we get all of the "you look like a man comments" from others. When we gain weight post-show it's hard to see all that muscle. I think there's obviously less expectation of a woman to be to be jacked so when I stopped being so visibly defined, it was completely unremarkable…and that's hard to come to terms with too. It's been a few years since I've been on a stage it was only within the last year or so that I've removed that the physique competitor aspect from my social media bio. I finally just quietly deleted that because I can let it go now but that lasted a lot longer than I thought it would, it was hard to come to that decision to acknowledge the passing of that part of me. By removing that title, it doesn't strip away my beliefs. It doesn't change the way I see the world. Gender doesn't matter; femininity doesn't matter. Bodybuilding reminded me that even though I'm a woman, I have the power to do whatever I want.

4.5.5 Remember When You Were Fun?

Alanna

I am pretty open about my journey in the sport and everything that happened afterwards. I share a lot online as well because I think it's important to be authentic in a sport that is filled with people with so many poor intentions. I know I'm not the only one to mention this, but I just think as women, we're already subject to criticism in society and then when you add on the bodybuilder, or the bikini label, it's like that criticism increases, and then follows you at that level for what feels like forever. Here's just a list of some of the things I've been told:

The Judges: They're supposed to be objective and judge you based on the criteria. I've been told I'm too big, I'm too lean, I need more glutes, and I need to work on my posing. It's fine really because it's their job. Some judges I've spoken with have been really nice and helpful while others are not. I remember having one conversation with the head judge where he told me I was really pretty, and because of that, I had a ton of potential in bikini. He didn't make any comments on my physique, he just said because I was pretty, I'd do well. That really stuck with me, and it still does. Sometimes, I wonder if my success in other areas is because of how I look, and not what I am capable of. After I left the sport, I had a couple judges reach out to me on Instagram and ask if I'd be coming back. That was about it.

My Coach: "You have potential" – that's always it. Potential can only take you so far. It's almost like they tell you that to keep you invested. At the end of the day, it's a business and I understand that, but when you're young and a powerful man in the industry is telling you that you are the total package and you're going to go pro, you listen, and you do whatever it takes to make it there. When I left, my coach blocked me and removed me on everything. It's like he was embarrassed about my weight gain and didn't want to be associated with a "failed" bikini athlete. Yeah, that felt great. I felt disposable. Because of that, I've learned to be a lot more critical and ask more questions before committing to anything, whether it's coaching, or just buying a car or something.

My Parents: My parents were supportive for the most part, but they hated when I'd prep. They've told me I look sick and unhealthy, and they'd always ask when I was going to let this go. I get why they were concerned…I mean I did look sick and unhealthy, but it was exhausting to constantly justify your actions when you know it won't even change their opinion. My parents were so happy when I was done. Even though it's been a few years, my mom sometimes brings it up at family events or family dinners, like "It makes me so happy to watch you eat a full meal!" I know she means well, but she doesn't say that to anyone else.

My Boyfriend: He doesn't always say out loud how he feels but he doesn't need to. I know he hated when I was in prep too. When I met him, I was curvier, and I know he likes that more. In prep, I would lose all of my natural curves, and my clothes just don't fit the same. There's also the low energy and no libido. I couldn't ever really do anything, so I know he felt lonely. Since I left, he's said things like, "I'm so happy to have you back." I get it, I really do. It feels good to feel "attractive" again to my partner or to feel wanted. I know my prep look was not a good look.

My Friends: I lost a lot of friends when I competed, but I also gained a lot too. I can't really sum it up since there were so many different reactions of comments. A lot of my ex-friends would say like, "remember when you were fun" or "I wish you still drank" while my new gym friends and other girls in the fitness community would be cheering me on and constantly commenting on my Instagram posts or sending me DMs. It's funny though, when I left, a lot of those girls stopped checking in. It's like if you're not competing, or your Instagram isn't growing, they don't care anymore. I learned a lot about who my real friends are not just from competing but also from leaving.

People on social media: Social media is the worst. When I competed, so many men and women would be in my DMs. The men would either be trying to hit on me or telling me I look disgusting, and no man would want to be with me. There was really no in-between. A lot of women DMed me mostly asking for advice, like "how do I grow my glutes" or asking things like "I need to lose 10 pounds, what can I do?". It was kind of sad actually. I would try my best to be transparent and explain how extreme prep was, but all the women saw was my weight loss or my glutes and just wanted it. They didn't understand how terrible it was to get to that position.

Don’t’ get me wrong, there are 100% sustainable ways to achieve a similar look, but that’s not what I was doing. When I left competing, the comments from men were mostly like “wow, you let yourself go” or “I take it you’re done competing” just because I gained a bit of weight. The comments from women actually stayed about the same, mostly just asking about my workout routine. It was weird. I’m not a coach or a trainer, but just because you look a certain way, people want to do what you do.

People at the gym: It’s funny because you’d think people would be less overt in-person compared to online because they’re not hiding behind a screen, but I got some wacky comments in the gym. When I competed, a lot of men, mostly older men, you know like those guys in their 50s and probably ex-bodybuilders themselves, they would come up to me and tell me I was working hard, or they admired my hard work. I liked those conversations. Otherwise, some of the guys, unless they were competitors themselves kind of just stared at me, almost in disbelief that a woman could look like I looked at the time. After I stopped competing, the looks stopped unless I was lifting something really heavy. From the women, it was kind of the same as online. I was stopped at least once a week by a girl asking about my workout routine, both in prep and after. I did have a lot of strange looks, and even some comments from women when I was in prep about how skinny I was but that stopped when I became “normal” again. The hardest part was those regulars you’d see. Sometimes, I’d get in my head and wonder if they were thinking “oh, she got fat” because I’d seen them at the gym for years. Now, I know no one really cares.

Now, I sometimes still do bodybuilding type workouts, but I can't call myself a bodybuilder because I'm not part of that club anymore. I don't want to be part of that cult like mentality where we all have to look a certain way and do certain things. I’ve changed a lot because when I went into it, I was super naive. I got thrown in at such a young age, and I was just super impressionable. I tried so hard to keep up that image and I was so wrapped in this idea that I need to fit in. Because of that, I think I embodied the image of a competitor for a lot of people who just don't know much about the space…and now, even though I’ve moved on, it sometimes feels like everyone around me hasn’t. I go the gym now for me, because I work out, because it's good for me. I just wish everyone else understood that too.

4.5.6 Womanhood And Community: A Digital Dialogue-Based Essay

The Collective

So many of these stories really resonated with me and I think that all of us can see ourselves in each other in one way or another. Social media is engrained in the bodybuilding industry and continues to play a role in our lives even after we leave the sport. For me, seeing social media captions on Instagram of other women sharing their experiences really helped me realize that I wasn't alone. These posts are like a diary entry, explaining thoughts, perspectives, and raw, honest, emotion related to the transition experience in terms of disappointment, weight gain, depression, and more. I didn't know other women felt the same way until then, and the comments only strengthened that feeling of togetherness. Here's an example:

Photo collage with a bikini stage photo on the left, and a "normal" body on the right

[@Alanna] *The dark side of competing* ⤵

The photo on the left is not what you think. Sure, I look lean, I'm smiling, and I'm all glammed up in my sparkling bikini, but I was miserable.

I was weak, malnourished, and running on caffeine and adrenaline. I only cared about one thing, and that was winning. What you don't see, is I was suffering, and continued to suffer for years. I lived with a fear that if I stopped, I wouldn't know how to live life without restrictions, or I would gain weight, and no one would like me. This probably seems dramatic, but if you've competed before, you'll understand. I did severe metabolic damage to my body with my constant need to keep competing, and it took me years to work through. I needed years to heal my relationship with food, with exercise, and with the people around me. I've never felt so alone.

So, was it worth it? I don't know. It certainly taught me discipline and dedication, and at the time, I really did love it, and I had so many opportunities come out of it. I don't regret it, but if I could go back, I would definitely do it differently.

I'm not sharing my story so you feel bad for me, or so you can tell me "You chose to do this." I'm sharing my story because every time I post a caption like this, my comments and messages are filled with women thanking me for sharing my experience. This experience is unique to us, and I've built so many relationships and a sense of community with other women who share similar experiences. Being a woman is hard and adding that layer of competing just makes things harder. I don't know if I'd be where I am now without this community we've built supporting each other through this transition.

My DMs are open and I'm here for anyone looking for someone to listen. You're not alone in this □

[Comments]

[Isabelle] I went through phases of deleting and re-downloading Instagram after I left the sport because it felt inauthentic. The reason I came back is for the community and for that group of women who uplifted me while I competed AND when I left.

[Carol] Thanks for sharing this. Competing is a different experience for women, and I think that means retiring is going to be different too. I don't think men start questioning their identity of who they are the same way that women do when they leave the sport.

[Lisa] I totally agree about the community aspect and support, but these connections were also essential for other reasons. I'm pretty transparent about using PEDs but when I found when I retired and was coming off all the drugs, I couldn't find a lot of information online. It seems like all of the studies and research are geared towards men's experiences. I ended up messaging a lot of girls on social media to hear their experiences and perspectives.

> **[Carol]** That's a really good point. As a coach I've found the same thing. I tend to guide my clients based on the experiences of others since that's all the information I have. I always encourage my clients using PEDs to connect with each other as well.
>
> **[Rachel]** As much as it sucks that we have to go through all of this, and there isn't a ton of information on it, at least we have each other. Like I dealt with so much, but I also

used my platform to share my experience and connect with other women who were experiencing the same thing.

[Carol] I have heard things like just sitting in the audience and talking with other coaches who say things that they probably should not be saying in earshot of people who may or may not have been one of their clients. You know what I mean like. “Oh, this is her last competition. I wonder how much she's gonna blow up.”

[Alanna] That’s so true. It feels like people are just waiting for us to fail, or “blow up” like you said. The culture can be so toxic. I think we’re lucky we have spaces like this to talk through things with each other.

[Rachel] Outside of bodybuilding I think women talk more about body image because it has been normalized for us to have these discussions. I've had a lot of girls that I could lean on to help me through that stuff whereas I feel like men don't have that… so I think for women, yeah, sure, our hormones get maybe a bit more out of whack and we might have a bit more going on with our cycles and stuff, but it also seems natural for us to bond with each other. We’re lucky to have this community, even if it is built on our struggles.

4.6 Epilogue: Would You Ever Go Back: A Dialogue-Based Essay

Amy (and the Collective)

> *The external context [of bodybuilding] is training for an athletic event. But here, too, that goal becomes subordinated to the internal one. The real battle, ultimately, is with the self* – Susan Bordo[13]

It's only been a few months since my last show, so I've been catching up with a lot of people in my life now that I actually have the energy to do so. When someone asks about my most recent show, they usually start with two questions. The first is, how was your show? And the second is, when is the next one? "Retirement" or leaving the sport may look different for everyone, and there are many factors that can influence someone's reason to leave, and also to potentially come back.

Amy: I think one thing we can all agree on, whether we've been "retired" for one year, or 15 years, is that someone will always ask us "would you do another show?" It's a guarantee. Once you do one, someone out there will always ask if you'll do another. When I decided to explore the idea of bodybuilding retirement, I considered myself done with the sport. I didn't think I'd compete again…but then I did. Bodybuilding is so different compared to other sports because you don't necessarily need certain physical abilities to be competitive. Yes, you certainly need to be able to train and do cardio, but really, anyone can compete, especially at the amateur level. I think that's what makes the idea of "retirement" so blurry in the industry. We are all at different stages in our lives…so now I want to ask that question…would you ever go back?

Rachel: To be honest, I still have moments to this day where I'm like, maybe when we're done having kids completely, I'll do another show for fun or something, but I don't know. I know that I've come so far and I'm in such a good place now with my body so I don't know if I would ever revert back. It's a little scary to think about going back there because of the commitment that it entails. I really struggled for a while with body image and tearing myself apart when everyone

[13] Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture, and the body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

would be telling me I look amazing and all I would think is “I’m fucking fat, what are you talking about.” I hate to admit it, but I loved being that lean and I always wanted to be thin, like thin, thin, thin so it took me a long time to accept what’s beautiful and actually realistic beauty, not temporary beauty. That body I once had is not something that you should hold on to. You should not continue to look that way. That's literally a temporary thing.

Isabelle: If I ever did compete again, I’d do it my way. I don’t want to feel like I have to conform to what the judges are looking for, or what all the coaches think you have to be. I’d do it for me and show up with a look I was happy with. That way, I could just train how I wanted to. In general, I think it’s a very difficult thing for a woman to change her physique anyway, just given different testosterone levels and that kind of thing. I think it’s just harder for a woman to fit into a mold, and to build her body the way that the judges want it built. And what if I don’t want that body? The only areas they really care about are shoulders and glutes for bikini to fit that feminine judging criteria. And is that feminine? I don’t even care about that. I don't pay a whole lot of attention to femininity versus masculinity and I just kind of do what I like, and what I think works for me. There are so many expectations placed on women, whether it’s to be curvy or to be lean, and I think for now, I’m okay just being me and working towards my own goals.

Lisa: I’m 100% not doing another show. My body just can’t handle it. When it comes to my body now, I’m happy. I think, from a female point of view, it always came down to, one, what was your goal and, two, what look did you want to achieve that you are comfortable with on stage and off stage? For any women in the sport, but especially physique competitors, you have to remember that you have to carry that body around for the rest of the year offstage and that you live in that body for the rest of the year as well. Basically, how big did you want to get? Reminding myself of that really gave me closure as I realized I wouldn’t be stepping on stage again. I’ve found other ways to keep active and kind of carry that resistance piece with me. I’ve tried all sorts of things from dance classes to visiting a shooting range. Even when my body isn’t at the forefront, I’ve been seeking different ways to feel that same rush.

Alanna: Lisa, I know you competed in physique so it’s a bit different, but for bikini, we end up having to make a decision that depends on two things: our genetics, and if we want to get on

PEDs or not. For most of us, if we want to grow, we have to sacrifice quite a bit just to get enough muscle to be competitive, and then, prep would be brutal to lose all that fat that comes with muscle gain. Going from natural to enhanced, and choosing to use PEDs is a big decision that many of us don't want to compromise. Like you said, too, you have to think about your body offstage as well. If you go the drugs route, you're going to lose some femininity and it's going to change how you look and you have to be okay with that on stage and off stage.

Carol: I have this conversation with a lot of my clients. I really get them to think about what they want inside and outside of the sport, because everything on that stage is temporary. When it comes to choosing a division, I find men don't have to make decisions like this. No matter what, their criteria are about their muscle mass and size. They can choose whether they want to get bigger or smaller and that's that. For us, we have to sacrifice something if we want to move up in the women's divisions. It definitely reinforces femininity and masculinity to the absolute baseline description. The industry has a really long way to go to make things equitable for women, like why are we wearing heels? And it's only some of us…in physique and bodybuilding, they don't but it's like, why don't they? Is it because they have more masculine features? They create a division in the women who want to compete based on how masculine or how feminine they want to look.

Lisa: And the standards are shifting so much in the industry. I think that's why so many of us women in physique are actually leaving. At my last show, I was small compared to the other women in my class. The interesting thing was that I was as lean as I had ever been. I had frickin lines going through my quads in every direction, like it was my leanest I've ever been on stage, but I was small in comparison to them. Looking at the other women, I knew they were just as shredded as I was, but they must have had at least 20 pounds on me. I remember thinking, what do they have to carry around size-wise for the rest of the year to grow and to produce this look on stage? And do I want to? Do I want to stay with that? And the answer was no. It's nothing against them. It just wasn't the body I wanted to inhabit myself.

I really had to sit with that and think about it because yes, I love being on stage, I love presenting, and I love that look on stage but it's very temporary. It needs to be temporary, or you

would die trying to maintain that look. That look gets awarded in the moment, but what do you look like for the other 9-10 months of the year? I did not want to be that size. This is no shade for the women who have that goal, and that's their life and they love it… I hope they kill it. I hope they rock it, and I support, and I applaud them but that wasn't for me. Even if I didn't get injured, I think I still would have left the sport because I did not like where it was going, in order to be successful. I don't think I would have stayed just because of that.

Rachel: It's also the money too and the financial commitment. When you have kids, and a house, and all the things that go with it, you have to make decisions too. As much as I love the idea of doing a show for fun, I know what the financial and time commitment entails, and I just don't know if I'd be willing to give up time with my family to compete again.

Lisa: Even if I had all the free time or money or whatever in the world, I don't think I would do it because I don't want to carry that size around with me anymore. I don't. I don't want to get to the size I would need to be now in 2024 to be competitive because this shit isn't what it was in 2017.

Amy: I totally agree. All of these thoughts are so fresh in my mind as I decide what my next move is. I know I am going to take a break for about a year and just focus on "life" things like finishing up school, attending friends' weddings, and travelling, but I will say, never say never. I could see myself coming back when I'm 35 as a master's athlete and doing a regional show for fun, but who knows what'll happen before that I know the stage will always be there if I choose to return.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings presented in the previous chapter represent the thoughts, experiences, and reflections of 15 women who competed in various divisions of women's bodybuilding. Through narrative essays, informed by the perspectives of five composite characters, these insights directly address the purpose of my research: to explore the retirement transition for competitive bodybuilders in the women's divisions. Specifically, this research examines how women bodybuilders are shaped by gendered ideologies and how these ideologies influence their transition experiences, particularly in relation to identity, health, well-being, and leisure. Drawing on a sport feminism framework, I will now bring meaning to the stories shared above, linking them to existing literature and offering new insight to answer my research questions: (a) how do women-identifying bodybuilding competitors experience the retirement transition in terms of (i) identity, and (ii) health/well-being and, (b) how are gendered ideologies experienced, reproduced and/or maintained after leaving the sport? I will begin by summarizing the key findings in the next section.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The stories presented above highlight that women's experiences of the retirement transition are complex and shaped by a variety of factors that contribute to both shared and divergent experiences. Identity emerged as a central theme in this transition, with many women describing a crisis of identity, and the ongoing process of negotiation, as they moved beyond their competitive careers. All women noted that their time in bodybuilding led to significant physical and physiological health challenges, many of which continued to affect their lives after leaving

the sport and required time and effort to recover from. In terms of mental health, concerns with body image, disordered eating, and achievement were frequently carried over into retirement and the women shared their ongoing struggles and the strategies they used to navigate these challenges. The retirement transition also affected the participants' well-being regarding their finances, leisure participation, and social connectivity. These challenges were influenced by a range of internal and external factors such as personal characteristics, reason for leaving the sport, or bodybuilding prep protocols. Beyond these experiences, many participants reflected on the influence of their gender both while competing, and after leaving the sport. Influenced by factors such as their division and their ideas or preconceptions of gender, the women shared how bodybuilding influenced their views on resistance and empowerment, while also offering insights into how their perspectives continued to impact their lives when retiring. These stories deepen our understanding of the retirement transition and underscore the need for more in-depth exploration of this transition phase. The following sections will further examine these findings as they relate to existing literature, offer new insight to address the research questions and advocate for change and activism within the industry.

5.2 The Retirement Transition: The After(math)

The first research question explores how women bodybuilding competitors experience the retirement transition in terms of identity, health, and well-being. To address this question, I have broken down each component into distinct subsections. I begin by examining the process of identity formation, crisis, and negotiation that the former competitors shared. Next, I delve into how the transition affected both their physiological and mental health, including connections to

relevant literature. Finally, I explore the broader aspects of well-being, highlighting key influencing factors and emphasizing the nuanced nature of bodybuilding as a sport.

5.2.1 Identity

To explore identity formation, crisis, negotiation, and the related outcomes in the context of women's bodybuilding retirement, I turn to sociological theories such as identity theory, the looking-glass self, and conceptualizations of digital identity. I also refer to the athletic retirement literature, and conceptualizations of athlete identity, to understand how the participants in this study perceived their identity before, during, and after the retirement transition.

5.2.1.1 Identity Formation and Athlete Identity

Social identity theory and identity theory propose that "the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications" (Stets & Burke, 2000b, p. 224). Given that social identity theory focuses more on belonging to social categories or groups and inter-group relationships (Stets & Burke, 2000b), I turn to identity theory to further explore identity during this transition. Identity theory focuses on the "categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, or the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance (Stets & Burke, 2000b, p. 225; Burke, 1991; Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Chapter two provides a fulsome explanation of identity theory, however, Figure 2 depicts how this theory may apply to bodybuilders. Figure 2 illustrates how verifying reactions (e.g., compliments on one's appearance) can encourage an athlete to identify with the "bodybuilder" label. Conversely, non-verifying reactions (e.g., comments on weight gain or loss of strength),

can cause tension for a former or current bodybuilder, leading them to believe that their actions or outward appearance do not align with their identity, causing them to change their behaviours to realign and re-verify that identity (e.g., modifying their exercise routine and/or diet).

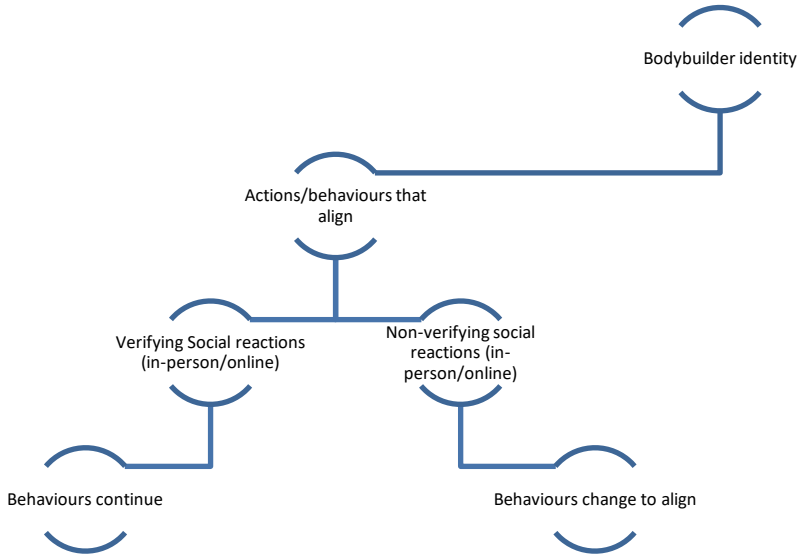


Figure 3. Bodybuilder Identity and Identity Theory Adapted from Davis (2016).

When sharing their stories, many of the women in this study discussed how they formed their identity as a "bodybuilder." For example, Carol's perspective highlighted how she received comments at the gym regarding her strength *(People, both women and men, would come up to me in the gym and comment on how strong I was).* These comments acted as a verifying reaction, which encouraged her to continue her bodybuilding pursuits as the reactions she received aligned with the identity she was developing. Furthermore, identities can vary in strength. For example, Rachel shared how she felt her identity so strongly, that she struggled to let her behaviours waver from the behaviours she believed to align with her identity *(When I competed, I became really rigid with everything…. I had tunnel vision and that was my whole new identity…).*

The process of identity formation in bodybuilding can vary significantly among competitors. For instance, within women's bodybuilding, some may embrace the identity of "bodybuilder," while others may distance themselves from that label, preferring to identify as "bikini competitors" to avoid the masculine associations often tied to the broader "bodybuilder" identity (Matharu, 2019). This distinction was evident among the participants in this study. For instance, those who competed in the physique category were reluctant to identify with bikini competitors, and instead, chose to describe themselves as "women's physique competitors" or simply as bodybuilders *(*Lisa: *My only issue with women's bodybuilding is that I only associate myself with physique, but I don't like what happens in other divisions like bikini. Don't even get me started on bikini girls taking up as little physical space as possible to stay alive on stage to get the validation of men).* Lisa's perspective suggests that she was keenly aware of how her identity could be perceived by others and was intentional in choosing identifiers that aligned with her actions, to avoid potential misconceptions. Bodybuilding also introduces an added layer to identity formation when considering the influence of athlete identity.

As described in chapter two, athlete/athletic identity is part of one's identity referring to the level in which an individual defines themselves by the sport they participate in (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Athlete identity is more pronounced in sports that rely on specific ideals of body shape and size (e.g., gymnastics, diving, ballet), compared to sports where body shape and size are less central to performance (Gairdner, 2015; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; Wylleman et al., 2014). Furthermore, athlete identity can be shaped and reinforced through social responses and feedback, which might include public recognition, success, achievement, and/or a sense of

belonging to a community (Cosh et al., 2013; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Turning to the study participants' experiences, many of the women exhibited a strong athlete identity influenced by the social responses and validation they received from others, as well as by their public recognition and, for some, sponsorships *(*Alanna: *I started winning shows right away and I got a ton of sponsorships which means companies were paying me to promote their products on social media and paying for me to fly to different cities and represent them at expos and conferences).* While the participants follow a similar identification process to athletes in other sports, bodybuilding is heavily influenced by the prominence of social media and the digital landscape within its community. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the role that social media plays in the identity formation process.

5.2.1.1.1 Digital Identity

Chapter two introduced the concept of digitally mediated identities, referring to the impact of social media on the formation and negotiation of one's identity (Davis, 2016; Wellman, 2020). Social media offers athletes an additional platform for social recognition, which can strengthen their athlete identity (Cosh et al., 2013). Bodybuilding is intertwined with, and dependent on, social media. As a result, competitors are exposed to both verifying and non-verifying reactions that can shape their behaviours and actions, both online and offline. The immediacy, and accessibility of social media also indicate that these reactions can occur in real-time—often within seconds, or minutes, of posting on one's platform.

Social media played a pivotal role in identity formation for the participants in this study. The participants not only highlighted their engagement, followings, and sponsorships on social

media (i.e., Instagram) but also discussed how they carefully curated their profiles to reflect their status as bodybuilding competitors. For example, Alanna's Instagram account served as a continuous source of verifying reactions for her "bikini competitor" identity, which in turn influenced how she engaged with the sport, and ultimately, her retirement experience *(I never took a true offseason because I was addicted to winning, to being asked to represent these companies, and to the idea of being lean and getting attention from others online and in person. My Instagram account was out of control at this time with thousands of followers. With that added on, the pressure really started to build).* Many participants included their "label" in their Instagram profile (e.g., "bikini competitor" or "women's physique competitor"), which is common for those who compete (e.g., Figure 1 in chapter three depicts my personal Instagram bio). Some even opt to include the competitions they won or their placings at an amateur level. Professional bodybuilders, referred to as International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) pros, typically include "IFBBPRO" somewhere in their Instagram handle. The formation and curation of their digital identities significantly impacted the identity crisis and negotiation process that many of the women experienced when they left the sport.

5.2.1.2 Identity Crisis and Negotiation

Identity plays a central role in an athlete's career, both online and offline. When considering identity theory, and the formation of athlete and digital identities, it is not surprising that a period of identity crisis and/or negotiation may occur when retiring from bodybuilding. This is supported by the existing literature as scholars note that athletes with intense training regimes, and athletes who participate in aesthetic-based sports (e.g., gymnastics, diving etc.) are

proven to identify closely with their sport leading to crises and negotiation upon retirement (Cosh et al., 2013; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Papathomas et al., 2018). Additionally, Sparkes et al.'s (2008) case study of a male bodybuilder, described how this bodybuilder's identity became deeply entangled with his sport participation resulting in a crisis when he retired. Similarly, the women in this study negotiated their identity both online and offline regarding their gender and their position in the sport. As depicted in the narrative essays, the identity negotiation process varied for each composite character. Below, I will examine each composite character's journey through their athlete and digital identity formation and negotiation pathway.

5.2.1.2.1 Athletic Identity

First, Lisa, the seasoned physique competitor, experienced a profound loss of identity when her compounding injuries caused her to end her prep early, leading to her eventual retirement. This pivotal moment sparked a struggle to reconcile and negotiate her various identities upon retirement. While she recognized the identities and roles she held within larger social structures, she began questioning who she was outside of those roles, and who she was for herself (*I think I had put so much of my identity of I was a women's physique competitor. And that's who I was. And in my mind, I was like, if I don't have that, what, who am I? Who am I like for myself? Who am I outside of [bodybuilding]? Yes, I am a mother. Yes, I am a wife. Yes, I am a friend, but who am I outside of that?)*. Her role as a women's physique competitor was largely shaped by the identity verification process, both online and offline, in which reactions from those around her reinforced how she saw herself. For example, Lisa described how she felt like a God in the gym fueled by both positive and negative reactions from others, regarding her muscularity

and perceived strength (*For me personally, that was the hardest part because I still wanted to be that person. I liked it. I liked her. You know, you walk in the gym, and you feel like a God in there)*. Without that verification, and the active competitor status, Lisa struggled to redefine who she was or how she saw herself. Moreover, since Lisa already possessed established roles (wife, mother, etc.) outside of her bodybuilding identity, she lacked a clear goal or plan to address the new void in her life. Since her exit from the sport was unexpected due to her injuries, she was unable to plan for the transition, which likely magnified her sense of loss (Cosh et al., 2013).

Furthermore, Lisa's identity as a women's physique competitor was strongly associated with the visibility of her muscularity. Lisa consistently expressed that her physique and participation in the women's physique division (a "less feminine" division) served as a form of resistance to Western feminine norms. Losing this part of her identity also meant losing a key outlet for that resistance, leaving her resulting identity more aligned with conventional feminine roles such as a wife and mother. Ultimately, the loss of this athlete identity had greater ramifications for Lisa as her connection to the sport was rooted in her long-standing drive to challenge gender norms *(I've always liked to challenge gender roles and assumptions. I've always had jobs in male-dominated fields. Challenging those norms has always been a part of me. When it comes to bodybuilding, I didn't even know women could do it).* Lisa's experience adds a new perspective to the bodybuilding retirement literature. While Sparkes et al. (2018) described how the loss of muscle during retirement can affect male bodybuilders by removing their hypermasculine identity, women's physique competitors offer a divergent view. When a woman retires from the physique division, she shifts arbitrarily towards the norms of a feminine

identity (i.e., appearance, roles as mother, wife etc.) but loses the resistance and sense of personal power that bodybuilding provides. This unique aspect of bodybuilding retirement is explored further in part two of this discussion.

Second, Carol also emphasized the impact of her athlete identity on the transition while highlighting the multiple roles women take on throughout their lives (*I don't think we talk about the identity piece as often, so I appreciate when people do. As women, we take on so many roles in life, and for some of us, those roles become so engrained in who we are that we lose sight of our true selves).* Carol's negotiation process differed from Lisa's in that she questioned her role as a coach within the industry. However, their experiences also align as Carol's athlete identity contributed largely to her overall sense of self resulting in a profound sense of loss despite her continued coaching career and involvement in the industry *(I thought everything was going to be okay [when I left]. I had a great team of athletes, they were all doing well, and I still had a role in the industry, but once I kind of settled into the routine of coaching, that feeling of emptiness started to creep back in. I felt like I was pouring so much into my athletes and the industry that I was losing my sense of self again).* Carol's story underscores the weight that one's athlete identity carries in shaping their overall sense of self and illuminates the challenges of losing that specific identity, even when still immersed in a subculture that values it. In Carol's case, her sense of loss was compounded by the fact that she had to experience an identity crisis and renegotiate her identity twice—once when her career as an athlete ended, and again when she questioned her credibility as a coach and her belonging within the industry.

The literature supports the notion that athletes in aesthetic or embodied sports often have a stronger athlete identity (Cosh et al., 2013; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Papathomas et al., 2018), and my findings suggest that bodybuilders should also be considered in this category. Furthermore, I offer new insight by proposing that all bodybuilders, regardless of competitive level, are likely to develop a strong athlete identity given the all-encompassing nature of the sport. By that I mean, the boundaries between amateur and professional bodybuilders are often blurred, and although these athletes differ in status, their behaviours, actions, and appearances align. Amateur bodybuilders may emulate professional athletes in ways that heighten their sense of athlete identity. Additionally, Carol's story offers a unique perspective that is not explored in the literature: the dual role of being both a coach and an athlete at the same time. While scholars suggest that many retired athletes turn to coaching to maintain a connection to their sport (Cosh et al., 2013), this transition is often explored once an athlete retires and moves from athlete to coach. Carol's case displays a unique perspective in that being both an athlete and a coach can complicate the retirement transition and resulting negotiation process, offering a new avenue for continued research in the field.

5.2.1.2.2 Digital Identity

Both Alanna and Isabelle's narratives illustrate a unique identity crisis given their involvement with social media. Alanna reflected how when she started competing, she was still grappling with her own identity and sense of self *(I was pretty young when I started competing…young and impressionable).* Her athlete identity was shaped by the feedback she received from her online and offline interactions. In contrast, Isabelle, an experienced athlete, did

not place much emphasis on the "bodybuilding" aspect of her identity as she identified strongly as an athlete, regardless of the sport she was involved in. Isabelle had already built a well-established social media following within the fitness community before she began bodybuilding. Both Alanna and Isabelle used their social media platforms frequently throughout their bodybuilding preps to document their journeys and engage with their followers. As they transitioned out of the sport, both women faced a form of identity crisis and had to negotiate this shift both online and offline.

For Alanna, there was notable tension between her evolving offline identity and her existing online presence *(*Alanna: *When I competed, I was very open on my Instagram about wanting to go pro. I'd document everything, my check-in photos, which shows what I was doing, and what I was eating, but then I just stopped. I couldn't post if I didn't fit that image anymore).* When she decided to stop competing, Alanna dedicated her time to optimizing her mental health and unlearning many of the harmful habits she developed from competing. Despite her ability to adjust her identity internally, her digital identity as a bikini competitor remained intact, which added to the tension during her retirement transition. For example, she shared a moment when she attempted to post a photo of herself in a bikini accompanied by a self-love caption, only to receive a harmful message from an anonymous user (*I remember one day, I woke up feeling pretty good and I just thought I'd post a photo of me in a bikini with a caption about self-love to kind of get myself back into it…one [message] stood out to me. It was someone…who just said "Wow, you've really let yourself go." … I deleted the picture immediately…I went through this whole phase of feeling lost because now I'm just the bikini competitor who let herself go. I felt*

worthless). From an identity theory perspective, that negative comment acted as a non-verifying response to Alanna's digital identity, creating a sense of internal conflict and undermining the new identity she was developing for herself. Furthermore, scholars exploring digital identity note that users can curate an image of themselves based on how they wish to be perceived (Davies, 2016), and for Alanna, the space between her offline self, and digital identity continued to cause confusion and tension in her actions, behaviours and perception of self.

Isabelle's experience was also shaped by her social media presence and digital identity. As a seasoned athlete, Isabelle had already cultivated a strong athlete identity and online presence before entering the bodybuilding industry. She continued to use her platform to document her bodybuilding journey. However, after deciding to leave bodybuilding, she felt that her followers were primarily interested in her "fitness persona"—the digital identity curated by posting bodybuilding-related content including her meals, training routine, and stage photos. She discovered this when she began posting content related to her day-to-day life and career outside of bodybuilding, her engagement decreased significantly *(I slowly started to realize that all these followers I had were following me because they liked the way I look, and they wanted to see my training routine and watch me do these crazy lifts, or post stage photos. The issue was, it's not everything about who I am…Anytime I started posting about things that I cared about, I'd lose hundreds of followers because no one gave a shit about my thoughts. They only cared about seeing me in this light that I didn't want to be seen in anymore).* From an identity theory perspective, Isabelle interpreted the loss of followers as "non-verifying" reactions towards the new identity she wanted to project, however, instead of reverting to her old fitness persona or

striving for approval, Isabelle chose to distance herself from the industry altogether *(I couldn't be the person everyone thought I was or thought I looked like…I decided to drop all of my sponsorships. I just felt fake. I was promoting these companies that I didn't even really believe in anymore…I lost a lot of followers, and honestly, I don't care. That's the thing with social media, so much of it is fake. You can edit photos, you can literally lie about your daily routine, and young impressionable girls will buy into it. I didn't want to be a part of that. I didn't want to sell a story to other women that just wasn't true).* This shift allowed Isabelle to align her digital identity with her evolving offline persona and pursue her passions without the pressure of maintaining a specific image for her online audience.

Based on these two perspectives, I argue that athletes who retire from bodybuilding and have a strong online presence may find themselves navigating a dual identity crisis during the transition. This process requires negotiating one's identity twice, once offline, and again online, with different ramifications for each. For example, mixed feedback from the offline world (e.g., family members suggesting they look "healthy" again versus being called fat by someone in the industry) can complicate the transition and lead to negative behaviours as these athletes try to develop new identities (as discussed in section 5.2.3). Similarly, the negotiation of one's online identity can impact sponsorships, income, engagement, and mental health, further complicating the transition and adding new layers of pressure to the experience.

5.2.1.2.3 Identity Role Shifting

Rachel's narrative illustrates an identity crisis and negotiation process following her retirement from bodybuilding and transition into motherhood. Much of Rachel's crisis stemmed

from her perception of others' expectations *(I felt like I was forcing myself to do this, and it was very, very difficult to stop for me. My whole identity became this, and, in my head, I felt like people relied on me to do this and this is who I am – Rachel, the bikini competitor. I felt like I had to follow that, and I had to give people what they want even though no one actually cared. I had this idea of what everyone thought of me, so I put a lot of pressure on myself to maintain that identity).* According to identity theory, Rachel adjusted her behaviours and actions based on social reactions, however, she genuinely believed that others—both online and offline—expected her to uphold her "bikini competitor" identity. Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self-theory explains how individuals view themselves based on their perceptions of others' reactions towards them. While some reactions may appear clear-cut (e.g., a compliment on someone's muscle mass in the gym), other reactions appear more ambiguous and may be interpreted and internalized to fuel a crisis in one's sense of self. For example, Rachel recalled how people in her social circle made comments when she deviated from her dieting routine *(People would ask me where my prepped meal was if I went out for dinner or if I ordered something other than a Diet Pepsi someone would make a comment about how "Oh she's finally eating now" …. [sometimes] it would send me into a spiral. I'd think "so people are definitely looking at me" and I felt judged like, "oh, wow, you're eating regular food…shouldn't you be in prep or shouldn't you be getting ready for your next show?" I felt like I kind of boxed myself in).* Rachel's interpretation and subsequent internalization of these comments, regardless of the commenter's true intentions, further deepened her identity crisis and created tension between her genuine desires, and what she believed was expected of her. This led her to feel both ashamed and guilty when she did not meet these perceived expectations.

Rachel's story also offers a unique lens on role-shifting, specifically with her transition from athlete to mother. While there is substantial literature exploring how elite athletes navigate parenthood or motherhood, much of this literature focuses on identity negotiation during pregnancy and the identity crisis that ensues when deciding to return to sport (McGannon et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2009; Daroch & Hillsburg, 2017). Rachel's case offers an alternative perspective as her role shift from athlete to mom represented the key turning point in resolving her identity crisis (*When I got pregnant, everything shifted for me. I had always dreamed of being a mom, and giving up competing meant I'd regain my health, and focus on investing in the life I always wanted outside of competing).* While guilt and shame previously defined her identity, Rachel learned to fully embrace her role as a mom and channel the knowledge and discipline she once applied to bodybuilding into her role as a mother (*Being a mom is everything to me. I love my daughter, and I love my family. I feel like I am Rachel, the mom, and Rachel, the wife, and there's no one else I'd rather be, becoming a mom gave me an outlet for that spark and drive I had from competing).* Furthermore, Rachel reflected on how her past challenges with her mental health, body image, and disordered eating became tools to inform her decisions as a mother. She shared her desire to protect and prevent her daughter from experiencing similar issues (*…I don't want her to have like, body image issues that I had or like food issues that I had. I don't want to pass that on to her…I think just like having that in the back of my mind has also just helped me like stay focused, because you have someone else now that depends on you and is learning from you).* Rachel's identity shift highlights the power of role-shifting in identity negotiation and reformation, while also illuminating the learned skills bodybuilding affords such as drive, focus, and discipline.

Furthermore, Rachel's ability to apply the same level of care and discipline to her role as a mom, maintaining the same "spark" she once had in bodybuilding, speaks to the adaptability of her athlete identity *(I'm just obsessed with my life as a mom. I feel that same level of dedication and I take so much pride in like, keeping my house clean, doing my laundry and keeping my babies happy. I know it sounds different, but the mindset is similar. You commit to something you're dedicated to and you're going to do whatever you got to do to get to that end goal)*. This shift depicts how deeply one's athlete identity may be engrained with their sense of self but can also be transferred to new life roles.

Rachel's transition from athlete to mom may also relate to Tajrobehkar's (2016) exploration of bikini competitors' perception of gender and the industry. Tajrobehkar (2016) discussed the concept of "feminine apologetic" (Felshin, 1974) which refers to women athletes turning to hyper-feminine ideals to "legitimate their involvement in sport and "reduce the role conflict they might experience as a result" (p. 301). In Rachel's case, her turn to motherhood might facilitate social acceptance. Tajrobehkar (2016) suggested that women bodybuilders turn to hyper-feminine ideals as "an attempt to reestablish gender norms after having violated them" (p. 301). This phenomenon might explain why other competitors, such as Lisa, who was also a mom, did not experience the same sense of identity alignment or reformation after leaving the sport and instead, felt a sense of loss. The transition from athlete to mother is not universally experienced in the same way. Furthermore, the diverse identity pathways illustrated by all characters may be influenced by athlete identity foreclosure.

5.2.1.3 Athlete Identity Foreclosure

All five characters experienced unique challenges with their identity when retiring from bodybuilding. Some were able to navigate this shift through strategies such as role-shifting or disengagement, while others, faced challenges during this process. A potential explanation for these differences might stem from the concept of "athletic identity foreclosure," which refers to the "commitment to the athlete role in the absence of exploration of occupational or ideological alternatives" (Brewer & Petipas, 2017, p. 118). Much of the literature on this concept focuses on adolescents and considers how sport participation influences identity development in the earlier years of one's life (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). However, some scholars explore identity foreclosure broadly as applied to non-athlete retirees in later life (Newton, 2021). Both perspectives are helpful to consider when exploring the experiences of women bodybuilders in this study.

For instance, Rachel and Alanna, who shifted their identity during the transition, both started competing at a young age with external factors (e.g., other people at the gym) encouraging them to pursue this sport. This early and intense commitment to bodybuilding likely resulted in them experiencing a form of athlete identity foreclosure, as their identities became closely tied to bodybuilding without having explored other forms of fitness, or other sports. They both faced a period of identity crisis and negotiation when leaving the sport. However, with time, they were both able to explore new aspects of their lives and fitness, shifting their identity into new roles outside of bodybuilding. In contrast, Isabelle, who came into the sport as an athlete already, spent a significant period of her life exploring various facets of fitness, and did not experience the same athlete identity foreclosure. For Isabelle, bodybuilding was just one part, if

any, of her athletic identity and as a result, she was able to transition out of the sport without feeling as strongly connected to it. On the other hand, both Carol and Lisa expressed deeper feelings of loss and grief when leaving the sport. For Carol, continuing her career as a coach did not mitigate the personal loss she felt when she retired. Both women had stronger ties to bodybuilding that were not only about the sport but rooted in larger social ideologies that were crucial to their sense of self such as resistance and empowerment. The loss of this outlet seemed to affect their personal ideologies more profoundly than it did for other participants. This connection is explored further in section 5.3.

In summary, women bodybuilding competitors often develop strong identities linked to their participation in the sport including specific identities such as athlete and digital identity. As a result, leaving the sport can trigger a period of identity crisis or negotiation, experienced in varying ways. Athlete identity foreclosure offers a possible framework for understanding why these negotiations differ. However, identity is only one piece of the retirement transition. While competitors navigate this period of change, they may also experience challenges related to their health, which will be explored further in the next sections.

5.2.2 Physical Health

The narrative titled *Bodybuilding Should Come with a Warning Label* highlights several health concerns reported by the participants in this study which surfaced either post-competition or during their transition out of the sport. The personal profiles and individually authored narratives also reveal the profound effects of these health issues not only on the women's physical well-being but on other aspects of their lives such as the ability to conceive and their social

interactions. In essence, these physical health concerns cause harm beyond the surface causing a cascade of effects impacting other elements of their lives including their mental health and well-being, as explored in subsequent sections. In terms of physical health, I first provide an overview of these health issues including the potential causes, and then discuss how they are either resolved or continue to create lasting harm during the retirement transition. I conclude with a discussion on the use and potential impacts of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs), which can contribute significantly to physical health challenges after leaving the sport.

5.2.2.1 Health Concerns During a Bodybuilding Prep

The physical and physiological health risks and implications for competitive bodybuilders are well documented in the literature, particularly concerning their time in prep or when actively competing (Alwan et al., 2022; Haynes et al., 2019; Fagerberg, 2018). In line with the literature, the women in this study shared the negative health implications they experienced during their preps such as low energy, cardiovascular distress, decreased or lack of libido, mood fluctuations, irritability, and hormonal disruption resulting in amenorrhea and fertility concerns. When comparing the participants' experiences to the literature, we gain a clearer understanding of the physiological factors that likely contributed to the plethora of health-related symptoms they experienced after retirement.

Many of the health challenges experienced by the women likely stemmed from engagement in extreme dieting and exercise protocols resulting in a severe decrease in body fat (Alwan et al., 2022; Haynes et al., 2019). Scholars suggest that women athletes, including bodybuilders, are vulnerable to relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S) and low energy

availability (LEA) (Alwan et al., 2022; Fagerberg, 2018). LEA is defined as the imbalance between energy intake and expenditure and may impact health and performance in the short term or long term (Wasserfurth, 2022). In response to LEA, the body adapts through various physiological reactions such as endocrine alterations, suppression of the reproductive axis, thyroid suppression, and metabolic changes which can affect all systems in the body (Wasserfurth, 2022). RED-S, which includes LEA, is particularly concerning for people who menstruate as the gap between energy expenditure and energy intake becomes far too great that the body responds by dropping estrogen levels to compensate (Brown, 2022). This alteration results in the loss of a menstrual cycle and an increased risk of bone-related conditions such as osteoporosis and osteopenia (Brown, 2022). Although not professionally diagnosed, many of the health concerns expressed by the participants align with RED-S and LEA. These findings underscore the long-term health risks associated with a bodybuilding prep, particularly for women, further emphasizing the need for further importance of exploring how women's health is impacted in the long term, and when leaving the sport.

5.2.2.2 Transition Impacts

Asking former competitors to describe their physical health issues post-competition may not provide the same level of rigour as physiological testing such as bloodwork, or other image-based diagnostics, however, the consistency across participants' stories and similar stories shared online offers a degree of trustworthiness to support these claims. The findings from this study suggest that many of the health complications experienced by the participants during their time in the sport persisted into their retirement experience, with some lasting longer than others.

Most of the commonly reported health issues were associated with RED-S and LEA, as discussed in the previous section, and were often described to have a short-term effect on the participants' overall health. Many of the participants in this study reported that with a return to sustainable caloric intake and a reduction in cardiovascular activity, their general energy levels returned, which improved their libido and mood fluctuations. Within a few weeks of increasing their caloric intake and decreasing their activity levels (particularly cardiovascular activity), many participants reported "feeling like themselves again." This finding aligns with existing literature exploring active bodybuilding competitors, and by scholars and medical professionals in the field of eating disorder recovery, who suggest that energy rebalancing, and reducing physical stress can reverse hormone downregulation (particularly estrogen), which in turn, improves energy levels, and reduces symptoms of LEA and RED-S (Brown, 2022; Alwan et al., 2022).

Concerns with hormonal health were another common area of discussion, with participants reporting both short-term and long-term health effects. Many participants experienced amenorrhea during their time in prep, with this condition persisting after they retired. Amenorrhea is a well-documented outcome in the literature for women athletes who engage in high-intensity training protocols and redistricted caloric intake (Grosman-Rimon, 2019; Warren, 1999). Scholars note that recovery from amenorrhea, and hormonal disruptions in general, generally follows a similar pattern to the LEA and RED-S recovery. That is, rebalancing one's energy expenditure and intake while reducing physical stress can help restore one's menstrual cycle and decrease the risk of infertility (Grosman-Rimon, 2019). In this study, the

women shared varied recovery timelines regarding their hormonal health. Many reported that their hormones returned to their baseline ranges, leading to regular mensuration, and for some, the ability to conceive once their body reached a balanced state. One competitor entered early menopause (permanent cessation of one's menstrual cycle), however, it is unclear if this was due to their competitive history. Scholars in the field suggest a breadth of internal and external factors such as baseline stress, age, and genetics, can influence one's recovery process from hormonal dysfunction (Grosman-Rimon, 2019; Warren, 1999). Therefore, these findings align with the literature in that there is no definitive timeline for reversing or correcting hormonal disruptions and recovering from amenorrhea. Nonetheless, the consensus from this study and the existing literature on this topic suggests that these symptoms can be addressed with attention to energy rebalancing (Grosman-Rimon, 2019; Warren, 1999). While these hormone-related challenges varied in persistence, the participants shared two other areas that appeared to persist in the long term including gastrointestinal issues, and the potential to uncover unrelated health issues.

During prep, bodybuilders typically consume the same foods daily, whether organized in a meal plan (i.e., the same meals every day) engage in or "macro tracking" (i.e., the same amount of food, from varying sources). Regardless of approach, these diets often include a high-protein intake. These practices may contribute to long-term gastrointestinal issues. For instance, several participants reported new food intolerances, such as the inability to digest certain food groups (e.g., dairy), severe bloating and discomfort, and gastrointestinal pain, both during prep and for years after they left the sport. This finding is significant as there is limited if any, literature

exploring the long-term impact of bodybuilding diets on the gastrointestinal system. Given that food is central to bodybuilding prep, this element of the process is crucial to explore further. Some scholars have explored the impact of a high protein diet on one's gut microbiome, however, these explorations only include men in their participant pool with inconclusive results (Jang et al., 2019; Szurkowska et al., 2021; Luk et al., 2022). The long-term consequences for women competitors remain largely unexplored and given the numerous reports of digestive issues from the participants in this study, future research is warranted, especially from a women's health perspective.

Lastly, a novel finding from this study is the way a bodybuilding prep might uncover pre-existing health issues that may have been ignored otherwise. Three participants shared how the extreme nature of their prep, including intense cardiovascular activity and a restricted dietary routine, revealed underlying health conditions such as pre-existing food intolerances, hormonal imbalances and mental health challenges that were not related to their bodybuilding prep. These women shared that had they not competed, and undergone their bodybuilding prep(s), they might never have uncovered these issues, as their lifestyle before competing did not cause their bodies to ensure that same level of stress. Some of the participants described their discovery as a "blessing" as it encouraged them to seek professional care and address these health issues with medical professionals when they retired. The strict and extreme protocols required in a bodybuilding prep might have stripped away certain lifestyle layers that may have been masking these physical, physiological, and mental health concerns that were not apparent to the participant before entering the bodybuilding industry. This novel finding highlights the complex

relationship between the extreme protocols of bodybuilding and one's health as what might seem damaging to one's health might also lead to a positive outcome by uncovering underlying health concerns and ultimately leading to a better quality of life after leaving the sport.

5.2.2.3 PEDs and Related Impacts

Out of the 15 participants in this study, six openly reported using PEDs at some point in their bodybuilding career. Given the wide range of PEDs available (as outlined in chapter two), and the varied aesthetic goals of the women in this study, their reported PED-related health implications varied. For example, two physique competitors described their careful approach to engaging with PEDs, which involved regular bloodwork, and a meticulous cycling protocol to ensure their hormones were balanced, and harm was minimized. One participant shared her mindfulness towards the health risks associated with PEDs, which informed her decision to leave the sport before sustaining any long-term damage. This awareness played a role in the participant's engagement with these substances, helping her avoid the negative health effects associated with PED use. This careful approach to PED use was not common among all participants.

Several participants reported persistent health issues such as hormonal imbalances, and unintended weight gain, due to their engagement with PEDs, which for some, persisted after leaving the sport and disengaging with their PED protocols. Interestingly, those who did not experience PED-related side effects competed in women's physique and had a strong foundation of knowledge regarding the general use of these substances. In contrast, those who did experience PED-related side effects typically engaged with these substances at the

encouragement or direction of their coaches, suggesting that external influence influenced their health outcomes. This finding highlights the importance of education and guidance in terms of PED use, especially for women.

A recurring theme in the participants' experiences was the lack of accessible information regarding PED use for women. One competitor specifically expressed the difficulty in finding reputable resources for women regarding PEDs. Although scholars have made significant efforts to explore the short- and long-term influence of PEDs, most of the existing literature focuses on male competitors or athletes (Escalante, 2023; Mantri, 2023). This issue reveals the lack of sufficient research and support for women's engagement with PEDs in the bodybuilding industry, which is essential for making informed decisions about their health. Bodybuilding has been and continues to be, a sport dominated by men in terms of coaches, athletes, and organizers (Boyle, 2005; Monaghan, 2001). This power imbalance influences the availability of support, knowledge, and guidance tailored to women in the industry. Participants in this study who expressed shame or regret with their PED engagement also expressed their disappointment with their coach, or the individual guiding their protocol, as they lacked the specific expertise to advise a safe PED protocol for women. This gap in knowledge regarding PEDs can ultimately lead to negative health outcomes for women competitors which then persist into their retirement.

In addition to PEDs, natural competitors (i.e., those who do not engage with PEDs) may still engage in drug misuse and abuse of legal substances (Chappell & Simper, 2018). Participants in this study, both natural and enhanced, described protocols including fat burners such as caffeine coupled with ephedrine, and yohimbine which operate by increasing one's heart

rate to subsequently burn more calories. Other substances, such as vitamin C, dandelion root, and other over-the-counter substances, were used as diuretics to reduce water retention, usually just before the competition date. Although these substances may be legal, their use in these contexts is not well studied, and the potential side effects are inconclusive (Escalante, 2023). For instance, one participant mentioned experiencing arrhythmia when coming off her fat-burning protocol, while others shared stories of inflammation and rapid "water" weight gain shortly after their show when these substances were removed. Again, these findings highlight the lack of research exploring both the short-term and long-term effects of these substances, especially with attention to women athletes. There is a pressing need to explore women's experiences and the roles of drug misuse and abuse involving regulated substances to further understand how these substances influence the retirement transition.

In summary, the women in this study highlighted specific aspects of their physiological health that were impacted upon leaving the sport primarily attributed to their extreme dieting and exercise practices. While some issues were short-term and resolved once their energy was rebalanced (e.g., low energy, mood fluctuations), others persisted (e.g., amenorrhea), and some remained unresolved (e.g., gastrointestinal issues). Moreover, while a significant body of literature explores PED use in bodybuilding athletes, women's experiences are not often included, and there remains a gap in exploring misuse and abuse of regulated substances, all of which might impact one's health after leaving the sport. While navigating these physical challenges, many women shared the mental and psychological challenges they experienced at the same time. These challenges will be discussed further in the following sections.

5.2.3 Mental Health

The athlete retirement literature and the bodybuilding literature both highlight the potential impacts on one's mental health when leaving a sport or competing in bodybuilding respectfully (Cosh et al., 2013; Park et al., 2013; Sparkes et al. 2005). As such, it is not surprising that many women navigated various mental health challenges after leaving the sport. The following subsections delve into various aspects of mental health shared by the participants including body image and body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and achievement addiction.

5.2.3.1 Body Image and Body Dissatisfaction

The academic literature widely recognizes the challenges women face related to body image and body dissatisfaction, particularly in relation to Western societies' emphasis and expectations of body shape and size for women (Papathomas et al., 2018; Mosley et al., 2009; Coy-Dibley, 2016). Understandably, participants in this study shared experiences of negotiating their body image and body dissatisfaction both while actively competing, and after leaving the sport.

As illustrated in the participant profiles in chapter four, many of the participants were inspired to pursue bodybuilding with the primary goal of transforming their bodies *(*Lisa: *This woman was putting in the work and she was obviously getting the kind of results that that I wasn't seeing yet. Her body was everything I wanted. She had really nice capped delts and her legs were magnificent…she just looked powerful, and I craved that aura of personal power with my own body).* This desire to transform one's body supports the underlying premise of bodybuilding, which is to construct an "ideal" physique. Unlike many other sports where

physical performance dictates success, bodybuilding emphasizes one's appearance, without regard to the physical actions required to achieve such physiques. As a result, some scholars argue that this focus increases the risk of developing body image-related issues and dissatisfaction as success is linked to one's physique (Whitehead et al., 2020; Goldfield, 2009).

Although many scholars have addressed body image-related concerns in women athletes, this body of literature overlooks the unique challenges women bodybuilders may face when leaving the sport. To gain a deeper understanding of the "transitioning body" during this retirement, I turn to Buckley and colleagues' (2019) conceptualization of the *Athletic Body Transition* which describes the "body image or body dissatisfaction a retired athlete experiences based on a number of active and passive factors" (p. 9). Chapter two provides a fulsome explanation of this model, however, Figure 3 provides a summary. The authors of this proposed model also identified four key drivers for retired athletes developing a poor relationship with their body and eating habits including the strength of athlete identity, possessing unrealistic expectations, facing challenges with energy balance, and reason for/length of retirement (Buckley et al., 2019. p. 8). While this model provides insight into the transitioning body, there are many gaps when applying it to women's bodybuilding retirement including (a) the division differences and conflicting standards within the industry, and (b) the entanglement of bodybuilding and health. I address these gaps in the following sections.

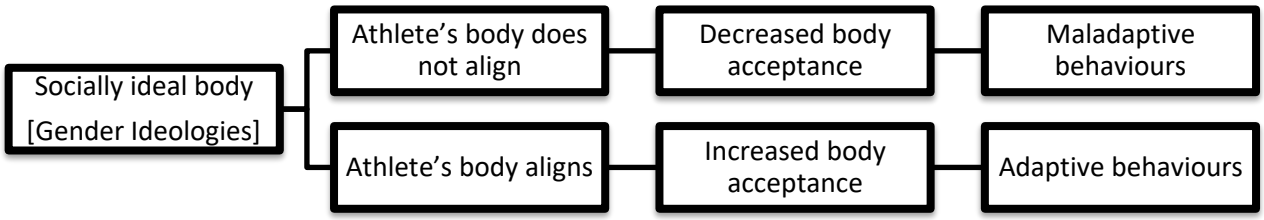


Figure 4. The Athletic Body Transition Adapted from Buckley et al. (2019).

5.2.3.1.1 Division Differences and Conflicting Standards

Women's bodybuilding is structured with multiple divisions, each with different standards for level of muscularity, and physique shape and size. The variability in divisions results in dissimilar physical transitions for women when leaving the sport, dependent on the division they competed in. Some may see a shift in their body that aligns with the socially ideal body (i.e., physique competitors losing muscle mass), while others may experience a shift that deviates from this ideal (i.e., bikini competitors gaining weight). This contrasts with other sports that require a standardized physique for all athletes involved (e.g., gymnastics) where performance, rather than aesthetics, drives the sport-specific expectations for the athlete's body. As a result, I suggest that the latter half of the *Athletic Body Transition* model may not fully capture the experience of all women bodybuilder's experience when leaving the sport.

Findings from this study revealed that those who competed in the bikini division often expressed body dissatisfaction as they gained weight and lost muscle definition post-retirement. Many participants reported shared feelings of shame and guilt tied to this weight gain as it deviated from the ideal bikini physique they worked hard to maintain *(*Alanna: *Competing, and everything else in the industry really, is very much just about what you look like so for a while,*

my mindset and self-worth were completely tied to my weight and my appearance. I believed that if I gained weight, or I lost that "bikini competitor" look, everyone would drop me, and I'd be alone). In contrast, those who competed in women's physique expressed how their post-show weight gain resulted in the resemblance of an average woman's body *(*Lisa: *For us, since we have so much muscle, we look like freaks when we're shredded and that's when we get all of the "you look like a man comments" from others. When we gain weight post-show it's hard to see all of that muscle. I think there's obviously less expectation of a woman to be to be jacked so when I stopped being so visibly defined, it was completely unremarkable).* Regardless of division, the way these women understood their bodies in relation to the "socially ideal body" was influenced by external and internal standards, which often contradicted each other. For example, many bikini competitors shared that they received positive reactions from their family, friends, or partners, in terms of their weight gain as they transformed from an extreme level of leanness to what may be considered "socially" balanced weight gain mirroring feminine ideals (gaining weight in glutes, hourglass figure etc.). However, the guilt and shame they felt were heavily reinforced by others in the bodybuilding industry or within online spaces, where comments such as "she let herself go" or "she blew up" were frequently made towards the participants. This reflects a skewed relationship with the concept of a "socially ideal body" as the participants' retirement weight gain might align with societal expectations of femininity while also contradicting the level of leanness valued by the bodybuilding community. Furthermore, women's physique competitors illustrate a unique perspective in relation to the "socially ideal body" as upon retirement, these competitors typically face a loss in muscle mass, resulting in smaller physiques that may mirror the societal expectations of femininity. This change may lead

to varying perceptions of alignment (i.e., losing muscle may make them feel less strong, and small) which can influence their body acceptance and resulting behaviours. Decreasing muscle mass may even be a driving factor for leaving the sport *(*Lisa: *I think, from a female point of view, it always came down* to, *one, what was your goal and, two, what look did you want to achieve that you are comfortable with on stage and off stage? For any women in the sport, but especially physique competitors, you have to remember that you have to carry that body around for the rest of the year offstage and that you live in that body for the rest of the year as well… Reminding myself of that really gave me closure as I realized I wouldn't be stepping on stage again).* These varying perceptions might be connected to athlete identity.

One's strength of athlete identity can also impact their body image (Buckley et al., 2019). For instance, participants who retained a strong athlete identity often aligned their body norms and expectations with those of the bodybuilding community. As a result, seeing their body deviate from their stage-level physique resulted in decreased acceptance of their body, leading to engagement in maladaptive behaviours (e.g., disordered eating). This trajectory was illustrated by Alanna and Rachel, who both grappled with their changing bodies while simultaneously trying to move away from the bodybuilding industry. Conversely, participants with less attachment to their athlete identity often embraced their changing body with ease leading to increased body acceptance and adaptive behaviours as illustrated by Isabelle's experience. Furthermore, as discussed in the following section, the entanglement of bodybuilding with one's health can also influence how this transition is experienced.

5.2.3.1.2 Entanglement of Bodybuilding and Health

Based on the findings from this study, I argue that the maladaptive behaviours experienced by the women (e.g., eating habits, over-exercising), cannot solely be attributed to body satisfaction. Rather, I suggest that the emphasis that the extreme diet and exercise measures, coupled with the high degree of autonomy and self-control required to compete in bodybuilding can, and does, influence one's adaptive or maladaptive behaviours after leaving the sport. For example, women who competed in the women's physique division and incurred a shift in their body that aligned more with societal norms of femininity still reported engaging with maladaptive behaviours regardless of their body acceptance level *(*Lisa: *I didn't necessarily want to be lean or lose weight all the time, but I had these obsessive habits tied to food that pretty much paralyzed me and controlled my life for years).* I argue that the obsessive habits that persist after leaving the sport are not solely driven by the desire to achieve a certain physique valued within the bodybuilding industry, but are a product of the intense, all-encompassing involvement that a bodybuilding prep requires. The unique nature of this lifestyle, including the high degree of physical and mental discipline, may translate uniquely into maladaptive behaviours once their careers end.

Furthermore, I also argue that the extreme focus on diet and exercise during a bodybuilder's career may act as a protective mechanism against other maladaptive behaviours commonly cited in the athlete retirement literature such as drugs and alcohol abuse when leaving the sport (Cosh et al., 2013; Ponizovskiy, 2013). None of the women in this study reported engaging in substance abuse or other harmful coping mechanisms beyond those related to their diet/exercise. This avoidance may be attributed to the fact that bodybuilding requires a high level

of self-regulation and attention to one's body. While the participants noted maladaptive behaviours related to diet and exercise, these behaviours, and attention towards their bodies may have helped them evade other destructive coping mechanisms. In a sense, the strict bodybuilding approaches and lifestyle may paradoxically offer a shield, or alternative outlet, preventing other harmful behaviours that other retired athletes may adopt.

While the *Athletic Body Transition* model provides a useful framework to explore the experience of athlete retirement for women, it does not fully capture the complexities of women bodybuilders. Division differences, conflicting standards, and the entanglement of bodybuilding and health can all influence how one engages with adaptive or maladaptive behaviours in relation to their post-retirement body image. Beyond body image and dissatisfaction, another body image-related issue commonly discussed by participants was body dysmorphic disorder (BDD).

5.2.3.2 Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), an official diagnosis under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), refers to an individual's "preoccupation with one or more perceived defects or flaws in physical appearance that are not observable or appear slight to others" (National Library of Medicine, 2016, para. 1). BDD also encompasses the diagnosis of muscle dysmorphia, referring to an individual's preoccupation with the idea that their body is insufficiently muscular or too small (National Library of Medicine, 2016). It is important to clarify that while several participants in this study exhibited behaviours, habits, and thoughts that align with the diagnostic criteria of BDD, it would be inappropriate, and unsound, to diagnose these participants in this context. Furthermore, I am not a licensed healthcare

professional, and therefore, it would be unethical to attempt to make any claims regarding an official diagnosis. However, we can examine how retirement from bodybuilding may increase the risk of BDD-related behaviours and alter one's perception of their appearance.

A key element of BDD is the "clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other areas of functioning" (National Library of Medicine, 2016, para 2.). Many competitors who shared experiences related to BDD spoke about their preoccupation with leanness, muscle size and definition, and weight (Alanna: *A photo memory came up in my phone this morning from when I was in prep a few years ago…My face was so gaunt, and I was just so lean. I had pretty much no body fat to the point where I remember it even hurt to sit down…Even though I felt that way I just remember constantly thinking, "you're not lean enough." Even when I could see my ribs through my clothing, and my leggings hung off my body, it wasn't enough for me. I'd keep telling myself, "You're not lean enough, you need to get leaner").* Internal dialogues such as Alanna's highlight the distorted thinking patterns that typically accompany BDD.

BDD is often studied in the context of bodybuilding, however, efforts often focus on men's experiences concerning muscle dysmorphia (Sparkes et al., 2005; Murtha et al., 2021; Vallet, 2017; Mosley, 2009). Scholars suggest that men are typically more preoccupied with their loss of muscle mass and in turn, their ties to masculinity (Sparkes et al., 2005; Murtha et al., 2021; Vallet, 2017; Mosley, 2009). In contrast, participants in this study more often expressed preoccupation with their decreased leanness, and using their own words, becoming "fat" after leaving the sport *(*Rachel: *It's like as soon as you put on weight, you are fat. I went through this whole phase of feeling lost, because now I'm just the bikini competitor who let herself go… I felt*

like because I was fat, no one was going to follow me, companies weren't going to sponsor me, and really, I just thought that no one would like me). The contrast between men's preoccupation with muscularity, and women's preoccupation with weight, aligns with broader social structures that dictate gender ideologies. Western norms related to femininity impose the expectation for women to maintain a lean physique, which is perpetuated at an extreme level in the bodybuilding industry. As a result, upon retirement when women experience a change in their physique, these overarching societal norms may exacerbate their preoccupation with their body, especially if their body trends away from these norms.

Not all participants shared experiences that align with BDD when competing, or when leaving the sport. For instance, Isabelle shared that her upbringing as an athlete contributed to a more body-neutral perspective *(Growing up, I was always an athlete… I was always surrounded with like-minded girls and honestly, I know body image is a huge issue for girls, but it wasn't for me. I think that was all because of the people I surrounded myself with and the coaches I had. I never really felt pressure to look a certain way…).* Isabelle's contrasting experience illustrates how a sport culture and environment can influence one's body image, indicating that participation in bodybuilding might increase one's risk of experiencing BDD while competing, and after leaving.

As mentioned throughout this chapter, social media is intertwined with the bodybuilding industry and therefore cannot be overlooked when considering body image perceptions. While many participants shared mixed perceptions of how they reviewed their bodies when retiring, social media also played a role in enforcing or mitigating these perceptions. Several participants

reported that their social media engagement reinforced specific body ideals and expectations. Those who were more active in these digital spaces often internalized the fitness-specific aesthetic displayed in these spaces, and as a result, were more critical of their changing physiques when leaving the sport. The algorithms present on these apps often favour similar content, prioritizing those within the bodybuilding industry, which may act as another outlet perpetuating the "ideal" physique for retired competitors. This unique blurring of online-offline feedback might influence one's self-perception of their body and deepen the body dysmorphia experienced by many former competitors.

Furthermore, one criterion of BDD is the avoidance of social situations in fear of exposing one's perceived flaw (National Library of Medicine, 2016). While participants shared stories of avoiding in-person social events, they also shared experiences of digital withdrawal, where they avoided, or reduced their presence on their social platforms by posting older photos displaying a leaner physique, not posting at all, or even deleting social media completely *(*Alanna: *I was so embarrassed. If I went out in public or to the gym, I'd wear massive hoodies and sweats so no one would see my body…. I stopped posting on Instagram and I was dropped by a lot of my sponsorships. These companies pay you to post a certain amount per month, but it was just hard for me to post because I didn't look the same…the clothes they wanted me to advertise didn't fit the same…).* While social media exacerbated BDD-related challenges for some, it also offered a healing environment when explored through the lens of digitized dysmorphia (Coy-Dibley, 2016).

5.2.3.2.1 Digitized Dysmorphia

Digitized dysmorphia offers an intriguing perspective given the evolution of body image issues in the digital age. Introduced in 2016, digitized dysmorphia considers the intersection of social media and body image perceptions and differs further from BDD as digitized dysmorphia can promote agency and resistance, particularly for women (Coy-Dibley, 2016).

Many participants discussed their use of social media as a form of resistance when they left the sport. For instance, several women shared their personal stories on Instagram and included realistic, unedited photos, revealing the physical and mental realities of this transition period. Their written captions and accompanying photos highlighted the participants' weight gain, changes in how their clothing fit, and other visible impacts such as bloating or inflammation. In doing so, the participants actively opposed the unrealistic body and beauty standards imposed on women, and perpetuated by social media, and challenged the pressure they felt from the industry, and the outside world, to maintain a specific image. Sharing this authentic digital content helped participants address the filtered and unrealistic nature of social media and potentially decreased their risk of BDD too.

Furthermore, for some, sharing their vulnerability on a public platform led to increased social media engagement, including increased followers, and a flow of supportive messages and comments (Alanna: *These posts are like a diary entry, explaining thoughts, perspectives, and raw, honest, emotion related to the transition experience in terms of disappointment, weight gain, depression, and more. I didn't know other women felt the same way until then, and the comments only strengthened that feeling of togetherness).* The supportive response from others

suggests that authenticity is a key element in building community and providing a sense of validation for others. From a broader feminist perspective, this act of resistance aligns with the everchanging climate of feminism in that many women find platforms to share their views that may oppose the expectations or norms placed on them by the patriarchy. Through these digital spaces, the participants were able to "reclaim" their bodies, standing up against both the bodybuilding industry, and social media portrayals of perfection as they embrace, share, and celebrate their changing bodies in public stages. Resistance is discussed further in part two of this discussion.

Leaving the sport of bodybuilding may impact one's perception of their body and associated behaviours, further influenced by various factors such as athlete identity, competitive division, and the digital environment. Interestingly, bodybuilding may also act as a protective factor against certain maladaptive behaviours such as substance abuse due to the extreme focus on health-related behaviours. However, those facing body image and BDD-related challenges may also be at increased risk for experiencing disordered eating or eating disorders following their retirement.

5.2.3.3 Disordered Eating

I use the term "disordered eating" to describe a range of food and eating-related concerns, as highlighted in the narrative *I was terrified to eat a piece of pizza.* As Buckley et al. (2019) note, it is hard to establish a consensus on eating disorder behaviour with populations such as retired athletes due to the ever-changing landscape of terminology and diagnosis criteria in clinical settings (i.e., DSM-5). Like the discussion on BDD, it would be unethical and

methodologically unsound to diagnose any participants based on the stories and experiences shared during the interviews. Although many participants shared behaviours, habits, and thought patterns commonly associated with clinical diagnoses such as binge eating disorder and orthorexia nervosa, it is important to note that these experiences cannot be categorized or diagnosed in this context.

Regardless of official diagnosis, disordered eating behaviours were prevalent during the retirement transition for many participants, impacting their overall mental health. These behaviours may fall under maladaptive patterns that arise when decreased body acceptance is experienced (Buckley et al., 2019). While the literature exploring women's eating patterns during bodybuilding retirement is non-existent, we can draw insights from research exploring women in aesthetic-based sports, and the general bodybuilding literature. Participants in this study reported experiencing disordered eating behaviours such as cycles of bingeing and restricting food, fearing or avoiding certain foods, rigid food regimes, and preoccupation with food. These findings align with other retired women athletes in sports such as swimming and gymnastics (Cooper & Winter, 2017; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Plateau et al., 2017; Stirling et al., 2012). Given these parallels, I raise three points that differentiate or add to, the literature exploring women's experiences leaving aesthetic-based sports, specifically in bodybuilding.

First, bodybuilding extraordinarily focuses on food and diet to achieve a competitive physique. The extreme dietary protocols may distort physiological processes such as hormonal regulation and digestion, which may impact how one's body generates hunger cues after leaving the sport (Lenzi et al., 2018). Consequently, disordered eating patterns in this context may be

driven by physiological processes rather than appearance and aesthetic-based goals. For instance, cycles of bingeing and restricting may be a response to hormonal fluctuations rather than an athlete's preoccupation with food.

Second, while many aesthetic-based sports such as swimming and gymnastics are attuned to body shape and size, bodybuilding prioritizes appearance over performance. As such, the desire to achieve a specific physique is more prominent than the desire to achieve physical, or performance-based goals. As discussed previously, the focus on body image in the bodybuilding industry amplifies the drive to maintain an extreme level of leanness, which in turn, can impact eating habits. For example, participants in this study continued to track and weigh their food long after leaving the sport or used these methods when they felt their bodies changing.

Third, while many of these behaviours parallel disordered eating, some behaviours may not be inherently disordered depending on the context *(*Lisa: *I'll be honest, I still kind of loosely track things because it's still in my head. It's not necessarily a bad thing to eat this way but it can become very obsessive if you let it).* The intent behind these behaviours is crucial to consider. As discussed previously, undergoing a bodybuilding prep provides an extensive understanding of how food affects the body, and it becomes difficult to "unlearn" this knowledge once it becomes engrained in one's day-to-day life. Although these habits can become obsessive, they may also serve a functional purpose without any connection to disordered thinking. Understanding the root, or intent behind these behaviours is necessary before labeling them as disordered. Furthermore, the notion of obsession in the context of bodybuilding will be discussed next as it relates to achievement.

5.2.3.4 Achievement and Self-Worth

While the correlation between a body-focused sport, and body-related implications during retirement appears evident, the discussions surrounding achievement, obsession, and addiction, highlight the potential mental health impacts uniquely associated with bodybuilding.

All participant profiles highlight the unconscionable measures competitors take during their bodybuilding preps to achieve their competitive goals *(*Carol: *I became addicted to it. My body was wilting away and telling me to stop but I was chasing that high constantly. I didn't care that I was dying. I didn't care that I was waking up so hungry that it would make me get sick and I would still go to the gym… I've done things that I don't want to talk about).* Upon retirement, many participants shared the difficulty of "turning off" the obsessive and addictive tendencies they developed while competing *(*Isabelle*: I struggled a lot at the gym. I wouldn't talk to anyone because I was so focused on my heart rate. I was obsessed with calories and hitting PR on my lifts…. I constantly had to one-up myself, even though my standards were already so high. It became exhausting…mentally and physically exhausting. I think I just started to believe that if I'm not doing enough, or if I'm not achieving enough, I'm just worthless).* This transcendent relationship between achievement and self-worth can be further understood in terms of passion.

Vallerand et al., (2003) suggest that passion towards specific activities may contribute to optimal functioning and well-being. Passion can be categorized into two types: (a) harmonious passion which is associated with adaptive outcomes, and (b) obsessive passion, which is associated with less adaptive and maladaptive consequences (Mageau et al., 2009). Based on how the participants in this study described their experiences in bodybuilding, more of them had

a stronger form of the latter type of passion. While harmonious passion allows individuals to flexibly, and mindfully, engage in activities that often lead to positive experiences, obsessive passion often stems from a lack of fulfillment of intrinsic needs, leading to the internalization of internal or external pressure such as uncontrollable excitement, self-esteem, and social acceptance (Mageau et al., 2009). Furthermore, many participants in this study expressed the need to find new pursuits to fill the void they felt after leaving bodybuilding, further aligning their experiences with obsessive passion which can result in an individual substituting engagement in their activity of choice with their own self-worth (Vallerand et al., 2003). Some participants shared the new pursuits requiring a similar use of their passion from bodybuilding such as taking up other sports, motherhood, or academic and career goals.

Based on this finding, I propose that obsessive passion can not only lead to burnout, but to adverse effects after leaving the activity, potentially influencing the decision to leave the pursuit altogether (Alanna: *It felt like everything I worked so hard to build was crashing down, and what I once thought was saved my life, was now killing me. I was just burnt out from everything… I hated myself as a person and I hated what I looked like… I just went back to that dark place I was in before I even stepped foot in the gym).* While scholars note that perfectionism and passion are common traits shared among athletes in elite sports (Hill & Madigan, 2017; Vallerand et al., 2003), I argue that this obsessive drive is unique to bodybuilding and is further amplified by the everchanging endpoint and shifting standards in the industry. Several participants shared that there seemed to be no final goal in the sport, and if there was, it was always moving (Isabelle: *I wonder if like overworking yourself loses this spark. You'd think it*

would be the opposite, like if you work towards something, you get a reward…it motivates you to keep going…but with bodybuilding, there isn't really an end, you just keep going until you burnout). The evolving endpoints and standards within the bodybuilding industry are discussed in detail next.

5.2.3.4.1 Everchanging Endpoint and Shifting Standards

Success, particularly in sport, is often connected to one's sense of worth, whether self-worth or perception of worthiness to others (Cosh et al., 2013). Furthermore, the strive to succeed in the sport may also be influenced by cultural, and subcultural, norms that glorify accomplishment, contributing to achievement addition (Rao, 2018). Perceptions of bodybuilding related to socially ideal physiques and exercise and diet patterns may create a façade of health and wellness, therefore decreasing the risk of being seen as "addicted" by those outside the industry. Rao (2018) proclaims that "being addicted to success is [not] like being addicted to heroin. Nobody is going to tell you to seek counselling if you're kicking ass and taking names" (para. 9). As a result, competitors may push themselves to their mental and physical limits, without regard to the consequences that may follow when leaving the sport (Carol: *I pushed myself to a point that I would never push any of my clients and that I would ever want to promote… I wouldn't want my worst enemy to do what I did to myself).*

In the bodybuilding industry specifically, success is also tied to exemplifying a specific level of leanness resulting in both active and former competitors intertwining their worth with their appearance. For women competitors, this notion can be further explored through Naomi Wolf's (1990) conceptualizations of hunger and women's bodies in the *Beauty Myth*. Wolf (199)

suggests that societal pressures around beauty and thinness shape women's eating patterns, and in turn, their self-worth creating a cycle of deprivation, self-denial and low self-esteem/feelings of inadequacy (Wolf, 1990). This leads to a disconnect from their own bodies and their natural needs requiring them to constantly fight to achieve more (Wolf, 1990). In bodybuilding, divisions like bikini were initially introduced to embrace femininity with standardized criteria discouraging overly muscular frames. However, the advancements in prep methods, evolution in coaching practices, and increased use of PEDs have shifted the ideal physique toward more muscular, masculine physiques in all women's divisions, including bikini. With these shifted standards, many women who were drawn to the industry based on the feminine aesthetic may feel excluded from divisions such as bikini, with the growing realization that to succeed, they must sacrifice aspects of their femininity. The bikini division was introduced as a "gateway" division (Clawson, 2011) and aimed to offer an attainable entry into the sport, however, it no longer serves that purpose[14].

The bodybuilding environment amplifies the early proposition by Wolf (1990) in that women's bodies are not only tied to societal acceptance but also to success in a competitive sport. While actively competing, bodybuilding athletes, namely those in divisions such as bikini or wellness, achieve societal ideals related to the body, resulting in a sense of accomplishment and success. This sense of achievement is further reinforced by external feedback, such as comments on social media or in public settings. However, upon leaving the sport, these external

[14] In December 2024, the IFBB introduced the "Fit Model" division, a division requiring less muscle than bikini, emphasizing a natural, attainable, "beach body." This division will debut during the 2025 season.

sources of validation are often stripped away as the means to feel accepted, or "enough," and instead, left with a feeling of loss as illustrated throughout several of the narrative essays. This finding supports the notion that bodybuilding presents a unique environment where obsessive passion, shaped by external social pressure and internal ambition, can cause harm to one's self-worth while competing which carries over into the retirement transition. This is exacerbated by the added layer of the constantly evolving industry.

In summary, the women in this study highlighted specific aspects of their mental health that were impacted upon leaving the sport including challenges related to body image and body dissatisfaction, behaviours related to body dysmorphic disorder and disordered eating, and internal struggles tied to their achievement and self-worth. The discussion on these topics offers novel insight into the bodybuilding and athlete retirement literature and addresses the prominent gap in women's experiences during this transition. While navigating these mental hurdles, many women shared how these challenges impacted other aspects of their well-being and lifestyle. These challenges will be discussed further in the following sections.

5.2.4 Well-being

Determining well-being is an individualized process as it is multi-dimensional and shaped by elements with varying levels of importance depending on the person (Mansfield et al., 2020). Physical well-being is typically a key component of most well-being frameworks, but other dimensions may include spiritual, social, occupational, and emotional. Regardless of how well-being is defined or conceptualized, participants in this study expressed a magnitude of ways that

their well-being was impacted upon leaving the sport, namely through their leisure, finances, and social networks. These three elements are explored in more detail in the following sections.

5.2.4.1 Leisure

The connection between leisure and well-being has been extensively explored in the academic literature (Mansfield et al., 2020). Bodybuilding, specifically amateur bodybuilding, can be categorized as leisure, or rather serious leisure which Stebbins (1992) defines as a leisure pursuit "that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (p. 3). The findings from this study clearly outline the all-encompassing nature of bodybuilding, whether participants are actively preparing for a competition, or in their off-season. Moreover, as Stebbins (1992) notes, amateur participants are inevitably linked to their professional counterparts and, by extension, the public eye. This means that their leisure engagement is not only viewed as serious by the participants themselves but also by those around them. Therefore, when retiring from such an all-consuming pursuit, the individuals may experience a profound sense of loss. Scholars exploring leisure abandonment argue that leaving a meaningful activity can lead to negative psychological consequences influencing self-identity, health, and overall quality of life, all of which are key dimensions of well-being (Lovelock et al., 2018; Stebbins, 2019). Many women in this study expressed their sense of loss differently, some of which were discussed in previous sections (e.g., identity). The narrative titled *Finding the Spark* illustrates the magnitude of this feeling (Carol: *When I was competing, or when I was in prep, I was a guided missile. I had a very clear destination. I lacked*

that. I tried to find something that would give me that same drive that bodybuilding gave me. It was like chasing a high. I haven't really found anything that big. Life is not as black and white in this stage so I'm searching for a target to land the missile). Several women shared similar sentiments in that their bodybuilding pursuits were tied to a sense of purpose and meaning.

Feelings of loss after leaving a serious leisure pursuit are commonly experienced in other retirement contexts (Kraus, 2020; Stenseng et al., 2011) however, there is some evidence that engaging in new forms of leisure can serve as a mediating factor to alleviate this feeling of loss and contribute to one's well-being (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, Grove et al., 1997). Several participants in this study reported seeking new outlets to provide a similar sense of satisfaction that bodybuilding once did. For instance, some women turned to new forms of exercise or activities that still incorporated physical challenges *(*Lisa: *I've found other ways to keep active and kind of carry that resistance piece with me. I've tried all sorts of things from dance classes to visiting a shooting range. Even when my body isn't at the forefront, I've been seeking different ways to feel that same rush).* Within the broader athlete retirement literature, scholars suggest that these "replacement" behaviours can have both positive and negative outcomes (Cosh et al., 2013). For example, some athletes may transition to a similar activity or sport such as a recreational league or coaching which can be fulfilling, while others may turn to harmful recreational activities as coping mechanisms such as excessive alcohol consumption (Cosh et al., 2013; Ponizovskiy, 2013). Interestingly, none of the women in this study reported resorting to pursuits that caused harm and instead reported finding a new activity that was equally fulfilling or actively seeking a new activity that would provide a sense of fulfillment. As suggested earlier

in this discussion, I argue that the foundations of bodybuilding may leave a lasting impression on competitors to the point where positive health behaviours are engrained in who they are. In fact, many participants shared that a lot of the knowledge they learned from competing was educational, and their experience itself whether negative or positive, provided evidence as to what their body needs, and what they need to enhance their well-being. This finding enhances the argument that bodybuilding might act as a protective factor that prevents negative coping mechanisms or engagement in deviant leisure purists after leaving the sport. Beyond the impact of leisure on well-being, the participants in this study also experienced fluctuations in their financial well-being.

5.2.4.2 Finances

The financial aspect of bodybuilding is not explored in-depth in the existing literature with only one known study exploring general reasons for leaving bodybuilding that includes cost as a potential factor (Setayeshi et al., 2016). The authors of this study also define "bodybuilder" broadly as many of their participants did not compete in bodybuilding competitions (Setayeshi et al., 2016). The authors found that economic reasons were less significant for both men and women in leaving the sport compared to other factors such as time, health, coaching, and the social environment (Setayeshi et al., 2016). Additionally, the authors note that their participants were new to the bodybuilding culture which makes their experiences less comparable to amateur competitors who are more aware of the increased sacrifices and costs involved in competing (Setayeshi et al., 2016). Beyond this study, leisure scholars exploring leisure abandonment offer some insights into the cost of serious leisure pursuits as financial reasons are often cited as a key

driver for individuals abandoning leisure pursuits, regardless of their enjoyment and emotional connection to the activity (Kraus, 2020). However, these comparisons do not fully capture the unique nature of bodybuilding. Therefore, this study may be the first to address the specific issue of gendered financial expenses in bodybuilding, and how these expenses influence women's decisions to leave the sport.

Many women in this study shared that amateur competitive bodybuilding is an extremely costly pursuit, with a significant gender imbalance in terms of expenses. Due to the gendered requirements in the sport, women typically incur higher costs than men (Rachel: … *it's a lot…especially as a girl in her early 20s. I felt like I had no other option and with each show, I just spent more money. I probably spent 9k on one show if you think about everything involved. There's the coaching, the posing, shoes, your suit, registration fees, federation membership, hotels, tan, hair/makeup, and of course all the groceries and supplements on top of that too).*

While finances were acknowledged as a burden, these expenses were not universally cited as a prominent reason for women in this study leaving the sport, which deviates from the broader leisure literature (Kraus, 2020). Instead, their reasons for leaving were often tied to their mental and physical health and changing life priorities. Interestingly, multiple women in this study expressed that cost would be a key factor in their decision not to return to bodybuilding and some shared that they felt regret regarding their significant financial investment in the sport. Reflecting on their experiences, several women shared that in hindsight, they wished they directed their financial resources elsewhere. Financial considerations were impacted by the age and life stage of the participants. Those who competed in their early 20s cited cost as a reason for

staying retired, as they focused on other personal goals such as getting married and purchasing property. Based on this finding, I suggest that perhaps many of the participants were aware of the expenses required to compete in bodybuilding and planned accordingly. Had these costs been unknown, or underestimated, the outcome may have been different.

Additionally, scholars exploring athlete retirement have noted that retired athletes typically face financial challenges when moving into a new career, especially when considering their lack of education or experience in other career fields (Pica et al., 2019; Cosh et al., 2013). While these athletes might be competing at higher levels (i.e., professional), it appears that retired bodybuilders may not face the same financial uncertainty, especially when considering amateur competitors. Instead, amateur bodybuilders might experience financial recuperation due to the significant expenses required not only to compete but to maintain the lifestyle. Although this cannot be confirmed objectively, given the evidence that women face higher costs to compete, leaving the sport could likely allow women to recuperate financially and potentially save more than their male counterparts. In summary, while the women recognized the gender inequity in expenses associated with bodybuilding and expressed disappointment about this disparity, cost played more of a peripheral role in their decision to retire, and retiring may lead to financial recuperation compared to athletes retiring from other sports. The last dimension of well-being impacted during retirement is social connectivity and support as described in the next section.

5.2.4.3 Social Connectivity and Support

The women in this study shared their thoughts on the bodybuilding community, particularly regarding relationships, networks, and overall sense of belonging. Sport and leisure pursuits in general can foster a sense of increased sociality and social capital, which are often associated with increased levels of well-being (Stebbins, 2018; 2020). Participants in this study described how their online and offline relationships changed after leaving the sport, and how these changes influenced their well-being. Three general perspectives emerged regarding these experiences: (a) leaving completely, (b) leaving but remaining in contact with the community, and (c) leaving, but remaining in contact through the industry (i.e. coaching). These perspectives are detailed below.

First, participants in this study who left the sport completely often prioritized other areas of their lives which involved a shift in their identity (e.g., motherhood). These women reported that as bodybuilding became less of a priority, they spent less time interacting with the community online. Some participants shared that their relationships within the bodybuilding community only felt relevant when they were actively competing, and once they retired, they did not rely on this network for the same feeling of social connection that they once did. When reflecting on their experience, some participants expressed that these relationships were developed based on a shared interest, and without that interest, the bond weakened (Alanna: *It's funny though when I left a lot of [the girls I knew from bodybuilding] also fell off. It's like if you're not competing, or your Instagram isn't growing, they don't care anymore. I learned a lot about who my real friends are not just from competing but also from leaving*). As discussed earlier, some participants shared that their social media platforms experienced a decrease in

followers and engagement when they began posting content that was not related to bodybuilding which encouraged them to distance themselves further from the industry and community.

Second, those who left the industry but remained in contact with the community faced identity negotiations regarding their social role within these communities. These women expressed the challenges of maintaining a digital persona that aligned with the bodybuilding community while diverging from this persona in their day-to-day lives. As discussed earlier, several women in this position felt that their acceptance in this community was determined by their appearance and alignment with the ideal body of the bodybuilding industry. However, some participants capitalized on social media as a tool to build a new community after leaving the sport to connect with other retired competitors. For example, the narrative, *Womanhood and Community: A Digital Dialogue-Based Narrative,* includes an Instagram caption that mirrors common posts often shared in these digital spaces. These posts, photos, and captions can act as a catalyst to generate connections and build a community for women who left the sport and strive to find balance (Cohen et al., 2019; Hockin-Boyers et al., 2021). Some participants used social media to share stories of their post-show experiences and resilience to inspire others, and in some cases start social media movements and connect with others for support. *(*Lisa: *I'm just happy I can connect with other women about this post-show experience and use my story to help others. I was so happy when you reached out to me to participate in this study too, I really think this is what we need).* Several participants in this study expressed their appreciation for the community of retired women they associated with after leaving the sport.

Lastly, those who left the sport as an athlete, but remained involved through industry connections such as coaching, photography, tanning companies and social media influencing, shared that they still felt very much engrained in the community both offline and online. For some, this connection was positive. For example, Carol expressed her passion for coaching others within the same industry despite not competing herself, further reinforcing her dual identity discussed earlier. For others, their continued industry connections led to increased identity negotiation. For example, Isabelle shared how she tried to maintain her contractual obligations in terms of social media influencing, but felt a significant disconnect, preventing her from authentically continuing her commitments (*I couldn't be the person everyone thought I was or thought I looked like. Actually, just last year I decided to drop all of my sponsorships. I just felt fake. I was promoting these companies that I didn't even really believe in anymore. They would send me a shit ton of clothes each month and most of the time I'd just give them away or donate them. I lost a lot of followers, and honestly, I don't care*). Evidently, those who remain connected to the industry after leaving the sport may experience the transition differently.

The athlete retirement and leisure abandonment literature reinforces the expectation that one's social network will change when leaving a pursuit (Kraus, 2020). However, I argue that bodybuilding offers a unique perspective to these bodies of literature. Bodybuilding blurs the boundaries of athlete retirement and leisure abandonment because even if you leave competitive bodybuilding, you can still participate in bodybuilding pursuits (i.e., going to the gym, and following a meal plan) and continue to live a similar lifestyle without the competitive aspect, however, there is no recreation level of competition; you either compete or you do not. As a

result, the shift in social networks is also unique. Based on this finding, there appears to be a formation of a second social community. Assuming the primary bodybuilding community consists of active competitors, the secondary community consists of those who leave. This second social community appears open-ended in that there is no pressure to be a part of it. For instance, some women may choose to fully disassociate from the sport as mentioned earlier. Although participating in the same activity can naturally bond a group of participants, providing a sense of community, leaving that same activity may also bond a group of participants under unique pretenses. The bonds created within the retired group of athletes are built on sharing common traumatic, difficult, and confusing experiences potentially leading to deeper bonds and connections within this group.

In summary, various dimensions of well-being may be affected when leaving bodybuilding. Specifically, women who retire from bodybuilding may experience changes and challenges related to leisure, finances, and community when leaving the sport, leading to a variety of positive and negative outcomes they must navigate during the transition. Challenges related to well-being, as well as the physical, physiological, and mental impacts discussed earlier, may influenced by external and internal factors related specifically to bodybuilding.

5.2.5 Factors that Influence

The previous factors illustrate a wide range of experiences highlighting the variability in the retirement transition for women bodybuilders. While gender certainly influences these experiences and will be discussed in greater detail in part two, various other factors may

influence one's transition experience. I turn to the athlete retirement literature for guidance in understanding how these factors can play a role in the bodybuilding retirement experience.

Athlete retirement is explored extensively in the literature and while many scholars believe that this experience is unique, they also suggest that the experience is influenced by factors such as (a) the reason for athletic retirement, (b) the strength of one's athlete identity, and (c) one's retirement planning (Cosh et al., 2013; Drummond, 2010). These influences arose in the study participants' experiences as well, offering novel findings to the existing literature based on bodybuilding.

First, Cosh et al. (2013) identified three types of retirement from sport: retirement in relation to age, in relation to injury, and active choice to retire. Lisa and Carol's narratives illustrate the trajectory of retirement due to injury and illness as both women faced identity crises, physical ramifications, and mental challenges when attempting to regain balance in their lives after leaving the sport. In contrast, Isabelle, who had a strong sense that she was leaving the sport after her last competition, did not experience the same identity loss and avoided challenges related to her body image and dissatisfaction when she retired. Alanna and Rachel's narratives highlight the role of athlete identity, as they both struggled mentally regarding their body satisfaction and identity when they retired due to their engagement with social media, and success in the sport. Scholars consistently note that athletes, particularly young athletes, with strong athlete identities experience heightened difficulty managing their identities and well-being during retirement from their sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). However, in terms of retirement planning, knowing she was leaving to start a family may have

mediated the challenges for Rachel. Like non-athletic retirement, retirement planning helps mediate this transition, especially for elite or professional athletes (Pica et al., 2018). While the reason for retirement, athlete identity, and retirement planning played varying roles in the women's transitions, I also suggest two other factors that might impact retirement, specifically for women bodybuilders. These include (a) coaching and prep experience and (b) the presence of pre-existing mental health challenges.

First, whether working with a coach or self-coaching, like Carol, coaching protocols will impact one's prep experience. Depending on the coaching relationship and the protocols implemented, competitors might encounter more obstacles when transitioning out of the sport compared to others. For example, Alanna's profile illustrated how the power imbalance in her coaching relationship influenced her well-being and perceptions of worth when leaving *(*Alanna*: I was just looking for some support and guidance to get out of it and instead he just treated me like I was disposable. I just knew this man had no integrity and he didn't care about my well-being. I did everything he told me to do, and he used me to promote his business all over his Instagram, and as soon as he couldn't use me for that, he was done. It was kind of like being blindsided in a breakup or catching your boyfriend cheating…I had that same feeling).* In contrast, positive coaching relationships built on trust and respect, coupled with science-based protocols can create a positive experience for competitors, potentially influencing their retirement transition. As such, critically exploring coaching options to ensure a positive coaching relationship before entering a bodybuilding prep may mitigate or prevent a negative retirement experience when leaving.

Second, both the presence of pre-existing mental health conditions and a history of eating disorders or body dissatisfaction might impact the transition experience for women leaving bodybuilding. Given the extreme focus on both diet and exercise discussed in the previous sections, those with pre-existing conditions or disorders may reinstate certain behaviours or actions based on familiarity (Rachel: *It ended up impacting me a lot mentally with my previous history of eating disorders. I think prep and bodybuilding kind of just masked my underlying issues …).* While pre-existing or underlying conditions could certainly apply to other sports, the added element of dieting and food restriction may increase one's risk of experiencing challenges. Conversely, positive perceptions of body image, and existing knowledge of dietary needs in sport may lead to a positive prep experience *(*Isabelle: *I figured my prep wasn't that bad…like yeah, you have your tough times, but it wasn't really until, the very like end where you're like okay, I'm exhausted, I don't think my calories ever dipped below 1000, which is so like insane to say but for women in the sport, that's pretty good).* Again, Isabelle's story illustrates how her athletic background and knowledge of fitness and nutrition informed her experience in the sport, leading to a positive transition out of it as well.

In summary, women bodybuilding competitors often face challenges regarding their identity, such as identity crises and negotiation, short-term and long-term physiological and physical health challenges, mental health challenges related to their body image, disordered eating, and achievement, and their well-being, including finances, leisure, and social connectivity. These challenges can be influenced by various factors such as the reason for retirement, athlete identity, retirement planning, and factors specific to bodybuilders such as prep

experience, coaching, and pre-existing conditions. Furthermore, the unique and dynamic nature of bodybuilding retirement may differ for others in the industry given the role of gender and the influence of gender ideologies on the industry. This influence will be discussed in depth in the next section.

5.3 Part Two: Gender

Part one of the discussion explored challenges and areas of growth related to identity, health, and well-being the participants experienced when leaving bodybuilding. These findings also illuminate the role that gender plays in influencing the transition experience, whether through physiological health implications or social expectations placed on women both within the sport and within society. To gain a deeper understanding of how gender influences this transition, participants reflected more thoroughly on their experiences to address the second research question: how are gendered ideologies experienced, reproduced and/or maintained after leaving the sport? Given that there is no existing literature exploring women's experiences retiring from bodybuilding, the following discussion adds novel findings to both the athlete retirement literature and the bodybuilding literature while also highlighting the roles of power and patriarchy in the sport industry. This section is sorted into two subsections including a) power and patriarchy in the bodybuilding industry and b) resistance and empowerment, which are detailed next.

5.3.1 Power and Patriarchy in the Bodybuilding Industry

Like all sports in Western societies, historical beliefs and ideologies surrounding power and gender shaped the bodybuilding industry (Coakley, 2021; Bunsell, 2013). The bodybuilding

industry today exemplifies how these global systems of power continue to influence not only sport participation but retirement from sport as well. To an extent, the "bodybuilder" identity can be considered an overarching group which includes men and women as they both train and diet with extreme precision, with the same goal, of achieving their desired physique (Matharu, 2019; Bunsell, 2013). Several women in this study hinted at this shared identity grouping in terms of person identity (Davis, 2016) in that all bodybuilders share characteristics such as discipline and ambition *(*Isabelle: *…to do this sport… you have to be a little bit nuts. You have to have a little bit of something where you're like, "I'm never good enough." You always have to have that desire to just want to be better).* Despite these similarities, women's experiences in the sport are unique, and therefore will likely experience this transition differently compared to men. The unique nature of this transition is explored below with attention to (a) the over-arching influence of the patriarchy, (b) gender ideologies and expectations, and (c) male domination in the industry.

5.3.1.1 Overarching Influence of the Patriarchy

For many years, scholars and activists have highlighted the patriarchal nature of sport (Coakley et al., 2021; Monaghan, 2001). Like most organized sports, bodybuilding was a sport created for men, by men, and women were not allowed to compete during its initial inception (Boyle, 2005). Even with the introduction of women's divisions in the late 1900s, the patriarchy influenced and continues to influence women's roles in bodybuilding. The findings from this study suggest that the patriarchy influences women's experiences of leaving the sport too.

Many participants in this study hinted at injustices and influences stemming from greater social structures that affected both their experience of competing and leaving, such as ageism and sexism. Carol, however, was perhaps the most outspoken with her understanding and comprehension of the patriarchy and its prominent role in shaping the bodybuilding industry. As a coach, Carol shared how gender influences one's motivation to compete and leave the sport (*Women come in, looking to be brought up doing something for themselves because they feel like they've been squashed down through society whether it's their family, their job, social media, or a partner. Society has already built men up. We live in a patriarchal society that already spends all of its time, reason, resources and systems, granting and building men up their entire lives. I just don't think a man needs to go on stage and compete to get that same feeling of success and that feeling of accomplishment because they already have it just from existing in our society. I think when they're done competing, and when they're ready to leave the sport, I don't think that they start questioning their identity of who they are the same way that women do).* These findings illuminate that despite the range of factors discussed earlier (e.g., athlete identity, age, injury etc.) that may influence one's retirement experience, women's gender, and position in society may already place them at a disadvantage in terms of the challenges they might face when leaving. For women in bodybuilding, the sport might provide them with a sense of self, or identity, that exceeds what is expected of them, or what they believe is expected of them (e.g., wife, mother), and gives them something that might be empowering or an act of resistance. By removing this outlet, the women may face greater challenges compared to their male counterparts, because, as highlighted by Carol, society already spends so much time building men up.

Furthermore, feminists exploring bodybuilding subculture frequently emphasize that the image of power, and often, hegemonic masculinity may attract those with existing insecurities, or low self-esteem (Bunsell, 2013; Monaghan, 2001). While this subculture may affect men leaving the sport as they lose their muscle mass, and in turn, lose their associated hyper-masculine identities leading to crisis (Sparkes et al., 2005), the subculture may also impact women. As Carol highlighted in her narrative, women often enter the sport seeking to fulfill an aspect of themselves that they believe to be missing or has been impacted by the world around them. By competing, they may appear "exceptional" to those around them as they are going beyond what is expected of them in terms of gender norms. That is, women are praised for losing weight and embodying a fit persona in Western society not only in the fitness community, but in other experiences and roles influenced by these norms such as postpartum (Lee et al., 2023; Rodgers et al., 2024), and aging (Gosselink et al, 2008; Winterich, 2007). These expectations may become magnified for competitors as they receive attention, praise, and positive reinforcement from the world around them. This praise and admiration are often heightened when considering other factors such as natural beauty (by society's standards), being a mom, and being older. Taking away this outlet of self-esteem and confidence, may place retired women competitors in the same position as when they began, or in a position of crisis as described earlier. Additionally, given the influence of gender ideologies and expectations placed on women, they may experience an unequal amount of pressure, and perhaps a double standard compared to men when they retire.

5.3.1.2 Gendered Differences and Expectations

The patriarchy influences the bodybuilding industry and given that the patriarchy also dictates gender ideologies, it is unsurprising that gender influences were weaved throughout the participants' narratives illustrating how this social construct impacts the experience from the moment they choose to compete, to their life after retirement. Furthermore, there is a wealth of literature from various feminist perspectives exploring gendered differences and expectations for women bodybuilders while actively competing (St Martin & Gavey, 1996; Marshall et al., 2009; Bunsell, 2013; Chananie-Hill & McGrath, 2012) and within the athletic retirement literature, much of the emphasis on women's experiences is placed on eating habits and behaviours, body image and dissatisfaction, and motherhood in relation to leaving sport for or returning to sport after (Papathomas et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2011; Whitehead et al., 2020; Devrim et al., 2018). Again, it is unsurprising that the key findings in most of this research suggest that women will experience the retirement transition differently, and their experience will be impacted by society's expectations and existing gender ideologies surrounding women's bodies and behaviours. Drawing on the existing literature and the findings of this study, I now explore how gender also influences the bodybuilding retirement experience and offer a novel perspective, expanding this area of research.

Women's bodies are constantly scrutinized based on gender ideologies both online and offline. While progress has been made to mediate societal body image expectations, such as the body acceptance and body neutrality movements (Cohen et al., 2019; Hockin-Boyers et al., 2021; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2024) in both traditional and social media, along with social media specific movements such as hashtags and trends (e.g., #gainingweightiscool), the findings from

this study suggest that these ideologically influenced expectations still exist, and in fact, maybe heightened for women who compete in bodybuilding. In terms of retirement, the women shared their thoughts on the gendered reactions they received, or heard about others, regarding their transitioning body. *(*Alanna: *Men can walk away from bodybuilding because they don't have to even consider what they look like … It's all about their size. Their size is valued more, whereas women, especially in bikini, your size is not valued. Like you need to be proportionate, but dainty, whereas men, they can be massive, or they can be shredded but either way, they're going to be valued because they are already valued for just being men).* Again, some of these factors may be linked to biological determinants such as genetics, or lifestyle factors such as stress management and resilience, but overarching gender ideologies and expectations influence these reactions, especially in terms of size and muscle (Bunsell, 2013). Given that size is a valuable trait when considering hegemonic masculinity, and in many cases, men's bodies may not show a drastic change upon retirement, men are continuously seen as valuable even after leaving the sport. While many women in this study expressed that they did not want to dismiss men's feelings or speak for them, the idea that a double standard exists was a common conclusion for all women. They expressed how if they gain weight, they are seen as "letting themselves go," which results in a fear of being labelled this way.

Rachel's narrative mirroring the infamous *Barbie* monologue depicts how regardless of women's efforts to meet societal expectations, their efforts never feel enough. Furthermore, competing in bodybuilding exhibits those efforts under a microscope, seemingly giving those around them "permission" to judge. Rachel's narrative also illustrates how the athlete identity

adds another layer to this judgement. That is, on top of being scrutinized on her body, or her appearance, she also felt like her actions were scrutinized *(It's like we are expected to be exceptional, and perfect, and disciplined all the time just because spent a few years of our life in the sport. It's like we are not allowed to make mistakes, or eat a cookie, because at one point in our life we participated in this sport and we're women).* This perspective demonstrates how the actions of a bodybuilder become associated with their appearance which ultimately becomes subject to external judgment as well. Rachel's narrative describing her transition to motherhood also highlighted the ongoing scrutiny and questioning of her eating and fitness habits after leaving the sport. While this may be a common experience for all bodybuilders, the connection between these actions (i.e., diet and fitness habits) and their physical appearance may be heightened for women, who are already placed in a position to face greater judgement. Rachel's perspectives were further supported by Alanna's narrative which described the reactions from those around her, including those within her social circle, and strangers, both when she competed and after she left the sport *(My parents were so happy when I was done. Even though it's been a few years my mom sometimes brings it up at family events or family dinners, like "It makes me so happy to watch you eat a full meal!" I know she means well, but she doesn't say that to anyone else).* These continuous comments and reactions further emphasize the impact of athlete identity in that it may define their sense of self both internally, and externally.

Alanna's narratives also illustrate her beliefs that her leanness was commodified through social media. After retiring, she experienced a shift in social engagement and sponsorships, a common occurrence for retiring athletes as these levels of social valour decrease (Gairdner,

2015). Alanna, however, felt that her engagement decreased due to her weight gain. She felt her value was tied to her lean physique, and that companies only wanted to work with her based on her outward appearance *(I stopped posting on Instagram and I was dropped by a lot of my sponsorships. These companies pay you to post a certain amount per month, but it was just hard for me to post because I didn't look the same…the clothes they wanted me to advertise didn't fit the same, and I was scared of the backlash I'd receive from gaining weight)*. Interestingly, however, this drop-off in engagement and sponsorships may be influenced by that athlete's use of social media after leaving the sport. As discussed earlier, some participants in this study began posting less about their bodies on social media, either due to fear, or disassociation from the industry, when they retired. As a result, their social media accounts may not appear as desirable to collaborate with by fitness businesses and organizations in the industry, which typically opt to work with social media accounts with high engagement and activity (Wellman, 2020). Regardless, women leaving bodybuilding face an added level of pressure to not just maintain a certain appearance but also behave in a particular way after leaving the sport. This pressure can extend beyond their athlete role, influencing their engagement with digital platforms, and as discussed next, their relationship with their coach.

5.3.1.3 Male Domination in the Industry

Bodybuilding is a male-dominated sport, not only regarding the number of participants, but in terms of coaches, and organizers who often have greater visibility, influence and control in determining the standards and commercialization of the sport. This patriarchal influence might impact the career aspect of bodybuilding for women as well (i.e., coaches). The findings from

this study offer insight into how this male domination impacts the retirement experience for women.

Carol's narratives explore her experience grappling with her coaching identity and her athlete identity *(… It was my career. I was earning an income, as a young single woman and supporting myself through this. At the time, there were few female coaches who were successful. Most of them were men, or like, big-name teams led by men with women as their assistant coaches. I worked hard to prove myself in this industry and I was scared I would lose some of that credibility if I stopped competing myself. I was also worried about my coaching abilities).* The dominance of men's perspectives has resulted in the marginalization of women within the industry regarding representation and recognition (Coakley, 2021; Boyle, 2005). Some scholars have explored women's coaching experiences in male-dominated fields, however, retirement is not often included in these conversations (Thomas et al., 2021; 2023). Generally, women coaches face decreased well-being, and increased pressure due to their gender in various male-dominated sporting fields (Thomas et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). As Carol suggested, she was one of few successful woman coaches in the industry and she felt increased pressure to prove herself in the field. One way of proving herself was to actively compete while also coaching at the same time. Thomas et al. (2021) explored the experiences of women strength and conditioning coaches to find that women often find themselves in subservient positions requiring them to adopt subcultural, and often male-generated, practices to fit in. In alignment with these findings, Carol's method of managing her coaching outwardly included actively competing in the sport. When Carol retired, her method of managing her coaching identity was taken away,

and she worried about her credibility as a coach. Given that gender already placed her at a disadvantage in the industry, removing a part of her that built up her credibility led to further identity confusion and increased anxiety in supporting herself financially.

Patriarchy influences bodybuilding in complex ways, from defining the standards of beauty and strength that women are expected to meet, to reinforcing gendered norms and expectations around femininity. These influences carry over into the retirement transition as the women expressed their increased pressure to maintain their identities and appearances, and their fears of losing credibility on social media, and as a coach. Feminist critiques of bodybuilding often highlight the tension between empowerment, resistance and objectification that women face bodybuilding stage (Bordo, 1993; Bunsell, 2013). This tension results from the pressure placed on women by the patriarchy, both inside and outside of the industry. As a result, women take up resistance and empowerment differently in their bodybuilding careers, and as discussed next, when leaving the sport.

5.3.2 Resistance and Empowerment

Sport is well known as a site for women athletes to demonstrate resistance (Parry, 2016; Theberge, 2000) and has "emerged as an important context for resisting narrow and restrictive gendered norms, ideologies, and roles" (Parry, 2016, p. 297; Shaw, 2001). Bodybuilding presents a dynamic environment to explore this resistance as the requirements to participate involve some form of adherence to feminine gender norms, and as a result, there is extensive research exploring gender, resistance, and empowerment within women's bodybuilding (Boyle, 2005; Richardson, 2008; St Martin & Gavey, 1996; Marshall et al., 2009; Bunsell, 2013; Chananie-Hill

& McGrath, 2012). The following sections will offer new insight and add to the existing literature on resistance and empowerment in two key areas: division differences, and retirement transition impacts.

5.3.2.1 Division Differences

Scholars often explore women's resistance in bodybuilding from the perspectives of women who compete in categories mirroring the men's divisions, and therefore, requiring more muscle (i.e., women's physique and bodybuilding) (St Martin & Gavey, 1996; Marshall et al., 2009; Bunsell, 2013; Chananie-Hill & McGrath, 2012). In these cases, women competitors are often perceived to resist feminine norms with their display of increased musculature, challenging expectations of a feminine physique. Lisa, a physique competitor, shared similar thoughts in her narrative essay (Lisa: *I've always liked to challenge gender roles and assumptions. I've always had jobs in male-dominated fields. Challenging those norms has always been a part of me. When it comes to bodybuilding, I didn't even know women could do it. I didn't think it was allowed. The moment I learned there were women's categories, I wanted it. Women's bodybuilding was made for me. It was just another way of expressing that women can do anything that guys can do).* In contrast, bikini competitors, or those competing in divisions requiring less muscle mass, are often criticized for conforming to feminine ideals or are objectified based on the sexualized requirements of this division (Tajrobehkar, 2016; Connolly, 2001). Lisa also highlighted this difference expressing her devotion towards women's physique *(Bikini in particular is heavily sexualized and the higher you get in classes like figure and all that, is less sexualized).*

While the women in this study shared similar experiences that align with the literature, they also expressed how their resistance differed, and how their perspectives contrasted with one another. Though all women competed in bodybuilding, their division-specific differences and their morals shaped the way they exemplified their resistance. For natural bikini competitors, displaying resistance can be challenging as the judging criteria are associated with a highly specific set of gender ideologies rooted in Western norms. The bikini division not only focuses on muscularity and leanness, but also evaluates certain traits and behaviours associated with femininity such as an "hourglass" shape, and a polished, glamorized appearance including tan, hair, makeup, and jewelry. In short, it is not just about muscle mass and symmetry, but rather the complete package. Participants in this study who competed in the bikini division expressed how they did not agree with their judging feedback, however, they refused to alter their appearance in alignment with the judges' suggestions (e.g. breast augmentation, hair extensions, dying hair, hiding tattoos) as acts of resistance (Isabelle: *Bikini I just think if you push the PEDs too hard, you change the way you look. If you're okay with that, then good, but not every woman wants that. I just found other ways to resist conforming through my hair, my tattoos and just knowing what my stopping point was).* Existing literature exploring bikini competitors specifically focuses on their empowerment demonstrated through their participation in weightlifting and gaining muscle (Tajrobehkar, 2016). That is, their resistance is explored as "off-stage" acts. Furthermore, Tajrobehkar's (2016) findings suggest that, for the most part, the bikini competitors in her study "accepted having their femininity policed and defined" with little discussion on how they might exercise their resistance through other means. Resultingly, the findings from this study offer new

insight into the field as the former bikini competitors shared their "on-stage" methods of resistance that they were able to display within the constraints of the strict judging criteria.

Interestingly, while these simple acts of opposition provided a sense of resistance for those competing in bikini, the overarching embodiment and expectations of the bikini division were still seen as overly oppressive for the physique competitors (Lisa: *With physique, I got to ditch those heels and what I think is the prop of femininity that they represented and that forced helplessness. The heels took away from the power I was displaying with my muscle).* Conversely, however, the physique competitors shared that their engagement with PEDs resulted in the level of muscularity required to be competitive in women's physique divisions, which they associated with resistance. While it is possible, gaining the muscle and conditioning required to be competitive in women's physique would be challenging without the use of such substances. So, while the natural bikini competitors actively resisted the use of PEDs, the physique competitors embraced it. Lisa even equated her muscle to power and expressed how she wanted this authority as a woman since she felt her size was small (*I'm a small woman, but bodybuilding gave me a physical authority that I don't possess as a small woman. Having the muscularity allowed me to demonstrate resistance absolutely and to take pride in my femininity and in my strength at the same time).* Her perspective aligns with men competitors who seek bodybuilding to address their feelings of inadequacy, whether mental (e.g., self-esteem), or physical (e.g., lack of muscle) by gaining muscle (Garratt, 2015; Parent et al., 2022; Mosley, 2001). This links back to the notion that muscle is associated with hegemonic masculinity, and therefore, power. This difference in

perspectives, however, is that women competitors like Lisa, sought this method to resist, whereas men competitors may seek this method to conform.

Both groups, bikini and physique, discovered methods to resist the feminine norms imposed upon them, however, in very different ways. The natural bikini competitors did not see moving up divisions with enhancements as an option and the physique competitors did not see fitting into the bikini criteria as an option. While these examples highlight more obvious forms of resistance and empowerment, Parry (2016) also proposes the "need for rethinking traditional conceptualizations of empowerment whereby resistance equals empowering, and reproduction equals disempowering" (p. 295). The findings in this study illustrate that, although the "show day glam" and women's bodybuilding might act as a stage to reproduce norms of femininity, these acts are not necessarily disempowering as expressed by Alanna in her profile story *(I loved the whole show-day experience. I loved getting my hair and makeup done and just prancing around in my sparkly bikini).* Although the bikini division embraces a hyper-feminine image, conforming (and enjoying) this image can also be empowering. Furthermore, when considering intersectional identities, bodybuilding, including the bikini division, can be a site of resistance and empowerment when a competitor adheres to the expectations. For example, Phoenix and Smith (2011) found that natural bodybuilding acted as a site to show a counter-story of aging for competitors entering the sport in later life. For women in particular, this sport provides an outlet to resist the norms of ageism that specifically apply to women (e.g., frail, weak, fragile, un-feminine) (Matharu, 2019). This was illustrated through Lisa's story as she continued competing into her 50s. Also, the reproduction of femininity can act as a site for resistance for those who

may feel culturally or religiously oppressed, as seen with Iranian bodybuilders in the media (Rahbari, 2019). While these findings add to the conversation on resistance in women's bodybuilding, the women also shared how their resistance and empowerment were impacted upon retiring from the sport.

5.3.2.2 Transition Impacts

Gender plays a significant role in influencing the athlete retirement experience (Papathomas et al., 2018; Coakley, 2021) and as highlighted throughout this discussion, competing in bodybuilding typically often carries more emotional weight for women, extending beyond mere sport participation. For many, bodybuilding is both empowering and an act of resistance. Competitors like Lisa, took great pride in their identity based on these feelings (*For me, bodybuilding was both empowering and an act of resistance. It was absolutely both and it soon became a badge of honour).* When leaving the sport, this outlet is removed, affecting one's identity, as discussed previously. However, when critically considering the influence of gender and the resultant feelings of loss during retirement, the consequences become further complicated. These various trajectories and perspectives related to this loss were explored within the narrative essays and are discussed further next.

As expressed by Alanna, bodybuilding, particularly the bikini division, attracts young women *(I was pretty young, and I just got so caught up in the image, or the façade of everything like the influencer trips and photoshoots…).* When considering the power dynamics and entanglement with social media, it may be easy to get caught up in the industry and lifestyle as Alanna experienced. However, stepping away from the sport might encourage others to seek

connections through healthier, or more fulfilling means. For example, capitalized on her social media presence, and shared her challenges during retirement on her public platform. In doing so, she felt empowered, while also encouraging others to do the same, building a community based on shared understanding and support (*Social media was a huge thing for me when I competed, and like I shared, it was also really difficult to navigate when I left. I felt a lot of pressure to post things and be that "bikini girl" that everyone knew. Eventually, I started to post more authentically and share more of the struggles I was facing… and I was blown away by the response. I had so many girls reaching out to me and telling me how what I posted resonated with them… I didn't know other women felt the same way until then).* Social media is an inescapable and pervasive force that shapes the bodybuilding industry and can magnify challenges when negotiating body image (Marshall et al., 2019), however, it can also be used productively. Alanna's reflection demonstrates how using her authenticity led to her empowerment, as her ability to build a community empowered others as well, providing a sense of fulfillment. Her social media posts, along with others, mirror that of other feminist movements within the fourth wave (Parry et al., 2019) in which sharing one's story can prompt others to share theirs as well while fostering a new sense of identity and community in the wake of losing an existing one (Carstensen, 2013).

For others, like Isabelle, who did not necessarily struggle with her identity when retiring, bodybuilding allowed her to own her resistance within the industry and carry that with her when she left (*Looking back at it now, I see how the lines are so clearly drawn between what is expected from men and women. I think I've always been a bit resistant to those criteria as an*

athlete but competing gave me a chance to resist, and to own my resistance as a woman. That is something that I will always carry with me). For those who enter the sport as existing athletes and may or may not have already been exposed to the gender bias in many sport subcultures, bodybuilding offers an added layer to sport with the engrained gender norms in the judging criteria. While Isabelle's story highlights various mechanisms of resistance such as refusing to change her physical appearance beyond her body, being able to exercise that resistance still provided a sense of empowerment that she applied to other areas of her life. Furthermore, simply leaving bodybuilding ended up providing a similar sense of resistance and empowerment for Isabelle *(Hearing that feedback and just thinking about all the awful things I heard from others really turned me off from the industry in general…like I just didn't want to be a part of it anymore. I didn't want to give my energy to a space like that when I have so much going for me outside of that…so yeah, that was it for me…There are so many expectations placed on women whether it's to be curvy or to be lean, and I think for now I'm okay just being me and working towards my own goals).* Isabelle's act of retiring and leaving the sport which left a negative impression on her, was her strategy for exercising her resistance, leading to a feeling of empowerment.

While Alanna and Isabelle's profiles highlight embracing resistance and carrying it with them, Lisa's story highlights the negative consequences of losing her outlet for resistance. Since Lisa competed in women's physique, much of her resistance was visible in that her muscularity represented her defiance. When she experienced a decrease in muscle during retirement, she called herself "unremarkable" and as a result, her resistance was less overtly obvious.

Bodybuilding also provided Lisa with a sense of power and superiority (*I like standing on the stage and being judged because at the end of the day, no matter what they say to you, you're on that stage, and they're sitting on their butts in chairs so I guess there's a feeling of like accomplishment, but it's also a bit of a cockiness or a feeling of superiority like, "I'm up here, and I did it").* The removable of this source led her to grapple with her identity and resistance upon leaving *(I've always felt empowered, but bodybuilding reminded me that I can be whomever the fuck I want to be. Gender doesn't matter; femininity doesn't matter. Bodybuilding reminded me that even though I'm a woman, I can do what I want).* Similarly, Carol highlighted her personal connection and reliance on bodybuilding to define herself outside of her other roles in life. Without the ability to compete, and therefore demonstrate resistance, she lacked that feeling of empowerment. Both Lisa and Carol possessed strong athlete identities and connections to their bodies, and as a result, when these were removed, both women struggled to find an outlet offering that same sense of resistance and empowerment. While they may have felt this loss more deeply, the group also shared various strategies to regain similar feelings of passion and drive, such as leisure, as discussed previously.

In summary, bodybuilding can provide a strong sense of resistance and empowerment for women competitors. Depending on one's division, this resistance can be taken up and displayed in various ways such as cutting one's hair short in the bikini division or choosing to increase one's muscle mass to compete in women's physique. Upon retirement, when this outlet for resistance is removed, retired women bodybuilders may struggle with feelings of loss. To regain

this sense of resistance and empowerment some may turn to social media, other forms of leisure, new roles in their lives, or simply leave the sport as an act of resistance in and of itself.

5.4 Summary

This chapter discussed the findings presented in chapter four as they relate to existing literature, offered new insight to address the research questions for this study, and advocated for change and activism within the bodybuilding industry and beyond. The final section of this chapter summarizes the key points of the discussion, highlighting the novel contributions to the literature and bodybuilding community, and reiterating the significance of this topic.

In part one of this discussion, I explored how the retirement transition was experienced in terms of identity, health, and well-being. Regarding identity, women bodybuilding competitors often develop strong identities linked to their sport participation including specific identities such as athlete and digital identity. As a result, leaving the sport can trigger a period of identity crisis or negotiation, experienced in varying ways, and often paired with a feeling of profound loss. Athlete identity foreclosure offers a possible framework for understanding why these negotiations differ.

In terms of health, the women in this study highlighted specific aspects of their physiological health that were impacted upon leaving the sport, primarily attributed to their extreme dieting and exercise practices. Some issues were short-term and resolved once energy was rebalanced, but others, such as amenorrhea, persisted after leaving the sport. Some concerns even remained unresolved such as disruptions to the gastrointestinal system. Discussions surrounding women's engagement with PEDs revealed the gap in exploring the use, misuse, and

abuse of both PED-use, and regulated substances within the academic literature, and the bodybuilding industry. This limited knowledge base may result in misinformation regarding drug engagement, with detrimental consequences to women's health while competing, and after leaving the sport. Furthermore, the women in this study expressed how their mental health was affected when leaving the sport related to body image and body dissatisfaction, behaviours related to body dysmorphic disorder and disordered eating, and internal struggles tied to their achievement and self-worth. These challenges were influenced by unique factors specific to the bodybuilding industry such as division differences, shifting industry standards, and the inherent entanglement of bodybuilding and health. I explored these challenges and influences with the *Athletic Body Transition* framework (Buckley et al., 2019) and scholarly concepts including digitized dysmorphia (Coy-Dibley, 2019), and obsessive passion (Vallerand, 2003). I also offered novel insight into the positive impacts that emerged from these experiences including heightened awareness and attention to one's health, and the engagement in online activism to dispute misconceptions regarding women's bodybuilding.

I also discussed the various dimensions of well-being affected during this transition including leisure, finances, and community. The women in this study shared how exploring new leisure options mediated their retirement transition, strengthening the argument that bodybuilding provides a strong foundation for health and fitness knowledge. Many participants expressed their disappointment with the gender inequity in competitive costs, leading to what I suggested is an opportunity for financial recuperation upon retirement. In terms of community, the women in this study discussed various levels of engagement with the bodybuilding

community upon retirement, which I suggested led to the formation of a second community founded by and consisting of those who leave the sport. Lastly, I discussed external and internal factors related specifically to bodybuilding such as the reason for retirement, athlete identity, retirement planning, and factors specific to bodybuilders such as prep experience, coaching, and pre-existing conditions that may influence the retirement experiences in terms of identity, health, and well-being.

In the latter part of this discussion, I explored how gender ideologies were experienced, reproduced and/or maintained after leaving the sport. I started with a discussion on the patriarchal nature of the bodybuilding industry and the resulting impacts on the retirement transition. The women in this study shared examples of how patriarchy influences bodybuilding in complex ways, from defining the standards of beauty and strength that women are expected to uphold, to reinforcing gendered norms and expectations around femininity. This underlying influence places women at a disadvantage when entering the sport, often leading to an uphill battle to regain aspects of their "self" when leaving. During the retirement transition, women in this study expressed their increased feelings of pressure to maintain their identities and appearances, and their fears of losing credibility on social media or in their coaching careers. Furthermore, I discussed how bodybuilding can provide a strong sense of resistance and empowerment for women competitors and participants in this study highlighted the various methods they engaged with to display their resistance. For example, some bikini competitors refused to cut their hair or cover up their tattoos as acts of resistance towards the hyper-feminine expectations of their division, while some physique competitors expressed how their engagement

with PEDs and subsequent muscle mass was both empowering and an act of resistance. Upon retirement, when these outlets for resistance and empowerment are removed, competitors may face a profound feeling of loss. I concluded the discussion by sharing how the women in this study attempted to regain their sense of resistance and empowerment through social media and leisure-related endeavours, by shifting to new roles in their lives, and for some, just by leaving the sport. Overall, this discussion offered an in-depth exploration of the retirement transition, while addressing the research questions, and offering a novel perspective into an experience that is not discussed in the academic literature, or in circles outside of the bodybuilding community.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

As I write this final chapter, about six months have passed since my last bodybuilding competition. Writing my findings, and discussion, and pulling together my dissertation while navigating my own post-show health challenges has been both overwhelming and rewarding. Some days, working on this project provided me with a sense of closure from the sport as I looked forward to the future. Yet, other days I found myself drawn to the 2025 competition schedule, wondering if I should start another prep. Regardless, reflecting on this project and the conversations with the courageous and thoughtful participants in this study provided me with a safe space to navigate this transition myself. To bring this project to a conclusion, I first summarize the previous chapters including a reiteration of the purpose, data collection process, and an overview of the findings and discussion. Then, I highlight the theoretical, methodological, and contextual outcomes and implications of this research. Next, I offer some recommendations for future research and discuss the limitations of this study. After that, I share my goals for knowledge mobilization while emphasizing the impact of this work on the bodybuilding community, my participants, and anyone who may relate to this work. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on how this research shaped my own journey, both as an athlete and as a researcher.

Inspired by my own experiences as a bodybuilding athlete in the bikini division, the purpose of my research was to explore the retirement transition for competitive bodybuilders in women's divisions. More specifically, this study explored how women bodybuilders are influenced by gendered ideologies and how this influence affects their transition experience in relation to identity, health, well-being, and leisure. Rooted in a sport feminism theoretical

framework, and guided by narrative inquiry, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews with women bodybuilders and observed online spaces including Instagram and Reddit. With these data, I developed five composite characters that represented the various experiences shared by the participants in this study. To present the findings, I crafted a series of personal narratives, authored by these characters, while also incorporating my own voice to provide context throughout the stories. The narratives were organized into two parts, with part one highlighting the impact of retirement on physical health, mental health, and well-being, and part two revealing the influence of gender ideologies on the retirement experience. I then unpacked the stories in relation to sociological theories and related literature while maintaining sport feminist lens, to describe the unique nature of bodybuilding retirement, specifically for women. I conclude that gender plays a significant role in the retirement transition as gender ideologies are engrained deeply within the industry, and society, leading to a dynamic experience impacting identity, health, and well-being during the transition, unique to women. This research is the first of its kind to address women's bodybuilding retirement in the academic literature and therefore contributes valuable insight contextually, methodologically, and theoretically.

Selecting a topic to explore for a PhD research project involves a thorough process of reflection and exploration. Although my personal connection to this topic is evident, and this research addresses gaps in the academic literature, as a feminist researcher I also aspired to uplift the voices of women and shed light on experiences that are not often shared in public discourse. Contextually, beyond one case study (Sparkes et al., 2008), the experience of retiring from bodybuilding is largely ignored in relevant disciplines including the athlete retirement literature,

and the bodybuilding literature, and there is no literature exploring women's perspectives during this transition. This study provides a glimpse into this experience, offering insight into the physical and mental challenges women face when leaving the sport, and how their experiences are impacted by gender ideologies. This research is the first of its kind, and addresses this gap, while also contributing to the ongoing work of feminist researchers in sport. Theoretically, this research brings together and updates various feminist perspectives and theories that are often used to explore sports. The sport industry is incredibly dynamic, and updating feminist theories to address the ever-changing nature of sport is crucial to support social justice initiatives within the industry and beyond. As mentioned, feminist perspectives aim to uplift and illuminate the perspectives of all individuals who are oppressed or marginalized by the patriarchy, and sport settings present a unique environment given the historical dominance of cis-White men. This study offers insight into how a sport feminist perspective can be applied to explore the bodybuilding industry. Methodologically, this research applies narrative inquiry to explore the experience of retirement from bodybuilding. While narrative inquiry is often used in sport-related research, it is less often employed in the bodybuilding literature. By engaging with this methodology, I was able to capture the nuanced nature of the participants' experiences and gather deep insight and understanding of their stories. Given my "insider" perspective within the sport, I am familiar with the cultural and political landscape of the industry, allowing me to situate the participants' stories politically, culturally, and socially with my expertise. Furthermore, my position as a researcher-participant not only allowed me to connect with my participants during the interview process but also aided in generating credibility as I developed composite characters. My process contributes to the growing number of scholars using

representative methods such as creative analytic practice. Lastly, from a social justice perspective, I believe that my work offered a space for women to share their stories and perspectives in a positive, and supportive, environment with the shared goal of generating awareness on this topic. This awareness is essential to inform policy and practice within the industry. As highlighted in chapter two, the bodybuilding industry is not well regulated and bodybuilding federations cannot control how one prepares for a competition (e.g., unhealthy practices, PED use), nor do they regulate coaching practices. I argue that the "after" is not talked about enough and requires more attention within the industry. This research contributes to that call for attention and provides anyone who engages with this work the opportunity to learn more about the challenges of leaving the sport, or, if they have shared a similar experience, to feel validated in their own experiences.

While I wholeheartedly believe that this research brings attention to an understudied topic and provided a space for the participants to share their stories and experiences, I also acknowledge that there were limitations in conducting this work. First, as highlighted in chapter three, participants were diverse in their age and competition division but understanding how the intersections of other demographic factors may have also offered new insight. As a result, future research would benefit from exploring the intersection of other demographic factors such as race, culture, ethnicity, social class, and sexual identity with gender and how that impacts the retirement transition. Scholars have started to explore the impact of various identities such as age (Phoenix & Smith, 2011), race (Sparkes et al., 2008), and culture (Rahbari, 2019) on the bodybuilding experience, so combining what has emerged from these explorations may address

this literature gap and include more diversity in the perspectives. Second, as highlighted in my discussion on physiological health impacts, there were no diagnostic tests, or health-related data, involved in this study to reinforce these stories. Although there is a level of trustworthiness in these claims given the sufficient background, the consistency in the stories, and the numerous online reports of a similar nature, this study does not offer quantitative data to further support these assertions. While my goal was not to collect quantitative data, I also recognize that supplementing these stories with diagnostic data might call more attention to health-related challenges and generate increased awareness specifically regarding the risks of bodybuilding. Considering this limitation, I suggest that scholars explore this transition from an interdisciplinary approach, to understand how this transition period impacts the body from a biological and physiological standpoint. Given the lack of existing information specific to women's bodies, future research should attend to the impact of PEDs on women while actively engaging with these substances, and when cycling off of them, and also explore the role of natural and non-regulated substances (e.g. caffeine, ephedrine) used in a bodybuilding prep. Including diagnostic data would further support the stories and experiences shared by the women in this study, and offer more data to generate strategies and solutions to support women competitors with their physical health when leaving the sport. Third, while I believe the reflexive, dyadic interviews were a productive method of collecting stories related to this experience, I also believe the data collection methods could be enhanced to generate more robust data. For example, taking a longitudinal approach, and interviewing participants shortly after their last show, and then again after some time (e.g., 6 months to a year), could highlight their shifts in thinking and emphasize how their mindset fluctuates during the transition process.

Given my position as an active competitor during the data collection process, I was able to experience first-hand how my thoughts, opinions, and perspectives towards the bodybuilding industry, and my thoughts on retirement, fluctuated with time. Furthermore, supplementing the one-on-one interviews with group interviews may provide more insight into the relationships and community aspects of this transition. This collection method was not feasible at the time of this study but would still be a helpful method to consider for future research and contribute methodologically to the bodybuilding literature as this interview group interviews are not often conducted in these settings. Beyond these suggestions, I also believe this research provides a foundation to explore other aspects of the transition experience such as personal relationships (e.g., partners, children, parents and friends) and coping and/or recovery processes. With that said, I believe that any research in this area, whether in line with these recommendations or not, would be a welcomed addition to the limited body of literature that this work begins to address. This research offers novel findings to the literature and I am mindful of the impact and excited to mobilize this newfound knowledge.

For future knowledge mobilization, the findings from this research will be disseminated in an academic context through conference presentations, guest lectures, and journal publications. My goal is to present this work at sports-related conferences to gain more insight into the policies and procedures that influence various sports industries, and the impact on athletic retirement, to inform future research in this area. I will also devise multiple manuscripts attending to the various dimensions of retirement explored in this research, such as identity, physical health, mental health, well-being, and gendered influences in bodybuilding. I will

submit these manuscripts to academic journals with a focus on sport, and women's health to highlight the unique nature of bodybuilding, and the challenges women face while competing, and when leaving. I will also revise the findings of this research with an accessible lens and disseminate this novel work outside of the academic community.

I believe that using CAP to present the findings of this study inherently attends to accessibility and understanding outside of the academic community. During my interviews with the participants, I shared that my goal was to conduct this research for "us," and to create a substantive piece of work that can be published in broader communities that we can all "hold on to" for our self-validation and share with others. I wrote the narrative essays in engaging formats, attending to a diverse audience, to connect with the participants and those outside of the industry. I will revise accordingly, and share these findings with national fitness magazines, as well as the IFBB newsletter, and the Canadian Physique Alliance magazine. The audiences of these media sources are likely more engaged with fitness or bodybuilding so the results will hopefully reach those who relate to the experiences shared. Lastly, the findings as presented in this dissertation, and the other formats suggested above will all be shared with the participants of this study to disseminate however they wish.

This research is very personal. As I write these final paragraphs, I am realizing just how intertwined my own story is with the insight I have gathered from others. Every step of this endeavour has shaped how I understand the sport and myself, as an athlete, as a scholar, and as a woman. This work was grounded in my personal experience struggling to determine my next

steps as an athlete, and interestingly, four years later, I find myself in a similar position to when I started. To close as I began, I chose to end with a glimpse into my current negotiation.

While conducting this research, I spent a lot of time reading for leisure. Leisurely reading is what led me to the narrative essay format in which I displayed my findings, however, I also engaged with a lot of fictional literature. One of my favourite books is a historical fiction novel by Taylor Jenkins Reid, titled Carrie Soto is Back, *which chronicles the journey of an "older" pro tennis player who comes out of retirement to defend her record. She describes how the sports industry treats women, the expectations placed on her, and how her age and gender impacted her comeback story. This book aligns so well with my research, and I always felt connected to the main character in this story. I've read this book many times but there is one particular line that always causes me to stop and reflect. As the story protagonist, Carrie, wins one of her final titles, she expresses how her injuries were catching up to her, and she didn't know if she could continue despite the crowd cheering for her as she celebrated this monumental win. The chapter ends with this quote:*

> "But I cannot hear anything as clearly as the sound of my own voice, begging me: Let this be enough."**— Taylor Jenkins Reid, Carrie Soto Is Back**[15]

I think about this quote a lot as I always wonder when I will have the moment where I know it's enough. I thought I had this moment a few years ago, but I ended up coming back and competing again. As I write this now, I still wonder, when will it be enough, or will it ever be enough? When

[15] Reid Jenkins, T. (2022). *Carrie Soto is Back.* DoubleDay Canada.

will I let this go? Do I need to let this go? As I ask myself these questions, I reflect on all the stories shared by my participants, and the stories that I read online. With this knowledge, I know that whenever I reach that decision, it will be the right decision for me, and I'm going to be okay. The stories shared in this dissertation, and the conversations that occurred during this project give me hope for the future and remind me that I'm not in this alone.

References

Adams, C. & Leavitt, S. (2016). 'It's just girls hockey': Troubling progress narratives in girls' and women's sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 53*(2), 152-172. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690216649207

Ahmed, A., Vavrenyuk, A., Fallahi, A., Lin, E., & Hsi, D. (2019, March 12). Bodybuilding gone wrong: Anabolic steroid induced cardiomyopathy [Poster presentation]. J*ournals of the American College of Cardiology, 73*(9).

Ainsworth, N., N Thrower, S., & Petróczi, A. (2022). Fragile femininity, embodiment, and self-managing harm: An interpretative phenomenological study exploring the lived experience of females who use anabolic-androgenic steroids. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 14*(3), 363–381. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2021.1941210

Alwan, N., Moss, S. L., Davies, I. G., Elliott-Sale, K. J., & Enright, K. (2022). Weight loss practices and eating behaviours among female physique athletes: Acquiring the optimal body composition for competition. *PLOS One*, *17*, e0262514–e0262514. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262514

Andreasson, J. & Johansson, T. (2019). Bodybuilding and fitness doping in transition. Historical transformations and contemporary challenges. *Social Sciences, 8*(80), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8030080

Aranyosi, I. (2018). Body, skill, and look: Is bodybuilding a sport? *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, *17*(2), 401–410. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-017-9513-3

Arjomand, N. (2022). Empirical fiction: Composite character narratives in analytical sociology. *The American Sociologist*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-022-09546-z

Armstrong-Stassen, M. (1994). Coping with transition: A study of layoff survivors. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 15*(7), 597–621. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030150705

Atchley, R. C. (1989). A continuity theory of normal aging. *The Gerontological Society of America, 29*(2), 183-190. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/29.2.183

Ayotte, J. [@teamatlasmtl]. (2022, April 14). Here's my opinion on all the deaths happening with the male bodybuilders in the last 12 months… [Instagram story]. https://instagram.com/teamatlasmtl?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

Ayres, L. (2008). Semi-structured interview. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods (*p. 811). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Ballerand, R.J., Salvy, S.J., Mageau, G.A., Elliot, A. J., Denis, P.L., Grouzet, F.M et al. (2007). On the role of passion in performance. *Journal of Personality, 75*(3), 505-533. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2007.00447.x

Bartky, S. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.

Becker, H. (1963). *The outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: The Free Press.

Berbary, L. (2011). Poststructural writerly representation: Screenplay as creative analytic practice. *Qualitative Inquiry, 17*(2), 186-196. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410393887

Berbary, L. A., & Boles, J. C. (2014). Eight points for reflection: Revisiting scaffolding for improvisational humanist qualitative inquiry. *Leisure Sciences, 36*(5), 401–419. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2014.912169

Birrell, S. (2000). Feminist theories for sport. In J. Coakley, & E. Dunning (Eds.), *Handbook of sports studies* (pp. 62-77). Sage Publications Ltd.

Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C. & Walter, F. Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation. *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1802-1811. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870

Birzniece, V. (2015). Doping in sport: Effects, harm and misconceptions. *Internal Medicine Journal, 45*(3), 239-248. https://doi.org/10.1111/imj.12629

Blinde, E., & Stratta, T. (1992). The "sport-career death" of college athletes: Involuntary and unanticipated sport exits. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 15*, 3-20.

Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture, and the body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Boyle, L. (2005). Flexing the tensions of female muscularity: How female bodybuilders negotiate normative femineity in competitive bodybuilding. *Women's Studies Quarterly, 33,* 134–149.

Brammer, L. M. (1992). Coping with life transitions. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 15*(4), 239–253. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02449903

Brinkmann, S. (2008). Interviewing. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 471-472). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Brown University. (2022). Relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S). *Bwell Health Promotion*. https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/health/services/promotion/nutrition-eating-concerns-sports-nutrition/relative-energy-deficiency-sport-red-s

Buckley, G. L., Hall, L. E., Lassemillante, A. C. M., Ackerman, K. E., & Belski, R. (2019). Retired athletes and the intersection of food and body: A systematic literature review exploring compensatory behaviours and body change. *Nutrients, 11*(6), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu11061395

Bunsell, T. (2013). *Strong and hard women: An ethnography of female bodybuilding.* Oxon: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1990; 2000). *Gender Trouble* (1st; 2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Canadian Heritage. (2013). *Sport participation 2010*. Government of Canada. Retrieved from: https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2013/pc-ch/CH24-1-2012-eng.pdf

Canadian Physique Alliance (CPA). (2024). *About us.* Canadian Physique Alliance. https://www.canadianphysiquealliance.com/about-us

Carstensen, T. (2013). Gender and social media: Sexism, empowerment, or the irrelevance of gender? In C. Carter, L. Steiner, and L. McLaughlin (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media and gender* (pp. 483-492). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., Neville, A. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 41*(5), 545-547. https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.545-547

Castelnuovo, S. & Guthrie, S. (1998). *Feminism and the female body: Liberating the amazon within*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Chananie-Hill, R. A., McGrath, S. A., & Stoll, J. (2012). Deviant or normal? Female bodybuilders' accounts of social reactions. *Deviant Behavior*, *33*(10), 811–830. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2011.647592

Chappell, A. J., & Simper, T. N. (2018). Nutritional peak week and competition day strategies of competitive natural bodybuilders. *Sports (Basel), 6*(4), 126. https://doi.org/10.3390/sports6040126

Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 651-679). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chesser, S. (2017). *Diapers and dissertations: An exploration of doctoral and postdoctoral trainee decision-making surrounding first-time parenthood* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Waterloo]. UWSpace, http://hdl.handle.net/10012/11148.

Chen, C. (2022). Naming the ghost of capitalism in sport management. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *22*(5), 663–684. https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2022.2046123

Clandinin, J. & Caine, V. (2008). Narrative Inquiry. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods (*pp. 542-544). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Clawson, B. [@fitprobecky]. (2022, March 5). 2022 Bikini international champ…[Instagram post]. https://www.instagram.com/p/CavxN4UgLag/?igshid=NTdlMDg3MTY=

Coakley, J. (1983). Leaving competitive sport: Retirement or rebirth? *Quest, 35*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.1983.10483777

Coakley, J. (2021). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*, (13th International ed.). McGraw Hill.

Coakley, J., & Donnelly, P. (2009). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*. (2nd Canadian ed.). Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

Cohen, R., Irwin, L., Newton-John, T. & Slater, A. (2019). #bodypositivity: A content analysis of body positive accounts on Instagram. *Body Image, 29*, 47-57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.02.007.

Collette, C. [@chanelcollette]. (2022, April 5). And I did it for 8 years…[Instagram Post]. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb_RtjUMIHe/?igshid=NTdlMDg3MTY=

Collins, P. H. (2004). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader* (pp. 103-126). New York: Routledge

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* New York: Routledge.

Connolly, M. (2001). Bikini bytes: A communicology of front stage and back stage performances at competitive body-building events. *The American Journal of Semiotics, 17*(4), 229-246. https://doi.org/10.5840/ajs200117480

Cooper, J. N., Grenier, R. S., & Macaulay, C. (2017). Autoethnography as a critical approach in sports management: Current applications and directions for future research. *Sports Management Review, 20,* 43-54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2016.07.003

Cosh, S., Crabb, S., & LeCouteur, A. (2013). Elite athletes and retirement: Identity, choice, and agency. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 65*, 89-97. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1742-9536.2012.00060.x

Coy-Dibley, I. (2016). "Digitized Dysmorphia" of the female body: The re/disfigurement of the image. *Palgrave Communications, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.40

Creedon, P. (2004). Women, social media and sport: Global digital communication weaves a web. *Television & New Media, 15*(8), 711-716. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414530476

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1).

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241-1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Creswell, J. W. (2007). Five qualitative approaches to inquiry. In J. W. Creswell (Ed.), *Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches* (pp. 53-84). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Davis, J. L. (2016). Identity theory in a digital age. In J.E. Stets and R.T. Serpe (Eds.). New directions in identity theory and research (pp. 137-164). Oxford Academic.

de Beauvoir, S. (1952). *The second sex.* Vintage Books

de la Cretaz, F. (2021, June 22). *Carl Nassib, the first openly gay active NFL player, could be turning for male sports*. Think. https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/first-openly-gay-nfl-player-carl-nassib-could-be-turning-ncna1271896

Denham, B. E. (2008). Masculinities in hardcore bodybuilding. *Men and Masculinities, 11*(2), 234–242. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X07304809

Denton, F. T., & Spencer, B. G. (2009). What is retirement? A review and assessment of alternative concepts and measures. *Canadian Journal on Aging, 28*(1), 63-76. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980809090047

Dèttore, D., Fabris, M. A., & Santarnecchi, E. (2020). Differential prevalence of depressive and narcissistic traits in competing and non-competing bodybuilders in relation to muscle dysmorphia levels. *Psychologia Kliniczna*, *20*(2), 102–111. https://doi.org/10.15557/PiPK.2020.0014

Devrim, A., Bilgic, P., & Hongu, N. (2018). Is there any relationship between body image perception, eating disorders, and muscle dysmorphic disorders in male bodybuilders? *American Journal of Men's Health*, *12*(5), 1746–1758. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988318786868

DiCaro, J. (2021). *Sidelined: Sports, culture, and being a woman in America*. New York, NY: Dutton.

Dill, B. T. & Kohlman, M. H. (2012). Intersectionality: A transformative paradigm in feminist theory and social justice. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 154-174). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Donnelly, P. (2012). Prolympism: Sport monoculture as crisis and opportunity. *Quest*, *48*(1), 25-42. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.1996.10484176

Douglas, K., & Carless, D. (2009). Abandoning the performance narrative: Two women's stories of transition from professional sport. *Journal of applied sport psychology, 21*(2), 213-230. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200902795109

Dowling, F., & Garrett, R. (2016). Narrative inquiry and research on physical activity, sport and health: exploring current tensions. *Sport, Education and Society*, *21*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2015.1112262

Drummond, M. (2010). The natural: An autoethnography of a masculinized body in sport. *Men and Masculinities, 12*(3), 374-389. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X09352181

Ebaugh, H. R. F. (1998). *Becoming an ex: The process of role exit*. University of Chicago Press

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry, 13*(1), 3-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406294947

Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Escalante, G., Barakat, C., Tinsley, G. M., & Schoenfeld, B. J. (2023). Nutrition, training, supplementation, and performance-enhancing drug practices of male and female physique athletes peaking for competition. *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*, *37*(8), e444–e454. https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0000000000004462

Fagerberg, P. (2018). Negative consequences of low energy availability in natural male bodybuilding: A review. *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism*, 28(4), 385–402. https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsnem.2016-0332

Felshin, J. (1974). The triple option…for women in sport. *Quest, 21*(1), 36-40. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.1974.10519789

Fisher, M. J. R., Berbary, L. A. & Misener, K. E. (2018). Narratives of negotiation and transformation: Women's experiences within a mixed-gendered gym. *Leisure Sciences*, *40*(6), 477-493. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2016.1261744

Firmin, M. W. (2008). Unstructured interview. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods (*p. 907). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry, 8*(4), 777-795.

Gaines, C. & Butler, G. (1980). *Pumping iron: The art and sport of bodybuilding*. London: Sphere.

Gairdner, S. E. (2015). *The Making and Unmaking of Elite Athletes: The Body Informed Transition out of Sport.* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto].

George, L. K. (1993). Sociological perspectives on life transitions. *Annual Review of Sociology, 19*, 353–373. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.19.080193.002033

Goldfield, G. S. (2009). Body image, disordered eating and anabolic steroid use in female bodybuilders. *Eating Disorders, 17*(3), 200–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/10640260902848485

Gosselink, C.A., Cox, D.L., McClure, S.J. & De Jong, M.L.G. (2008) Ravishing or ravaged: Women's relationships with women in the context of aging and western beauty culture. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 66*(4), 307-327. https://doi.org/10.2190/AG.66.4.c

Grech, K. (2021). The dark side of bodybuilding exposed. Evolution of Bodybuilding. https://www.evolutionofbodybuilding.net/the-dark-side-of-bodybuilding-exposed/

Grosman-Rimon, L., Wright, E., Freedman, D., Kachel, E., Hui, S., Epstein, I., Gutterman, D., & Eilat-Adar, S. (2019). Can improvement in hormonal and energy balance reverse cardiovascular risk factors in athletes with amenorrhea? *American Journal of Physiology. Heart and Circulatory Physiology, 317*(3), 487–495. https://doi.org/10.1152/AJPHEART.00242.2019

Grove, J. R., Lavallee, D., & Gordon, S. (1997). Coping with retirement from sport: The influence of athletic identity. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 9*(2), 191–203. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413209708406481

Hargreaves, J. (2004). Querying sport feminism: Personal or political? In R. Giulianotti (Ed.), *Sport and modern social theorists* (pp. 187–205). Palgrave Macmillan

Harding, S. (2004). *The feminist standpoint theory reader.* New York: Routledge.

Haupt, H.A. & Rovere, G.D. (1984). Anabolic steroids: A review of the literature. *The American Journal of Sports Medicine, 12,* 469-484. https://doi.org/10.1177/036354658401200613

Havnes, I. A., Jørstad, M. L., Innerdal, I., & Bjørnebekk, A. (2021). Anabolic-androgenic steroid use among women – A qualitative study on experiences of masculinizing, gonadal and sexual effects. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 95*, 102876–102876. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102876

Hawkesworth, M. (2012). Truth and truths in feminist knowledge production. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 92-118). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Heatherton, T. F., Kleck, R. E., Hebl, M. R., & Hull., J. G. (2000). *The social psychology of stigma.* New York: The Guilford Press.

Heckert, A. & Heckert, D. M. (2002). A new typology of deviance: Integrating normative and reactivist definitions of deviance. *Deviant Behavior,* 23(5), 449-479. https://doi.org/10.1080/016396202320265319

Heintzman, P. (2013). Defining leisure. In R. McCarville & K. MacKay (Eds.), *Leisure for Canadians* (2nd ed., pp. 2-12). State College, PA: Venture Publishing

Henderson, K. A. (1994). Broadening an understanding of women, gender, and leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research, 26*(1), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.1994.11969940

Henderson, K. A., Bialeschki, M. D., Shaw, S. M., & Freysinger, V. J. (1996). *Both gaps and gains: Feminist perspectives on women's leisure.* Venture Publishing.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). Feminist research: Exploring the interconnections of epistemology, methodology, and method. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *The handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 1-29). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2012). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. & Piatelli, D. (2012). The feminist practice of holistic reflexivity. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 557-582). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hockin-Boyers, H., Pope, S., & Jamie, K. (2021). #gainingweightiscool: The use of transformation photos on Instagram among female weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *13*(1), 94–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2020.1836511

Hill, A. P., & Madigan, D. J. (2017). A short review of perfectionism in sport, dance and exercise: out with the old, in with the 2 × 2. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *16*, 72–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.04.021

Holstein, J. A. & Gubrium, J. F (2003). *Inside Interviewing*. Sage Publications Inc.

hooks, b. (2003). Feminism: A movement to end sexist oppression. In McCann, N. & Kim, S. (Eds.), *The Feminist Theory Reader* (pp. 50-56). New York: Routledge.

Hunnicutt, G. (2009). Varieties of patriarchy and violence against women: Resurrecting "patriarchy" as a theoretical tool. *Violence Against Women, 15*(5), 553-573. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801208331246

Hurst R., Hale B., Smith D., & Collins D. (2000). Exercise dependence, social physique anxiety, and social support in experienced and inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters. *British Journal of Sports Medicine, 34*, 431-435. https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsm.34.6.431

Hutchison, E. D. (2018). A life course perspective. In E. Hutchison (Ed.), *Dimensions of human behavior: The changing life course* (pp. 1-38). Sage Publications.

International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB). (2024). *Homepage*. International Federation of Bodybuilding. https://ifbb.com/#

International Olympic Committee (IOC). (2018). *Athlete Career Program.* International Olympic Committee. https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/What-We-Do/Protecting-Clean-Athletes/Athletes-Space/Athlete-Career-Programme/EN-ACP-IOC-Athlete-Career-Programme-ACP.pdf

Ivy, V., & Warren, C. A. (2018). Including trans women athletes in competitive sport: Analyzing the science, law, and principles and policies of fairness in competition. *Philosophical Topics, 46*(2). 103-140. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201846215

Jang, L. G., Choi, G., Kim, S. W., Kim, B. Y., Lee, S., & Park, H. (2019). The combination of sport and sport-specific diet is associated with characteristics of gut microbiota: an observational study. *Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition, 16*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12970-019-0290-y

Johnson, C. W. (2014). "All you need is love": Considerations for a social justice inquiry in Leisure Studies. *Leisure Science*, *36*(4), 388-399. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2014.917006

Johnson, C. W. (2013). Feminist masculinities: Inquiries into leisure, gender, and sexual identity. In V. J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, women, and gender* (pp. 245-257). State College, PA: Venture Publishing Inc.

Johnson, C. W. & Cousineau, L. S. (2018). Manning up and manning on. In D. C. Parry (Ed.), *Feminisms in leisure studies: Advancing the fourth wave* (pp. 126-148). Routledge.

Johnson, C. W. & Parry, D. C. (2022). *Fostering social justice through qualitative inquiry: A methodological guide.* Routledge.

Johnson, C. W., & Rose, J. (2024). "Collecting loose change:" Conceptual clarifications on bias, subjectivity, positionality, reflexivity, & autoethnography in leisure research. *Leisure Sciences*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2024.2351965

Kerr, G., & Dacyshyn, A. (2000). Retirement experiences of elite, female gymnasts. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 12,* 115-133. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200008404218

King, C. (2018, December 3). Courtney King: Why I stopped doing bikini fitness competitions. *Vital Proteins*. https://www.vitalproteins.com/blogs/fitness/courtney-king-miss-olympia-fitness#

Klein, A. M. (1985). Pumping iron. *Society Transactions, Social Sciences, and Modern*, *22*, 68-75.

Klein, A. M. (1993). *Little big men: Bodybuilding subculture and gender construction.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Krane, V., Choi, P. Y. L., Baird, S. M., Aimar, C. M., & Kauer, K. J. (2004). Living the paradox: Female athletes negotiate femininity and muscularity. *Sex Roles, 50*(6), 315-329. https://doi.org/10.1023/b:sers.0000018888.48437.4f

Kraus, R. (2020). Abandoning Belly Dance: Leaving Female-Dominated Serious Leisure. *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure, 3*(2), 135–152. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41978-020-00052-5

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. London: Routledge

Lally, P. (2007). Identity and athletic retirement: A prospective study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 8*(1), 85–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.03.003

Laughter, M.R., Anderson J.B., Maymone M.B.C. &Kroumpouzos G. (2023). Psychology of aesthetics: Beauty, social media, and body dysmorphic disorder. *Clinics in Dermatology, 41*(1), 28-32. https://doi: 10.1016/j.clindermatol.2023.03.002.

Lavallee, D., & Robinson, H. K. (2007). In pursuit of an identity: A qualitative exploration of retirement from women's artistic gymnastics. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 8*(1), 119–141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.05.003

Lee, M. F., Bolton, K., Madsen, J., & Burke, K. J. (2023). A systematic review of influences and outcomes of body image in postpartum via a socioecological framework. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2023.2252453

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Linghede, E., Larsson, H., & Redelius, K. (2016). (Re)presenting equestrian histories—storytelling as a method of inquiry. *Sport, Education and Society*, *21*(1), 82–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2015.1061985

Linghede, E., Purdy, L., & Barker-Ruchti, N. (2022). Glitching trans* athletes: possibilities for research and practice in sports coaching. *Sports Coaching Review*, *11*(1), 64–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2021.1990656

Linton, R. (1936). *A Study of Man*. New York: Appleton-Century-Croft.

Liokaftos, D. (2019). Natural bodybuilding: An account of its emergence and development as competition sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *54*(6), 753–770. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690217751439

Loh, J. (2013). Inquiry into issues of trustworthiness and quality in narrative studies: A perspective. *The Qualitative Report*, *18*(65), 1-15.

Lowis, M. J., Edwards, A. C., & Burton, M. (2009). Coping with retirement: Well-being, health, and religion. *The Journal of Psychology*, *143*(4), 427-448. https://doi.org/10.3200/JRLP.143.4.427-448

Luk, A. W., Mitchell, L., Koay, Y. C., O'Sullivan, J. F., O'Connor, H., Hackett, D. A., & Holmes, A. (2022). Intersection of diet and exercise with the gut microbiome and

circulating metabolites in male bodybuilders: A pilot study. *Metabolites, 12*(10), 911. https://doi.org/10.3390/metabo12100911

Maier, M. J., Haeussinger, F. B., Hautzinger, M., Fallgatter, A. J., & Ehlis, A. C. (2019). Excessive bodybuilding as pathology? A first neurophysiological classification. *World Journal of Biological Psychiatry*, *20*(8), 626–636. https://doi.org/10.1080/15622975.2017.1395070

Mansfield, L., Daykin, N., & Kay, T. (2020). Leisure and wellbeing. *Leisure Studies*, *39*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2020.1713195

Mantri, S., Agarwal, S., Jaiswal, A., Yelne, S., Prasad, R., & Wanjari, M. B. (2023). Bodybuilding: A Comprehensive Review of Performance-Enhancing Substance Use and Public Health Implications. *Curēus (Palo Alto, CA)*, *15*(7), e41600–e41600. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.41600

Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adeison (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 109-237). New York: Wiley & Sons.

Marshall, K., Chamberlain, K., & Hodgetts, D. (2019). Female bodybuilders on Instagram: Negotiating an empowered femininity. *Feminism and Psychology*, *29*(1), 96–119. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353518808319

Marshall, K., Chamberlain, K., & Hodgetts, D. (2020). Male bodybuilders on Instagram: negotiating inclusive masculinities through hegemonic masculine bodies. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *29*(5), 570–589. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1722620

Matharu, A. (2019). *Bodybuilding, gender and age: Perspectives of older Canadian females* [Master's dissertation, King's College London].

McAdams, D. P., Josselson, R., & Lieblich. A. (Eds.). (2001). *Turns in the road: Narrative studies of lives in transition*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and interactions.* New York, NY: Free Press.

McGannon, K.R., Gonsalves. C.A., Schinke, R.J., & Busanich, R. (2015).Negotiating motherhood and athletic identity: A qualitative analysis of Olympic athlete mother representations in media narratives, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 20,* 51-59, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.04.010.

McGannon, K. R., McMahon, J., & Gonsalves, C. A. (2018). Juggling motherhood and sport: A qualitative study of the negotiation of competitive recreational athlete mother identities. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 36,* 41–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.01.008

McGrath, S. A., & Chananie-Hill, R. A. (2009). "Big freaky-looking women": Normalizing gender transgression through bodybuilding. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 26,* 235–254. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.26.2.235

McKeown, J. (2015). Single and ready to mingle? A feminist exploration of singlehood, dating, and leisure. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Waterloo]. http://hdl.handle.net/10012/9449

Mcmorran, S. (2021, Nov 19). *New IOC guidelines on transgender athletes lauded, but experts say questions remain*. CBC Sports. https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/ioc-advice-transgender-athlete-rules-experts-1.6254989

Mitchell, L., Murray, S. B., Hoon, M., Hackett, D., Prvan, T., & O'Connor, H. (2017). Correlates of muscle dysmorphia symptomatology in natural bodybuilders: Distinguishing factors in the pursuit of hyper-muscularity. *Body Image*, *22,* 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.04.003

Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review, 30*, 61–88. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42

Money-Taylor, E., Dobbin, N., Gregg, R. Matthews, J. & Esen, O. (2021). Differences in attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs towards eating between female bodybuilding athletes and non-athletes, and the implications for eating disorders and disordered eating. *Sport Sciences for Health, 18,* 64-74. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11332-021-00775-2

Moos, T. H. and Tsu, V. D. (1976). Human competence and coping: An overview. In Moos, R. (Ed.), *Human adaptation* (pp. 3-16). Lexington, MA: D. C.

Morgan, D. L., Ataie, J., Carder, P., & Hoffman, K. (2013). Introducing dyadic interviews as a method for collecting qualitative data. *Qualitative Health Research, 23*(9), 1276-1284. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313501889

Mosley, P. E. (2009). Bigorexia: Bodybuilding and muscle dysmorphia. *European Eating Disorders Review, 17*(3), 191–198. https://doi.org/10.1002/erv.897

Mulcahy, C. (2012). The homing of the home: Exploring gendered work, leisure, social construction, and loss through women's family memory keeping. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Waterloo]. http://hdl.handle.net/10012/7104

Munro, E. (2013). Feminism: A fourth wave? *Political Insight, 4*(2), 22–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-9066.12021

Murtha, R., Heffernan, C., & Hunt, T. (2021). Definition diets and deteriorating masculinity? Bodybuilding diets in mid-century America. *Global Food History, 7*(1), 71–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/20549547.2020.1868106

Musolino, E. A., O'Connor, B. P., & Cioe, J. D. (2021). Bigger isn't always better: an exploration of social perception bias against high levels of muscularity in women. *Journal of Social Psychology, 162*(5), 523-539. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2021.1927943

National Strength and Conditioning Association. (2017). *Sport performance and body composition*. National Strength and Conditioning Association. https://www.nsca.com/education/articles/kinetic-select/sport-performance-and-body-composition/

Newman, H. J. H., Howells, K. L., & Fletcher, D. (2016). The dark side of top level sport: An autobiographic study of depressive experiences in elite sport performers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *7*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00868

Newmire, D. E., & Webb, H. E. (2021). The role of age in the physiological adaptations and psychological responses in bikini-physique competitor contest preparation: A case series.

Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition, 18(1), 1-45. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12970-021-00445-1

Newton, N. J. (2021). Older Canadians' identity and well-being in retirement. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 95*(1), 91-109. https://doi.org/10.1177/00914150211001586

NFL Football Operations. (2021). *NFL Player Engagement*. https://operations.nfl.com/inside-football-ops/players-legends/nfl-player-engagement/

Nicholson, L. (2010). Feminism in "waves": Useful metaphor or not? *New Politics, 12*(4), 1-14.

NPC News Online. (2024a). Homepage. *NPC News Online*. https://npcnewsonline.com/#

NPC News Online. (2024b). Official NPC bikini rules. *NPC News Online.* https://npcnewsonline.com/bikini-rules/

NPC News Online. (2022). IFBB MR OLYMPIA. *NPC News Online.* https://contests.npcnewsonline.com/contests/2022/ifbb_mr_olympia

Nyikach, D. A., & Hansen, K. L. (2024). The lived experience of immigrant parents of disabled adolescents and young adults transitioning into adulthood: A narrative inquiry. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities, 52*(2), 188–198. https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12563

Ofoegbu, E., Gaston-Gayles, J., & Weight, E. (2021). "More than an athlete": How black student athletes use navigation capital to transition to life after sport. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education, 16*(1), 23-44. https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2021.1924561

Orbach, S. (2000). *The Impossibility of Sex*. London: Penguin.

Ortner, S. (2022). Patriarchy. *Feminist Anthropology*, *3*(2), 307-314. https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12081

Osborne, J. W. (2009). Commentary on retirement, identity, and Eriksons developmental stage model. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, *28*(4), 295-301. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980809990237

Owton, H., & Sparkes, A. C. (2017). Sexual abuse and the grooming process in sport: Learning from Bella's story. *Sport, Education and Society*, *22*(6), 732-743. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2015.1063484

Papathomas, A., Petrie, T. A., & Plateau, C. R. (2018). Changes in body image perceptions upon leaving elite sport: The retired female athlete paradox. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, *7*(1), 30–45. https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000111

Park, S., Lavallee, D., & Tod, D. (2013). Athletes' career transition out of sport: A systematic review. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *6*(1), 22–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2012.687053

Parkes, C. M. (1971). Psycho-social transitions: A field for study. *Social Science & Medicine, 5*(2), 101–115. https://doi.org/10.1016/0037-7856(71)90091-6

Perna, F. M., Ahlgren, R. L., & Zaichkowsky, L. (1999). The influence of career planning, race, and athletic injury on life satisfaction among recently retired collegiate male athletes. *Sport Psychologist, 13*(2), 144-156. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.13.2.144

Parry, D. C. (2016). “Skankalicious”: Erotic capital in women’s flat track roller derby. *Leisure Sciences, 38*(4), 295–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2015.1113149

Parry, D. C., & Johnson, C. W. (2007). Contextualizing leisure research to encompass complexity in lived leisure experience: The need for creative analytic practice. *Leisure Science, 29*(2), 119-130. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400601160721

Parry, D. C., Johnson, C. W. & Wagler, F. (2018). Fourth wave feminism: Theoretical underpinnings and future directions for leisure research. In D. C. Parry (Ed.), *Feminisms in leisure studies: Advancing the fourth wave* (pp. 1-12). Routledge.

Phoenix, C. & Griffin, M. (2013). Narratives at work: What can stories of older athletes do? *Ageing and Society, 33*(2), 243-266. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X11001103

Phoenix, C. & Smith, B. (2011). Telling a (good?) counterstory of aging: Natural bodybuilding meets the narrative of decline. *The Journal of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 66(5), 628-639. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbr077

Pica, G., Mallia, L., Pierro, A., Alivernini, F., Borellini, V., & Lucidi, F. (2019). How stressful is retirement! Antecedents of stress linked to athletes’ career termination. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *49*(8), 488–497. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12599

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 8*(1), 5-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103

Ponizovskiy, P.A. (2013). Addiction in retired athletes. In D.A. Baron, C.L. Reardon & S.H. Baron (Eds.), *Clinical Sports Psychiatry* (pp. 13-20). https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1002/9781118404904.ch2

Pope, H. G., Jr., & Brower, K. J. (2000). Anabolic-androgenic steroid abuse. In B.J. Sadock V.A. & Sadock (Eds.), *Comprehensive textbook of psychiatry VII* (pp. 1419-1431). Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

Pope, H. G., Gruber, A. J., Choi, P., Olivardia, R., & Phillips, K. A. (1997). Muscle dysmorphia: An under-recognised form of body dysmorphic disorder. *Psychosomatics*, *38*, 548–557. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0033-3182(97)71400-2

Preissle, J. & Han, Y. (2012). Feminist research ethics. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 583-605). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Rahbari, L. (2019). Pushing gender to its limits: Iranian women bodybuilders on Instagram. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *28*(5), 591–602. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1597582

Rajan, R. S. (2000). Introduction: Feminism and the politics of resistance. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, *7*(2), 153–165. https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150000700201

Rao, S. (2018). How my addiction to achievement has almost destroyed me. *Medium* https://medium.com/the-mission/how-my-addiction-to-achievement-has-almost-destroyed-me-15e3c4e87210

Reger, J. (2017). Finding a place in history: The discursive legacy of the wave metaphor and contemporary feminism. *Feminist Studies, 43*(1), 193–221. https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2017.0012

Richards, C., Bouman, W., Seal, L., Barker, M., Nieder, T., & Tsjoen, G. (2016). Non-binary or genderqueer genders. *International Review of Psychiatry, 28*(1), 95-102. https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446

Richardson, L. (2000). Evaluating Ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry, 6(*2), 253–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040000600207

Richardson, N. (2008). Flex-rated! Female bodybuilding: Feminist resistance of erotic spectacle? . *Journal of Gender Studies, 17*(4), 289–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230802419930

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Rodgers, R. F., Campagna, J., Hayes, G., Sharma, A., Runquist, E., Fiuza, A., Coburn-Sanderson, A., Zimmerman, E., & Piran, N. (2024). Sociocultural pressures and body related experiences during pregnancy and the postpartum period: A qualitative study. *Body Image, 48,* 101643–101643. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.101643

Rohrs-Cordes, K., & Paule-Koba, A. L. (2018). Evaluation of an NCAA sponsored online support group for career-ending injured collegiate athletes transitioning out of sports. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education, 12*(3), 200–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2018.1529651

Roth, A. & Basow, S. (2004). Femininity, sports, and feminism: Developing a theory of physical liberation. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 28*(3), 245-265. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723504266990

Ruban, D. [@danielleruban]. (2022, September 28). "You were never really that fat…"[Instagram caption]. https://www.instagram.com/p/CjEiO0gua3R/?igshid=NTdlMDg3MTY=

Rutter, M. (1996). Transitions and turning points in developmental psychopathology: As applied to the age span between childhood and mid-adulthood. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 19*(3), 603-626. https://doi.org/10.1177/016502549601900309

Saini, V. (2022). 21 bodybuilders who died of heart attack. *Fitness Volt*. https://fitnessvolt.com/bodybuilder-deaths-heart-attack/

Salmons, J. (2015). *Doing Qualitative Research Online*. SAGE Publications.

Santarossa, S., Coyne, P., Lisinski, C., & Woodruff, S. J. (2019). #fitspo on Instagram: A mixed-methods approach using Netlytic and photo analysis, uncovering the online discussion and author/image characteristics. *Journal of Health Psychology*, *24*(3), 376–385. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316676334

Scafoglio, G. [@ginamarie.ifbbpro]. (2022, March 14). Social media has glamorized bodybuilding…[Instagram caption]. https://www.instagram.com/p/CbFnrYpOLGj/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). Major contributions. *Counseling Psychologist*, 9(2), 2-15.

Schlossberg, N. K. (2011). The challenge of change: The transition model and its applications. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 48*(4), 159-162. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01102.x

Schwandt, T. A., Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2007). Judging interpretations: But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Program Evaluation, 2007*(114), 11-25. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.223

Sequin-Morin, P. (2024). [coachpat_ifbbro]. (24 November 2024). How much will it cost me to compete in a bodybuilding competition? 4 month prep breakdown [Instagram post]. https://www.instagram.com/share/BAQjVx3i7h

Selvi, K. & Bozo, O. (2020). The dark side of bodybuilding: The role of bodybuilding activities in compensation of frustrated basic psychological needs. *Motivation and Emotion, 44*, 190-208. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-019-09805-6

Setayeshi, M., Badami, R., & Musazadeh, H. (2016). Saving costs by preventing leaving the sport: Prioritize reasons for leaving sport of bodybuilding clubs from the customer perspective. *Resistive Economic, 4*(4), 60-71

Shaw, S. M. (2001). Conceptualizing resistance: Women's leisure as political practice. *Journal of Leisure Research, 33*(2), 186–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2001.11949937

Shilling, C., & Bunsell, T. (2009). The female bodybuilder as a gender outlaw. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, 1*(2), 141–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/19398440902909009

Shiva, N., & Kharazmi, Z. N. (2019). The fourth wave of feminism and the lack of social realism in cyberspace commentary. *Journal of Cyberspace Studies*, *3*(2), 129–146. https://doi.org/10.22059/jcss.2019.72456

Slater, A., Varsani, N., & Diedrichs, P. C. (2017). #fitspo or #loveyourself? The impact of fitspiration and self-compassion Instagram images on women's body image, self-compassion, and mood. *Body Image, 22*, 87–96. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.06.004

Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2009). Narrative inquiry in sport and exercise psychology: What can it mean, and why might we do it? *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 10*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.01.004

Smythe, W. E., & Murray, M. J. (2000). Owning the story: Ethical considerations in narrative research. *Ethics & Behavior, 10*(4), 311-336. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327019EB1004_1

Solomon, D. (2009). *Questions for Jessica Valenti: Fourth-wave feminism*. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html

Soucie, S. M. A., Parry, D. C., & Cousineau, L. S. (2018). The fourth wave: What #MeToo can teach us about millennial mobilization, intersectionality, and men's accountability. In D. C. Parry (Ed.), *Feminisms in leisure studies: Advancing the fourth wave* (pp. 149-164). New York: Routledge.

Sparkes, A. C. (1998). Athletic identity: An achilles heel to the survival of self. *Qualitative Health Research, 8*, 644-664. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239800800506

Sparkes, A. C. (1999). Exploring body narratives. *Sport, Education and Society, 4*, 17-30. https://doi.org/10.1080/1357332990040102

Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 17*, 21-41. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.17.1.21

Sparkes, A. C., Batey, J., & Brown, D. (2005). The muscled self and its aftermath: A life history study of an elite, black, male bodybuilder. *Auto/Biography*, *13*(2), 131–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967550705013002030l

Sparkes, A. C., Brighton, J., & Inckle, K. (2018). Imperfect perfection and wheelchair bodybuilding: Challenging ableism or reproducing normalcy? *Sociology*, *52*(6), 1307–1323. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517737476

Spoor, S. T. P., Bekker, M. H. J., van Strien, T., & van Heck, G. L. (2007). Relations between negative affect, coping, and emotional eating. *Appetite*, *48*(3), 368–376. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2006.10.005

Spreitzer, G.M. & Sonenshein, S. (2004). Toward the construct definition of positive deviance. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, *47*(6), 828-847. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203260212

St. Martin, L., & Gavey, N. (1996). Women's bodybuilding: Feminist resistance and/or femininity's recuperation? *Body & Society*, *2*(4), 45–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X96002004003

Star, T. [tasha_star_fitness]. (2021, June 4). Life after competing [Instagram caption]. https://www.instagram.com/p/CPtYoS3hMF8/?utm_medium=copy_link

Stebbins, R. A. (1992). Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure. McGill-Queen's University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81ccj

Steinbuch, Y. (2021, 28 December). *Transgender swimmer Lia Thomas is 'destroying' sport, official says.* New York Post. https://nypost.com/2021/12/28/official-transgender-swimmer-lia-thomas-is-destroying-the-sport/

Stenseng, F., Rise, J., & Kraft, P. (2011). The dark side of leisure: obsessive passion and its covariates and outcomes. *Leisure Studies*, *30*(1), 49–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614361003716982

Stets, J. E. & Burke, P. J. (2000a). Femininity/masculinity. In E. F. Borgatta & R. J. V. Montgomery (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of sociology* (Revised ed., pp. 997-1005). New York, NY: Macmillan.

Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000b). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *63*(3), 224-237.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2016). [Table 23] DSM-IV to DSM-5 body dysmorphic disorder comparison. *National Library of Medicine*. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519712/table/ch3.t19/

Suffolk, M. T. (2015). Professional female bodybuilding: Self-determination theory approach. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *16*(3), 71-85.

Super, D. E. A lifespan, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 16,* 282-298. https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1

Szurkowska, J., Wiącek, J., Laparidis, K., & Karolkiewicz, J. (2021). A comparative study of selected gut bacteria abundance and fecal pH in bodybuilders eating high-protein diet and more sedentary controls. *Nutrients*, *13*(11), 4093. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13114093

Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. (1986) The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel and W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relation* (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Hall Publishers.

Tajrobehkar, B. (2016). Flirting with the judges: Bikini fitness competitors' negotiations of femininity in bodybuilding competitions. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *33*(4), 294–303. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2015-0152

Tarver, W. L. Career maturity and college students: A case study comparison of student-athletes and non-athletes at a division 1 institution. [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:cj82r293s/fulltext.pdf

Taylor, S. E., & Stanton, A. L. (2007). Coping resources, coping processes, and mental health. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, *3*, 377–401. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091520

Thomas, G., Devine, K., & Molnár, G. (2023). Experiences and perceptions of women strength and conditioning coaches: A scoping review. *International Sport Coaching Journal, 10*(1), 78-90. https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2022-0026

Thomas, G., Guinan, J., & Molnár, G. (2021). "It's not particularly p.c., you know . . .": Women coaches' performing gender in strength and conditioning. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal, 29*(2), 106-116. https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2020-0049

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837-851. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121

Tuck, E. & McKenzie, M. (2015). *Place in research: Theory, methodology, and methods.* Routledge.

Vallerand, R. J., Blanchard, C., Mageau, G. A., Koestner, R., Ratelle, C., Léonard, M., Gagné, M., Marsolais, J., & Diener, E. (2003). Les Passions de l'Âme: On Obsessive and Harmonious Passion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*(4), 756–767. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.4.756

Vallet, G. (2017). The gendered economics of bodybuilding. *International Review of Sociology*, *27*(3), 525–545. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2017.1298431

Wainwright, S. P., & Turner, B. S. (2006). 'Just crumbling to bits'? An exploration of the body, ageing, injury and career in classical ballet dancers. *Sociology, 40*(2), 237–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038506062031

Warren, M. P. (1999). Health issues for women athletes: Exercise-induced amenorrhea. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism, 84*(6), 1892–1896. https://doi.org/10.1210/jc.84.6.1892

Wasserfurth, P., Palmowski, J., Hahn, A., & Krüger, K. (2020). Reasons for and consequences of low energy availability in female and male athletes: social environment, adaptations, and prevention. *Sports Medicine, 6*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-020-00275-6

Wang, M., & Shi, J. (2014). Psychological research on retirement. *Annual review of psychology, 65*(1), 209-233. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115131

Warriner, K., & Lavallee, D. (2008). The retirement experience of elite female gymnasts: Self identity and the physical self. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 20*, 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200801998564

Webb, W. M., Nasco, S. A., Riley, S., & Headrick, B. (1998). Athlete identity and reactions to retirement from sport. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 21,* 338-362.

Wellman, M. L. (2020). What it means to be a bodybuilder: social media influencer labor and the construction of identity in the bodybuilding subculture. *Communication Review, 23*(4), 273–289. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2020.1829303

Wertz., F. J., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L. M., Josselson, R., Anderson, R., & McSpadden, E. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis*. New York: NY: The Guildford Press.

Wesely, J. (2001). Negotiating gender: Bodybuilding and the natural/unnatural continuum. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 18,* 162-180. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.18.2.162

Whitbourne, S. K., Sneed, J. R., & Skultety, K. M. (2002). Identity processes in adulthood: Theoretical and methodological challenges. *Identity*, *2*(1), 29-45. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532706XID0201_03

Wiegers, Y. (1998). Male bodybulding: The social construction of a masculine identity. *Journal of Popular Culture, 32*(2), 147–161. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1998.00147.x

Willis, R. (2019). The use of composite narratives to present interview findings. *Qualitative Research, 19*(4), 471-480. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118787711

Winslow, R. W. (1970). *Society in transition: A social approach to deviance*. New York: The Free Press.

Winterich, J.A. (2007). Aging, femininity, and the body: What appearance changes mean to women with age. *Gender Issues 24*, 51–69. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-007-9045-1

Wood-Barcalow, N. L., Alleva, J. M., & Tylka, T. L. (2024). Revisiting positive body image to demonstrate how body neutrality is not new. *Body Image*, *50*, 101741-. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101741

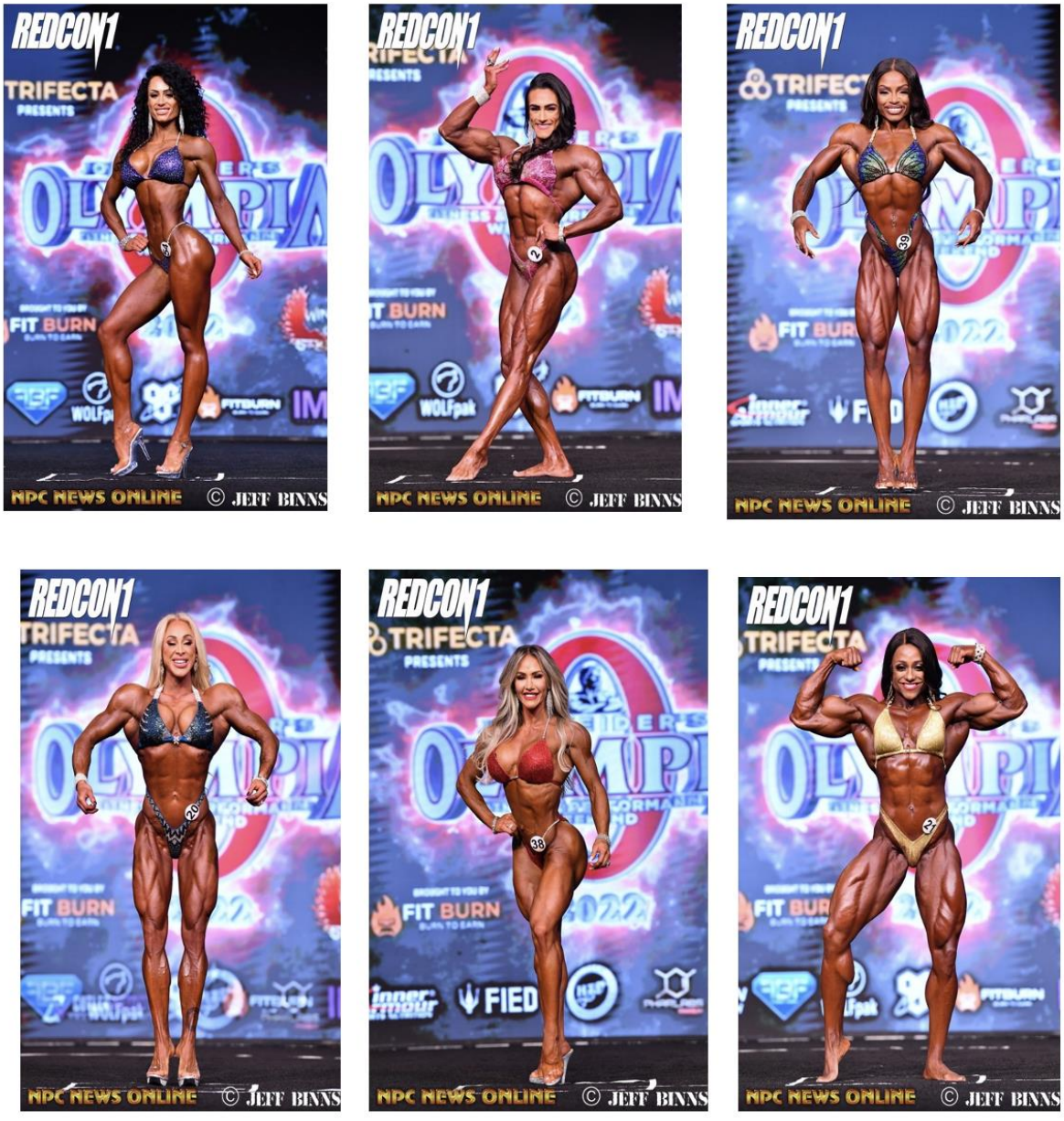
Worthen, M. G. F., & Baker, S. A. (2016). Pushing up on the glass ceiling of female muscularity: Women's bodybuilding as edgework. *Deviant Behavior*, *37*(5), 471–495. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2015.1060741

Wylleman, P., Alfermann, D., & Lavallee, D. (2004). Career transitions in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 5*(1), 3-5. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1469-0292(02)00048-1

Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes. In M. Weiss (Ed.), *Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective* (pp. 507-527). Morgantown: Fitness Information Technology.

Appendix A: Women's Bodybuilding Divisions

Jen Dorie (Bikini, top left), Francielle Mattos (Wellness, top middle), Cydney Gillon (Figure, top right), Missy Truscott (Fitness, bottom left), Natalia Abraham Coelho (Physique, bottom middle), Andrew Shaw (Bodybuilding, bottom right). Source: Jeff Binns[16]



[16] Permission granted to reuse images from Jeff Binns via email on April 4th, 2025. Image Source: NPC News Online 2022

Appendix B: Judging Criteria for Bikini, Figure, Wellness, and Physique

The following criteria are directly copied from the National Physique Committee (2025) website and are current as of January 2025.

Criteria for Judging Female Physiques:

1. Muscularity – the amount of muscle will vary between the divisions
2. Condition- will vary depending on the division
3. Symmetry and Balance
4. Presentation (Posing)

Bikini

Bikini athletes should display:

1. A foundation of muscle which gives shape to the female body
2. Full round glutes with a slight separation between the hamstring and glute area
3. Small amount of roundness in the delts
4. Conditioned Core
5. Overall look- hair, makeup, suit, and tan

Bikini athletes should NOT display:

1. Muscular density seen in a figure physique
2. Squared glutes
3. Muscle separation seen in figure competitors
4. Graininess
5. Striations anywhere

Figure

Figure athletes should display:

1. An overall balance of muscular development which includes rounded delts, sweep to the quads, back depth, and width – emphasis is on balance and symmetry
2. Small amount of muscle separation
3. A nice "V" taper
4. Tight glutes with separation between the hamstring and glute area
5. Balance between the upper and lower body

Figure athletes should NOT display:

1. Striations or graininess
2. Muscularity thickness associated with Women's Physique

Wellness

Note: The wellness criteria are outlined with a FAQ rather than standardized criteria as with the divisions listed above and below.

Level of conditioning?
We are looking for conditioning almost on par with Bikini athletes, but the athletes will have slightly more muscle. We want to see a little body fat with slight separation but no striations.

Abs defined like Figure or less defined like Bikini?
As it currently is in Bikini.

Shoulders? Rounded & Capped like Figure and Women's Physique or less pronounced like Bikini?
Slightly more developed than Bikini and a little less than Figure, but not as lean and with no striations. Not like Women's Physique.

How much definition for quads?
The quads should display an athletic appearance with slight separation but no striations. Not as lean and defined as Figure and Women's Physique.

Glute Development?
Full round glutes with a slight separation between the hamstring and glute area but no striations, as is in place for the Bikini Division. Glutes will be bigger than current Bikini competitors. They will not be as lean and defined as Figure and Women's Physique.

Physique

Women's Physique athletes should display:

1. More muscular density than seen in figure
2. Clear muscle separation – small amount of striations is acceptable
3. Emphasis is on muscular development with full muscle bellies
4. Muscular development should be balanced between upper and lower body

Women's Physique athletes should NOT display:

1. An overly striated physique
2. Graininess associated with female bodybuilding

Appendix C: Participant Information Letter

[DATE]

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a research study exploring the experience of retiring from competitive bodybuilding. This research is being completed for my dissertation, as part of the degree requirements for my PhD in Aging, Health and Well-being in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. I'm currently in my third year of the PhD program working under the supervision of Dr. Diana Parry. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

The bodybuilding experience is well-documented in the academic literature in areas including health consequences, identity, and gender. However, there is limited research exploring the experience of retiring from bodybuilding. As a competitor myself, I am aware of the challenges we face as we think about transitioning out of this lifestyle. With the Covid-19 pandemic, many bodybuilding athletes were compelled to step back from competing and re-evaluate their position in the sport. Hence, even more athletes were faced with the idea of retiring from bodybuilding. Therefore, the purpose of my proposed dissertation research, is to explore the retirement transition experience for competitive bodybuilders. More specifically, this study will explore how bodybuilding athletes are influenced by gendered ideologies—including femininity and masculinity, and how this affects their transition experience in relation to identity, health, well-being, and leisure.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in two interviews: 1) a one-on-one interview and 2) a small group interview with 3-5 other participants. You will be asked questions about your bodybuilding career and experience, as well as how you are negotiating your potential transition away from the sport. Both interviews will last approximately one to two hours in a location agreed upon by the participants and the researcher. Interviews can occur in-person or online.

If you prefer to participate in an online interview, the interview will be conducted over an online platform, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams. Zoom and Microsoft Teams have implemented technical, administrative, and physical safeguards to protect the information provided via the Services from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction. However, no Internet transmission is ever fully secure or error free.

During the interviews, you may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be audio or video recorded to facilitate collection of information and later transcribed for analysis. The information shared in the one-on-one interviews will be kept confidential. Video recording will

only be used to ensure accurate transcription of group interviews. Although I cannot guarantee confidentiality within the small group interviews because of the context, I will emphasize the importance or privacy and confidentiality amongst group interview participants before proceeding with the interview. We will ask participants in group interviews to respect the privacy of others and to not share information that identifies or could potentially identify another participant and/or their comments, however, please be aware that we cannot guarantee that everyone will honour this request.

There is a risk that the topics covered in the interview conversations may cause some emotional distress as you reflect on your experiences. You may skip any question, take a break or end the interview early (or leave the group interview), by letting the interviewer know. If you experience any distress or concern, the Canadian Mental Health Association has a list of resources that may be helpful to you. Please visit https://ontario.cmha.ca/provincial-mental-health-supports/ for National and Provincial resources.

Shortly after one-on-one interviews are completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. If you'd like to review your comments from the group interview, you can request a copy of your comments to review.

You will also be asked to share your social media accounts (e.g., Instagram) for observation. The researchers will observe the content to better understand how social media is used in the bodybuilding industry. We may ask to share quotations from your posts. The quotations will be shared in advance with the participant and participants will be asked for consent/approval to use those quotations in any publications with a pseudonym.

Your identity will be kept confidential in study results. Your name will not appear in any paper or publication resulting from this study, however, with your permission quotations may be used with a pseudonym in place of your real name. Identifying information will be removed from the data that is collected and stored separately for 6 months and then permanently erased. If you choose to withdraw your consent and request for your data to be deleted, please contact us within this time period. Afterwards, it will not be possible to remove your data because the research team will have no way of identifying which responses belong to you. With regards to information collected during group interviews, we will do our best to remove individual data (e.g., quotes etc.), however, please be aware that it may not be possible to remove all data associated with you given the group format of the discussions. Additionally, it is not possible to withdraw data from results that have been submitted for publication or otherwise shared publicly. De-identified data (data with identifying information removed) will be securely stored on a private, password-protected device that only the research team has access to for for at least 7 years.

For all other questions or if you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me by email at amy.matharu@uwaterloo.ca. You can

also contact my supervisor, Dr. Diana Parry by email at dcparry@uwaterloo.ca. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB ***[45221]***). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #45221). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca

I hope this research illuminates the social and cultural influences shaping the bodybuilding retirement transition. By bringing these experiences that are often hidden or discussed in limited forums to light, this research may not only empower participants by having their perspectives heard, but also validate the experience of many retired bodybuilders, and promote an open dialogue on retirement in bodybuilding to support those experiencing, or thinking about, this transition. I also hope this research will contribute to the limited body of literature in the academic community to inform future explorations of this understudied topic.

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Yours Sincerely,

Amy Matharu	**Diana Parry, PhD**
PhD Candidate	Professor
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies	Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
Amy.matharu@uwaterloo.ca	dcparry@uwaterloo.ca

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

By agreeing to participate, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Amy Matharu, a PhD candidate in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo, working under the supervision of Dr. Diana Parry. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

- I am aware I have the option to allow the interview(s) to be audio recorded (and video recorded, if online) to ensure an accurate recording of my responses [Note: you may turn off your camera if you prefer not to be video recorded].
- I am also aware that with my permission, excerpts from the interview(s) may be included in the thesis and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that a pseudonym will be used in place of my real name.
- I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #45221). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca

For all other questions contact Amy Matharu by email at amy.matharu@uwaterloo.ca. You can also contact Dr. Diana Parry by email at dcparry@uwaterloo.ca.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

☐YES ☐NO

Interviews

I give permission for the interview(s) to be audio recorded.

☐YES ☐NO

If online, I give permission for the interview(s) to be video recorded.

☐YES ☐NO

I agree to the use of quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this study with the understanding that a pseudonym will be used in place of my real name.

☐YES ☐NO

Social Media

I agree to the observation of my social media accounts. I understand that the researcher may reach out to request the use of quotations from these accounts in the future.

☐YES ☐NO

Participant's name: _____

[ ] Verbal consent was obtained.

Participant's signature: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Interview Guide

Hello, my name is Amy Matharu. I am a graduate student at the University of Waterloo in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of my proposed dissertation research is to explore the retirement transition experience for competitive bodybuilders. More specifically, this study will explore how bodybuilding athletes are influenced by gendered ideologies—including femininity and masculinity, and how this affects their transition experience in relation to identity, health, well-being, and leisure.

Before we begin, I would like to go over a few important items. The interview is meant to be conversational in style, but there are several questions that I would like to ask you about your bodybuilding experience. You can also choose to stop the interview at any point, for any reason and as reminder, your identity will be kept confidential. If there are any questions you are not comfortable answering, please let me know and we can omit them.

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Demographic Details

Tell me about yourself. How do you identify?

Probes: sex/gender, race/ethnicity, age, occupation

Research Question One: How do bodybuilding competitors experience retirement (in terms of identity/health/well-being)?

General questions:

Tell me about your bodybuilding history…

Probes: What motivated you to start/to keep going? What were some memorable moments in your time competing? What were your preps like? How did your lifestyle change when you started competing? How did it affect your identity? How did it affect your health?

Tell me about when you decided you might leave the sport…

Probes: Can you describe a specific moment or experience that shifted your thinking? What did you think/how did you behave after you had these thoughts?

Tell me about leaving the sport, or retiring…

Probes: Where there any notable moments or shifts in thinking during this time? How did it affect your identity? How did it affect your health? How is your lifestyle similar/different to when you competed? How do you feel now?

Research Question Two: How are gendered ideologies experienced, reproduced and/or maintained after leaving the sport?

General questions:

How do you think your experience was similar/different from other [men/women] in the industry?

Probes: How (if at all) did your gender/age/race/culture/division play a role in your experience? How (if at all) do you think gender influences the industry?

Tell me about your views of gender, masculinity, and femininity before/during/after competing….

Probes: How has competing influenced your perspectives? How (if at all) have these perspectives changed throughout your career?

Questions regarding social media (if not addressed earlier):

General questions:

Tell me about your social media use before you started competing…

Probes: What were your goals? What motivated you to post/stay active?

Tell me about your social media use while you competed…

Probes: How did your social media use change (if at all) while competing?

Tell me about your social media use after you leaving the sport…

Probes: What are your goals now? How has your use changed (community, mood, acceptance, validation).

Probes (if the information does not come up naturally):

General questions to contextualize participants' bodybuilding history: What division do you compete in? What is your status (i.e., amateur/pro) and which federation do you affiliate with? How long have you competed for (i.e., when was your first competition)? When was your last and/or most recent competition?

Appendix F: Participant Letter of Appreciation

Department of Recreation and Leisure, Faculty of Health

University of Waterloo

[Insert Date]

Dear ***[Insert Name of Participant],***

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study entitled ***Bodybuilding Retirement: Exploring Health, Leisure, Identity and Well-being.*** As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to explore the retirement transition experience for competitive bodybuilders. The data collected during interviews will contribute to a better understanding of this retirement transition—a topic that is often discussed within the bodybuilding community but has yet to be explored in depth. Your contributions are greatly appreciated.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB ***[45221]).*** If you have questions for the Board contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or reb@uwaterloo.ca.

For all other questions contact Amy Matharu at ***amy.matharu@uwaterloo.ca***

Your identity will be confidential. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this project, I plan on sharing this information with the research community through seminars, conferences, presentations, and journal articles. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the results of this study, or would like a summary of the results, please provide your email address, and when the study is completed, anticipated by ***Fall 2024,*** I will send you the information. In the meantime, if you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email as noted below.

Thank you,

Amy Matharu
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo
Amy.matharu@uwaterloo.ca

Dr. Diana Parry
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo,
dcparry@uwaterloo.ca