

***Investigating the impact of male body image ideals  
on lived experiences of the male body and  
masculinity.***

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**Investigating the impact of male body image ideals on  
lived experiences of the male body and masculinity.**

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Northumbria University at Newcastle for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others. Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted through the Researcher's submission to Northumbria University's Ethics Online System in November 2014.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 85,000 words

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the rise of the muscular male body as an objectified, sexualised and desired embodied state in contemporary society. The study delves into consumer experiences of the lived masculine body and its representations. This is of importance when considering the increased visibility of the male body in media and the implications on male consumers and male body image transformation. A rich insight is provided into the way in which marketing discourses of the idealised muscular body are interpreted by individuals and used to define masculinity and an idealistic masculine self-concept. This offers important insights into under-developed male consumer research knowledge.

The research adopts an immersive ethnographic approach using access to a fitness club and twelve male participants embroiled in regular exercise routines. As a result, a compelling data set of observations, personal narratives and my own experience of building a muscular body are presented and analysed in this thesis. The research yielded deep, meaningful findings related to the muscular body as an agent of the self with regard to defining the self-concept and setting a desired identity. Furthermore, the process of sculpting muscularity was perceived as a masculinising process with weight training methods and other weight trainers seen as bearers of authentic masculinity.

The research presents a number of original contributions that enhance understanding of male embodiment and the value of physical body capital informing male consumer research and outlining implications for self and identity research. I argue the relationships around body image expectations, norms and ideals are complex and formed through self-concept perceptions, nuanced power dynamics and how the natural body reacts to cultural norms and expectations. The research findings demonstrate a need to go beyond social conceptualisation assumptions and consider individualistic agendas, the natural/biological masculine body and body identity motives in contemporary culture.

The study comprehends the power of physical capital in helping to achieve other forms of capital and masculinity affirmation. Important contributions are developed in relation to the gym habitus as a safe haven for masculine males to play out interpretive masculinity beliefs. Such insights provide an enhanced understanding of how males are combating threats to traditional masculinity and to shape the masculine-self in order for the 'macho' spirit to live on. The research builds upon the cultural meanings of male fitness as a body constructing scene to showcase self-identity and superior masculinity. Additionally, the desire to obtain social and cultural capital through the muscular body is analysed to provide novel insights into a consumer movement shaping male consumer lives both culturally and physically.

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## **i. Glossary of terms used**

Due to the nature of the study and the various terms used to describe bodily practices, I have developed a glossary of terminology used through the thesis. In proposing these terms, I also outline assumptions I have taken forward involving various marketing and consumer culture constructs.

- **Bodybuilding**

According to formal definitions the term relates to a programme of exercises designed to develop bodily muscle (Britannica, 2019). However, due to its global presence and rising popularity seen in the 1970's, as both a form of exercise and cultural presence the term's use has become widespread and contradictory (Pickett *et al* 2005). Mosley (2009) conceptualised the term refers to the sporting profession of displaying impressive muscular physiques on stage for competition purposes. Conversely, Smith (2015) portrays how the popularity of muscle and strength building, as a form of regular exercise across the globe, can be deemed as bodybuilding, where an individual seeks to become healthier and improve self-confidence. It is the latter explanation, which was carried forward in this study, to discover the ways in which males utilised the culture of bodybuilding and process of exercise to develop self and identity narratives.

- **Consumer and consumer culture**

Within marketing and consumer research specific terms are used to refer to individuals who engage with market discourses. In simple terms a consumer refers to the individual or group of people who purchase and utilise products and services (Brobeck 2006). In this study I refer to male consumers individually or groups of males. Subsequently, the context in which male consumers exist and self is enacted, is referred to as consumer culture. I adopted a sociological based definition by Singh (2011: 62) in that: "*Consumer culture refers to cultures in which mass consumption and production both fuel the economy and shape perceptions, values, desires, and constructions of personal identity*". In such a definition there is a clear distinction on the impact at a personal level for the individual consumer. This includes identity and self-concept, which is allegedly aligned to socially constructed ideals presented through marketing discourses (Friedman 2013).

- **Consumerism and embodied consumerism**

Paying closer attention to consumer based activities and processes they undertake, consumerism is defined here as the collection of behaviours, attitudes and values that are associated with the consumption of material goods (Trentmann 2004). In this study the key focus is on the consumption of the male body and market discourses related to body image ideals. Subsequently, I explored the behaviours and attitudes males presented when interacting with discourses related to the male body and embodiment practices. Furthermore, the research investigated male consumer activities involving the body and body image management practices. The term embodied consumerism is used to capture the various consumer and consumption practices, which revolve around the maintenance of the male body and its aesthetical image to fulfil perception of both masculine and self-ideals.

- **Embodiment**

Due to its multi-disciplinary nature, embodiment can be used to refer to various meanings (Crossley 2007). In this research I focus upon embodiment in reference to the body, consequently I follow the perspective posed by Weiss (2013:27): *“Embodiment refers to the biological and physical presence of our bodies, which are a necessary precondition for subjectivity, emotion, language, thought and social interaction”*. This definition brings experience to the forefront and deliberates how embodiment relates to experiences of the body in the social world. Due to phenomenology playing a role in this study, I have focused upon highlighting the experiences of the male body and lived experiences of masculinity. Through this study, I focus upon male embodiment, which relates to the male gendered body and experiences of masculinity. The attention is drawn on the nature in which body management practices exist and how they fulfil perceptions of masculinity and masculine body experiences.

- **Muscularity and muscularity processes**

Focusing particularly on the male body experiences, as part of the research I explore the processes of developing body muscle. From the medical perspective (Farlex Medical dictionary 2012:1) muscularity is referred to as: *“A state or condition of having well developed muscles”*. In social contexts (Daniel and Bridges 2010:32) the term has been elaborated upon further: *“The state or quality of being muscular or having well-developed muscles with minimal fat”*.

It is interesting to find the positive connotations attached to the term in sociology. We find terms such as 'quality', 'desirable', 'appealing' used in defining muscularity with various links to masculinity and sexual appeal (Tod and Edwards, 2014).

- **Self-concept and Self-Identity**

The study fundamentally explores the male body and its relation to self-concept and identity. These constructs are defined using marketing and consumer research literature. Belk's (1988: 139) main conceptualisation on the self-concept related to: "*The basic states of existence: having, doing and being*". It is understood these states portray an individual's existence and how the individual defines themselves in respect of who they are and what they are striving to become. Therefore, in this study I explored male individuals in respect to their bodies in which self-concept is performed. Mittal (2006) observed in most postmodern, interpretivist consumer research literature, the personal narrative view has developed whereby self is entwined within a consumer's identity and in essence played out through a personal narrative (Mittal 2015, 2006).

Mittal (2006) makes the important distinction in that the self-concept is inherently part of the individual and is seen through identity makeup and characteristics portrayed. Self-identity is related to appearance construction that is based on social connections, or through collective associations which share common identification features (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Similar to other embodiment researchers, I followed the view identity is heavily entwined with the self-concept and can be described as an extension of self (Hogg 2018, Stern 2015).

## **ii. Thesis overview**

This section outlines the contents of the thesis and nature of the research undertaken. A brief overview is provided of each chapter, defining the research journey undertaken to present insightful accounts of male embodiment.

### **1. Introduction**

The introduction sets the scene for the topic delving into the highly visible muscular male body in contemporary culture and its profound effect on males chasing body image ideals. Historically, the study of the male body has strong sociological, psychological and health-related themes. However, consumer knowledge is lacking in the way in which males manage body ideals and map them onto their bodies through consumer lifestyle choices. It is envisaged such insights would benefit male consumer research, by providing a better understanding of those males engaged within body transformation and the significance of the muscular body to self-making.

### **2. Literature Review**

The theoretical underpinning of the research considers the way in which the body has been presented and conceptualised as a social and cultural phenomenon. Previous debates consider the socially constructed nature of the body and the social and cultural influences acting on its presentation. The lack of male consumer knowledge is identified, highlighting the need to develop contemporary male embodied knowledge to challenge the orthodox socially dominant explanations previous studies have relied upon. In order to help develop male embodied consumer research, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is proposed as a valuable framework to help bring meaning to male embodied consumer practices witnessed in contemporary culture.

### **3. Research context and background**

To help situate the study, this chapter contextualises the fieldwork of the research and the influences playing on the research participant's ideological beliefs regarding the idealised masculine body. The chapter also outlines my position and beliefs on the research topic to clarify my assumptions and influence on data interpretation and research findings.

#### **4. Research methods and methodology**

This chapter outlines the research approach in following an interpretivist stance and the use of an ethnographic approach. By following a longitudinal research design process, I observed and experienced how body image ideals played out in male consumers' lives. This helped to develop accurate representations of embodied practices and how they fulfil the male consumer sense of self and bring meaning to lifestyle choices.

#### **5. Findings and discussion**

The research findings present intriguing insights of my time spent with males involved with body transformation and sharing my experiences of weight training and building a muscular body of my own. The merits of the methodological approach are illustrated with insights such as the symbolic role of muscularity in self-actualisation and body transformation acting as a live project for males. Such findings help breakdown the relationships male participants enacted, whilst also unravelling the tensions experienced when not being able to reach muscularity goals.

#### **6. Conclusions and research contributions**

The research has identified new conceptualisations that go beyond social construction explanations. For example, it was found some males were chasing body ideals for personal agendas and self-actualisation not necessarily related to social conformance. Furthermore, due to biological (genetics) limitations, body ideals achievement can vary, leading male participants to consult cultural knowledge publicised through the media in order to enforce change on the natural body. These insights portray the study's value to male consumer knowledge and aid our understanding of male embodiment as both a cultural and physically bounded phenomenon.



## 1. Introduction

***“What glistening slab of mesomorph flesh will be on the cover this time? What should my boy build, crush, smash or ignite this month?”***

(The Guardian, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020)

The above transcript published by The Guardian (2020) presented writer Emma Bedington’s account of receiving a well-known men’s lifestyle magazine her teenage son religiously followed in his body transformation routine. By reporting upon her son’s embodied practices, Emma, raised concerns of how beauty standards for men, particularly around body image and muscularity were *‘out of control’*, leading young males to experience certain health conditions.

Emma’s son is not alone in living out his body beautiful desires, with a number of studies publicising the need to pay young men more attention due to body image pressure (Chatzopoulou *et al* 2020, Hakim 2018). The BBC reported in November 2018 that the number of boys admitting to body image health conditions had accelerated to record levels due to an obsession with muscle definition and body shape (BBC 2018). It appears such trends have intensified further with more recent research reporting lifestyle choices followed by young men are heavily shaped by body image management (The Guardian July 2019). Intriguingly, muscles are reported to be shaping expectations of identity and appearance amongst men more widely (Metro 2020). The Daily Mail (August 2017:1) reported on the growing trend of males chasing muscle body ideals stating: *“There is mounting concern in the UK among healthcare professionals that males suffer from poor body image and its subsequent detrimental effects on health, well-being and confidence”*.

To help shed further light on these concerning issues, research within academia has reported upon the increased exposure of idealised male body image in marketing discourses and consumer culture (Clatterbaugh 2018, Hakim 2018). It has been conceptualised that the male body is promoted as an objectified (Otterbring *et al* 2018), sexualised (Smith 2018) phenomenon which can be worked upon to increase its social desirability in contemporary culture (Hakim 2018, Shilling 2012). As a result, it is reported that one of the most significant threats to male health and wellbeing relate to body image pressure leading to disorders including steroid abuse and psychological issues (Yurdagül *et al* 2019).

Furthermore, Frank (2014) reported males have become increasingly conscious of body image due to the transformation in masculinity witnessed over the last decade. This is alleged to be as a result of the heavily publicised muscular body that promotes; “*masculine perfection*” according to Frank (2014:279).

More recently Gultzow *et al* (2020) investigated male body depictions on social media, reporting the rising popularity of muscular bodies as a standard for men to strive for. The culture of body image especially amongst males has seen great expansion through media and consumer adoption (Andreasson and Johansson 2019a, Hakim 2018, 2015, Hall and Gough 2011). Commentators in various fields have conceptualised acts of body transformation naturalise hyper-masculinity (Waling *et al* 2018, Murnen and Karazsia 2017, Glick *et al* 2015) represent masculine perfection (Coquet *et al* 2016) and offer a means in which to relate male body to self-representation and identity (Mittal 2015, Bey 2014).

Market research suggests the pursuit of health and fitness continues to rise and become more widespread in the UK, with record levels of new fitness centres and members (10.4 million members, increase by 4.7% in 2019) (Sports Think Tank 2020). 1 in every 7 adults in the UK is said to be a gym member, whilst 1 in 5 adult males have undertaken a form of strength training (Mintel 2020, Statista 2020). A UK government survey in 2018 involving over 185,000 participants found 65% of males over the age of 16 years old were physically active (Gov.uk 2018). Although there is no precise data for males involved in body image transformation practices, Statista (2020) has reported the most common reason for males to join fitness clubs is to work on body image and improve strength.

It has been commonly regarded that muscles have always been desirable for men (Bordo 2008), yet the dominant body ideal has shifted towards muscularity with an emphasis on lean, well defined muscle mass as an aesthetical ideal (Gultzow *et al* 2020, Del Saz-Rubio 2019, Bey 2014). Muscle obsession trends (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2009) and drive to achieve such a body shape is said to have significantly affected the way in which men envision their bodies and undertake embodiment practices (Clatterbaugh 2018, Brewster *et al* 2017, Gill 2008). The muscular body ideal is conveyed as being attainable for all, whilst also being instrumental in the achievement of good health and wellbeing (Lefkowich *et al* 2017, Frank 2014).

Accordingly it is important to ask what has caused such a shift in men and the obsession to transform their body image. Masculinity literature has reported contemporary masculinity and its representation is focused on stylised, muscle toned bodies which has set aspirational standards for how a man should present himself in contemporary contexts (Gough 2018b, Ho *et al* 2016).

Therefore body transformation and muscle development becomes a focus for many males to try and capture in order to optimise social popularity (Lefkowich *et al* 2017). Barber and Bridges (2017) reported that muscularity in the marketing of idealised masculinity is now unprecedented. Hearn and Hein (2015) posed males depicted in popular Hollywood productions and professional sport stars tend to encompass muscular builds which for many males correlate to success and social appeal.

Investigating male engagement in market discourses, Alexander (2003) reported on the notion of how males were no longer regarded as producers of consumer goods, but equally engaged with consumption of products and services related to identity management. This was echoed in marketing research with Otterbring *et al* (2018) reporting men were susceptible to adopting branded goods for identity enhancement. Such male consumer behaviour was labelled as metro-sexuality (Mitchell and Lodhia 2017) with males regarded to possessing conscious needs and insecurities related to self-identity, body image and aesthetic preferences (Barber and Bridges 2017). Research has also indicated men are keen to develop muscularity in the belief of fulfilling masculinity aspirations (Lefkowich *et al* 2017) and social ideals of what the male body should symbolise (Del Saz-Rubio 2018, Norton 2017).

Historically, feminine bodies have dominated sociological and consumer research, although researchers have argued men are experiencing body image insecurities (Blond 2008, Elliott and Elliott 2005, Pope *et al* 2000) as a result of media publicised body ideals (Grogan 2016, Green and Kaiser 2016, Hall and Gough 2011). The male body and its image has been predominantly studied in sociology (Entwistle 2015), cultural studies (Hakim 2015), gender (Clatterbaugh 2018), media and sports (Fernandez-Balboa *et al* 2018, Vannini and Williams 2016). In these disciplines we have learnt the body for many men represents their social standing (Featherstone 2010), experiences of the world (Gadow 2003) and masculinity affirmation (Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

There is also a growing base of literature suggesting that self-concept and self-identity are swayed by body image and how an individual feels their aesthetical image conforms to their ideal self (Cuypers 2017, Chernev *et al* 2011). Originally Giddens (1991) proposed social, cultural norms in modernity emphasised the value of the body to define self-concept. Furthermore Featherstone's (2010, 1982ab) deep analysis into body and culture arbitrated how self-ideals of youth, beauty and sexual appeal were orchestrated through the body and its appearance. However, such knowledge of the male body and embodiment in consumer research remains to be fully explored.

I found male embodiment research was lacking and now dated in consumer research (Holt and Thompson 2004), whilst embodiment in relation to consumption behaviour has not delved into the body management relationships men experience (Hakim 2018, Hall and Gough 2015). Consumer research has traditionally focused on women as consumption leaders with bodies and appearance being the commodities and the subject of the external gaze (McNeill and Douglas 2011). However there appears to be consensus amongst consumer researchers that men are now just as important when exploring consumer, consumption practices in fulfilling identity desires (McNeill and Venter 2019, Hearn and Hein 2015, Bey 2014).

Such research literature inspired this study to proactively engage with males on how they perceive and react to body image media and experience masculinity through lived experiences. A good deal is known about the increasing number of males engaging in body transformation practices through existing research (Frank 2014, Bey 2014, Shilling 2012) and social, cultural trends of males adopting masculine identities to compensate for identity degeneration (Gough 2018b, Hakim 2018, Martin and Govender 2011). However, far less is known about the underlying conceptions males have on the importance of body image to sense of self (Grieve and Helmick 2008, Mittal 2006). For example we do not know the intricacies of the muscular male body and self-concept and how the two complement each other in perceptions of a masculine ideal.

It is envisaged exploring the role of the body in men's lives would help shed further light on embodied consumerism and the value males place on the body and its management in relation to self and identity. I was interested in discovering how males navigate through different expectations, norms and ideals concerning body image and masculine appearance and how these are negotiated to enrich self-ideals and identity.

### **1.1 Research aim and associated questions**

This study aims to identify the nature of embodied masculinity and how males interact and engage with marketing discourses to develop interpretations of body image ideals. The study examines male consumers' sense of body image and the consumption behaviours motivated by these perceptions relating to lived embodied experiences. Through the exploration I was keen to provide a nuanced understanding and deeper knowledge of the processes by which idealistic male body related conceptions and beliefs are diffused throughout modern consumer culture. The focus was to depict how perceptions shape experiences, motivations, preferences of the self-concept and dictate consumer practices in relation to embodiment. The research questions are devised in reflection to identified knowledge gaps and aimed at providing a better understanding of male embodied consumerism.

The central research questions explored in this study are:

**RQ1. What are the effects of the idealised muscular male body promoted through media on male consumers and how does this shape embodied consumer practices and perceptions of masculinity?**

**RQ2. How are body ideals mapped onto the male body through workouts and body image transformation?**

**RQ3. How do males associate body muscularity with self-regard and identity?**

**RQ4. What role does the fitness setting have on males and the enactment of masculinity?**

In answering the research questions the study attempts to develop detailed insights into how males interpret marketing communications of body ideals and how in turn this shaped their embodied motives to transform body image. Unlike previous studies I did not want to present a discourse analysis of marketing communications as such research had been undertaken. Conversely the focus is on the male consumer and the subjective experiences of male body shaping as a result of idealised images of muscularity and hyper masculine trends in marketing of the male body. The research intends to provide accounts of the lived experiences of the male body and its relationship with self-concept and masculine identity. Thus the research follows key actors through an experiential approach to provide an accurate representation of male embodied consumer's lives from those who take it upon themselves to transform their body image.

## **1.2 Research contributions**

Following the above line of enquiry the research has been able to offer important contributions to current knowledge and understanding of male embodied consumer practices to benefit male consumer research. Firstly through this study I have had the opportunity to bring together multi-disciplinary research and theories to form a cohesive account of male embodiment and its relevance to the lived male body experience. The framework of male body consumerism presented in section 2.2.4 formed an important achievement in mapping together defragmented knowledge to provide insights into male embodied consumerism (Frank 2014, Gough *et al* 2014, Shilling 2012).

This was followed by planning an insightful interpretive, qualitative study. Access to a local fitness club and groups of male trainers provided the opportunity to implement a purposeful, ethnographic approach to study male embodiment. The primary study involved participating in exercise routines with groups of male participants over 25 months. The fitness club where primary data was collected presented the environment in which body image beliefs were played out in shaping and exercising the male body to meet idealistic aspirations.

Through my personal expertise I was fortunate enough to be able to become an active participant researcher (DeWalt *et al* 1998), engaging in workouts and developing expertise in body muscle development. This facilitated the collection of rich data geared towards gaining intriguing insights into the lived male body culture (Clatterbaugh 2018, Bey 2014). Due to the relatively closed nature of male gym communities this has resulted in outsiders having limited access and only able to obtain a glimpse of the prominent subculture (Brewster *et al* 2017, Klein 1993). A number of existing studies have utilised undergraduate students as participants to identify male embodied experiences (Grieve and Helmick 2008, Frew and McGillivray 2005, McNeill and Douglas 2011).

In contrast this research has embraced the heart of the male fitness community using the fitness club to recruit various participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences, adding to the distinctiveness of this study. This has allowed me to capture the intricacies of relationships existing in a fitness club and the ways in which male consumers interact and engage with market discourses to inform body image goals. Such insights offer important contributions to limited consumer research in this area (male embodiment). My research emphasises the individual mediation processes undertaken by males in their understanding of the masculine body and their decision to undertake body transformation routines. Deconstructing such mediation processes (interpretation of masculine ideals, symbolic meanings of exercise routines, experiences of muscle development) is profoundly important as they remain unspoken in existing consumer based literature.

Understanding the male consumer is now paramount especially when considering the rise of consumption trends amongst males (Mitchell and Lodhia 2017b) and the greater focus on male body image (Fernández-Balboa *et al* 2018) which happen to be shaping male consumer's lifestyle choices (Lefkowich *et al* 2017). Respectively this study helps to offer valuable conceptual and methodological benefits to marketing and consumer research (Downey and Caterall 2006, Holt and Thompson 2004) as well as masculinity and social, cultural scholarly work (Gough 2018b, Bey 2014, Frank 2014, Crossley 2006).

Through the informative methodological approach and extensive findings yielded the research has been able to offer a number of theoretical contributions to existent knowledge and research on male embodied consumerism. This includes the significant aptitude of the muscular body image and its meaning to male consumers in defining perceptions of self-concept and identity. It is proposed the muscular body acts as an agent of self-concept and helps males define themselves and bring meaning to lifestyle choices and consumption practices. Due to the active participation with participants the research reported upon weight training routines acting as masculinising processes in which males could experience a sense of authentic masculinity and develop body satisfaction through embodied performances. However, the research also found how lack in body performance and not achieving body image goals became concerning for my participants acting a source of body dissatisfaction, whilst leading participants to question their masculinity.

The research offers important contributions in particular to consumer research related to body transformation projects (in chasing body ideals) setting the tone for consumption practices and how males interpret meanings from marketing messages. I argue although body ideals are socially constructed, the way in which they are interpreted and mapped onto the male body are rooted in self-actualisation processes. It was found only those participants who were determined to depict the value of the muscular body for self-benefit developed the resilience to pursue the journey long-term. The research also found the battle between meeting socially derived body ideals and overcoming natural embodied genetics resulted in varying levels of muscularity achievement and body image ideals being met. These insights offer important contributions to consumer researchers in helping to form a better understanding of male consumers in the ways in which body image aspirations play out and influence day to day experiences of the male body and masculinity. It was also seen how the quest to achieve body ideals shape consumer lifestyle choices and bring meaning to leisure activities and fitness regimes.

Through my personal experiences I have been able to appreciate the role of the muscular body in complimenting self (concept) and identity perceptions, whilst also providing a heightened sense of self and superiority over other males. Additionally the research helps grasp the nature in which masculinity is experienced by males in portraying the importance of fitness environments, peer groups and exercise regimes in representing authentic perceptions of masculinity. Such insights help us move beyond the social derived explanations of how the male body is physically shaped and experienced. The research findings also have wider implications relevant to both social and consumer research in understanding and creating new knowledge around how the masculine body is perceived and worked on by male consumers.

The following chapter considers literature and theoretical underpinning of this research. Both historical and more contemporary literature is considered to apprehend existing knowledge and understanding of; the male body, masculinity, contemporary embodied culture, self and identity to establish theoretical links to base research contributions on. By reflecting upon existing understanding of how the male body is understood to be a social phenomenon, research knowledge gaps are highlighted in conveying how limited knowledge is apparent of how social ideals are mapped onto the bodies of males entwined within body transformation routines.



## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reflects upon the existing knowledge and understanding of the male body and its relation to masculinity experiences and self-perceptions. The chapter initially introduces the phenomenon by looking at the dominant concept of the socially constructed body. This reflects upon the social themes present in existent literature, considering how it is argued body and its image are socially formed. The review also details how the male body and embodiment have been conceptualised through the rise of the 'body subject' theme in the literature.

The literature review then moves onto the consideration of how the male body performs in the context of consumer culture. Here it is debated how the increasing spotlight on the masculine body has manipulated consumption traits and consumer habits to adopt body image ideals. It is proposed how adopting a consumer culture theory lens, provides an insightful way to study embodiment practices conducted by males through a valuable cultural framework (Arnould and Thompson 2007, 2005). In order to capture the nature of lived experiences of the male body, masculinity is considered in section 2.3 to provide an overview of how the male body enacts masculinity through body identity and embodied performances. Finally, the chapter delves into marketing and consumer research by exploring the self-concept and identity and their relations to the male body.

### **2.2 Making of the male body**

It has been defined the body and gender identity is socially constructed with a number of authors arguing the ever-changing constructions of body and the embodied self are socially entwined (Vannini 2016, Larsson 2014, Kirk 2002, Crossley 1995, Turner 1984). This section provides an overview of how thinking of body and embodiment has developed in the major disciplines and how scholarly work has influenced our perceptions of the biological body transforming into a social creature. Initially the nature of the socially constructed body is studied by presenting views from leading theorists (Csordas 2011, Turner 2006, 1984, Shilling 2004, 1999) before delving into the notions of socially derived embodiment in consumer and cultural research (Patterson and Schroeder 2010, Ziguras 2004, Thompson and Hirschman 1998). In exploring the concept of the socially constructed body, I begin to set the scene for the subsequent literature on male body performance and its existence in cultural contexts.

### **2.2.1 Social constructed body**

Social construction is concerned with the ways in which society has conceptualised ideals and expectations of agents, discourses, entities and embryonic elements of the world (Gamson *et al* 1992). Looking specifically at the body Shilling (2004:12) proposed social construction is; *“the process of transforming a biological entity through social action”*. A number of theorists have argued the body is socially constructed based upon our own interpretations and knowledge that is socially derived (Larsson 2014, Reischer and Koo 2004, Fraser and Greco 2004, Synnott 1992, Turner 1984).

It is argued the body has no intrinsic meaning and consequentially people create their own meanings to reflect the cultural, socialised body (Synnott 1992). It is conceptualised the body is defined and evaluated very differently, whilst still being a significant phenomenon in the study of biology, anthropology and culture (Kimmel 2005). Early theorists such as Mary Douglas in Yu *et al* (2011:59) suggested: *“The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived”*. Such views have led to the belief the physical experience of the body sustained a particular view of society and more importantly there was a divide between the physical and material body (Lyon 1997). It has since been conceptualised the physical related to the scientific, biological study of the body and material was the social construction of the body (Streeck *et al* 2011).

### **2.2.2 Conceptualising Body and Embodiment**

To provide some context to the adoption of social body thinking it is important to define how body and embodiment have conceptually advanced through early theorists' contributions. Early work on conceptualising the body included philosophical anthropology, which is said to have adopted a preliminary understanding, portraying the organic nature of the body (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Here it was proposed man was an unfinished creature with human embodiment presenting a host of opportunities through socio-cultural and historical development to develop the human body (Honneth and Joas 1988). As knowledge and understanding grew, symbolic meanings of bodies came into the spotlight such as, the body seen as a surface upon which the marks of culture and social structures were inscribed through symbolic, ritual and decorative detail (Polhemus 1978). Lock (1993: 134) conceptualises classical anthropology has described the body as: *“A universal biological base upon which culture plays its infinite variety”*. Crucially this philosophical thinking alleged the physical body was experienced in social terms (Eichberg 2009).

Turner (2006) added social anthropologists offered substantial contributions to the thinking of the body, which in turn influenced sociological work where the body carried notions of symbolic representation. It is the contributions of social anthropology, which are particularly relevant to this study as the body is seen both objectively and subjectively and importantly considered to be the 'material infrastructure' of the production of selves and identities (Turner 1994). Subsequent cultural anthropology conceptualisations have taken a more open minded approach with Csordas (2011) implying how individualism and self is related to the body and unified with the body being an aspect of self. Focusing on the concept of embodiment related to experiencing the body it is the prolific work of Merleau-Ponty who implied the body was used to experience the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962a).

It was deliberated perceptions were engineered through experiences and hence the body is the natural self and the subject of human perception (Carman 1999). Merleau-Ponty (1962a:100) made a number of contributions in explaining body motives and behaviours such as body image being defined as: "... *bodily experiences built up by association to a total awareness of my posture in the intersensory world*" and "... *body image is a way of stating that my body is in the world*". These definitions clearly distinguished the body object, subject element and the experience of life in the social world. Crossley (1995:44) proposed: "*He [Merleau-Ponty] argues for an understanding of the body as an effective agent and, thereby as the very basis of human subjectivity*". It is regarded Merleau-Ponty helped influence the paradigm shift in the sociology of the body to a phenomenological derived stance (Crossley 1995), hence embodiment is not a theory, but a different way of thinking about and knowing human beings (Howson and Inglis 2001). Merleau-Ponty (2013: 18) describes embodiment as: "... *how we live in and experience the world through our bodies, especially through perception, emotion, language, movement in space, time, and sexuality*".

As the social body and embodiment thinking developed, it was deemed the phenomenology perspective did not apprehend the true extent of social discourses and structures apparent in the world (Frank 1991). Spurling (2013) believes the phenomenological understanding of bodies did not embrace the richness of social structure contexts in which bodies are regulated and lived. Frank (1991) profiles how sociology philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu offered more valuable contributions in social research through the additions of habitus and social structures (Entwistle 2015, Howson and Inglis 2001). According to Mellor and Shilling (1993), Bourdieu (1984ab) was able to widen the thinking of body/embodiment by introducing the context of social reality by world and body through the distinction of habitus and bodily practices.

Bourdieu's (1984ab) work on ways of being enacted by individuals and in turn beliefs associated with the make-up and presentation of embodied self in society are particularly important in this study. Brown (2006) usefully portrayed how Bourdieu's perspective into the body and gender experiences is valuable in that it makes connections between everyday practices associated with the gendered body and the symbolic worlds of image and discourses the body creates. According to Pinxten and Lievens (2014:1096) central to Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical framework is the concept of habitus relating to; "*a system of dispositions that guides people's choices and attitudes*". It is conceptualised habitus expresses itself in all domains of life including, aesthetic preferences, cultural practices, lifestyle choices and in ways of being, by shaping how individuals perceive the world and act in it (Power 1999). Lizardo (2004) argues how habitus is Bourdieu's way of explaining the regularities of behaviours that are associated with social structures including class, gender and ethnicity. It is argued individuals are socialised by their environment and in turn develop a similar habitus such as sharing similar lifestyles and social conditions (McNay 1999).

Bond (2002) defines how the concept of lifestyle can correlate to Bourdieu's concept of habitus, relating to how it can embody the lived conditions where individual practices and identities are formed. Correspondingly, it is defined how habitus is not only connected to the possession of economic or cultural capital but also encompass bodily and physical capital. In this sense habitus is regarded to contribute to the development of the male body and transforming into physical capital (Blond 2002). Existing research into fitness and gym habitus (Frew and McGillivray 2005, Tomlinson 2004, Wacquant 1992) has highlighted how socioeconomic status and gender play an important role in defining these contexts (Monaghan 1999). Skauge and Seippel (2020) deliberated the bourdieusian hypothesis of social class based meaning-making helps explain individual motives in sport practices. In the specific context of fitness environments it is proposed the socialisation amongst individuals produces particular ways of thinking and acting (habitus) which distinguishes those attending fitness locations from those who do not (Frew and McGillivray 2005).

Research by Skauge and Seippel (2020) found those who attended fitness clubs over an extended period developed culturally inherited values relating to ways of thinking about the body and health included in the habitus. The fitness phenomenon is also said to carry cultural meanings in terms of being a body-constructing scene for staging self-identity and building the body (Sassatelli 2010). Monaghan (1999) found bodybuilders developed meanings of muscular bodies, whilst the process of bodybuilding related to self-character development which outsiders could not relate to.

Monaghan (1999) elaborated interactions with other males resulted in types of muscular bodies being appreciated in terms of their visual impact. It is conceptualised the bodybuilding habitus becomes the basis of choice and structure of preferences and mind frame amongst those entwined within the subculture (Brewster *et al* 2017). The distinction is made that these ideologies of body presentation and ways of looking at male bodies develops over time in the bodybuilding habitus and eventually has an impact on self (concept) and identity motives (Frank 2014).

To help shed further light on individual's social positions Bourdieu introduced his theory of capital (Power 1999). Three forms of capital (social, cultural, economic) were distinguished to determine individuals power position in specific fields. Social capital according to Julien (2015: 356) relates to; "...a networked-based resource that is available in relationships". Ziersch (2005) usefully deconstructed social capital by stating how it relates to both cognitive (such as trust) and structural capital infrastructure (formal, informal networks). Furthermore Song (2011) conceptualised social capital refers to resources that are available in a social network. In relation to training within fitness clubs and body modification Crossley (2004) highlights how training is a form of symbolic interaction based on social networks individuals take meaning from in helping to inform body modification practices.

According to Bourdieu (1986) cultural capital exists in three forms; embodied state, objectified state and institutionalised state. The embodied state can comprise of elements such as skills, the habitus, posture and styles of interaction (Anheier *et al* 1995). Flemmen *et al* (2018) state it essentially refers to knowledge and culture as it is communicated through a person's mind. The objectified state is about material objects that act as cultural products associated with cultural capital. It is regarded an individual can acquire cultural capital through possession of such objects (Desan 2013). The institutionalised state of cultural capital is associated with recognised certificates such as education titles which grant an individual social prestige in specific cultural fields (Anheier *et al* 1995).

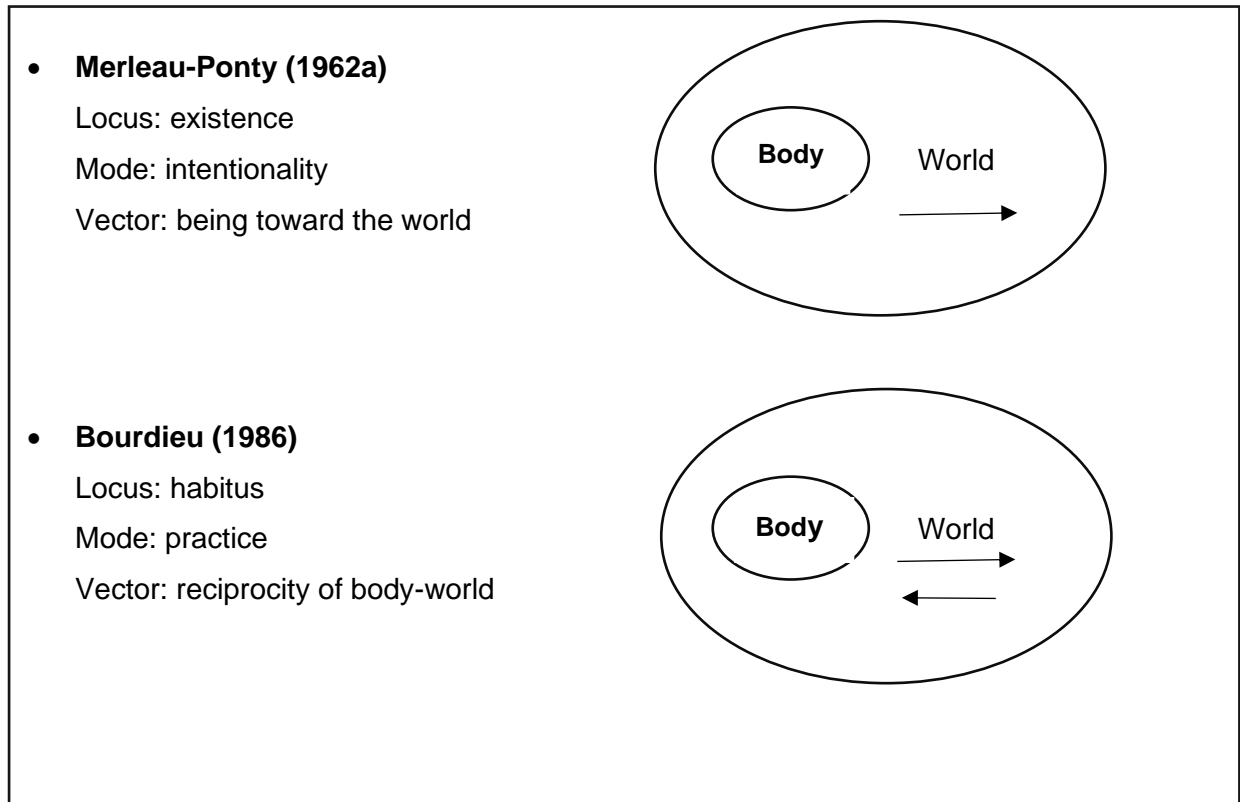
Male body image and masculinity have been studied in relation to cultural capital (Monaghan 2005, Frew and McGillivray 2005). It is deliberated the muscular body prevails as a cultural ideal through its visual representation and symbolic meaning associated with masculinity affirmation and perceived superiority (Connell 1987). Frank (2014) conceptualised due to the increased cultural attention given to the male body within popular culture, the circulation of desirable muscular body image has reached new heights. As a result the premium placed on body image ideals and their adoption have become increasingly desirable. Bourdieu (1984) advocates the male body is a form of capital which can be used to characterise social classification, status and masculine credentials.

Similarly Wacquant (1995) deliberated upon bodily capital to help distinguish the variety of ways in which bodies are evaluated in the sport of boxing. Frew and McGillivray (2005) also present the notion of the toned, muscular body encompassing physical capital which carries symbolic value in contemporary culture. Finally, economic capital can relate to individual assets and deeds which can be converted to money (Power 1999). Beasley-Murray (2000) portray how the dominant classes use their relative monopoly over economic capital to open doors to powerful positions and access to valuable social networks and organisations. It is argued such forms of capital provide the means of shaping lifestyle choices, cultural practices and occupations which ultimately develop the economic capital of individuals.

It is advocated possession of these forms of capital can determine an individual's power position in specific fields (Anheier *et al* 1995). Bourdieu (1984) referred to a field as a specific arena in social life where power dynamics are at play, which in turn makes certain individuals more adapted than others to act in the field and capitalise on opportunities (Connell and Mears 2018). Jenkins (1992) argues how the status of men in society is defined in relation to their access to the forms of capital. Commentators have also discussed the interplay between the different forms of capital (Pinxten and Lievens 2004, Powers 1999). It is argued that the forms of capital can be converted into one another, whilst the acquisition and use of a specific capital can be dependent on other forms of capital (Noble and Watkins 2003). In relation to the male body and fitness Frew and McGillivray (2005) analysed the concept of physical capital in health and fitness. By examining the value of the muscle toned body the authors identified the value of physical 'bodily' capital which was traded for distinction and symbolic value in the cultural field (health and fitness), where visual qualities are desirable. Frew and McGillivray (2005) argue the desire for physical capital is imperative for enhanced work opportunities, social and sexual relationships success. Furthermore due to the increasingly objectified male body image and visual imagery (Lefkowich *et al* 2017) the male body has become a commodity which is reproduced as a tradable asset carrying value in various fields.

To briefly summarise the prominent perspectives applied to body and embodiment studies it is stated within the dominant disciplines where body/embodiment thought has advanced three perspectives have been distinguished (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). The **phenomenology** stance is associated with the lived body as an experience investigating the individual embodied experiences. Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) advocate all people have a sense of embodied self, which is made up of the collective parts of body, mind, soul and self, whereby the focus is to look at the relations to each other.

The **social body** perspective is said to be related to the structuralism and symbolism value of the body and its role as a source and recipient of symbolism in the discourses of nature, culture and society (Kimmel 2008). Assad (1997) states this perspective explores the relations between natural and social worlds.



**Figure 2.1:** The study of body and embodiment (Adapted from Csordas (2011:138))

In this study it is important to consider these philosophical perspectives in helping to understand the male body and its value to self-concept and meanings of how embodiment practices are shaped by perceptions of the male body. Following a similar approach as previous studies (Crossley 2005, Monaghan 2002b, 2001), there has been an orientation towards Merleau-Ponty's (1962a) recognition of lived experiences of the body and Bourdieu's (1984ab) work on habitus and physical capital. As articulated by previous researchers (Shilling 2012, Sassatelli 2007) bodily practices such as working out and building muscle are socially entwined processes that are learnt by males. Such activities also involve consultation of cultural knowledge, participation in fitness regimes and attending fitness locations, which together are used to shape body performances and motives to transform body image (Clatterbaugh 2018).

It was deemed Merleau-Ponty's recognition of lived experience and Bourdieu's philosophical thinking on forms of capital important to apprehend how the male body is managed through its lived experience by males (Joy and Sherry 2003, Sparkes 1999) in experiencing masculinity (Lehman 2007) through its performative role (Edley 2017). These perspective were useful to help understand how the body supplemented male consumer lives, perceptions of self and live out masculinity beliefs.

### **2.2.3 Social construction of gender and masculinity**

Literature within the area of sociology (Addis *et al* 2016, Plummer 2016, Berger *et al* 2012, Leit *et al* 2001) and gender studies in reference to masculinity (Reynolds 2015, Coles 2009, Kimmel *et al* 2005, Connell 2002, 1995) have emphasised the socially constructed nature of embodied practices. Connell (1995) argued how body reflective practices within male embodiment were socially derived:

*“They [body reflexive practices] involve social relations and symbolism; they may well involve large-scale institutions. Particular versions of masculinity are constituted in their circuits as meaningful bodies and embodied meanings. Through body-reflexive practices, more than individual lives are formed: A social world is formed”.*

Connell (1995:64)

Notions of the socially constructed body have been of central importance to the construction of masculinities and gender (Larsson 2014, Lorber and Martin 2012, Connell 1998). In this area social construction refers to the slenderness, muscularity and physicality of the male body, which play a fundamental role in distinguishing masculinity from femininity (Plummer 2016, Hall 2015). The socially constructed body has also more generally been viewed as a process of considerable importance to understanding the constitution of modern (Turner 1984), consumer (Featherstone 1982ab), postmodern (Glassner 1989) and risk societies (Monaghan 2002b, 2001, 1999).

Looking at the ideology of social construction Stuart Hall (1985) provided a well-adopted ideology explaining the phenomenon. Hall's (1985) views on discourse and ideology distinguished these are directly concerned with expressing ideas about communication in relation to our thinking. Hall (1985: 78) states ideology can be identified as: *“... frameworks of thinking and calculation about the world”*. Furthermore, these ideologies appear in language as predicated by Hall (1985: 78): *“... in the domain of meaning and representation and in the rituals and practices of social action and behaviour that always occurs in social sites”*.



Correspondingly, social formations are a structure-in-dominance, with distinct tendencies and certain configuration. Applying this ideological thinking to body and embodiment Shilling (2004) proposed the body undergoes transformative practices to emphasise its symbolic social value. It is argued society and social roles play a central role in providing ideas, norms and constructions of bodies which adhere to norms of masculinity and femininity (Frank 2014, De Vega *et al* 2012, Streeck *et al* 2011). Reischer and Koo (2004) contend social structures and groupings hold values and attitudes of gendered body practices and consequentially, bodies are moulded to suit norms, which are regularly rewarded in society. It is also conceptualised lived experiences of the body are regarded to be about the body in the social context (Shilling 2012, Csordas 2011, 1994).

Conversely, cultural views also embody social thought and what is considered to be an ideal. Lorber and Martin (2012) provide a comprehensive insight into the socially constructed gendered body where they argue contemporary cultural notions of the body are viewed not only on the basis of visual appeal but also used to morally judge individuals. It is proposed individuals can be marginalised when their weight, height and overall body shape does not convey social norms of body ideals and consequentially be seen in lacking self-worth (Lorber and Martin 2012). The authors regard cultural views spread socially developed thoughts of various masculine and feminine bodies' ideals that rewards and punishes individuals in society. However, it can also be argued gender traits are now not necessarily carried by males and females. In cultural fields we now find males adopting perceived feminine like traits through metro-sexuality (Hakim 2018, Gough *et al* 2014) and the significant increase of women weight training to develop muscle tone (Land 2015, Green and Van Oort 2013).

This contradicts Lorber and Martin's (2012) claims, whilst encouraging further research to explore the motives and perceptions of male efforts to adopt physical masculine credentials in the context of resisting threats to hegemonic masculinity traits (Clare 2010, Connell 1998). Consequentially, this study explores perceptions of contemporary masculinity and motives to adopt a masculine body. Other notable work includes Shilling's (2012, 2004, 2003) prolific accounts of body and society, which provide deep insights into thoughts of the socially constructed human body and its implication on the study of embodiment and associated lived experiences. Shilling (2003) strongly argues the human body is not only constituted by physical properties, but also possess a range of social, moral and intellectual competencies, which are achieved by embodied being (Shilling 2004, 2003). The theme of embodiment has been adopted by Shilling (2012, 2004, 2003) throughout his publications that portray the socially constructed body as being a force of nature in the study of the body.

Shilling (2012) ultimately proposes how his theoretical contributions inform the properties of embodiment in the interaction of body and societal discourses.

The work of Featherstone (2010, 2000), Turner (2006, 2001), Joy and Venkatesh (1994) and Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (1991) similarly prescribe the socially derived human body and its appeal in distinguishing a socially approved identity. The theorists have elaborated upon accounts of the constitutive role of the body being the ultimate vehicle in forming identity, with the use of cosmetic surgery and other transformative processes. Featherstone (2000) proposes embodied culture has flourished through social adoption and in turn the body has been adapted to suit social ideals.

Turner (1984) believes embodiment is constructed through societies and cultures, which in turn allowed the body to be managed (Frank 1991). Sociologists in the field then expanded on these theoretical ideas with Featherstone (1991) discussing the societal role in the performing body and self. Here it was argued the body and consequentially self were manipulated to looking beautiful, which correlated to what was desired in society and being successful in modern life (Frank 2014, Gore and Cross 2011). Bordo (1999) added that males were susceptible to being drawn into culturally derived body image ideals that emphasised embodied beauty. As a result, it is stated males have adopted critical and conscious views of personal body image incarnations (Grogan 2016)

Furthermore, literature in the area of masculinity and male gender followed a similar line of thought by the prominent theorists. Connell (2002) and Kimmel, Hearn and Connell (2005) provide insightful passages into male embodiment, with conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity based on sociological principles relating to socially derived beliefs of the male body (Plummer 2016). Kivisto and Faist (2009) contended societies in western developed countries expected males to be authoritative figures; to be able to protect women and children. Consequentially, these beliefs were enacted through muscularity enhancement routines adopted by males to map the masculine ideal onto the physical body for self-actualisation and identity construction (Cohen 2016).

Commentators such as Gorely *et al* (2003) also discuss the concepts of physical culture (Hargreaves and Vertinsky 2007) and body transformation culture (Coquet *et al* 2016, Eichberg 2009, Gimlin 2002, Sassatelli 1999). Here it is proposed society and peer milieu provides the means in which masculinities are constructed for males to adopt: this then dictating masculine behaviour (Bey 2014). Research also prescribes both traditional and more contemporary masculinities are based upon social, cultural trends males find themselves in (McLaren *et al* 2015). It is argued masculinity is fluid, socially constructed and can change in different contexts to suit perceptions of what is considered ideal (Waling *et al* 2018).

More recent research on masculinity defines new dimensions of masculine traits (Messerschmidt 2019b, Hakim 2018, 2015). Orrells (2011) contends masculinity in the modern age presents the body having aesthetic pride through slenderness and muscle tone, which echo embodied cultural ideals. Cultural research also suggests new incarnations of masculinity are present in modern societies, which take cues from cultural changes in contemporary society (Hakim 2018, 2015). Commentators in this area also pose how hegemonic masculinity is under threat due to social, cultural changes in the landscape of modern day society and consequently, there is a so called crisis in masculinity (Waling *et al* 2018, Cohen 2016). This poses fundamental questions over the current state of masculinity adoption and threat to manhood amongst male consumers, whilst also considering the meaning of the male body to modern embodied consumer projects.

Moving on to marketing and consumer research in relation to the body, ideas formed about the construction of self and its enhancement deliberate upon the role of the body and embodiment in self-actualisation and identity setting (Patterson and Schroeder 2010, Ziguas 2004, Thompson and Hirschman 1995). In this research area it was found both phenomenological and interpretivist views discuss the self-construct being reactive to individual's perceptions and sociality based stimuli (Reed 2002). Theorists following the phenomenological view define the self-concept being fluid and reactive to an individual's motivational state and perceptions of agents and situational cues (Gore and Cross 2011, Marcus and Wurf 1987).

Similarly, the interpretivist conceptualisations also discussed the broader existence of human beings and experiential accounts of the body and embodiment (Belk 1988). Mittal (2006) believes the self-concept is entwined within social roles and in turn body identities and performances are manipulated to suit socially adopted ideals and understanding of phenomenon. Furthermore, Synnott (1992) advocated the body relates to the 'social self' indicating how the two are intertwined with body presentation being dictated by social discourses. In contrast, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson 2007, 2005) based research, where the majority of body consumer research appears to exist, delves into symbolic consumer practices. Here it is defined embodiment plays a prominent role in consumer practices and the nature of relationships between the consumer and marketing discourses (Patterson and Schroeder 2010).

It is conceptualised the body acts as a surface in which identity and project based transformations can take place through the adoption of mass marketed products and services (Askegaard *et al* 2002). This in turn allows individuals to encapsulate body image ideals heavily promoted through marketing communications (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Albeit limited in context, consumer research more generally deliberates upon (mainly female) body manipulation and embodiment to construct identities and preview idealised states of symbolically important images (Gore and Cross 2011, Joy and Venkatesh 1994). Groz (1994) argues the body has the dynamic qualities of being seen as a sign of systems, narratives and identity, which render it as a valuable marketing tool. Literature also suggests that body manipulation reflects a desired appearance (Patterson and Schroeder 2010) where the body and its surface is ascribed an exchange value and perceived to possess physical capital that can be converted to social and cultural capital (Shilling 2005).

Furthermore, as conceptualised by Featherstone (1991), as body images come closer to mimicking normalised ideals in the social field more their symbolic, embodied value increases. These perspective encourage a deeper exploration of cultural research on the body and the implications for self-concept, associated with how males interact with mainstream discourses to learn and adopt body images to fulfil masculinity desires and ideal self -perceptions.

#### **2.2.4 Implications for this study**

This section has highlighted how notions of social constructionism have played a significant role in the way in which body and embodiment are interpreted in the various disciplines. It is essentially proposed that the body is effected by society and therefore, it is not only biologically developed, but also socially constructed (Shilling 2012, Synnott 2002, Crossley 2001). Existing literature has made explicit the various aspects of the social constructive nature of the body and how masculinity and gendered identities are developed and expressed through the adoption of a masculine body (Hakim 2015, Frank 2014, Larsson 2014, Featherstone 2010, 2000, Turner 1984). However, there is limited research that has gone beyond discussing the implications of social construction on lived experiences of the body and the nature in which individuals interact with market discourses in shaping their bodies.

In this regard it is important to consider Merleau-Ponty's (1962a) recognition of lived experiences of the body, which similar studies (Crossley 2005, Monaghan 2002b, 2001) have defined as being paramount in understanding male body management practices. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus and physical capital is also important to this study due to the symbolic meanings body muscles carry in society and mainstream culture, as demonstrated in previous research (Clatterbaugh 2018. Frank 2014).

The subsequent section considers the performative role of the male body and its situated context whereby males are exposed to marketing discourses and subsequently engage in embodied practices. This offers important contributions to research as previous scholarly work has raised questions such as: is social construction the only plausible conceptualisation of the male body? Shilling (2012, 2003) briefly touched upon the idea of offering further explanations regarding the make-up of the body and identity. Consequently, this study reflects upon contemporary male embodiment practices and offers new explanations to aid our understanding of male body construction.

## **2.3 Performing Male Body**

This section presents a critical appraisal of embodiment with specific emphasis on performing the male body in its cultural context. The section defines the relationships between body, embodiment, consumer culture and consumerism relating to the ways in which the male body exists and is perceived and managed by males. The review draws upon a wide, diverse perspective of sociology (Vannini 2016) and consumer culture research (Maclaran 2015). It takes into consideration prominent theories developed on the subject of body culture (Wagner 2015) and associated male embodied practices (Hakim 2015, Gill *et al* 2005).

### **2.3.1 The male body spotlight**

Before delving into the realms of consumer culture it is important to distinguish the popularity of literature published on the increasing focus on the male body and its consumption value in the fields of social and cultural research. Sassatelli (1999) and Williams and Bendelow (1998) were keen to point out the need to study the male body in postmodernism and provide the attention male bodies deserved in the light of dedicated research on feminine body image. Subsequently, a distinctive rise on commentary on the male body and masculinity has occurred (Frank 2014). The work of Thompson and Hirschman (1995), Holt and Thompson (2004), Gill, Henwood and McLean (2005), Caterrall (2006) and more recently with specific relevance to masculinity; Fernandez-Balboa and Gonzalez-Calvo (2018), Hearn and Hein (2015) and Hall and Gough (2011) have brought the attention on to the male body including, masculine identities (Bey 2014) and associated male embodied consumer activities (Hill 2016, Neale *et al* 2016, Frank 2014).

Exploring the historical perspective of male body imagery, research commentators have proposed the male body has been transformed from bodies at work (Wienke 1998) to eroticised, idealised imagery showcasing the male body's aesthetical pride (Hakim 2019, Patterson and Elliott 2002). Gill *et al* (2005) believe over the past 20 years the way the male body is represented has changed to become objectified due to complex social and cultural evolution. The authors believe changes in gender relations, femininity and corrosion of traditional masculinity paved the way for the era of male body objectification and identity management. It is commonly agreed since the rise of metro-sexuality from the 1970's males have been encouraged to become conscious of appearance and body image (Murray and Touyz 2012, Elliott and Elliott 2005).

Media is also said to play an influential role in providing the vast imagery for males to compare themselves with popular culture and social ideals (Lehman 2013). Grogan (2006) deliberates with changes in the media portrayal of the male body and modern masculinity men have developed closer relationships with sense of self (concept), harbouring insecurities and dissatisfaction with body identity. It is believed the increased visibility of the male body has been dictated by males losing work (labour) identities and taking up leisure identities where the body plays a more active role in defining self through appearance (Monaghan 2016, Gill 2008).

Galli and Reel (2009) argue within the sporting profession of bodybuilding where the male body is on show was traditionally played out behind closed doors with a few spectators, whilst the rise of global media channels has exposed athletic bodies for males to aspire to. It is believed such exposure has objectified the male body to encompass muscle tone, shape and size as a set standard for idealised masculinity (Monaghan 2005). Frith and Gleeson (2004) advocate the disruption in masculinity and its meaning has been significant in the imagery of male body and the cultural shifts in the way men's bodies are seen. It is regarded the male body was perceived as a tool for labour, maintaining the masculine, breadwinner role pre 1970's era in western societies (Olivardia *et al* 2004). Conversely, the rise of the commodified male body which came into fruition as a result of femininity strides has engineered males to question masculinity and become distinctively aware of self-identity and expressive meanings of the male body (Gultzow *et al* 2020, Lehman 2013).

It is apparent male embodiment in particular has generated interest in the fields of sociology, psychology and men's health with a number of studies investigating objectification of the male body (Otterbring *et al* 2018, Dakanalis *et al* 2015) impacting on body dissatisfaction (Blond 2008), self-esteem (Elliott and Elliott 2005) and social norms (Hakim 2015, Hall and Gough 2011).

Patterson and Elliott (2002) studied male representations in advertising, arguing men are increasingly forced to view their bodies as sites of identity management. Consequentially, bodies are perceived as being the products of labour requiring use of commercial products to increase their marketing value (Roux and Belk 2016).

Hall and Gough (2011) portrayed the growing objectification of the male body by arguing how marketers and advertisers play on male consumer's insecurities with men's product/grooming market witnessing significant growth (Del Saz-Rubio 2019). It is also advocated males have become the target of appearance related insecurities previously experienced by women (Blond 2008, Kimmel 2008, Pope *et al* 2001). Gill *et al* (2005) implied bodies have become de-facto to the male sense of identity and self, as well as objects to be looked at and desired within consumer discourses. It has been argued there is a neglect of dedicated research investigating body image play for men (Gore and Cross 2011) and particularly devoted research on and about male bodies (Lefkowich *et al* 2017, Frank 2014).

### **2.3.2 Marketing of male body ideals**

Research has advocated how marketing messages of male body ideals have become dominant in encouraging males to work on their body image (Su *et al* 2020, Norton 2017, McNeill and Firman 2014). Commentators have argued advertising messages sexualise and objectify the male body (Sweta Chaturvedi *et al* 2014, Gardner and Davis 2013), whilst the bodybuilder image has become popular in portraying standards for males to aspire to (Elliott and Elliott 2005). Fernandez-Balboa (2018) found marketing of male body ideals were posing unrealistic body image aspirations of muscular males for ordinary men to fulfil masculinity and identity perceptions. Looking specifically at the contents of marketing messages Su *et al* (2020) highlight the mesomorph male body type (large, muscular) is commonly used by advertisers for clothing, fragrance and male grooming products. It appears such marketing traits have intensified with the rise of social media (Gultzow *et al* 2020), creating a platform for a vivid collection of extreme body image aspirations (Sweta Chaturvedi *et al* 2014). Norton (2017) indicated how the rising popularity of the muscular body on such platforms has set norms and standards for men to strive for.

More recently Palfreeman *et al* (2020:31) argued that males are now portrayed as metrosexual, yet still possessing impressive body shapes: *“As well as his eye-catching physical attractiveness and impressive muscularity, the mythical ‘new man’ who emerges from media culture is a successful professional, powerful and sure of himself, strong yet compassionate partner...”*

Furthermore, with particular relevance to body image, Palfreeman *et al* (2020:32) states: “*The male must now be able to display a body somewhere between that of Schwarzenegger and Beckham*”. Such commentary highlights the popularity of bodybuilder and sport personality image acting as inspiration for males (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015).



**Figure 2.2:** Dolce and Gabbana (2015)



**Figure 2.3:** Protein World (2016)



**Figure 2.4:** Men's Health (2018)

It is argued that marketing, as previewed in figures (2.2-2.4), has resulted in males adopting critical and self-consciousness views of body image constructs (Clatterbaugh 2018). Frank (2014) and Otterbring *et al* (2018) agree male consumers are being subjected to normalising body discourses and socially derived ideals that are related to perceived body beautiful and socially acceptable body image constructs. Furthermore, it is also proposed cultural fields such as sport represent cultural ideals and physically active embodiment related to the visibility of an athlete's sporting talent (Adams *et al* 2020, Widdop and Cutts 2013). This is stated to influence cultural norms including those related to masculinity and gender (Grogan 2016).



Similarly, music and Internet posted media are said to provide a rich tapestry for bodily image representations, as well as body behaviour in contemporary consumerism (Crossley, McAndrew and Widdop 2014).

Commonly referred to in media and cultural fields is the so-called rise of Spornosexuals (Hakim 2018), a term given to the new so-called breed of young males described by De Mar *et al* (2015:1068) as: *“Being beefier or well-built, concerned about their physical appearance, spend enormous time working out in the gym and consider their body as masturbatory aids”*. The term is stated to capture the combination of sportsman, porn star and the muscular body influences that 21<sup>st</sup> century males map onto their bodies. Hakim (2018) conceptualised the term signified a new articulation of masculinity that has begun emerging prominently within contemporary culture. Such trends and marketing communication traits appear to act as powerful discourses in driving males to develop perceptions of masculinity, whilst also setting standards for body image ideals (Simpson 2020, Gerrard 2019).

### **2.3.3 Male body and Consumer Culture**

It is argued that under the conditions of late modern culture where consumerism developed as a result of social, economic development (Featherstone 1991) the body has become *“objectifiable,”* to encompass a variety of meanings (Downey and Caterrall 2006:128). Thus the body has become laden with unprecedented high levels of physical and social value (Bey 2014). Consequently, it is advocated that bodies have been used to construct identity, whereby individuals are presented with a myriad of opportunities to construct their own embodied identities based upon body maintenance and the articulation of an outwardly more marketable self (Roux and Belk 2016, Frank 2014).

Correspondingly, sociological embodiment research (Shilling 2012: 70) suggested socio-cultural discourses play an influential role in body image development: *“The body is somehow shaped, constrained and even invented by society”*. From such a perspective it is apparent the body has taken a prominent place in the mind of consumers and society. Therefore, it is important to consider not only the sociological perspective but also appreciate the consumerism and self-element related to marketing body and self-concept (Mittal 2015, Sirgy 2015). When investigating embodiment and its role in consumer culture, it is evident the body and its interrelated image are intricately entwined within popular discourses, which are stated to influence consumer perceptions and beliefs relating to the body (Krishen and Worthen 2011).

Joy and Venkatesh (1994: 337) have highlighted the extent of embodied associations in popular culture, advocating the body as a possible source of cultural knowledge: *“Looking around us, we see the full force of marketing linking the body to numerous products and services - perfumes, fashion, clothing, dining, all kinds of sensual and pleasurable objects, exercise machines, fitness centers, dietary products, cosmetic surgical procedures and the like”*. Such studies illustrate the power of body culture (Featherstone 2010) and its significance in marketing, whereby representations of idealistic body images are portrayed prominently and intricately related to consumption behaviour (Otterbring *et al* 2018).

The prolific work of Featherstone (2010, 2000, 1999, 1991, 1982ab) has substantial relevance to this study relating to the context of body and culture. Featherstone (1999) discussed how social changes have created the environment in which the performing self has been nurtured to the ideology: looking youthful, fit and beautiful correlates to feeling good and being successful in modern life. Featherstone (2010) deliberates, consumer culture is fanatical about the body and its image, with a host of media emphasising idealistic body image of celebrities exemplifying the good life. It is believed this substantial marketing activity has shaped consumer culture to be dominated by body culture itself (Sirgy 2015 Hakim 2015).

Featherstone’s (2010) retrospective look at the growth in consumer culture captured the rise and expansion of consumer needs to new stylised appearances and copycat traits of those individuals gleaming on TV screens with desirable body aesthetics (Featherstone 2010). Featherstone (1982a: 22) earlier proposed: *“It is generally assumed that consumer culture asks people to take an instrumental attitude towards their bodies to scrutinize themselves for imperfections, to measure up to the ideal bodies presented in media advertising, the models, celebrities, and beautiful people of leisure”*.

In reflection to male embodiment in particular Featherstone (2010) cited the work of Atkinson (2008) stating men were following females and being drawn into the consumer culture derived body image ideals. Such research conveys how modern social trends and influences promote the unheralded value of the transformed male body. Subsequently, contemporary cultural trends appear to influence consumption behaviour amongst body image conscious males (Hakim 2018, Bailey *et al* 2017, Hall and Gough 2011).

Shilling (2013) highlights the importance of using Bourdieu's (1990) ideology of Symbolic Violence (SV) in understanding the highly visible body in modernity. He suggested employing the concept of habitus and capital and their relations to key aspects of masculinity. Ryan and Morrison (2009) believe acts of symbolic violence such as bullying appear to drive men to desire a muscular body image. This is based on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) view of how SV can refer to the imposition of the dominant system and values of masculinity. Edwards *et al* (2017) argue when men are exposed to dominant social narratives of what it means to be a man through comparisons, such experiences result in males perceiving they do not conform and question self-masculinity. Furthermore, it is conceptualised males are exposed to gendered (masculine) habitus and through comparisons and reinforcement in prominent fields, the norms form a male's perceptions and in turn body identity motives (Bourdieu 1990).

Monaghan (2008) has also deliberated upon SV in the context of the male gender and masculinity. He usefully conceptualises how SV is routinely enacted by social institutions in relation to health and wellbeing. The gym is used as an example to portray its existence as a location for health, fitness and wellbeing, although its residents and practices they are entwined within are not necessarily positively impacting on health (Robertson 2006). Monaghan (2008) found how the masculine habitus provided men with a rich legacy to defend hegemonic masculine status and resist threats prevailing in contemporary culture. Brown (2006) added men are likely to not challenge the status quo of masculine domination, conversely seek refuge within the dominant symbolic order. Such research inspired this study to explore concepts relating to gender experiences and masculine narratives associated with male embodiment practices and the gym habitus.

### **2.3.4 Male body in Consumer Research**

Reviewing literature in consumer research specifically on the male body and gendered consumerism, reveals how some knowledge and insights have advanced with the inclusion of sociological and anthropological understanding (Maclaren *et al* 2015, Bettany *et al* 2010, Borgerson 2005, Jagger 2000, Penaloza 2000). Holt and Thompson (2004) offered one of the few postmodern male body overviews of how understanding has developed in this field. The theorists believe consumer research began to change during the 1990's to include a broader range of consumer and consumption dimensions including, experience, symbolic meanings and how the self-concept and identity were maintained (Schiffman *et al* 2008).

Bettany *et al* (2010) similarly correlated the stream of gender, marketing and consumer behaviour research, which they state revealed further insights in gendered consumption. The authors referred to the work on gendered identity and consumption, namely Hirschman (1993, 1986) whom presented concepts on masculinist ideology in consumer research.

Conversely, consumer research briefly reported upon male consumption and masculinity derived consumer traits (Bettany 2010, Schroeder *et al* 2006, Otnes and Mcgrath 2001). Nevertheless, this is said to be under developed (Hall 2016), with research being descriptive and lacking the required depth to develop meaningful conceptualisations (Maclaran 2015). For example, the postmodern perspective argues that gender is fluid and identity can be altered to suit consumption ideals (Barber and Bridges 2017, Joy and Venkatesh 1994). Additionally, Caterall and Maclaran (2001) highlight the need to look beyond consumer research to help develop cohesive understanding of gendered consumption experiences and behaviour. More recent research proposed a significant opportunity exists for new insights into gendered consumption research (Hall 2016).

Subsequently, it was found contemporary gender consumer research has been subsumed into the phenomenon of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Bettany 2017, Firat and Dholakia 2017, Vannini 2016). CCT based research offers some valuable conceptualisations into embodiment practices (Firat and Dholakia 2017, Maclaran 2015, Gopaldas 2010); however, knowledge gaps still remain at the experiential level of how the male body is experienced in relation to the self-concept and masculinity. As a result, this study focused upon male body experiences and the exploration of lifestyle choices shaped by body image conscious males to help develop insights for male consumer research.

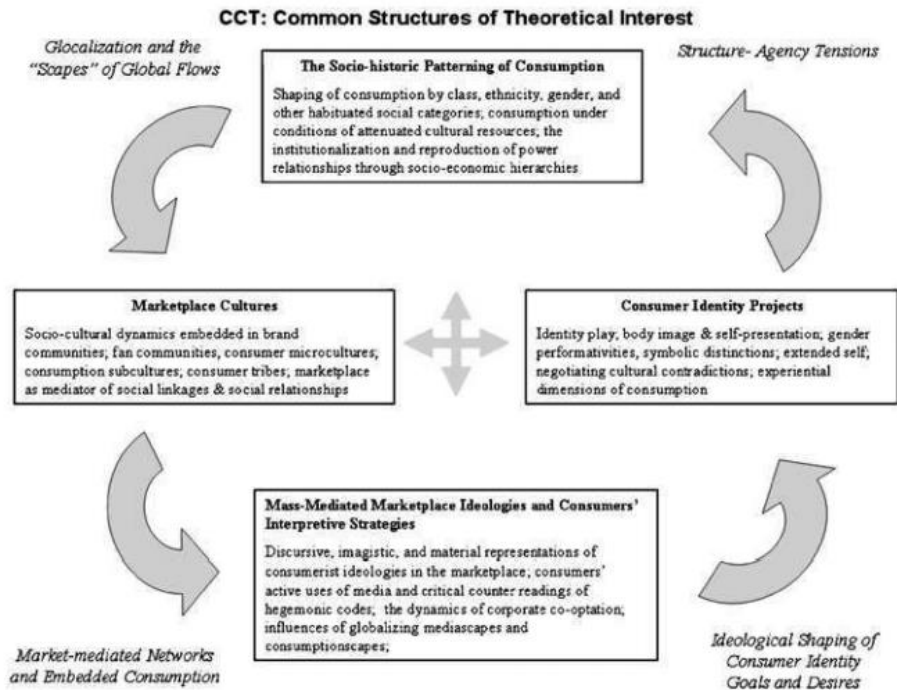
### **2.3.5 Consumer Culture Theory**

It is apparent consumer culture plays an intricate role in the way in which the male body is presented, the variety of meanings it possesses, as well as influencing its symbolic value and consumption processes (Fernandez-Balboa and Gonzalez-Calvo 2018, Featherstone 2010, Crossley 2006). The theoretical framework of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is fundamentally important here when considering its core principles and theoretical underpinnings (Arnould and Thompson 2005). CCT proposes in order to inherently understand consumption habits there is a need to investigate consumption within the contexts they exist and to investigate the full consumption cycle including acquisition, possession, consumption and disposition (Askegaard 2015).

Although there is no singular definition for CCT, Arnould and Thompson (2005: 869) propose, “CCT... refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings”. Correlating the principles of CCT to the present study there is a clear focus on a lived culture, embodied consumption and consumer lifestyles, which this study investigates.

Through the exploration of lived experiences of the masculine body to the symbolic meanings of habiting a muscular body and its social value, an insightful view was achieved by taking a CCT inspired lens in studying male embodiment. The purpose and rationale for CCT based research relates to grasping a better understanding of consumption and consumer behaviour within social, cultural contexts (Arnould and Thompson 2005). This is based on the ideology consumer agents exists in socio-cultural environments, which in turn play a key role in consumer behaviour and defining consumption traits (Joy and Li 2012). Arnould and Thompson (2005:871) propose: “Consumer culture theory explores how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals”.

This has many connotations to the study of male embodiment and in particularly body image representations, which inform consumer interpretations regarding self-concept, identity goals and lifestyles to aspire to, as seen through previous studies (Brewster *et al* 2017, Bey 2014). The CCT framework encompasses four distinguished clusters and related ‘interstitial linkages,’ which have common theoretical interest and interrelated dimensions to social sciences and cultural research (Arnould and Thompson 2007). As illustrated in figure 2.5 the framework considers a multi-dimensional perspective to capture a holistic understanding of consumption cycles and the nature of social, cultural discourses playing on consumption behaviour.



**Figure 2.5:** Consumer Culture Theory framework by Arnould and Thompson (2007: 10)

In this instance only those components of the framework which are wholly related to this research are elaborated upon, as a description of the entire framework is outside the scope of this review.

Primarily, it is the consumer agent construct of **Consumer Identity Projects** which provides inspiration for this research. This evolves around consumerism and consumer behaviour correlating to a distinct individual focus (Askegaard 2015). The construct and its interstitial linkage (*Ideological shaping of consumer identity goals and desires*) draw upon the relationship between the consumer and the marketplace and the co-constitutive, co-productive ways in which consumers define themselves and construct narratives of identity and sense of self (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Consumer identity projects helps to deconstruct the nature in which male participants in this research interact with marketing discourses and develop a muscular body image. By exploring these insights, relationships with masculinity and the male body were also distinguished amongst participants to unravel the ways in which identities are shaped through consumption trends and lifestyle choices.

Secondly, ***Mass-mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers' Interpretive Strategies*** investigates the influence of the media on consumer culture make-up and meanings derived from marketing messages (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The construct explores media theory as well as marketing communications, such as what messages does the commercial media distribute regarding consumption and how do consumers make sense of these messages and formulate beliefs and actions? This domain was used to apprehend the interpretive meanings male participants adopt from promoted body ideals and how this complements perceptions of masculinity and self-ideal. Marketing messages of male body ideals that participants found to be influential in shaping their aspirations were considered. Such discourses were used to question participants concerning the influential power these communicated and the interpretive meanings the individuals proceeded with in shaping their beliefs and desires.

The subsequent domain explores the context of the marketplace. ***Marketplace Cultures*** is said to focus on consumer behaviour of activities associated with market engagement and how consumers develop cultural communities and sub-cultures through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Arnould and Thompson 2005, Belk and Costa 1998). The construct and its interstitial link (*Market-mediated networks and embedded consumption*) centre upon behavioural dynamics and how consumers play an active part in culture production as opposed to simply being culture bearers (Bajde 2013, Joy and Li 2012). Although this was not entirely adopted in this research, the contextual variables were considered.

The fitness club was analysed in terms of its institutional presence effecting participant's behaviour and perceptions of masculinity. The wider culture of bodybuilding was also considered, as to how its global presence inspires males to work on body image and its role in distributing knowledge of embodiment practices.

The final construct, ***Socio-historic Patterning of Consumption*** considers the broader cultural influences on consumption including the underlying institutional and social structures, whilst studying their relationship with consumer's experience(s). It is regarded in liberated social contexts, consumption is used to anchor identities (Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005). Due to being outside of the scope of this study, this was not studied in its entirety, instead the enactment of cultural knowledge of the male body and working out was considered in managing consumer identities and lifestyle choices. By adopting such an approach, the research is able to develop a sense of how the enactment of culture and embodied consumerism are entwined and shape embodied consumption trends (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

From a broader perspective, CCT is used to help investigate the cultural underpinnings of the muscular body and working out in a fitness setting to gain a desired body image. This was studied via the role of my participants as 'cultural agents' who inhabit specific ideologies and meanings regarding body image ideals, which are used to inform their perceptions of self and identities that have been filtered and elaborated through popular culture (Brewster *et al* 2017). According to CCT based research, it is proposed the four structures allow CCT to provide mid-level theoretical contributions that link macro-level socio-cultural forces to micro-level actions (Askegaard 2015). Specifically, it helps understand consumer behaviour traits by exploring the interplay between consumer agency and cultural structuration (Joy and Li 2012). This is an important contribution for this study to make, regarding how male participant's behavioural traits had been established and the influence of the male fitness and bodybuilding culture play on shaping consumption traits.

The application of CCT in previous cultural studies can be seen in the work of Cova *et al* (2013) who remarks the study of mythologies, ideologies, discourse and meaning in shaping consumers' engagement is a central thrust of CCT. Kozinets (2008) added CCT attempts to unravel the processes through which conditions harmonise into particular consumption ideologies, discourses and ultimately influence consumer narratives, identities and actions. In effect it was argued that consumer ideologies go hand in hand with cultural dynamics in that ideas and thoughts are proposed to consumers to interpret and act upon in order for these ideas to become a desirable cultural resource (Thompson 2004).

In applying Thompson's (2004) thesis according to existent research (Bauman 2013, 2005, Featherstone 2010, 1999), gaining a particular body image is cultural in terms of the ideologies, myths and discourses shaping consumers' understanding of specific body image type. Furthermore, the two related CCT domains, Consumer Identity and Socio-historic Contexts are particularly relevant in this study, as they help gain an understanding of the processes through which particular body images came to be desired. Using the ideology underpinning Consumer Identity Projects and Socio-historic patterning of Consumption and the interplay between the two (*Structure-agency tensions*) the consumer agency (male participant), marketing (discourses of body ideals) and broader socio-cultural forces (fitness, bodybuilding culture) were explored in the process of making meaning of the muscular, masculine body. These findings add substance to identifying the dynamic processes of how a muscular body image becomes meaningful and productive of desired social relations and identities for male consumers.



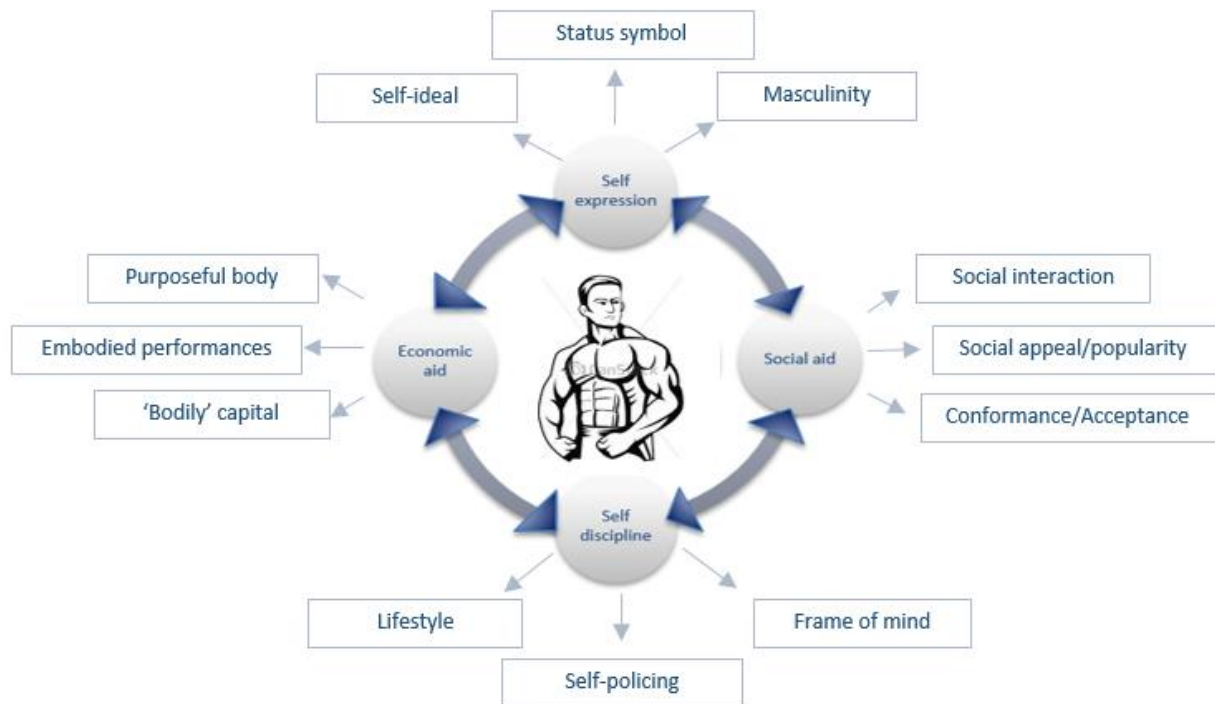
In essence CCT provides a purposeful framework to ground the study by helping to gain a deeper understanding of consumer beliefs and developed ideologies regarding body image transformation. The male consumer is at the heart of this research to which CCT is able to focus in on and offer a useful guide to help deconstruct the relationships with the muscular body.

### **2.3.6 The concept of Body Consumerism**

The section has so far captured the high profile role of the masculine body in consumer culture and its increasing consumption value orchestrated in the socio-cultural field and consumer research. Considering the cultural influence on embodied consumer practices, it is important to harmonise existing understanding and develop new consolidated perspectives. This will help to progress with male consumer research in what remains an under-developed field, as conveyed by sociological research (Gough 2018a, Shilling 2012) and consumer researchers (Downey and Catterall 2006, Tuncay 2006, Thompson 2004).

Existing research prominently proposes the need to consolidate existing knowledge and understanding of lived consumer experiences of the body (Bendelow and Williams 2002) to inform and develop frameworks in articulating new insights of embodied consumer practices (Bey 2014, Shilling 2012, Gore and Cross 2011). As a result, the concept of Body Consumerism (figure 2.6) has been established. The framework primarily captures the academic interest and contributes to knowledge in reference to the male body being an increasingly central focus of lifestyle choice and helping to fulfil perceptions of contemporary masculinity (Bailey *et al* 2017, Roux and Belk 2016, Hearn and Hein 2015).

The Body consumerism conceptual framework has been developed to illustrate consumer motives for engaging in embodied practices, providing rich insights into the lived male body experiences in contemporary culture. The framework relates to male consumer activities, where the body plays an active performative role in enterprise practices such as leisure activities and self-management. These are inherently consumer based activities and not necessarily related to consuming product and services alone, hence the reason why a consumerist ideology has been adopted. The framework distinguishes the inter-relationships between different dynamics of the lived experiences of the masculine body and the role of market discourses involved in forming, manipulating and maintaining these lived experiences. As stated by Bendelow and Williams (2002), it is these intricate relationships that help to form a picture of the distinguishable role of the body to modern day man (Waling *et al* 2018).



**Figure 2.6:** Body Consumerism framework

The defined constructs as illustrated in figure 2.6 frame male consumer's engagement with body transformation activities, thus gaining rich insights into consumer embodiment behaviour. It is proposed body consumerism cannot relate to a single purpose or distinct benefit.

In essence it can involve a constant negotiation of multiple ideologies depending upon the priorities and social context the consumer and consumption is entwined within, whilst each of the ideologies share characteristics. The Body consumerism framework considers the transformative project based efforts on the masculine body (Griffiths *et al* 2016, Bey 2014), which permeate the interaction with market discourses in the quest to achieve physical body capital (Gough 2018b, Frank 2014, Shilling 2012). The framework defines four ideological constructs relating to body image transformation and the beliefs male consumers carry in enhancing their body image to gain both pleasurable (hedonic), social and economic benefits.

The framework harmonises the popular research interest of the male body and its associations to identity and self-management to portray the distinct male consumer motives for engaging in embodied practices and the symbolic meanings these possess for males (Hakim 2018, Hearn and Hein 2015).

By consolidating existing research, the framework attempted to fill the gap in research by cohesively presenting the myriad of meanings and purposes the masculine body poses for male consumer research. Such insights will help provide a constructive understanding of modern consumer culture, associated with embodied consumption and relationships between men, masculinity, body and self (Roux and Belk 2016, Hill 2016, Gore and Cross 2011).

The body consumerism framework utilises CCT principles, by exploring the underlying male consumer beliefs and attitudes towards body image ideals and how these inform consumer practices. Furthermore, the social, cultural contexts are also captured by investigating key influences in the processes of how male consumers embrace body consumerism. The framework highlights the cultural myths and meanings that apply to body image choices and having certain body aesthetics. This is based on the premise that the male body is not a stable entity, but is seen to possess certain qualities, functionalities and benefits whilst imbued with meanings as posed by Cova *et al* (2013).

#### **2.3.6.1 Self-expression**

The self-concept is prominent in consumer research (Claiborne and Sirgy 2015), whilst also having associations in the study of male embodiment (Gore and Cross 2011). The ideal self-image relating to how consumers would like others to see them is regarded to compromise traits or characteristics that an individual believes is his duty to possess (Solomon *et al* 2004). Evidently, it is apparent the body and its respective image play a significant role in the way consumers define themselves through self-identity and body aesthetics, which fit with an ideal self-image (Otterbring *et al* 2018).

Gill *et al* (2005) presented the idea of how the male body becomes objectified and not only represents an attribute of oneself, but also symbolises a personal product to be desired in the form of an idealistic body image. The correlation of embodied relationships with self-construct can be further explained through research studies such as, Downey and Caterrall (2006) who focused on the significance of body image articulation in postmodern culture, highlighting the importance of the body as a personal resource, which acts as an indicative marker of an individual's self-identity (Grogan 2016). Furthermore, Featherstone *et al* (1991:171) conceptualised the body expressing wealth: *"A vehicle of pleasure; it is desirable and desiring and the closer the actual body approximates to the idealised images of youth, health, fitness and beauty the higher its exchange value"*. As a result, it can be conceptualised the male body and its image can be used to carve out idealistic notions of an enhanced self-identity and for males to portray an alpha male status through masculine features the body possesses (Brewster *et al* 2017).

Holt and Thompson (2004) argue males have suffered feelings of anxiety regarding their masculine identities during social and economic changes. This has led to '*compensatory consumption*,' described as body focused activities associated with reaffirming traditional masculine identity (Holt and Thompson 2004:425). The strong connotations between body image and self-concept amongst male consumers, illustrates the desire to manipulate the body for self-development, capturing the perceived positive benefits males achieve through an idealistic body image (Eisenberg and Neumark-Sztainer 2015). The self-expression construct provides a realistic explanation of how male consumers perceive and utilise body image to enhance and/or change perceptions of self.

### **2.3.6.2 Social aid**

Within consumer culture the male body is regarded to act as a source of symbolic capital, with emphasis on body appearance, as opposed to what the body can actually do (Grogan 2016, Hakim 2015, Giddens 1991, Featherstone *et al* 1991). Consumer culture theorists suggest body and its appearance are socially attuned to cultural contexts and carry significant weight in influencing social acceptance and appeal (Frank 2014). Grogan and Richards (2002) and more recently Friedman (2013) and Otterbring *et al* (2018) outline how men now live in a society that puts increasing emphasis on form and fitness. The existence of social pressures is also noted by Tkarrde (2003) in the form of stereotypes and powerful codes of conduct that enshroud and dictate masculinity.

Social norms such as being strong and capable are said to be prevalent in contemporary culture and set expectations for males to present these attributes through appearance (Fabris *et al* 2018, Gough 2018a, Cohen 2016). Consequently, marketing research investigated the effect of idealised male body images displayed through the media on male consumers (Gore and Cross 2011, Mcneill and Douglas 2011, Schroeder *et al* 2006). Such research signifies men are now aspiring to adopt muscular, toned bodies that act as benchmarks for masculinity and self-identity expectations. It is also apparent male muscularity portrays a heightened sense of masculinity in social contexts (Lefkowich *et al* 2017, Monaghan 2002b). Elliott and Elliott (2005:4) suggested: "*Men have become pre-occupied with muscularity because it is still perceived as a cultural symbol of masculinity*". Crawshaw (2007) stated within late modernity the muscular body has become prevalent, with male health and well-being expressed through popular discourses.

Monaghan (2002a) outlined how males are being subjected to normalising body discourses, which depict body beautiful and socially acceptable image constructs. These views are echoed by Grogan (2016) and Blond (2008) who argue, male body dissatisfaction appears to increase after exposure of athletic male bodies in popular culture. The social body construct emphasises the rise of the exposed male body and its social value, by defining the growing trend of male consumer's attempts to adopt body image ideals, which adhere to social expectations and popularity beliefs (Frank 2014). The muscular, toned athletic body is believed to be sought after, because this embodied state plays a prominent social role in signifying social wealth, as well as being a striking attribute in engaging with social actors (Cohen 2016). With the rise of social media phenomenon, there is now a tendency for consumers to adopt the idealised body image and expose this through the various online platforms to gain social recognition and increase self-appeal (Gultzow *et al* 2020, Lonergan *et al* 2019).

#### **2.3.6.3 Economic aid**

Bourdieu's (1986) prolific work on the concept of physical capital is particularly relevant when considering the economic role of the masculine body. Physical capital is the term used to relate to embodied states, which are reproduced as tradeable assets carrying significant symbolic value within consumer markets (Bourdieu 1986). Such an ideology can help explain the toned body's value as an economic resource for many males involved in physical labour, including those in sport and recreation (Farred 2014). Research correlating to the occupational body value, signifies the entwined nature of physical embodiment and employment.

For example, McDowell (2009:8) highlights the significance of the purposeful body to economic viability by conceptualising: *"A well-groomed, preferably slim body, produced through exercise... is seen as an essential requirement of many, if not most, forms of employment"*. Furthermore, Monaghan (2002a, 2002b) explored masculinist body performances, whereby an individual's bodily capital is transformed into an economic resource. A key point raised by Monaghan (2002a: 409), depicts the essence of the economic body construct proposed here: *"The exercised and dieted (muscular) body, while multi-faceted, imparts to the individual body a set of gendered working-class abilities liable to produce value..., in the form of income and masculine-validating recognition"*.

Monaghan (2002a) presented the case of males utilising personal body attributes (muscularity), to fulfil an occupational role where a male can make use of the multi-faceted body and offer embodied services. The concept of body capital is also apparent in sport, whereby athletes nurture a high performing, optimised body (Farred 2014, Magdalinski 2009).

Wacquant (1995:66) proposed professional boxers can be seen as: *“Entrepreneurs in bodily capital,”* which the gym and training provide the social machinery to convert the abstract bodily capital into; *“Pugilistic capital”*.

A distinctive relationship appears to be existent between male embodiment and employment, with waged work increasingly involving and dependent upon embodied performances, including the appearance, body shape, sociability and in essence the bodily presentation of self (Gough 2018b, McDowell 2009, Hancock and Tyler 2000). It can be argued that the conspicuous role of embodiment in employment can characterise the nature of transformative processes undertaken on the male body to meet expectations of corporate work identities relating to various occupations an individual decides to capitalise upon (Otterbring *et al* 2018). In sport it is the athletic toned body, which is synonymous with high performance, achievement and success and can be interpreted as wealth derived from these bodily attributes (Coquet *et al* 2016, Silva *et al* 2010). Conversely and more apparent in modern culture is the social media derived trait of enterprising individuals creating video blogs and marketing their idealised male body on the online marketplace (Gultzow *et al* 2020). This then attracts a significant amount of online followers, which raises the ‘body stars’ profile, bringing marketing and sponsorship opportunities for the individual (Franchina and Coco 2018).

#### **2.3.6.4 Self-discipline**

When investigating the variety of cultural fields and discourses, it becomes apparent there are a number of culturally sanctioned experts and body health advice about healthy eating habits and subtle social pressures to conform to an idealistic male body image (Grogan 2016). Crawshaw (2007) proposes men’s health is highly perceived and very popular amongst research and policy agendas. These views stem from Featherstone *et al* (1991: 174): *“Within such cultures, individuals are increasingly constructed as active consumers of health; as responsible citizens with an interest in, and a duty to maintain, their own well-being... yet also to construct a socially appropriate and acceptable body form”*. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) presented a poststructuralist model of the socialised body referring to Foucault (1980), through the ideology of taking control by accentuating self-policing and social regulation to manage personal meaning and anxieties. The self-disciplined body construct here highlights the consumerism traits, whereby male individuals discipline themselves and their bodies to control consumption habits and nurture an aspirational body image (Fabris *et al* 2018, Gough 2018b).

Supporting this proposition, it is argued in the postmodern era the disciplining of the body and self is instilled within consumer society and punishment is met if the individual dithers away from the norm (Eisenberg and Neumark-Sztainer 2015, Krishen and Worthen 2011). Thus, disciplining of the male body is self-induced but heavily mandated by the social, cultural contexts and cultural knowledge is used to shape the natural body to a desired state (Brewster *et al* 2017). This is believed to dictate regimes of strict diets and exercise programmes to body image conscious male consumers (Edley 2017). In a practical sense, this can be interpreted as embodied practices relating to adopting particular lifestyle choices through; exercise regimes, training programmes, diet, posing self-control and disciplining self.

This results in embodiment becoming a 'frame of mind' for the male consumer in the quest to develop satisfying body aesthetics through hard work, a high level of discipline, which will ultimately yield social benefits and avoiding fears of invasion and loss of: "*bodily identity*" (Boni 2002:475). It can be advocated body maintenance and transformation has become a moral obligation for male consumers (who chase body ideals), effecting lifestyle choices, consumption behaviour and product and service choices (Gough 2018a, Leftkovich *et al* 2017).

By bringing together research on the male body and embodiment, it is valuable to establish the current knowledge and understanding, whilst more prominently identifying where gaps are still apparent. From consolidating the literature, it was illustrated sociological literature embarked upon the social context of conveying the social appeal of a muscular, lean body. What was absent was the individual perspective as to how a male comes to apprehend the social appeal of the male body and attempts to develop a muscular image. Furthermore, the muscular body encompasses various dimensions and purposes, as seen through its self-concept defining role and economic importance. Consequently, it is important to understand the relationships men have with their bodies and whether they perceive them as having various roles relating to self-regard, employment and social capital. By collating existing research together, important lines of research enquiry were identified, which the study followed through the primary study.

### **2.3.7 Implications for this study**

This section has presented a cohesive account of the relations of the male body and its performative role in contemporary consumer culture. The research has distinguished how the male body interacts with culture to co-create the male body image. Through the exploration of existing literature, it has been identified that it is not only important to consider the sociological perspective but also appreciate the consumerism and self-element related to marketing body images and the self-concept (Mittal 2015, Sirgy 2015).

It has been discovered that existing consumer research into male embodiment and masculinity is under developed (Hall 2016) and lacking depth (Maclaran 2015). Consequently, this study has captured a valuable theoretical lens, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), to help understand male embodied consumer practices and develop new insights to contribute to male consumer research. I was able to use the principles of CCT to explore how ideologies, mythologies and discourses influence consumption of male embodiment ideals and how that impels working towards and obtaining an idealised body image. Such insights allowed me to deconstruct male consumer practices relating to body image management and the lived experience of masculinity and the male body.

The study has also followed the advice of embodiment theorists and commentators (Shilling 2012/2004, Bendelow and Williams 2002) to synthesise existing knowledge and understanding of male embodiment and to develop new perspectives by utilising multi-disciplinary research. As a result, the body consumerism framework is able to offer a rich insight by mapping together the key body transformative motives and practices, where the body plays a primary role in shaping male consumers' lifestyle choices. The framework comprehensively informs how the masculine body is a rich source of consumer and cultural knowledge. Beyond the framework, enquiry-based research can explore the lived culture of male consumers who pursue such embodied practices. The section has highlighted the significance of masculine body experience and how men enact their masculinity beliefs. As a result, the proceeding section presents a critical account of masculinity and its relevance to the study of male embodiment.



## **2.4 Acting out masculinity through the male body**

This section seeks to introduce the notion of masculinity and gendered experiences in supplementing knowledge of male embodied experiences. It profiles the construct of masculinity and the various associated theories. The role and value of male embodiment is defined to illustrate the significance of the body to masculinity and its role in presenting hyper masculine traits amongst male consumers. The section also delves into media and its portrayal of masculinity trends in popular culture and the consequential impact on contemporary masculinity portrayal.

Scholarly research in the area of male gender has revealed a range of literature on masculinity and its role in men's lives (Cohen 2016, Grogan 2016, Coles 2009, Lehman 2007, McKay *et al* 2005). The literature contains a wide range of research mainly in the psychology domain, which is regarded as the evolving field where advancements have developed (Murnen and Karazsia 2017). However, it is also argued the study of masculinity is multi-disciplinary (Kimmell *et al* 2004) with influences from anthropology (Johnson 2005) and health (Lehman 2007). Within these disciplines it has been seen that the gendered role and its meaning in social hierarchy, power, dominance and men's health and wellbeing are explored.

### **2.4.1 Masculinity**

Initially, looking at the concept of masculinity Carrigan *et al* (1985: 552) defined it as what men do to maintain their dominance and as a: "*A configuration of practices*". It is also proposed masculinity relates to the diverse ways in which men style themselves as men (Parent *et al* 2016, Kimmell and Messner 2005). Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) argue the term has many inconsistent definitions, which they attempt to clarify by proposing that if males intend on maintaining their dominant gender group, they must portray ownership of a masculine self. Others relate masculinity to behavioural traits related to competencies to exert control or to resist being controlled (Jewkes *et al* 2015).

A wide range of masculinities are presented through respective research. Formal definitions posit that masculinity centres on behaviours, male attributes and distinctive male roles (Edley 2017, Lehman 2007, Bordo 1999). It is publicised masculinity is socially constructed although it harbours both socially defined and biological attributes (Gill *et al* 2005, Carrigan *et al* 1985). This offered an important line of enquiry for this study in identifying how male participants perceived masculinity and how the male body is used to express masculinity.

Connell (1995, 1990) treats masculinity as a form of collective male practices, which are used to harbour links with heterosexuality and dictate behavioural traits. Connell (2000, 1995) believes it was how manhood is enacted by males. Respectively, this research investigates practices to discover how masculinity beliefs are shaped and influenced by discourses, whilst also paying attention to the lived experiences of masculinity. It is argued masculinities are used to display manliness and fulfil perceived roles of traditional masculinities, as well as more contemporary interpretations (Murnen and Karazsia 2017). These are said to be based upon the social, cultural milieu males find themselves in (Connell 2000).

Subsequently, Coles (2009) suggests masculinity is acknowledged to be fluid, socially constructed and undergoes change over time in accordance with historical and cultural phases. However, it is stressed there is little discussion on the strategies men employ to negotiate masculinities in their everyday lives (Pringle 2013, Coles 2009, Kimmell *et al* 2004). Obtaining access to male participants, this study was able to explore the lived experiences of male bodies and how masculinity is perceived and enacted through participant's behaviour and body image shaping routines.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) defined how masculinity research had posed distinctive gender culture phenomenon relating to the varying degrees of masculinity experiences. Messner *et al* (2005) amongst others recommend investigating the intricacies of the interplay of masculinities that exist in men's lives. According to Coles (2009) there is limited theoretical propositions of how masculinity exists in men's lives, which he attempts to portray by utilising Bourdieu's (1986) work on the structure/agency divide and specifically how individual practices are influenced by agents in daily lives. Coles (2009) introduced a field of masculinity, capturing the various interplay and contextual motivations for the demonstration of power and dominance to reaffirm male positions in society.

What appears to be distinctive in these theoretical perspectives (Coles 2009, Kimmell *et al* 2004) is the recognition of masculinities being recognised as sets of social practices adopted by men within the wider gender structure. This stance was regarded to help recognise the role of institutional embedding of gendered power dynamics, in addition to men's sense of self influence on both physical image and behavioural constructs (Jewkes *et al* 2015).

The prominent theorists of masculinity (Connell *et al* 2005, Connell 2005, 1995, 1987) argued the need for further research on social embodiment, localised patterns of social interaction and the conflicts and difference of opinions in the construction of gendered identities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, masculinity theorists have been criticised for conceptualising upon power dynamics on notions of class and structure, utilising traditional Marxist thinking (Pringle 2005).

Accordingly, Pringle and Hickey (2010) believe a more contemporary, post-structural view should be adopted, whereby masculinity is related to how people read bodies as expressive constructs. Subsequently, the relational and performative elements of masculinity were explored. Pringle and Hickey (2010) proposed Giddens's (1991) view on self and identity conceptions, linking masculinity as an expressive way individuals portray and narrate their identity and self-concept. Similar to Giddens (1991), Pringle and Hickey (2010) agree masculinity construction is delicate, lacking coherence and fundamentally changeable due to the changing contexts and discourses that play on identity and gender power relations.

As can be seen there are wide, varied views of what masculinity is and how men relate to their gendered self. In this study due to the close scrutiny of the male body, the research focused upon how masculinity is performed using the male body and how masculinity is enacted through performative actions. As such this research considered Franzoi and Shields (1984) interpretation that masculinity is often construed as independent, competitive and physically dominant. In order to develop further insights this study explores how male participants characterised their perceptions of masculinity. This is undertaken by witnessing how the male body is manipulated through engagement in competitive, physical routines of working out and stylised through the masculine appearance.

#### **2.4.1.1 Theoretical propositions of Masculinity**

Through its development and widespread use, the field of masculinity has enjoyed growing research interest in various disciplines including sociology (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), gender studies (Anderson and McCormack 2018) and men's health (Crawshaw 2007). This has led to the concept being theorised with several propositions developed by the prominent scholars.

- **Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1982)**

The most prolific masculinity theory is stated to influence thinking about men, gender and social hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Upon its formulation, hegemonic masculinity according to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 832) was considered to be: "*The pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue*". Although the concept primarily looked at social relations between the male and female gender, it was argued hegemonic masculinity embodied culture, institutions and in essence way of being a man (Connell 1990).

Additionally, it is conceptualised the theoretical stance related to a model of cultural control. This was presented by Connell (1995) who advocates that hegemonic masculinity can be culturally exalted at any given time, whilst dominant masculinities are drawn from and contextualised within a given field. Subsequently, researchers have conveyed hegemonic masculinity as a cultural ideal in depicting ways of being a man (Caruso and Roberts 2018, Hall 2015). Such perspectives are valuable for this study in order to help identify the influence of the fitness and bodybuilding culture on masculinity beliefs and its enactment amongst research participants. The concept of hegemonic masculinity offers theoretical propositions in gender hierarchy, geography of masculine configurations, the process of social embodiment and the dynamics of masculinities (Pringle 2013).

Social embodiment is regarded to theorise upon the importance of embodying masculinity for identity and behaviour in the various social contexts. Consequently, it is argued bodies are not just objects of a process of social construction rather that bodies are intertwined and participate in social action by defining the nature of social conduct (Edwards 2016). In this sense the body is said to be a participant in generating social practice. Such theoretical propositions correspond to theories in other disciplines, such as marketing (Barber and Bridges 2017) and consumer research (Hearn and Hein 2015). Conversely, CCT research argues the need to consider the wider social, cultural context and its influence on agent construction and development (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Connell through her series of masculinity publications (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Connell 2002, 1995, 1990) has continually argued for the need to understand bodies as having dual roles; both as objects and agents of social practice to inherently understand embodiment and masculinity. Within Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) the close relations of embodiment and society are distinguished, referring to society being embodied through the varying waves journeying through institutions, economic relations and cultural symbols, which involved material bodies (Pringle 2013).

The dynamics of masculinities are said to highlight the internal complexities of masculinities by investigating how masculinities are constructed from practices adopted by all men (Connell 2002). Through its contribution to understanding men and masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is criticised for being ambiguous (Hearn 2004) and not clearly articulating what makes an idealistic hegemonic masculine male. Other commentators argue the concept mimicked existing ideologies in gender studies and characteristics of biological explanations in the field of anthropology (Whitehead 2002, Demetriou 2001). Furthermore, it is regarded the concept naturalises the male body and fails to harmonise the divide between biological versus gender (cultural) domains (Moller 2007).

- **Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009)**

Inclusive masculinity theory is said to capture the social, cultural, economic changes of the twenty first century and the new era of masculinities constructed by modern day males (O'Neil 2015). As suggested by O'Neill (2015:114): *"Inclusive masculinity theory centers on the belief that profound shifts in the social landscape, most particularly the decline of cultural homophobia, have led to the development of more inclusive forms of masculinity among young men"*.

The theory is based on the premise, young males are now more at ease with homosexuality and portraying laxer masculinity expression, hence inclusivity of feminine traits. Anderson and McGuire (2010) propose the fear of being homo-sexualised has been significantly reduced, which in turn allowed contemporary men to develop more expressive and less traditional forms of masculinity (Pringle 2013). As pioneers of the framework Anderson and McGuire (2010) believe Inclusive masculinity theory provides a contemporary spotlight on cultural changes. The theorists argue, due to the extent of social changes occurring in the last decade, contemporary masculinities cannot be explained by previous theoretical frameworks.

Consequently, a call was made to consider the relations of men alongside their social dynamics in contemporary environments, where masculinity is more open to interpretation (Clatterbaugh 2018).

Inclusive masculinity theory has enjoyed a great deal of attention both within gender studies and media research (Hall and Gough 2015). Anderson and McCormack (2018) state modern young British males are dramatically reconfiguring masculinity and heterosexuality, which encouraged commentators in the fields to suggest the need to fully re-examine what it is to be a modern man. Roberts (2014) argues the need to develop accurate accounts of how masculinities are constructed, performed and consumed in modernity where significant social, cultural and economic change has been witnessed. Although masculinity theory is relatively new it has invited some criticism from commentators in the gender and society fields (O'Neil 2015). Due to its infancy in research, it is not yet fully supported empirically or comprehensively (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). O'Neil (2015) accuses Anderson (2009) of ignoring the value of previous masculinity theories and paying attention to only social variables.

#### **2.4.1.2 Contemporary notions of masculinity**

Exploring more recent literature it was found masculinity beliefs are regarded to have been affected by changes in cultural trends (Hearn and Hein 2015). Edwards (2016) deliberates upon the view males are questioning authentic masculinity where 'under threat' feelings of insecurity, lack of role identity and corroding traditional masculinity traits are experienced by males. It is argued such traits are leading males to look to the body to affirm beliefs and develop muscularity in contemporary culture (Hearn and Hein 2015). Some literature has referred to the period as 'crisis in masculinity' and labelled it threatened masculinity (Edley 2017, Roberts 2014, Clare 2010).

As a result of 'second wave' feminism it is argued that men have lost a distinctive physical, breadwinner role in modern society (Joseph 2019). The crisis is known to stem from the proposition that men no longer have the claim to be superior from women. Consequentially, this has led to the questioning of masculinity itself and for males to uptake radical action to try and re-impose some form of traditional gender power (Edwards 2016, Clare 2010). Pope *et al* (2000) offered deep insights into the close boundaries of muscularity and masculinity. It was conceptualised that females have enjoyed growing equality rights in the postmodern era, which displaced males leading them to question masculinities and adopt ways alongside body image to try and retain their dominance.

It is advocated males have suffered an identity crisis, leading to last resort calls for defining masculinity through the only gender-affirming feature of muscle-mass (Monaghan and Atkinson 2016, Parent and Schwartz 2016). Threatened masculinity phenomenon appears to be inclined to the male body, with distinctive correlations between body image and muscularity perceived as embodying masculinity (Clatterbaugh 2018). Murnen and Karazsia (2017) suggest that the threatened masculinity perspective can explain why men appear to have experienced an increased focus on body shape and composition.

It is argued that females have expanded their accomplishments in previously male dominated areas, implicating a shift in male culture and an increased focus on body size and composition (Hunt *et al* 2013, Glick *et al* 2007). It is proposed that males have developed a compensatory need to publicly display their masculinity, which has now become embodied and wrapped within a highly muscular body (Brewster *et al* 2017).

Correlating to such views is the concept of Symbolic Violence (SV) introduced by Bourdieu (1977) in making visible power relations and apparent injustices hidden in historical and universal structures (Samuel 2013). Martin *et al* (2002) believe SV occurs when oppression is invisible, due to it being rooted in people's minds and consequently all parties perceive it as natural.

Swingewood (2000) believes SV is placed in an individual's principles of judgement and practice (habitus). In effect individuals embrace the structures and hierarchies of the social settings which exist in their mental structures and beliefs. It is conceptualised Bourdieu aimed to undo the processes by which individuals come to accept power relations by analysing historical and contextual roots of power configuration (Hussey 2010).

Brown (2006) presents how Bourdieu discussed gender relations and masculine domination through the SV concept. According to Bourdieu (2001:34) the SV of masculine domination is in operation through basic acts of cognition and practical recognition, whereby norms are not questioned and affirmed as being the truth. In this sense men become victims of gendered habitus in everyday life such as physical, heavy work related to division of labour males commonly undertake. SV is regarded to act as a means of reproducing gendered hierarchies, reinforcing gender orders that favour men and masculinity (Bourdieu 1990). Brown (2006:5) argues the body acts a "*mediating entity*" which links individuals to the "*broader socio-spatial processes of power, reproduction and change*". Bourdieu (2001) argued masculine domination remains both a symbolic feature and a practical product in the mundanity of everyday life. As a result it is important to study the body and its (masculine) management to develop knowledge of the power dynamics at play in consumer culture.

#### **2.4.2 Masculinity and the male body**

To help portray the link between the male body and masculinity further, literature was explored on defining the connection between a man's physical attributes and sense of masculinity. Frederick *et al* (2007:104) portrayed how characteristics of the muscular body distinguishes true masculinity for many males: "*Many individuals consider a man's body type to be related to his masculinity*". Edwards (2016) and similarly Clatterbaugh (2018) discuss the connection between body and its image by conveying how it plays a fundamental role in men's lives, acting as self-fulfilment in the gendered role. Coles (2009) offered a theoretical stance distinguishing the need to consider the male body as a form of capital, utilising Bourdieu's (1986, 1984a) work. It was argued in the broader perspective of Bourdieu's (1986) capital propositions that the male body is physical capital and is deserving of attention and appreciation as a valued resource (Jewkes *et al* 2015, Coles 2009).

Similarly, Connell (2002, 1995) identifies the male body as inherently linked between hegemonic masculinity, male self-regard and overall self-esteem. Such propositions are based on the work of Bordo (1999), who conceptualised the natural male body as fundamentally a strong and aggressive machine. It is believed these credentials are continually rewarded in society through cultural perks, male superiority and romantic attention.

Connell (2002) expanded upon Bordo's (1999) thinking by underpinning the links between hegemonic masculinity, male privilege and the body proposing: "*A man's physicality is the locus of his cultural power and a sense of self-esteem*" (Connell 1987: 26).

According to Jewkes *et al* (2015) the hegemonic masculine thesis can be quickly undermined in contemporary cultural view; therefore, it is in a man's interest to maintain the signifying values of the powerful body through sexual and pharmacological means. Gough (2016) argues a similar point stating men go to great lengths in creating and marking masculine differences and that the construction of the male body in cultural fields, such as sport, precisely expose the social, categorical nature of gender ideology. Baird and Grieve (2006) added the desire for increased muscularity is played out as self-fulfilment in the quest to capture increased masculinity. A similar line of thought is followed in the field of male studies (Messerschmidt 2019ab, Nascimento and Connell 2017, Edwards 2016), in that male body muscularity is coterminous with masculinity beliefs and desires to embody the muscular ideal.

Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) advocate the male body is a symbolic asset due to the conventional associations between maleness and manhood. They argue that the male body provides the value as a baseline signifier of a masculine self and what causes frictions and challenges for males relates to how masculinity can vary from individual to individual. This is said to be partly due to the fact that men's bodies can differ significantly with varying levels of perceived masculinity (Hearn and Hein 2015).

### **2.4.3 Performing masculinity**

It can be regarded that the male body and its enactment through bodily performances is dictated by masculinity perceptions and meeting masculine goals (Gough 2018b, O'Neil 2015). Within existing literature there appears to be an understanding that the male body and the motivation to adopt muscularity occurs so that the role of alpha male can be played and social recognition be gained (Messerschmidt 2019a, Barber and Bridges 2017, Edley 2017). However, due to the changing dynamics of gender domination and the fluidity of masculinity (Gough 2018b), males have been left confused, with some believing hyper-masculinity, embodied through overt muscle mass and size, will help reaffirm who they are and what they are about (Eisenberg and Neumark-Sztainer 2015, Hall 2015). Thus, the male body's role in performing masculinity has become of great importance to men in self-actualisation and promoting gendered qualities (Granero-Gallegos *et al* 2018).



Ghigi and Sassatelli (2018) propose the whole notion of masculine body construction and subsequent body enactment is to yield the social benefits a hyper-masculine body achieves in terms of sexual appeal (Hunt *et al* 2013) and male intimidation (Murnen and Karazsia 2017). As a result, the masculine body image carries significant power for individuals to develop it to desired appearance and to carry it well through bodily performances. Conversely, Birstow (2009) proposed that due to the ever-changing notions of what masculinity is, there is a need to continue to critique the various ways in which maleness emerges and how males acquire styles of masculinity. Subsequently, research has been published suggesting collective practices and performative acts characterise masculinity (Marcos *et al* 2013). For example, the phenomenological perspective takes the stance that gender (in relation to masculinity) can be understood as a constructed entity, which involves the repetition of acts that define shared experience as a form of collective action (Caruso and Roberts 2018). Thus, Marcos *et al* (2013:2) have called for: “... *unpacking the interactional processes through which most honoured way to be a man is locally constituted*”. This is undertaken by this study by exploring masculinity amongst male participants.

Research also predicates in most cultures the status to be considered ‘a man’ needs to be achieved through masculinity affirming practices, as it is not simply awarded (Waling 2017). Consequently, the importance of collective practices and performances act as essential means for men to experience masculinity and prove themselves to obtain the status of man (Moore *et al* 2020).

#### **2.4.4 Masculinity and the media**

The various forms of popular media are regarded to be prolific carriers in the (re)production of gender relations (Krefting 2002). It is debated that social media platforms have gained a prominent role in providing ongoing commentary regarding social and cultural trends (Maaranen and Tienari 2020). Light (2013) defined the term ‘networked masculinities’ to refer to those masculinities re-produced on publicly available digital platforms. There have been calls to explore masculinity expression on digital media platforms, including how hegemonic ideals are illustrated through photography, association and social popularity on social networks (Light 2013).

Such calls for further research revealed that hegemonic associations are still desirable for young males to conform to popular beliefs and live out self-ideals through traditional constructions of masculinity (Hearn and Hein 2015, Light 2013). This acted as an important line of enquiry in this study regarding the role media plays in participant’s lives, as both an influencer and a platform to promote hyper-masculinity traits.

Existing literature has also conveyed various media presents contradictory ways to both stabilise and disrupt representations of men's bodies and masculinity (Clatterbaugh 2018, Parent *et al* 2018, Edwards 2016).

This view was followed in the work of Connell (2002) and Kimmel (2005) in their respective accounts of how masculinities and media portrayals are played out in social and cultural contexts, where media presents concepts such as 'new man' and 'new lad'. Kimmell *et al* (2005) discuss how these much talked about media portrayals have implicated modern men to be softer and more in touch with their emotions (Hall 2015). It is argued that men's magazines serve as both reflectors and influencers of social relations (Hearn and Hein 2015). More notably, as advocated by Jackson *et al* (2001) magazines illustrate the potential for prominent changes in gender relations and corresponding identities, as well as emphasising traditional forms of masculinity.

Male bodies in these magazines are presented as a resourceful asset that require managing through exercise, sexual activity and consumer products that are less stereotypical (Kimmell *et al* 2005). Edwards (2016) conceptualises, media portrayals highlight the entwined nature of gender relations, the cultural economy and global entertainment, advertising and marketing industries. Accordingly, production, consumption, regulation, representation and identity are all mutually constitutive (Clark 2018). Such views led to me questioning the underlying motives driving my participant's embodiment endeavours and the nature and influence of marketing communications in order to develop a better understanding of male embodied consumerism.

#### **2.4.5 Implications for this study**

The section has presented an insight into masculinity and how thinking and scholarly work has developed on this topic over the decades. One of the main arguments posed by existing research is that the majority of studies on men and masculinities have followed a psychologically based approach, which has not deconstructed gender experiences and lived experiences of masculine bodies through the consumer lens (Messerschmidt 2019, Clatterbaugh 2018, Murnen and Karazsia 2017). The masculine led body performance is very much at the heart of this research, especially when considering the fitness context where the male body is forced to perform and compete with other masculine bodies (Bey 2014). As a result, this research explores the symbolic meanings of training regimes and body transformation journeys of research participants to help explore interactional processes through which perceptions of being a man is played out and masculinity is experienced and developed.

As such, this section has explored the role of the body in masculinity construction and expression by establishing the various links between masculinity and embodiment. Extant research has highlighted the nature of perception of masculinity being intertwined with self-regard and identity formation (Messerschmidt 2019, Gough 2016, Hearn and Hein 2015, Jewkes *et al* 2015, Pringle 2013, Kimmell *et al* 2005). Consequently, these constructs are explored in the proceeding section with links to marketing and consumer research. The literature has also captured the importance of performing masculinity and how researchers have posited that masculinity can be characterised through collective practices, such as working out and developing muscle (Gough 2018a, Bey 2014). As a result, this study scrutinises the nature in which such practices play out in the achievement of masculinity gains.

## **2.5 Masculine self and Identity**

Considering the close relations between embodiment, self and identity as seen through existing literature (Gough 2018a, Clatterbaugh 2018, Vannini and Williams 2016), this section outlines how these concepts are relevant in the study of the male body and embodied consumer practices. The self-concept is reflected upon before exploring the value of the body in self and masculine identity. The multi-faceted, subjective nature of the self-concept is presented, capturing its significance in the study of embodied consumerism (Leary and Tangney 2011, Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw 2011, Gadow 2003). The various conceptualisations of self are considered, including theories from both phenomenological (Reed 2002, Bergner and Holmes 2000) and interpretative propositions (Belk 1988).

### **2.5.1 Self-concept**

The self-concept is defined in various ways and refers to a number of personal, consumer traits in marketing and consumer literature (Kedzior *et al* 2016, Sirgy 2015, Stern 2015, Mittal 2006). However, looking more widely at other disciplines such as sociology, it is witnessed the concept encompasses various connotations, whilst referring to personal discourses (Dittmar 2009, Brown 2000, Fischer and Arnould 1994). Onkvisit and Shaw (1987: 15) note: *“The self-concept is purposeful. It exists for the purpose of both protecting and enhancing a person’s ego.... The self-concept is unique and promotes individualism”*. It is also proposed that the self-concept is a multi-dimensional concept consisting of a real self, self-image, ideal self and a looking glass self (Onkvisit and Shaw 1987). Such definitions follow themes established by Belk (1989) and his conceptual thinking of self and extended self.

Within consumer behaviour it is considered the self-paradigm is linked to behavioural sciences (Grubb and Stern 1971) to support links with product adoption, representing self-esteem and social status (Levy 1959).

The historic definitions of the self-concept placed significance on the object matter, for example Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) concluded research at the time emphasised the self as an object, which an individual is conscious of. Furthermore, these authors envisioned the self-concept as being formed through an iterative interaction process between an individual and others. This involves a dialogue that ultimately encourages the adoption of self-enhancement practices, utilising symbolic communication devices to provide meaning and desired responses. These earlier definitions acknowledged that perceptions of self are nurtured through the reactions of other person(s) and the contextual environment (Onkvisit and Shaw 1987).

Goffman (1959) introduced the concept of presentation of self in everyday life, whereby the ideology of performing self was proposed. It was deliberated that purposeful appearances are articulated to express self, which rely upon audience feedback to adjust self performances (Sirgy 2015). Goffman (1959) discussed how self-image is geared towards an image and perception an individual wanted to portray to others and appearance would in turn be adapted to fit with this ideal (Dolezal 2017). Sirgy (1982) added to the concept by presenting various attributes of self. These self manifestations presented the changing views of self and their links to personal perceptions (Chernev *et al* 2011, Barbalet 1999).

Sirgy (1982) presented the idea of 'actual self' related to how a person perceived themselves, whilst the 'ideal self' captured how the person would like to be perceived. Sirgy (1982: 288) also deconstructed the meaning of self-image and the associated ideal self to which he referred to as: "...the degree of value attached to a specific actual self-concept". Fournier (1998) believed Sirgy (1982) contributed to self-concept understanding by stating that it went beyond the two dimensions (actual, ideal) and included those attributes which made it more complex and multi-dimensional than initially proposed (Sirgy *et al* 2016). Other important work included that of Grubb and Grathwohl (1967), who defined the interpersonal value of self and the maintenance of the self-image. It is regarded the early theorists initiated the varying interpretations of the self-concept by proposing views which span across the prominent thinkers that contributed to self-thinking (Mittal 2006). Within sociology, the different characteristics of self were explored including, the actual, social, possible and ideal self (Giddens 1991, Biddle 1986). These contributions added to the multiplicity of self and the many meanings the concept has.

Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) proposed that the early conceptualisations portrayed an overly socialised view of human self-construction, with the authors advocating that the constitution of the self also included personal behaviour and experiences in the world. It is apparent the various former conceptualisations of the self were influenced by varied ontological and epistemological stances. The phenomenological view of the self-concept (Sirgy 2015) made an explicit recognition of two separate frames of reference relating to the self (Reed 2002). Mick and DeMoss (1990) argued the phenomenological perspective conceptualised the self-concept to consist of the objective observer including, the thinking, perceiving and behaviour of the individual, whilst the sense of self must be actualised through someone's perception. Accordingly, the self view implied an individual's behaviour is contextualised in relation to the situation an individual interprets (Berg 2017).

Sirgy (1982) believed the phenomenological view provides a holistic view of self through its appreciation of the social, cultural setting and its implications on self-expression. This perspective was subsequently carried forward by a number of theorists (Turner 1997, Schenk and Holman 1980). For example, Turner (1997) commented that the self-concept was complex and highly sensitive to social and situational contexts. A similar understanding has been commonly argued in more contemporary literature (Reed 2002, Bergner and Holmes 2000). Conversely, Belk (1988) championed the interpretative approach in comprehending the self-concept (Joy and Venkatesh 1994). Belk (1988) believed in order to understand consumer behaviour there is a need to apprehend the extended self and the broader existence of human beings.

Belk (1994) made the distinction between the inner self and the external world to which there are products that signified markers individuals could use to construct and manipulate themselves, namely their identity (Kings *et al* 2017). Belk's (1988: 139) main conceptualisation is on the extended self-concept related to: "*the basic states of existence: having, doing and being*". It is proposed these states portray an individual's existence and how the individual defines themselves. He also argued the major elements comprising the extended self as, the body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences. The mind and body has also been notoriously difficult to detach in psychological literature of the self, hence why they are treated equally as parts of the extended self (Belk 2016). Belk (1988) advocates that body parts are among the most intricate elements to the extended self, as they are permanently attached to the individual. Following a similar line of thought, Mittal (2006) offered the view the self-concept is based on a personal narrative view or a trait-centred understanding.

Mittal (2006) observed in most postmodern, interpretivist consumer research literature the personal narrative view has developed whereby self is entwined within a consumer's identity and in essence played out through a personal narrative (Mittal 2015, 2006). Accordingly, consumers are believed to articulate a story for themselves and perform the self-narrative through personal ideologies (who they are, what they are striving to become). Mittal (2006) distinguishes this personal narrative view as commonly referred to as the core self (Giddens 1991).

This is understood to emphasise the essence of the individual consumer, perceptions of how they are seen and like to be seen, whilst using products to portray their idealised self (Ferraro *et al* 2011). The trait centred view Mittal (2006) proposed includes physical attributes (body), which are said to dictate how a consumer considers themselves as and their perception of how they are seen by others (Dittmar 2009). Furthermore, identity is regarded as playing a more substantial role, as it fundamentally addressed the self-image view and in turn how self can be manipulated and altered (Dunk-West 2016).

Mittal's (2006) own interpretation of the self-concept realised the body playing an integral part of 'I' where the body forms the physical identity and bodily image (Schouten 1991). Similarly, Thompson and Hirschman (1995) argued that body parts are part of the make-up of self-image in both a psychological and physical sense (Askeegard *et al* 2002). For this study Mittal's (2006) view on self-concept is adopted due to its distinction of the body in defining the self-concept. The trait centred view is particularly useful in prescribing the purposeful role of the body concerning how participants perceive themselves and how they are seen by others.

Similar to Thompson and Hirschman's (1995) work on self-concept and the body, where body parts are regarded to comprise the make-up of self-image, I pursued a similar line of enquiry to understand the intricacies of the male body and masculine-self perceptions. Such a perspective was also adapted in CCT based research (Askeegard *et al* 2002), which provided further support for the value of Mittal's (2006) interpretivist perspective on self-concept analysis.

### **2.5.1.1 Theories of self-concept**

Due to its fluidity and various conceptualisations, a number of theoretical frameworks have been presented to articulate the relevance of the self-concept. A selection of those relating to this study are reviewed to help develop a better understanding of the masculine self-concept.

- **Symbolic interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism views the self-concept as a function of interpersonal interactions, taking into consideration the social dimensions of self (Vannini and Williams 2016, Sirgy 1982). Dwong Lee (1990) argues consumer research did not apprehend the social processes and interaction on the self and impact this had on consumer behaviour. Lee (1990) cited the work of Goffman (1951) proposing consumer behaviour is influenced by interaction of the consumer's self-concept, whilst the symbolic dimensions of products provide a means to express idealistic perceptions of self-regard. Lee (1990) defined symbolic interactionism as a theory for conceptualising the socially orientated self. It is regarded that society is perceived as a system of interpersonal communications and interactions with 'self' advocated as the product of society (Vannini and Williams 2016). What is distinctive in such a perspective is how the self was described within the arena of social networks and communications and hence it is argued that human behaviour is most effectively studied through society (Charmaz *et al* 2019).

Furthermore, it is suggested the self-concept refers to an individual's reflexive, social and symbolic activities; consequently, the self could be analysed by viewing it as a structure of various identities and attributes (Reed 2002). The relevance of symbolic interactionism to this study is based on Lee's (1990) interpretation of symbolic interactionism above. In the context of the socially orientated self, it is important to consider the societal role in the development of the muscular body and how the various influences are imprinted onto the masculine body. Self as the product of society, is a substantial proposition presented by Lee (1990). This however, is not actively explored, as the study involved observing how self is expressed and manipulated to suit socio-cultural ideals by male participants and the role the muscular body plays in the process of self-actualisation.

- **Social identity role theory**

In order to harmonise the various dynamic attributes of self and the sociological implications, within social psychology attempts were made to establish a general theory considering both identity and social application (Harrison and Lynch 2005, Hitlin 2003, Stets and Burke 2000). Correspondingly, identity theory and social identity theory were established to consider the varying interpretations and provide an overarching general theory of the self-concept (Hogg 2018). Role identity theorists focus on the specific individual meanings attached to particular roles and consequently the behaviours that an individual proceeds to enact in that role when interacting with others (Hook 2007, Briddle 1986, Solomon 1983).

Conversely, Solomon *et al* (1985) articulated role identities are determined by an individual's priorities and what they perceive defines themselves more centrally. Within social identity theory, it is comprehended the basis of identity is entwined within a uniformity of perception and behavioural actions amongst individuals in a group (Stets and Burke 2000). Accordingly, identities are enacted based upon perception and actions that accompany roles in groups. These were said to be categorised along cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the self-concept (Hogg *et al* 2017).

The importance of identity role theory to this study relates to masculine roles and how participants use their perceptions of contemporary beliefs to style their identities. As noted by Brown (2000), it is important to study perceptions of role expectations (masculine) and the prescribed behaviours, image and attitudes individuals relate to. Within the circle of weight trainers, muscular bodies and gym members' roles were explored in relation to their impact on self and identity.

### **2.5.1.2 The body in self**

To explore the relations between embodiment and the self-concept, further literature was explored to develop a comprehensive account of how relationships between the constructs have developed in existing research. As seen in the literature (Poole and Porter 2017, Hakim 2015, Mittal 2015, Hallsworth *et al* 2005) it was identified the body plays a pivotal role in the definition and experience of self.



Gadow (2003:73) proposed the self is inseparable from the body, advocating: “*The essence of human existence is embodiment*”. This view is also supported by a number of authors who discuss how the self is contained in the body, whilst being transported and used to experience the world and other humans through the physical entity (Charmaz *et al* 2019, Stern 2015, Turner 2008, Mittal 2006, Halliwell and Dittmar 2005). Poole and Porter (2017) argue that body image is a central domain of identity and how an individual perceives themselves.

Giddens (1991) evaluation of modernity concludes social and cultural norms emphasise the value of the body to define self-concepts. This was highlighted by Featherstone (2010, 1982ab) who argued, the surface of the body encompassed the symbolic notions of self desirable traits. Schouten (1991) believed the body encompassed an invaluable place in defining the self through both physical and cultural means. Subsequently, it was argued there are many symbolic instances and expressions of the self-concept to which the body through its image can illustrate and harbour experiences (Hallsworth *et al* 2005).

Furthermore, it is advocated that body image is significant in portraying the self, through personal perceptions and evaluation of one’s own body in terms of size, attractiveness and alignment to the idealised self-concept (Barber and Bridges 2017). This provides some justification why consumption behaviours, such as body image manipulation, are seen as solutions for males to maintain a harmonious self-concept (Mittal 2006, Schouten 1991). The body’s significance to the self-concept is regarded to be the consequence of how the body is seen as a valuable personal attribute (Charmaz *et al* 2019, Vannini and Williams 2016, Hallsworth *et al* 2005). Gadow (2003) adopted a phenomenological approach to define the distinct relationships between the self-concept and the body. Through her framework Gadow (2003) presents four levels of the relations between self and the body:

1. Primary immediacy (lived body).
2. Disrupted immediacy (object body).
3. Cultivated immediacy (harmony of the lived body and object body)
4. Aesthetic immediacy (subject body).

According to Gadow (2003) the lived body provides an orientation of the self, similar to Merleau Ponty’s (1962b) phenomenological view of embodiment. There are two differentiation factors; the distinction between affecting and being affected which are posed as agency (to affect) and vulnerability (to be affected). These are thought to form the basis of the ways in which the world is affected and experienced by the lived body (Gadow 2003).

The disrupted immediacy element posed by Gadow (2003), elaborates upon the relations of body being in the world, by introducing the concept of disruption on the body impacting on the lived body experience. It is stated the 'self' controls the body through discipline, habituation and training, whilst also through illness and disability, proposing self and body are at conflict (Herrera-Moreno *et al* 2018). The object body is described by Gadow (2003:74) as being related to the, "... *existential otherness of the self*". Here it is argued the body is constructed and understood through science, whilst belonging to both the world and self.

Gadow (2003) attempted to link the lived body and object body through what she terms, cultivated immediacy. This relates to mutual determination, whereby the self must master the body through objectification or succumb to its given capacities. Finally, the subjective body construct according to Gadow (2003), correlated to when the body is experienced as a subject. In this sense the body is described as an interactive intelligent agent, being very much a part of the self-concept and capable of those activities which distinguish self from an object. Gadow's (2003) conceptualisations offer a useful method to study the way in which my participants used workouts to change body aesthetics and develop muscularity, in the hope of transforming body image to reach perceptions of self-ideals. This involved exploring motives to adapt muscles and explore the links between the body and the self.

My research followed on from Brown *et al* (2007) who proposed how physical training is a recognition of the significance of embodiment in achieving self-concept change. Similarly, Schubert and Koole (2009) found through their male embodiment research an individual's conceptions of themselves was partly grounded in their bodily experiences. Therefore this study involves scrutiny of the body and self relations and how these underpin the embodiment practices my participants pursued.

### **2.5.2 Identity**

Like the self-concept, identity encompasses both internal and external dimensions relating to the inner and outer cores (Cuypers 2017, Ting-Toorney 2015, Hermans and Dimaggio 2007). It is argued identity comprises a multiplicity of connotations, whilst being heavily entwined within the self-concept phenomenon (Schouten (1991). Hermans and Dimaggio (2007) posited that individuals are unified by consciousness and inhabit a centre consisting of an inner core. Additionally, it is also proposed that fundamental identities are contradictory and dynamic based on shifting priorities and world experiences (Nelson *et al* 2018).

Goffman (1959) presents a detailed account of identity construction and how it is utilised by individuals. He proposes that individuals manipulate appearance and behaviour to be in tune with how they want to be seen by others. This relates to the desired self-image (Lindridge 2005). Similar themes have followed in more contemporary literature (Hogg 2018, Stern 2015, Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw 2011). Brewer and Gardner (1996) argued, interpersonal and collective identities are social extensions of the self. This is based on the premise, identity construction can either be based on social connections relating to personal links or attachments to groups (family) or through collective associations with common identification with symbolic group or social category. A number of research studies have focused on identity construction using the interpersonal/collective ideology and its impact on the self-concept (Ting-Toomey 2015, Sedikides and Brewer 2015, Leary and Tangney 2011, Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). This study follows a similar approach by exploring the symbolic meaning of a muscular body identity to self and the processes on which it is worked on collectively in the fitness club.

#### **2.5.2.1 Embodied identity**

Work in consumer culture is more interested on the contribution of objects in constructing identity and the nature of agency in the process of identity construction (Fitchett and Caruana 2015, Escalas and Bettman 2015). However, prior to this a stream of research (Cash and Pruzinsky 2002 and Halliwell and Dittmar 2005) agreed, body image is central to the construction of identity. Thompson and Hirschman (1998) argued the body is inseparable from self-identity and its role in experiencing the world.

Within postmodern literature it has been argued the body continues to act as a surface for identity construction, allowing it to be manipulated to become attuned to desirable trends (Hamouda 2015, Featherstone 2010). Featherstone *et al* (1991) commentated on how the make-up of the postmodern era promotes impression management, self-care and bodily presentation, which dictate routines and the management of a perceived successful image.

Similarly, Joy and Venkatesh (1994) agree postmodern consumer culture centres upon the body and its image. The authors elaborate how the series of cultural goods and consumer behaviour centre upon body manipulation practices to facilitate body identity management. Joy and Venkatesh (1994) argue consumer research has neglected the study of the body, whilst the marketing industry generates significant amount of interest by selling the body as the central concept in contemporary life (Hamouda 2015, Featherstone 2010). Furthermore, research on consumer experiences has emphasised the importance of embodiment in experiencing the world and responding to stimuli (Pham 2004, Schouten 1991).

Researchers have identified links between consumer choices and identity based motivation (Oyserman 2009, Lalvani and Shavitt 2009). Joy and Venkatesh (1994) propose self-identity in the cultural notion differed, based on whether the body is seen as being celebrated or commodified. This is illustrated by the authors who advocate the body is viewed differently in sub-cultures and representative discourses. For example, within advertising, body discourses are objectified and sexualised (Sengupta and Dahl 2008). Such cultural influences are said to impact consumer meanings of body and its experience (Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw 2011, Joy and Venkatesh 1994). Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw (2011) propose that body beautification enhances self-identity and social position for the individual providing an elevated stature. Other commentators have also correlated the symbolic value of the body to identity perceived by consumers (Waling *et al* 2018, Roux and Belk 2014, Venkatesh *et al* 2010).

Thompson and Hirschman (1998) advocate that both men and women's embodied selves are susceptible to influential discourses, which happen to be rife in postmodern consumer culture (Hamouda 2015, Stern 2015). They propose that marketing discourses encourage the adoption of confessional narratives by offering a variety of products and services to overcome body identity insecurities (Hill 2016). Joy and Sherry (2003) similarly illustrate the significance of the body's importance in self-image construction, by stating how all cultures are susceptible to placing great emphasis on the body as a notion of self-identity make up.

Such views are also echoed by a number of commentators in consumer research (Venkatesh *et al* 2010, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Reed 2004), where the relations between consumer choices and identity manipulation based motives are identified (Spangenberg *et al* 2003). Furthermore, McNeill and Venter (2019) and Barber and Bridges (2017) argue that the body can affect the logic of consumer thinking. Such research has inspired this study to explore the ways in which male consumers' perceptions emerge of having a muscular body image based identity.

Upon reviewing literature in consumer research related to embodiment, Joy and Sherry (2003) argue that previous studies have commonly adopted a phenomenological perspective in deconstructing consumer experiences and have not embraced the unconscious side of embodied experiences (Hill 2016, Arnold and Austin 2016, Arsel and Thompson 2011). Holt and Thompson (2004) argue research has focused on social conscious world and its effect on embodiment. Conversely, Joy and Sherry (2003) by addressing the links between embodiment and consumer experiences, note the unconscious side relates to how the body affects the logic of consumer thinking. This explanation defines how individuals are aware of their bodies in their thoughts and actions.

The essence of embodied agency is said to be lacking in phenomenological based consumer research (Joy and Sherry 2003). In retrospect, I am interested on how the masculine body is used to define perceptions of the self-concept; therefore, it is important to explore embodied agency to develop insights into male embodied consumerism. CCT researchers (Askegaard and Linnet 2015) and other consumer researchers (Hill 2016, Chernev *et al* 2011) believe embodied agency and its role in consumerism remains lacking in consumer research. Subsequently, by considering embodied agency in the construction of self and identity, important contributions into how the male body supplements consumer motives can be presented as part of this research.

### **2.5.2.2 Masculine identity**

Looking specifically at masculine identity, it was found previous definitions only referred to categorical meanings associated with behavioural traits and sexuality (McConaghy and Armstrong 1983). Kacen (2000) stated more recent definitions of masculine identity encompass a comprehensive conceptualisation of gender identity (Glick *et al* 2015). These definitions consider the effects of both socialisation processes, as well as intra-individual factors in the development of the male identity (Griffiths *et al* 2016, Hallsworth *et al* 2005, Mahalik *et al* 2003).

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) referred to the work of West and Zimmerman (1987) to present how male gender identity is partly socially constructed, whilst bodies are used to mark the identity of a category an individual belongs to. Holland and Scourfield (2000) argue the shared, conventional ideas of masculine identities through how individuals should look, talk and behave are constructed through the notion of a cultural model which, can differ in localised cultures. Such research encouraged investigating the culture of bodybuilding and male fitness and how these rich cultural institutions could influence identity motives for research participants entwined within muscularity development processes.

Neale *et al* (2016) distinguish, for males it is a primary concern to signify possession of a masculine self, which then provides the status quo to be within the higher status group. Kimmel *et al* (2005) argue that in order to portray allegiance to the masculine group, physical appearance and demeanour need to be adjusted to suit such ideals. Existing research has also conceptualised that the masculine self-identity portrays the self as being powerful, in control, autonomous and rational (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). Other research (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) indicates how the masculine gender identity is commonly comprised of four dimensions; relating to competitiveness and dominance, emotional non-expressiveness, gender role stress and anti-gay and anti-feminine attitudes.

However, it is apparent gaps in knowledge exist with Edley and Wetherell (1997) proposing that the cultural labels provided to masculine traits (new man, retributive man) only provide general surface level portrayal. More recently Frank (2014) similarly argues that cultural explanations do not entirely convey the lived experiences and everyday discursive practices of males. More recently Barber and Bridges (2017) and earlier Hearn and Kimmell (2006) reported that most existing research has generally portrayed that men construct their respective identities within the context of a cultural model of masculinity. These views are based upon previous work such as Kimmell (1987), who proposed how masculinity identities are being undermined.

Similarly, Thompson and Hirschman (1998) reported men's embodied selves are open to be affected by influential discourses, such as body image anxieties arising from concerns of deviating from set ideals (Griffiths *et al* 2016, Neale *et al* 2016, Connell 2000). Research on masculinity and identity stresses the contested nature of what now illustrates authentic masculine identity (Hearn 2015). Hegemonic masculinity is still related to the traditional traits, although there are now more contemporary mixed instances, which confuse the essence of masculine identity (Hearn 2019, Gough 2018b, Hall and Gough 2011). Correspondingly, male consumers appear to be toying with more contemporary incarnations of masculine identities to create their own interpretations on the widening portrayal of masculinity (Hearn 2019).

### **2.5.3 Implications for this study**

This section has identified the links between self, identity and embodiment. Literature has been reviewed to capture the various meanings and connotations of these constructs to illustrate how the self-concept and masculinity identity carry a range of meanings and interpretations across the major disciplines. In relevance to this study the significance of the body, its appearance and behaviour in self-expression and identity setting is important hence why Mittal's (2015, 2006) work on self is considered. Mittal (2006) clearly distinguishes the importance of body presentation in the make-up of the self-concept, which is relevant to this study in exploring male body image perceptions. The work of authors such as Thompson and Hirschman (1995), and more recently Neale *et al* (2016) and Sirgy (2015), have also provided great insights into how the masculine self-concept and modern social, cultural environments have impacted upon notions of masculine self and identity setting for males. Embodied agency consumer research has now moved into the developing field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) consumer research (Askegaard *et al* 2002), hence why this study has identified the significance of CCT to the analysis here.

## 2.6 Chapter Summary

The literature review has considered the varied, disparate literature on body and embodiment. The review initially deliberated upon social constructionism where existent research argued how body image is socially derived (Addis *et al*/2016, Entwistle 2015, Connell 2002). However, I found limited literature that went beyond discussing the implications of social constructionism on lived experiences of the male body and the nature in which males interpret media ideals and transform their bodies. The literature review, then moved onto the high profile nature of the body in consumer culture where research was reviewed on the increasingly objectified masculine body (Gough 2018a, Hall 2015) manipulated by social, cultural changes in the postmodern era (Grogan 2016, Featherstone 2010).

The section presented the co-created nature of the masculine body image and its increasing value in setting desirable male consumer identities (Frank 2014). The section introduced a consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) inspired lens to study male embodiment to help deconstruct consumer practices and consumption traits of males entwined within body image transformational routines (Firat and Dholakia 2017, Bey 2014). This was followed by highlighting the relations between the male body and masculinity and the changing perceptions of authentic masculinity. The section considered contemporary notions of masculinity expression and the importance males place on portraying a masculine identity in contemporary culture (Gough 2018b, Hearn and Hein 2015). The prominent role of the male body was emphasised to acknowledge the significance of body image and muscularity being used to reaffirm masculine credentials (Murnen and Karazsia 2017, Monaghan and Atkinson 2016).

A determined effort was then made to collate relevant marketing and consumer research, by considering the self-concept and identity in relation to the associated role of the male body and embodiment (Neale *et al*/2016, Sirgy 2015, Bettany *et al*/2010, Thompson and Hirschman 1998). It was discovered that literature on embodied self and identity formulation argued for the exploration and appreciation of the social, cultural environment and its impact on identity motives (Schubert and Koole 2009, Askegaard *et al*/2002, Joy and Venkatesh 1994). Although this research is now dated, it did provide a valuable platform for considering situational variables in the study of male embodiment. The section confirmed the gaps in literature within consumer research, particularly around masculine consumer dynamics and embodied masculine behaviour. It was observed the majority of research on embodiment is sociologically based, entwined within the social sciences literature (Shilling 2012, Sassatelli 2007, Monaghan 2007).

Social research has offered significant insights into embodiment; however, in this regard the male body has been studied in the situated context of the social world, with a strong emphasis on social variables and their impact. As articulated at the start of the thesis, there is an apparent gap in literature when looking at male embodied consumerism in consumer research. The literature review has delved into self-concept and identity within marketing and consumer research, discovering that body and embodiment literature is primarily female dominated (Sanghvi and Hodges 2015, Gurrieri *et al* 2013, Oswald 2010), whilst some knowledge exists on the impact of promoted body ideals on male consumers (Neale *et al* 2016, Chernev *et al* 2011, Schubert and Koole 2009). Nevertheless, it was found there was little distinction regarding how males make sense of body image choices and how these are interpreted and mapped onto the masculine body.

The literature review also revealed there is limited knowledge related to lived experiences of embodied masculinity and how such experiences enrich male consumer lives. Furthermore, existing literature has mainly drawn upon the negative issues of the effects of masculine body ideals in social, physiological and male health research (Gough 2018b, Barber and Bridges 2017, Lefkowich *et al* 2017, Monaghan and Atkinson 2016, Hallsworth *et al* 2005) with little contributions from the male consumer perspective and impact on self-discovery and physical and cultural capital development (Bourdieu 1984ab).

The literature review was valuable in not only providing theoretical underpinnings to the present study (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007), but also helping to distinguish key research themes for the study to follow. This included paying attention to how males make sense of body ideals and transform their body image, whilst also exploring the body's role in self-actualisation. Masculinity research recommended discovering how interpretations of masculine ideals are acknowledged and inform embodiment practices (Messerschmidt 2019, Gough 2016), hence this led to questioning participants of how contemporary masculinity was perceived and mapped onto their bodies.

The practices and processes in which body transformation occurs is limited in understanding in existing research; therefore, this study has pursued this line of inquiry and in doing so grasps closer insights to contribute to more definitive male consumer knowledge. Furthermore, research related to the self-concept and masculine identity, highlighted further research was required on the relations between how the male body is used in self-discovery and a means by which males make sense of who they are and what they want to be (ideal self-concept). Barber and Bridges (2017) described how males had followed females in utilising the surface of the body to relate to self-ideals and judge others through body image.



Consequentially, this study questioned male participants about how they related to self to discover the nature in which self-regard is articulated and adapted in the confines of health and fitness, with a novel focus on masculinity affirmation and machoism in the making. By focusing on the male consumer and male body transformation, the research is able to help uncover the relationships men have with their bodies. Such intuitions were called for by consumer research, (Neale *et al* 2016, Griffiths 2016, Gadow 2003), which essentially helped inform the immersive, comprehensive research design the study has pursued.

### **3. Research Context and Background**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the research context of this study. Firstly, I outline my interest and relation to health and fitness as a researcher, by defining my previous experiences and how I have become acquainted to the study of male embodiment. I discuss the issue of positionality associated with my beliefs on male body image and weight training. The chapter then delves into the fieldwork setting to contextualise the primary research and its location. Finally, the chapter considers the sporting profession of bodybuilding and weight training in shaping the localised cultures my participants were embroiled in. The chapter sets the scene for the proceeding chapter on research methodology, the nature of data collection and data analysis.

#### **3.2 My research journey**

My interest in health and fitness has been present since I began undertaking boxing training with a friend (Joe) 18 years ago. After leaving secondary school the two of us wanted to do something we enjoyed and after Joe's parents purchased a new house, which happened to have a deserted punch bag in the garage, we quickly became attuned to training on a regular basis. Joe and I were spectator fans of boxing and as well as watching professional fights on television we attended local amateur boxing fight events, which stimulated our enthusiasm to try it ourselves. Following a period of boxing training, Joe suggested gaining advice from a boxing coach. Subsequently, the coach recommended strength and body conditioning via weight training to build our strength. We then began visiting a local gym, which I recall was in a down-trodden, 'back street' location, nonetheless, it appealed to us due to its boxing ring facilities and low membership price.

As we trained on a weekly basis, we met other weight trainers and were overwhelmed by the amount of friendly support and training advice we received. I remember initially walking in on the first day feeling somewhat intimidated. These members did appeal to me as being aspirational in performing in high intensity exercises and aesthetically looking good because of their muscularity. I recall being impressed by member's competencies in strength, which enthused me to explore weight training. Joe and I began lifting light weights and we eventually set a routine to beat our record of the number of repetitions or weight we could lift.

As I really enjoyed the gym experience and feeling my strength developing I became very committed and although at times attended the boxing training with Joe, I prioritised weight training due to the satisfaction of body strength development I experienced. The reason why I wanted to develop strength was due to the fact I did not want to be weak, I found the feeling of having strength provided me with assurance and confidence in my embodied abilities, acting as a feel good factor. As I enjoyed partaking in various sports, I happened to find a good balance of enjoying sport, undertaking exercise and keeping healthy. I found by having body strength, it gave me the self-confidence I could perform competitively in the various sports. I also found that the gym experience went beyond working out and also involved interacting with like-minded individuals looking to improve themselves.

The members who became gym friends were seen as older role models who had desirable qualities, such as being strong, having discipline and being respected by other members. I found such traits desirable and I did happen to look up to some males. Reflecting upon this period, it was apparent body image and appearance was prominent in gym culture, with a number of members having muscle mass. Personally, such an appearance was not desired, as I was more concerned about improving my strength. I followed the belief body muscularity enhancement was a by-product of gaining strength and conditioning the body.

My health and fitness enthusiasm has remained with me throughout my adult life. I have trained with a number of people at various fitness clubs, as I find it interesting to go and visit the different locations. I have remained close to the culture of training, socialising with gym-goers and adopting healthy lifestyle choices. I believe it is a lifestyle choice to be healthy and fitness minded, which has helped me to remain disciplined and limit my indulgence in unhealthy foods. I have found attending fitness clubs and boxing training, as a way of having a break from occupational and life commitments. I recall a training partner once stating: *“Life is simple in the gym, you just have your goals and determination to better yourself”*. Such a perspective has remained with me and I have used such thinking to explain my long-term commitment to the cause.

During university my enthusiasm remained and I continued to train on a regular basis. Upon undertaking my Master’s degree, I decided to relate my dissertation to health and fitness and the local area. I set out on exploring the marketing and promotion of health and fitness in the local area. This provided a good insight into formally approaching this research area, whilst developing my role as a researcher, collecting and analysing data. Upon the latter period of my Master’s degree, I obtained a position as a researcher working in higher education.

This involved undertaking a number of research projects, before eventually going into lecturing part-time. As I developed my knowledge in academia, I obtained a full time post as a Senior lecturer. This was a monumental moment, as it provided job security and allowed me to explore taking up doctoral research. Upon exploring institutions and professorial academics who could supervise my research topic, I identified Northumbria University and begun collecting my thoughts of potential research topics. I did have preconceived ideas of considering health and fitness, but initially was not sure of the topical theme, as I had developed insights into general marketing principles of the industry through my previous research. I then decided to undertake some further research and to explore the current state of published research. It was at this point, I identified an apparent gap existed into male embodied consumerism and masculinity within consumer research.

Reading the work of Mike Featherstone (2010, 2002, 1999), Lee Monaghan (2007, 2002c, 2002a) and other sociologists (Sassatelli 2007, Crossley 2006) provided me with both the enthusiasm and frustration, as their rich insights into masculinity and embodied culture was well-known in sociology. However, no links to consumer research were apparent and such sociological work had not inspired male embodiment consumer based research. This framed my research proposal to contribute to existing socio-cultural research, but primarily create findings that would inform male consumer research. Authors such as Shilling (2004), Turner (2008) and Frank (2014) remarked that identifying the dynamic relations of embodiment research to develop well-informed, cohesive research which dissected the existing silos and bring together the sociological and cultural research of male body and embodiment inquiry would be a much needed path to tread. This I believe was an important contribution to be made in the sphere of male embodiment research.

I believed if I could add knowledge through a cross-disciplinary research study to develop rich insights that could inform both theoretical and practical research this would be of value. Upon speaking to a professor in Newcastle Business School, whom advised making use of access to weight trainers I had would offer distinctive practical insights to the research. The doctoral research journey then commenced with a thorough literature search, looking across disciplines on male embodiment research. It became apparent embodiment research primarily existed in the sociology domain (Frank 2014), which was based upon some key theoretical conceptualisations of body, society and embodiment in general relating to predominantly female bodies.

Masculinity and gender literature (Gough 2018ab, Edley 2017) was also similarly sociologically and psychologically based, but provided some useful contributions to developing insights. Conversely, consumer research and marketing literature was limited in male embodiment research, with only a handful of relevant literature identified (Holt and Thompson 2004, Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Reviewing existing cross-disciplinary literature encouraged amalgamating diverse research and knowledge to offer a more comprehensive understanding of male embodiment. Consequentially, the embodied consumerism framework (section 2.2.6) was developed to harmonise existing knowledge of male embodiment practices and contemporary masculine consumption trends. The framework helped to focus my thinking on the area, whilst identifying gaps in existing literature that this study attempts to offer contributions to.

### **3.3 Qualitative Researcher and Positionality**

According to Merriam *et al* (2001) and Bourke (2014) the researcher is a data collection instrument in qualitative research; therefore, it is important to consider the researcher's beliefs and background as influential variables in the research process. Furthermore, Merriam *et al* (2001) argued all researchers begin data collection with pre-assumptions of the research topic, including situations to be observed and people to be questioned. This goes beyond simply outlining whether you are an insider (investigating your cultural location) or an outsider (looking into the culture of others) researcher.

Merriam *et al* (2001: 405) states: *"As researchers, we can be insiders and outsiders to a particular community of research participants at many different levels and at different times"*. In this study I did perceive myself to be an insider to begin with in entering the fieldwork as a weight trainer, but then an outsider when seeking access to participant groups. This is based on the fact I was familiar with the fitness context, which provided the opportunity to observe internal dynamics of the fieldwork setting. However, once in this location, I was required to seek access to participants to whom the majority were not known to me. In order to gain a wider perspective in the timescale I had available, I made the decision to seek participants who trained in pairs or groups, as I believed they would be more willing to allow me to exercise with them. This was based on the assumption that such males were already sharing the workout experience with other males and would be more open to engage and participate in the research.

In gaining access to the youngsters (group 2) and seasoned weight lifters (group 3) I did feel I was an outsider at this point. This was because I knew little about these individuals and was not familiar with their character traits, how they perceived me, whilst some appeared to question my presence. My work as a researcher was a lot more challenging and time intensive during these periods, as I found I needed to spend more time with participants to collect research data.

It is also argued the boundaries between insider/outsider positions are not clear as first thought by qualitative researchers (Narayan 1993). Correspondingly, Merriam *et al* (2001: 411) argues qualitative researchers need to outline their position: *"In particular, the reconstruing of insider/outsider status in terms of one's positionality vis-a`-vis race, class, gender, culture and other factors, offer us better tools for understanding the dynamics of researching within and across one's culture"*. Hence positionality according to Merriam *et al* (2001: 411) refers to: *"... where one stands in relation to 'the other'"*. Due to the nature of this study it is important to position myself in the research process. In following Merriam *et al* (2001) I describe myself as a 35, year old, British, Asian, working-class male. I believe I carry the identity outside of academia, as a health and fitness orientated male, due to the various sports I participate in and being a regular gym visitor. I have a 'fit' physical build, consisting of some muscle tone and with weight training experience I can perform competently in exercise. I found by having these characteristics, I was able to relate to my participants and they perceived me positively in that: *"I was one of the lads"* as conveyed by Gary (youngsters) when he introduced me to other group members.

I believe my appearance and knowledge of weight training in particular, was crucial in allowing me to conduct this research and be accepted by the participants. Previous researchers have proposed that people tend to sway towards those they perceive to share some level of commonality (Fries-Britt and Turner 2002, Cabrera and Nora 1994). I found this to be the case, as I was perceived as a fellow male who possessed a similar body frame and undertook weight training. In this respect my researcher identity was not visible, instead the commonality of self-motives and identity allowed me to observe and participate in the environment saliently without drawing attention to myself. The only difference from participants was primarily my Asian ethnicity and being an academic researcher, which was declared through the overt role. It was difficult to apprehend how my ethnicity impacted on my participants and how they perceived me. The fitness club was multi-cultural with a 12% of total members being of Asian or African ethnicity according to club sources.

My role as an ethnographic researcher was explained to all participants as I undertook an overt role in collecting research data. Participants were fully briefed of the research study and nature of the data I was collecting prior to them committing to the research. Upon working out with the various groups, I did find the older participants were more inquisitive of the research purpose; however, this did not appear to hold back their views. Amongst the younger participants I found my researcher position to be of little significance once these individuals became familiar with me. Remarks such as: *“I forgot about your research, I thought you just liked training with us”*. Furthermore: *“Are you still doing research, I thought you were just working out:”* such statements portrayed how participants overlooked my research at times. I do believe my position as a researcher did not cause any significant issues, as the ethnographic approach was well suited to the nature of this study together with the non-obtrusive data collection methods employed.

On the subject of positionality, as a participant researcher and the length of time in contact with participants, Merriam *et al* (2004:411) argues: *“The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux”*. In explaining this concept, the authors refer to Narayan (1993) who distinguished personal characteristics such as gender, class, race or simply the duration of contact can offset the cultural identity used to associate with being an insider or outsider researcher. This appeared to be the case through my research experience. At times the intensive experiences exercising with participants overshadowed the differences in age, experience, body shape and my researcher position, as we were highly focused on progressing through the exercises.

Inevitably, I do bring my own beliefs and assumptions to the research, which I now deliberate upon. I have attempted to limit the influence of these by carefully considering data interpretation and analysis techniques and their implementation, whilst also carefully considering trustworthiness and research credibility, which are discussed in the subsequent chapter. As previously mentioned, I am passionate about health and fitness and have always enjoyed participating in regular sporting activities. Over the years I have found undertaking physical activities to be a fulfilling, stimulating experience, as it brought a form of competitive excitement and opportunities to catch up with friends on a regular basis. Although I have become a regular weight trainer, I do not see myself as a bodybuilder or have any desires to become such a thing.

I believe there is a difference between a weight trainer and a bodybuilder, with the former focusing on fitness orientated body conditioning, whilst the latter is keen to develop muscle mass and size with little consideration to physical health (Hallsworth *et al* 2005). Although there is considerable overlap in exercise routines and focus on body image, from my experiences I have witnessed how an individual's ideologies differ when their ultimate goals take separate paths to body muscularity and relative growth. This was something I was keen to capture in the research process. In outlining my beliefs, I refer to my Master's degree research, which involved exploring marketing discourses and strategies to attract male consumers to health and fitness services. This involved conducting a qualitative discourse analysis and in-depth interviews with marketers. I also deliberate upon my time working as a Personal trainer on an ad-hoc basis in a local gym from 2012-2014.

Through this role I worked with a number of males primarily in the age group of 16-28 years of age, who had recently joined the gym and wanted to undertake weight training as part of their exercise routine. In my Masters research study, I found the rich tapestry of media and popular culture imaging played a significant role in enthusing male consumers to become body image conscious and to explore fitness (Otterbring *et al* 2017, Frank 2014, Blond 2008). As a result of conducting this research and my own experiences of spending time in fitness clubs over the last 12 years, I firmly believe male body image is socially constructed (Addis *et al* 2016, Hall 2015, Larsson 2014). I believe aesthetics of the male body are heavily swayed by marketing communications and media representation of body ideals representing masculinity, health and fitness (Clatterbaugh 2018, Sassatelli 2007). However, an individual's physical capacities have a major bearing on the body they are able to attain: this is what this study focuses in upon.

Based on my observations and experiences as a Personal trainer I found males who worked on their bodies were susceptible to media messages of body image and ideal masculinity (Otterbring *et al* 2017). I met a number of males who were chasing body ideals in the hope of becoming more socially appealing (Frank 2014), whilst also conforming to social and cultural trends (Monaghan and Atkinson 2014, Featherstone 2010). Such marketing communications and imagery, as portrayed in section 2.2.2, was commonly referred to when males spoke of their body image desires. This was repeatedly seen amongst males I came across who desired muscle tone in order to promote as part of their identity and self-presentation (Barber and Bridges 2017). I witnessed how body image conscious males assess and monitor their bodies to evaluate who they are (self-concept) and how they come across to others (identity). In holding such views, I follow Mittal's (2006) trait centred view that physical attributes (including the body) are used by males to define who they are and perceptions of how they are seen by others (Dittmar 2009).



On reflection of bodily features, such as muscularity, I believe males desire a muscular image due to the various meanings and connotations attached to muscles. Based on my personal experiences and other males I have come across prior to this research, it has been illustrated how muscles act as a key indicator for masculinity affirmation, developing a positive mental image of self and illustrating self-worth. In following such ideologies, the motives to explore weight training and bodybuilding are justified, as the processes relating to the masculine body and developing muscle. I believe males relate to masculinity in various ways, including participating in competitive sports and adopting behavioural traits such as developing a muscular body to embrace an alpha male status.

### **3.4 The fieldwork setting**

To help contextualise the primary research I now introduce the fieldwork setting of the town and fitness club where the research was undertaken. Maintaining a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) inspired lens the cultural variables are captured regarding the environmental influences prevalent in the town of Middlesbrough. I also provide details of the local fitness scene and influential discourses playing on participants' beliefs of masculinity and body image. In outlining details of the local demographics, useful contextual insights are provided to inform the methodological approach adopted for the primary study.

#### **3.4.1 Middlesbrough, UK**

Middlesbrough is a large industrial town located in the north east of England. It has a population of 140,398 residents according to local government data (Middlesbrough local authority 2019). The town forms part of the wider Teesside area, with a population of 376,000. Middlesbrough has a large proportion of young people, with an average age of 38 years old, which makes it well suited to the nature of this research into young males. The town suffers from social deprivation issues with unemployment at 35% and 10% of males being unemployed (Middlesbrough local authority 2019). Middlesbrough has undergone major economic transformation, where the once thriving heavy manufacturing industries offered a safe haven for low skilled jobs to a number of young males who followed family traditions into labour-intensive positions. Since the demise of the industrial landscape in the area, it has been suggested a number of Middlesbrough males (similar to other post-industrial UK towns/cities) have found it difficult to adapt to contemporary societal trends (Winlow 2001).

As a result, working class men have become constrained, struggling to acquire the cultural capital, a positive self-image, and perception of a higher status (Winlow 2001, Beynon *et al* 1994). Social based research into male embodiment issues undertaken in the northeast have reported on a number of male insecurity issues. This has included the work of Simon Winlow, who investigated the high usage of steroids amongst northeast men, which was said to be one of the highest in the UK (Kean 2012). Furthermore, Antonopoulos's and Hall's (2016) research into the Teesside area, found males had experienced socio-cultural shifts and were questioning who they were and what they stand for. Antonopoulos and Hall (2016:12) posited how changes in the UK economy from manufacturing to a services based provider has left some working-class men questioning themselves:

*“In these locations anxieties about body image are now widespread and medicalised, and a muscular body commodified. The importance some men who use steroids attach to their ability to display an overly muscular body has in some respects replaced the symbolism attached to the physical prowess required for work in Britain’s former industrial heartlands. It has become the symbol of one’s ability to protect himself, a commodity and currency in the legitimate and illegitimate economy and, in the absence of employment opportunities”.*

Antonopoulos and Hall (2016:12)

Such research findings are important to consider as part of this study; however, issues such as steroid use are not followed, as it is outside of the scope of this study. Conversely, the demographic traits are important to consider, as they appeared to influence the consumer behaviour of males who ventured into fitness clubs and the world of weight training (Kean 2012). As the majority of participants were from Middlesbrough, it was insightful to learn about the social, cultural variables they embrace and how these inform their beliefs of masculinity, body image and working out.

#### **3.4.1.1 Historical town influences**

Middlesbrough has a reputation of being the home of numerous notorious ‘hard men,’ which the media has commonly associated the town with (Warburton 2012). Two individuals in particular have famously been influential, including the life of Lee Duffy who was infamous for terrorising the streets of Middlesbrough for over 8 years. Lee was known to being an impressive boxer and athlete until he died in a street brawl (The Northern Echo 2018). Brian Cockerill is another self-styled hard man, whose life story of bodybuilder and then ‘Tax man’ has been documented by Donal MacIntyre investigations (BBC, 2016).

Brian Cockerill competed in professional bodybuilding and at 22 stones was described as a; “*man mountain*” by local media (Warburton 2012). Brian, who went on to compete for town’s Mayor in 2012, was also famous for promoting his bodybuilding lifestyle and daily exercise and eating regime. It appears these individuals have inspired a number of young Middlesbrough, males such as John Watson who was recently in the national media for offering the people of Teesside security and protection services for a monthly fee. John Watson is another local ‘hard man’ who presents the value body capital can offer, including economic benefits (Anonymous 2018). What is apparent amongst all these cases is the role of the muscular body in characterising these individuals, as well as inspiring the younger male population to idolise the muscular body (Bridges 2009).



**Figure 3.1:** Lee Duffy (The Northern Echo, 2018)



**Figure 3.2:** Brian Cockerill (Warburton, 2012)

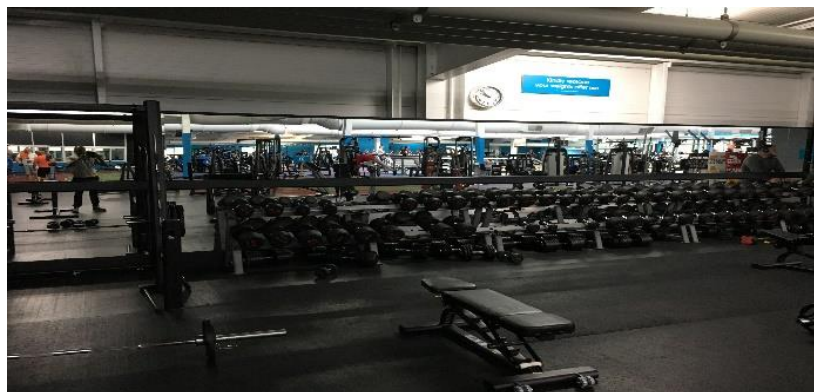
#### **3.4.1.2 The local weight training scene**

The Teesside area has a prominent gym culture with 26 large gyms/fitness centres operating in the vicinity of Middlesbrough and a number of smaller premises (Love 2019). There is a combination of both private clubs/centres, as well as local government funded premises. Due to the popularity of local residents working out in Middlesbrough and the surrounding areas, the local fitness businesses appear to have a healthy market for weight trainers and gym enthusiasts (Love 2019). Based on my personal experiences of visiting and briefly training at six facilities (prior to commencing this study), the majority of gyms have a comparable amount of members who weight train on a regular basis and chase body ideals and strength goals. Conducting preliminary research to scope out potential participants, I found a lot of premises were populated by resident weight trainers. These individuals would train regularly (some on a daily basis), displaying supreme masculinity through an overt muscular body and portrayed a dominant figure in their respective locations.

### 3.4.2 The fitness club

The research site I used to recruit participants and collect data was promoted as a private health and fitness club, housing a number of facilities and equipment to cater for its large clientele. The fitness club (as I refer to it) is a large corporate gym on an extensive site offering a large cardio area adjoining to the largest free weight training area of any fitness site nearby. This appeals to serious weight trainers and is one of the reasons why it was chosen for this study. Having membership of the club and all its facilities available to me also helped in its selection as a research site.

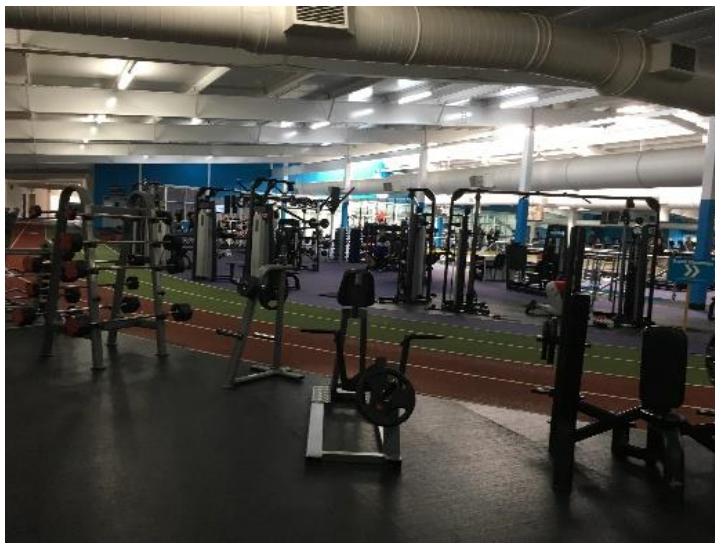
The fitness club was not a 'gritty, exclusive to bodybuilders' location unlike other previous ethnography studies (Monaghan 2001, Klein 1993). I wanted to explore men involved in weight training more broadly by selecting mainstream fitness environments that appealed to a variety of males. In this instance, the fitness club I used appealed to the wider market of fitness enthusiast and had a diverse range of members. The club had a serious but friendly atmosphere, due to the diversity of its members and varied facilities made it appealing to a range of members with different interests and fitness motives. Facilities including swimming pools, squash courts, running track, dance classes, weight-resistance training and relaxation pools appeal to a wide range of people. Consequently, there was a mix of members and motives in the club. The fitness club was a busy place, with a high member footfall, especially during weekday evenings and Saturday mornings. I observed how certain areas of the club encompassed their own micro-environment and tone. One such area was the weight training area as pictured in figures 3.3-3.5.



**Figure 3.3:** The fitness club: Weight training area view 1



**Figure 3.4:** The fitness club: Weight resistance training equipment view 2



**Figure 3.5:** The fitness club: Weight resistance training equipment view 3

The weight training area was one of the popular places of the fitness club and happened to be where most of my time was spent observing participants and partaking in muscle building exercises. The area contained a 24m<sup>2</sup> floor space for trainers with large mirrored walls, a wide range of free-weight dumbbell weights and other assorted equipment.

The equipment included a number of benches, three squat racks, two Smith machines and a variety of equipment for back and shoulder resistance exercises. The 'beast corner' as it was referred to by a number of members, was located on the far side of the first floor of the fitness club. The area was some distance away from the main gymnasium floor, yet was still visible to all, which did appeal to those who liked the attention when training. The area had a distinctive smell of rubber, which came from the newly laid rubber flooring. The area was dominated by the wide selection of dumbbells weights, which were stacked against the mirrored wall running the full width of the training area.

It was noted how each participant group had a favourite spot in the area and would regularly occupy a space or bench when training. The weight training area was open to all members over 18 years old; however, due to the equipment it contained, it mainly attracted weight trainers who would utilise the space to lift weights and carry out muscle toning exercises. The members visiting the area were primarily males, with the odd female. The area could accommodate up to 28 people at any one time, although this was an exception and would normally have between 6-18 members, depending on the time of day it was.

The majority of participation period occurred during 5-8pm during the weekdays and between 9am-1pm on weekends. The atmosphere was generally noisy, with the fitness club providing a local radio station service. There was a friendly vibe with regular members holding conversations amongst themselves and weight trainers engaging with each other, passing weights and sharing advice. I collected data within the weight training area, the male changing rooms, male only sauna, mixed (gender) sauna, jacuzzi pool and the club's coffee shop. Within the weight training area other members were present and at times entered into dialogue with participants. It became apparent all participants elaborated upon their views and opinions in confined spaces, such as the sauna and changing rooms, where less people were nearby to listen to conversations. Consequently, it was noted to not discuss any personal issues with participants in the public areas and encourage the use of the sauna and relaxation pools, as frequently as possible during the participation period.

Due to the nature of participation being highly active, I collected data in a salient manner without drawing attention to myself and data collection. Although the research was an overt study, I was still mindful of maintaining the naturalness of the setting and not being too obtrusive of my participants (Sands 2002). I focused on participation only to begin with to get a feel of the group and exercise programme. In this period, I did make fieldwork notes when alone to record my experiences and observations.

Upon becoming familiar with participants and sensing individuals were comfortable with my presence, I then began collecting data using my mobile phone to record brief notes, before elaborating upon these when alone. It was common for participants to look at their phones between exercises and rest periods; therefore, I followed this behaviour and made notes between exercises or when waiting for my turn on the exercise equipment. In this sense the recording of data was disguised naturally and I brought little attention to the data collection process. Further details of the data collection process is outlined in the next chapter. To help contextualise the nature of my participation in the fieldwork setting, I now deliberate upon the practice of weight training and bodybuilding to provide information of the prominent backdrop to the weight training culture I experienced.

### **3.4.3 Weight-resistance training and the bodybuilding sporting profession**

Weight-resistance training is said to date back to the time of ancient civilizations of Greece and Egypt (Stojiljković *et al* 2013). It is believed that physical exercise grew in popularity in Greece, with the establishment of gymnasiums in preparation for both the military profession and events such as the Olympics (Bird *et al* 2005). Within this era Stojiljkovic *et al* (2013) argues the notions of body image of man became known and have remained consistent with masculinity beliefs:

*“The broad back, muscular arms and shoulders, slim waist were synonymous with masculinity and a healthy body at the time of the ancient Greece, which can be testified by the numerous statues of their Gods as well as the Olympic winners, and drawings on vases that have been saved from the era, and so they remain to this day all over the world”.*

Stojiljkovic *et al* (2013: 135)

Stojiljkovic *et al* (2013) conceptualised weight resistance training as, the use of equipment or own body weight to exercise muscles in order to increase muscle mass. Stone *et al* (2006) claim wooden log, stones and such nature based elements were used to improve strength and endurance in the ancient period. In this period, it quickly became known lifting weight's increased physical fitness and body strength. When looking specifically at the act of weight training or its alternative name of strength training, the regime involves using a variety of specialised equipment to target specific muscle groups and body parts, to sculpt and tone muscle and improve physical strength (Stone *et al* 2006). It is now common to find both free weight training equipment and machine weight training equipment in fitness centres. The main difference is the type of equipment used and the degree to which it facilitates certain motions and resistance.



Free weight training, which is primarily preferred by most weight trainers, involves the use of dumbbells and barbells and is regarded to provide more flexibility and freedom to control the movement and target muscles more intricately (Zatsiorsky and Kraemer 2006). Machine weight training is used to denote exercises where dedicated machines facilitate the motion through pulleys, levers and weight resistance to target muscle groups (Rhea *et al* 2002). Meanwhile, bodybuilding as a sport begun in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in India, where it became a national sport (Stojiljković *et al* 2013). However, although steadily rising as a sport, its mainstream popularity came from exposure of prestigious competitions including, Mr. Universe and Mr. Olympia (Stone *et al* 2006). In America the popularity of bodybuilding peaked after the launch of the iconic production, Pumping Iron (1977), adopted from a book by Butler and Gains from 1974 (Andreasson and Johansson 2014).

Bridges (2009) deliberated how the film fuelled the desire for muscularity and size through visual scenes of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno working out in the famous Gold's Gym, in Venice Beach. Such exposure was regarded to stylise the popularity of bodybuilding and weight training to capture the appeal of physical body capital and muscularity (Klein 2007). Bodybuilding has attracted a lot of debate over recent years with some commentators arguing its popularity has been diminishing since the peak of the 1970's and 1980's (Bunsell 2013, Phoenix and Smith 2011). Meanwhile others have argued since the advent of social media and a more visual culture, young males have been embracing bodybuilding like lifestyles to gain social recognition (Andreasson and Johansson 2019ab, Locks and Richardson 2013). Thomas (2017) usefully conveys how in contemporary culture less males are embracing what traditionally was considered as bodybuilding and are more inclined towards being fitness models. Although no precise data is revealed, it is argued males typically chase lean muscular bodies as opposed to large overt muscle mass, due to its desirability in the contemporary era (Bey 2014).

Due to the continuing popularity and participation of professional bodybuilding as a competitive sport, four distinctive divisions have been established to cater for the various physiques and body image goals. According to commentators in the bodybuilding field, this has been as a result of increasing size, shapes and bodybuilders becoming more elite (National Physique Committee 2020, Gleyse 2018) whilst also attracting more males to the sport (Bey 2014).

<b>Bodybuilding/open category</b>
Established in the 1930's this is the pioneering division which raised the profile and profession of bodybuilding to become a competing sport (UK bodybuilding and fitness federation (UKBFF) 2018). Those who compete across the world are judged simply on muscle mass, definition and symmetry of muscular credentials (Quora 2019). As it is an open and untested division size and muscle has steadily increased to unheralded levels. This has negatively influenced the division with the rise of anabolic steroids athletes have been consuming to gain attention (Mosley 2009).
<b>Men's physique</b>
As a result of social, cultural trends with young males focusing on body aesthetics and tone, this division established in 2012 is regarded to combine muscularity with leanness and athleticism (UKBFF 2020). The division is split into various male height categories and judges look for the total package referring to conditioning, muscle definition and perfected symmetry.
<b>Classic physique</b>
Classic physique resides between the open and men's physique categories. This is the latest category to be added which combines healthy but not extreme muscle mass with athleticism. Strict weight to height ratios are stated to stamp out overly muscular physiques to allow for a level playing field (UKBFF 2020).
<b>212 Olympia</b>
212 Olympia has been established to cater for shorter in height males who cannot fairly compete with larger framed muscular males. The division has a weight limit of 212 pounds, whilst judges rate on muscle mass, muscle separation and conditioning (UKBFF 2020).

**Table 3.1:** Professional Bodybuilding categories

The various professional bodybuilding divisions are of particular importance in this research, as their interpretations have inspired males entwined within body image transformation routines to chase varying goals related to body muscularity, leanness and athleticism. A number of commentators have posited that at the professional level, body toning and leanness have become ever more desirable and the various categories are now focused on extensive conditioning and ultra-body tone, as opposed to outright muscle mass (Quora 2019, Mosley 2009). It appears the various categories identified above are following social and cultural trends in increasing the desirability of the lean, muscular body image a number of consumer males now chase (Brewster *et al* 2017).

Furthermore, Mosley (2009) conceptualises how weight training techniques have become more advanced as males chase new heights of defined muscle tone combined with athleticism and ultra-leanness. Such traits are regarded to have introduced more science into weight resistance training (Glyese 2018) and techniques are now believed to include a larger range of exercises and light weight based routines, as opposed to simply lifting heavier weight to engineer more advanced muscle tone (Quora 2019, Klein 2007). It is important to highlight how male participants in this research were not competing in competitive bodybuilding or had such desires. It was found males were chasing body image ideals (taking inspiration from bodybuilding cultural tapestry), whilst labelling themselves as weight trainers (in most cases) as opposed to bodybuilders. The only exception was participants from the seasoned weight lifters group, who believed they looked like bodybuilders due to their well-developed muscle mass; however, had never competed in any events.

### **3.5 Chapter summary**

The chapter has helped to contextualise the research study in describing the nature of social, cultural discourses where the study was undertaken. In prescribing the background details, a good insight has been established into the cultural notions acting on local male embodiment practices. The chapter has also provided background details of bodybuilding and its global presence in influencing the local culture of the study. The following chapter outlines the research design and methodology approach adopted.

## **4. Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the research design adopted in this study. I initially focus upon research philosophy underpinning this study, outlining the ontological and epistemological position in how I made sense of the research into male body practices and masculinity experiences. The chapter then considers data collection methods and why they were deemed most appropriate for this study. This is followed by an explanation of the data analysis process and finally research limitations and challenges experienced.

Before explaining the data collection process it is useful to highlight the research intentions and rationale behind the research approach adopted. The research questions involved exploring the underlying meanings and cultural notions of muscularity and body ideals, which were entwined within subjective experiences of the body and required building a rapport with males to gradually tease out embodiment beliefs and motives. In order to study self-conceptions and identity narratives of male consumers, there was a need to go beyond a surface level approach and delve deeper into embodiment practices (Vannini and Williams 2016), nature of interactions (Berg 2017) and appreciation of the cultural contexts (Arsel and Thompson 2011) to understand male body management. Consequently, the study involved employing a methodological approach, which would generate rich insights to help explain the masculine body and embodiment phenomena.

The research was also geared towards distinguishing the impact of male body ideals and body transformation on men, which was reported to play out over time through a negotiated journey (Ghigi and Sassatelli 2018, Hall 2015) whilst being integrated into the mundanity of everyday life (Brewster *et al* 2017, Hallsworth *et al* 2005). On reflection to such characteristics, the research approach was directed by my access to the fitness club and spending time training with participants. This involved studying how embodiment practices played out through aspirations and market discourses engagement.

This study follows a qualitative based enquiry, where the focus is on exploring the subjective world of body-conscious males and their experiences. Qualitative approaches are said to explore, describe and interpret the complexity of social, cultural environments (Saunders *et al* 2018), which is apparent in this study in relation to capturing rich, detailed insights. The research questions are not geared towards providing generalisations of male consumer embodiment practices, hence why a quantitative, positivist approach is not applicable. Conversely, subjective experiences of masculinity and the male body are the essence in which the research intentions are achieved.

#### **4.2 Research Philosophical Stance**

Initially it is important to outline the research stance adopted in this study and my assumptions carried forward to clarify the research approach and nature of data collection. According to existing knowledge and research outlined in chapter two, it was observed how the majority of research studies followed an interpretative, sociological approach in the study of male embodiment (Shilling 2012). The work of Monaghan (2007, 2002d, 2002b, 1999), Featherstone (2010, 1999), Gill (2008), Crossley (2006) and Gill *et al* (2005) were explicitly sociological, whilst following interpretive beliefs. Connell (2012) suggested reporting of embodied experiences of the male body and masculinity are inherently context based and consequently follow a social-constructionist perspective.

As illustrated in chapter two, when investigating the early conceptualisations of body and embodiment, it was discovered a number of studies favoured the active body and embodied experiences, thus following phenomenological traits in studying the body's presence in the world (Bendelow and Williams 2002, Crossley 1995). In this context, literature described how bodily experiences helped to acquire knowledge of the world (Kimmel 2008, Csordas 1999) and embodiment was the essence of body subjectivity (Crossley 1995). Following this perspective, theorists analysed the physical presence and perceptual meaning of body and embodiment (Shilling 2005, Turner 1997, Bourdieu 1984b). Crossley (1995) presented how Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu helped to make the paradigm shift of the study of the body into sociological theory and analysis. Consequently, what followed was sociological analysis of body and embodied practices in the adoption of the social construction perspective (Entwistle 2015, Berger *et al* 2012).

Reflecting upon marketing, consumer research and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) based research, it was found research has shifted to interpretative, qualitative based inquiry. According to Petrescu and Lauer (2017) this was to encourage the development of rich insightful accounts of consumer practices, as the marketing discipline continues to accept the diverse range of methods. Specifically, within CCT based research, studies have followed interpretive philosophical beliefs to apprehend the socio-cultural notions of consumption and consumer practices (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007). For example, Thompson (2004) and other CCT based studies, convey body image and consumer culture is heavily intertwined and the body plays a central role in an individual's social identity and appearance (Amaral *et al* 2019, Lefkowich *et al* 2017, Blond 2008, Siedman 1991).

Within marketing and consumer research relating to the self-concept and identity, a number of studies followed a phenomenological and interpretivist perspective (McNeill and Venter 2019, Maclaran 2015, Todd 2001, Turner 1997). Sirgy (1982) argued the phenomenological view provides a holistic view of the self-concept through its appreciation of the social, cultural setting and its implications on self-expression. Belk (1988) believed the interpretative stance is well suited to consumer research, arguing in order to understand consumer behaviour there is a need to consider the extended self and the broader existence of human beings. Through the exploration of further marketing research, it was learnt both phenomenological and interpretative viewpoints placed great importance on the contextual variables in influencing perceptions of self and motives to manipulate identity (Kedzior *et al* 2016, Hill 2016). Arguably, the interpretivist approach is more focused on how processes play out for identity manipulation (Hattie 2014), which is appropriate for this research regarding how muscularity was acquired through engagement with various discourses and actors to fulfil self-ideals.

Subsequently, this study follows the interpretative stance similar to other male body and bodybuilding research (Crossley 2006, Monaghan 2002b). The main reason for adopting such a stance was due to the belief males interpret self-ideals relating to masculinity, body image and muscularity. As illustrated in studies such as Sassatelli (2007) and Crossley (2001), it was seen how male body ideals are interpreted by male individuals who go on to shape their body ideals through embodiment practices. Such practices involve consulting marketing and cultural discourses to learn about inspirational states of the masculine, muscular body and perceptions of self, which are then used to drive embodied consumer practices (Griffiths *et al* 2016). In essence, the interpretative understanding is regarded as defining the reality of a phenomenon, in this case embodied experiences of the male body to develop new insights (Carson *et al* 2001).

This was achieved by offering new layers of understanding through the interpretivist approach (Willis *et al* 2007) that offered thick descriptions relating to subjective lived experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, Hudson and Ozanne 1988).

#### **4.2.1 Epistemology and ontology position**

The epistemology position of this study follows the belief reality is socially constructed as opposed to being objectively defined (Blaikie and Priest 2017, Gergen and Gergen 2007, McNamee and Gergen 1992). This is based on philosophical marketing theorists such as, Carson *et al* (2001), who proposed research in consumerism is commonly focused on understanding a phenomenon and why it is occurring. It is important to consider a philosophical stance, which appreciates the socially derived construction of reality relating to male body image and the consideration of sociological influences on male embodiment. Hence, an interpretivist, social-constructionist approach (Blaikie and Priest 2017, Holden and Lynch 2004, Schwandt 1994) was adopted and followed through the research process.

It was also acknowledged existing accounts of male embodied practices have been presented through experiential (Monaghan 2002ab) and social accounts (Crossley 2006). These studies have argued male body image ideals are learnt by males through cultural discourses and in turn shaped embodied experiences. Furthermore, a number of commentators (Clatterbaugh 2018, Downey and Caterall 2006, Pope *et al* 2000) propose the masculine body is socially constructed, whilst there is a need to study the material body and its vicinity in the social world (Otterbring *et al* 2018, Turner 1997). In this study I was interested in male consumer embodied experiences and their construction. I was particularly focused on developing an understanding of the interpretive view of how male consumers make sense of marketing discourses and in turn manage identity through the masculine body. As a result, the social derived construction of the male body epistemology was followed.

#### **4.2.2 Social constructionism**

Social construction is defined as a social concept used to help explain reality and its perception by social beings (Hoffman 1992). Its use in the theoretical sense, is regarded to help examine the knowledge and understanding of the world and hence reality (Parker 1998). McNamee and Gergen (1992: 63) state: *“A major focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of perceived reality. It involves looking at the way social phenomena are developed, institutionalised, known, and made into tradition by humans”*.

A number of related existing studies have presented the concept of the socially constructed body (Shilling 2012, Synnott 2002, Crossley 2001, Featherstone 1999) and how incarnations of the idealised body image are created through meanings, notions and connotations attached to the body by society (Entwistle 2015, Blond 2008, Fraser and Greco 2004). McNamee and Gergen (1992) propose how social theory focuses upon the notion that humans rationalise their experience of the world by creating symbolic models and meanings, which they reaffirm and share through interaction with social agents. This is of particular interest here, as this research explored lived experiences of masculinity and the symbolic meanings of muscularity, muscular body image and how this influenced male consumers.

There does appear to be variations between social constructionism and social constructivism and how they are used in the research context. Bryman and Burgess (2002) argue how the terms are used interchangeably when describing the epistemological stance. Constructivism is regarded to represent the view that meaning is created internally, through an individual's mind, through the process of reflection (Applefield *et al* 2000). Constructionism more to the point, is representative of the view that meaning is constructed through shared practices with society members through the process of integration and collaboration (Andrews 2012). Fuller and Loogma (2009) believe constructivism is commonly used in reference to individual's psychological perception of the construction of reality. In contrast, social constructionism holds the view, meanings and understandings are developed through interactions between people, based upon inter-subjective experiences.

Using a social constructionist epistemology was deemed to be useful in exploring relationships and meanings of embodiment practices and connotations of the masculine body to self and identity. It is conceptualised the perception of idealised body image is co-constructed through engagement amongst human interaction (Addis *et al* 2016, Bridges 2009), hence shared meanings are perpetrated and then enacted upon (Entwistle 2015). This was reported by existing studies such as Brewster *et al* (2017). In this study, it was believed participants came together and shared various views and perceptions of idealised masculinity and went on to practice and play out their beliefs through workouts and shaping their body image. As a result, social constructionism was used to help explain the epistemology of male body ideals and motives driving my participants to gain a muscular body image and the appeal of having and managing such a physique.



### 4.2.3 Limitations of social constructionism

As a result of proceeding with the research process and collecting data, it was discovered social constructionism was limited in not being able to explain embodied activities we undertook entirely. Through the study, I found what I observed and experienced in the fitness club exercising our male bodies went beyond the realms of social constructionism. Upon gaining insights into the underlying motives and beliefs driving embodiment journeys, I came to realise participants were not just conforming to social ideals of masculine body but also finding themselves (self-actualisation), touching base with their masculine-self. Participants also shared experiencing a perceived authentic form of masculinity through the workout practices and feeling the 'muscle pump'. Such attributes related to the essence of having and living with a muscular body and how participants internalised muscular body ideals and shaped their (embodied) consumption and lived body experience.

I found social constructionism could not fully explain the essence of having and living with a muscular body. Social constructionism helped explain the desire for the 'perfect' male body image however, as seen through this study an individual male's physical capacities are equally complicated. For example, the mesomorph body type is commonly associated with the bodybuilder image (Klein 1993) however, not all males can capture the mesomorph body, due to natural body limitations and physical capabilities (Brewster *et al* 2017). As a result, in relation to the ontological position, this study follows a phenomenological inspired lens to help understand the subjective experiences and meanings of a muscular body. This included distinguishing the lived reality of the male body and how participant's internalised meanings of the muscular body, how it influenced embodied actions and perceptions of self through the lived experience.

As part of my research approach, I considered existential phenomenology (Kafle 2011) in relation to the lived experiences of the male body (Crossley 1995). It was found by delving into the lived experiences allowed me to conduct a deeper analysis into the significance of the muscular body image in male consumer lives and how the masculine body is managed. As seen through existent literature Sparkes (1999), Joy and Sherry (2003) Merleau-Ponty (1962), recognised the body's experience in the social world. In this sense the experience of the male body in contemporary social contexts, helped to explain how the body is perceived and used by participants for self-actualisation purposes and enactment of a masculine self. I found the body experiences participants and myself engaged in, helped us to feel a sense of masculinity. The experiences involved developing relations with our bodies on a personal level that went beyond social, cultural conformance and desires.

Through the workouts and developing muscle, we engaged with our bodies at a deep, intimate level, which became a personal satisfaction vehicle we could positively relate to as part of the self-concept (how we perceived ourselves). I went on to learn how these experiences shaped our embodied lives, the way we perceived our bodies and relationships we developed with them. I found our bodies speak for themselves, in that the positive feeling of muscularity and feeling physically fitter, boosted self-regard and confidence in ourselves. As a result, a phenomenological lens played an important role to help explain my experiences.

The justification for adopting a phenomenological approach, centred upon the view although male body ideals are socially constructed, the way in which they are mapped onto the body is through the lived experience of the male body (Larsson 2014, Crossley 1995). The experiential stance has been highlighted in the way in which embodied masculinity is introduced through experiential accounts such as, the muscle pump, lifting weights and acquiring increased strength levels (Gough 2018b, Brewster *et al* 2017). Furthermore, the male body (as seen through this study), is set on a journey of physical performance, endurance, pain and growth and transformation, whilst an individual adopts consumption patterns to enforce change upon the body.

This is a gradual process that happens with the input of a variety discourses and cultural knowledge. A male learns about his body at an intricate level to discover how it reacts (to transformation process) in order to gain aesthetic results and strength gains (Bey 2014). Such experiences are seen as masculinity affirming, hyper-masculine chasing accounts that are required to be experienced in order to touch base with the masculine-self (Monaghan 2002a). Although the masculine ideal can be argued as given to a male, how it is internalised, negotiated and adopted for the self-concept is through the lived experience of the male body (Crossley 2005). These processes were required to be defragmented in this study to develop a better understanding of male embodiment.

#### **4.2.4 Existential phenomenology**

In order to draw upon the subjective experiences of masculine body existential phenomenology was employed to help understand the ways in which the male body shaped participant's lives. Existential phenomenology has been drawn from the philosophical and methodological stance of phenomenology (Giorgi 2007, Dale 1996). As described by Heidegger (1976:60) phenomenology is the science of: "*The being of entities*". This relates to living or existential meanings and their relevance to reality.

Existential phenomenology according to Kafle (2011: 187) is said to be focused on the: “*Description of everyday experience as it is perceived by the consciousness of the individuals*”. Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2009) add existential accounts acknowledge the centrality of the body in relation to an individual's consciousness, self and world. Lopez and Willis (2004) believed phenomenological approaches allow for a greater understanding to be established of living individuals and their meanings and engagement with others that occurs in a defined environment. Such views derive from the work of Heidegger (1976) who stated the environment in which human interaction occurs constitutes of social layers and social actor's existence of being, which is the subject of interpretation and understanding.

In retrospect to previous research, it was discovered the phenomenological approach in relation to examining subjective human experiences (Lopez and Willis 2004) and being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2005, Featherstone *et al* 1991) have been employed when studying lived experiences of the body (Ellis 2016) and masculinity (Coles 2009). Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2009) argue, modern derivatives of phenomenology spans across various disciplines and subjects including sport and leisure. Based upon these views, I considered existential phenomenology to help develop knowledge of the experiential accounts of masculine embodiment. This was based on understanding how the masculine body is acknowledged, interpreted and respectively managed by men, is through its lived experience (Frank 2014, Turner 2008, Gorely *et al* 2003). The phenomenological lens was considered to be useful, as the research entailed living out embodied experiences with participants over time to co-construct our experiences of masculinity and embodiment.

Furthermore, our experiences are shaped by the richness of the social contexts including, the fitness club, process of working out, sharing body management practices and our interpretations of body image ideals. It is important to clarify this study was not indecisive in selecting a particular philosophical approach. As illustrated both social constructionism and existential phenomenology played an important role in helping to explain male embodiment. I employed the latter due to the limitations of social constructionism. I found it did not entirely help to explain my fieldwork account and consequently proceeded with a phenomenology lens to prescribe the ontological position of this study.

In reflection to combining the epistemological (social constructionism) and ontological (existential phenomenology) approaches published research (Churchill 2011, Maggs-Rapport 2000) has discussed their compatibility with Scott (2011: 328) conceptualising how the mediation of the two act as a: “*ground for understanding*” rather than opposition figures. Furthermore, Smith (2017) publicised how the majority of his empirical research used phenomenological methods from a constructionist stance.

Brown (2014) argued the essence of both approaches fit together well, with phenomenology relating to the structures of experiences, whilst the existence of consciousness and space in which experiences occur are socially constructed (Mackenzie and Knipe 2006, Richie and Lewis 2003). In this sense, I was paying attention to the role of the male body in configuring notions of self and identity, which was associated with phenomenology and the lived experience of the male body. Conversely, the way in which these experiences played out at their location and networks amongst the participants were socially constructed.

### **4.3 Ethnography**

Ethnography as a research strategy was employed to gauge male embodied behaviour and exploring the relations of the masculine body on self-concept and identity over time. Ethnography is popular amongst Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research (Edirisingha *et al* 2014, Arnould 2007) and consumer research more widely (Sunderland and Denny 2016, Boddy 2011) to understand consumer motives and the underlying meanings of consumption practices (Valtonen *et al* 2010). Although this study considers CCT based research, the planning of the ethnographic approach has also taken inspiration from sport and leisure ethnography, including the work of Sands (2002, 1991) and Sparkes (2009) in sport ethnography. This is based on the view the study of the performative role of the male body (Yager and O'Dea 2014), fitness contexts (Sugden 1996) and bodybuilding (Gibson and Atkinson 2018) also fall into the discipline of sport and leisure and it is useful to learn from such research to inform my research.

Ethnography aims to capture the ways in which culture is constructed by individuals and group behaviour and experiences (Bazeley 2015, Murchison 2010, Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). This is based on the belief that the only plausible way to study social and cultural phenomena is to study them in action (Murchison 2010) and in the natural setting (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott 2003). Flick (2007) believes ethnography approaches are primarily concerned with providing analytical accounts of the make-up of social situations by encouraging participation in the relevant processes and monitoring how they come about. Ethnography is known to be valuable in gaining deep insights into socio-cultural and situational meanings that correlate to consumption behaviour (Arnould and Price 2006, Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Bazeley (2015) argues the approach is inherently centred upon cultural exploration, as it is embedded in cultural theory and the establishment of macro/micro and etic/emic distinctions. Some of the key characteristics describing ethnography, include sustained engagement in a particular site, where data is drawn from the 'real world' context to understand the environment from the perspective of participants (Lilis 2008, Taylor 2001).

Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) believe one of the distinctive benefits of adopting an ethnography approach is the increased knowledge of the language and behaviour constructs of those being researched. These in turn allow the researcher to gain an insider's perspective and a deeper understanding of thought structures and behavioural traits. William and Semken (2011) describe one of the fundamental purposes of employing an ethno-approach, is to go beyond what people say, to understand the shared system of meanings through constant, longitudinal engagement with actors, environmental variables and subjects in the setting.

This is said to offer an intricate understanding of the symbolic world of the subjects and being entwined within shared meanings and full immersion in the contextual tapestry (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott 2003). It is the insider perspective, which makes ethnography research particularly valuable in being able to yield rich insights that cannot be achieved from an outsider looking in (Lillis 2008, Kusenbach 2003). Working with people in their natural setting through fieldwork is said to be the hallmark of ethnography (Reeves *et al* 2008), which in turn is well suited to consumer exploration (Arnould 1998). Additionally, commentators have also proposed how the ethnography approach facilitates the collation of both emic and etic perspectives, which combine to provide cohesive insights (Murchison 2010, Lillis 2008, Boyle 1994). The emic perspective is regarded to be at the heart of ethnography related to the subjective significance of experience, whilst the etic perspective is the researcher's abstractions and interpreted significance of experience (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). It is commonly regarded these insights (emic, etic) combine to provide well-rounded conceptualisations that could not be developed using a single approach (Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

#### **4.3.1 Ethnography in previous research**

Ethnography has been used to study the lives of bodybuilders (Bey 2014, Monaghan 2001, 2002, Klein 1993) and gym environments (Crossley 2001) in sociological research. Researchers have publicised its suitability in the study of male practices related to sport (Sparkes 2009), leisure and gym environments (Pope and O'Sullivan 2003), gym culture (Andrews *et al* 2005) and more recently fitness trends (Crockett 2018). From such studies, it has been conveyed the merits of getting to know participants to build trust and rapport offers an effective means to gather insightful data (Steward *et al* 2013). Sands (2002, 1992) reported how through the immersive process, an ethnographer researcher can uncover many of the otherwise hidden values and meanings related to cultures such as sport.

From previous studies, it was learnt trustworthiness and loyalty to participants is paramount in order to get men to talk about their lifestyle choices (Klein 1993). Within the subculture of bodybuilding and male trainers, it has been acknowledged these groups participate in the private confines of members' only fitness settings and due to the stigma attached to bodybuilding, outsiders are rarely given the authority to ask questions and record data (Bey 2014, Klein 1993). Furthermore, in particular to males working out Monaghan (2002b) conveyed the importance of taking an active membership role with enclosed groups in order to learn about bodybuilder lives.

Looking more closely at ethnographic methods of data collection, Monaghan (2001, 2002b) conveyed the importance of taking an active membership role through a participative role as conceptualised by Adler and Adler (1987). He argued working out with bodybuilders was a realistic way to overcome methodological challenges of access and participant cooperation, by getting close and getting to know participants over an extended period. Others who have studied males in gym environments have spoken how a participative role helps provide a rich dynamic to the research and supplement findings further (Bey 2014, Andrews *et al* 2005). Due to the popularity of ethnography in this field, researchers have also debated upon the type of ethnography approaches they have adopted in their work. Monaghan (2002ab) adopted an experiential, reflective approach in reporting upon his situational experiences, by moving with the participants through their time and space (Rode 2011).

In explaining his approach Monaghan (2001, 2002b) defined how it allowed him to provide an accurate description of what he witnessed and experienced, by using field notes and experiences to map the journey. However, drawbacks were also noted, including how subcultural understandings of embodiment practices may have remained unspoken, as these were considered the norm in the culture and not necessarily shared by participants. Klein (1993:282) also spoke of the value of reporting on experiences through his ethnography by proposing: "*Workouts are a setting for a range of additional micro-interactions in which all manner of things take place (for example, jobs are sought, psyching out opponents occurs, interpersonal intrigues unfold, personal crises are worked out or exacerbated*".

Sands (2002:122) conceptualised upon the value of experiential ethnography in sport, by deliberating how experiences added another dimension to his research. Sands (2002) argued in reporting upon convoluted experiences which other researchers could not do so provided significant benefits to the research including allowing the researcher to share commonality with participants: *“In my research with sprinters and football players, I experienced sensations and feelings through participation that would have lain outside the non-experiential ethnographer's boundaries of observation. In effect, my body's lived experience of performance and competition not only allowed me access to sensations of pain, elation, adrenaline rushes, and wild swings of emotion generated through cognitive appraisal of performance but also brought me closer to the cultural experiences of my team mates and other like athletes”*.

In describing the concept of experiential ethnography Sands (2002:124) argued the ethnographer actively and intensively participates in the culture as a complete native: *“The fieldworker attempts to access the cultural reality of all cultural members, not only through his or her experiences, but also through canvassing other cultural members”*. Sands (2002) argues the ethnographer is not the central focus of the ethnography, conversely the individual's experience validates the experience and behaviour of those being studied. The main advantage of adopting such an approach in particular to studies such as males involved in body training routines, is that it allows distinguishing the deeper levels of meaning of culture through the intricate experience (Bey 2014). It is argued through the reporting of experiences the ethnographer can relate to the intangibles of human behaviour. This can include, adherence to routine and schedule, the tone of conversations and emotions which cannot be grasped through observations, questioning or interviews alone (Sands 2002).

Such points are raised by Bey (2014) and Sparkes (2009) who proposed providing details of experiences bring the reflective narratives alive and provide more than just a description of observation. It was deliberated the nature in which workouts affected the male body through the muscle pump, soreness and pain needed to be experienced in order to feel what participants experienced. Additionally, there was also the feel good factor of the masculine body when achieving workout milestones in body performance and developing muscle which provided a psychological boost (Monaghan 2001).

### **4.3.2 Ethnography process**

I followed a similar approach as adopted by Monaghan (2001) and Klein (1993) in that I went 'native' in the fitness club by fully participating in workouts with three training groups, twelve participants in total over a period of twenty-five months. Through the ethnography I embarked on participant derived exercise training regimes in the fitness club, whilst also socialising with group members during our time together. By reflecting upon my experiences and developing body muscle, I was able to learn more about the participants and their experiences, the norms, values and behaviours of the culture of male fitness, weight training and body image transformation (Bey 2014, Andrews *et al* 2005, Sands 2002).



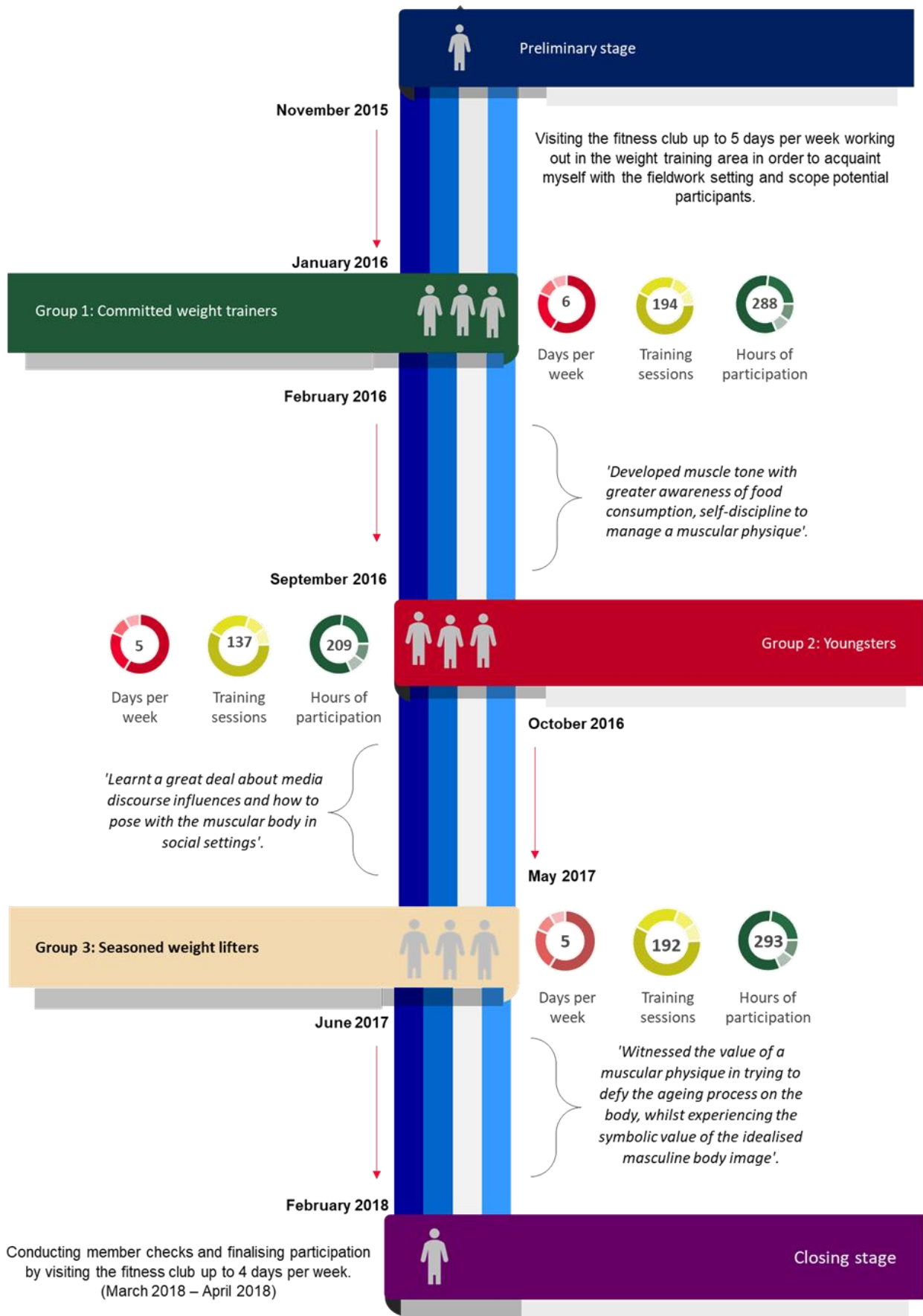


Figure 4.1: Fieldwork timeline

My ethnographic approach as illustrated in figure 4.1 centred upon my time spent in the fitness club. In November 2015 I began visiting the location five times per week to get to know the fieldwork setting, re-acquainting myself with weight-resistance training and scoping potential participants. This period span over 3 months. In January 2016 I came across a participant (Steve) who agreed for me to train with him and his fellow trainers. This became the first group of four participants I joined following a structured routine over 6 days per week, with club visits normally occurring during weekday evenings and Saturday mornings. The nature of participation is discussed later; however, to briefly state it involved exercising competitively in the group, engaging in discussions and supporting participants through exercises.

The opportunity to also attend social events on four occasions was also accommodated during my time, which included visiting participant's homes and attending birthday party events. The first month was spent just participating with the group to acquaint myself with the exercise routines and participants. During this period, I commenced recording my thoughts and experiences in a reflective diary. The reflective accounts centred upon my experiences in the field setting and my thoughts of the participants, their behaviours, norms and values I observed. I also noted the reactions of the participants from my presence since joining the group.

Once I felt comfortable with the routine, I then commenced collating fieldwork notes by capturing the various actors, routines, discussions and behaviours at play during the time spent in the fitness club. After a period of 4 months, I reviewed what data I collected and conducted some initial analysis as recommended by Hine (2015) and Edirisingha *et al* (2014) in following an adaptive approach to fine tune the fieldwork process and data collection. For instance, it was discovered spending more time with participants in isolated areas revealed they became more open to discuss personal agendas, insecurities and motivational drivers affecting their perceptions and drive to adopt muscular body ideals. I found accompanying participants in the sauna and steam rooms during relaxation periods allowed conversations to flow, presenting the opportunities to learn more about participant's lives. This included perception of masculinity and muscularity, how participants' negotiated marketing/media discourses of idealistic body images and managing the muscular body.

Upon acknowledging I had developed substantial enough insights into this group, I began seeking further participants. In August 2016 I was introduced to the younger brother of a participant from the first group who had recently joined the fitness club with his friends. This provided the opportunity to begin participating with the second group from October 2016. I adopted a similar approach in fully participating in workouts with the group to learn more about the participants, whilst also joining the group on social occasions.

The second group was more of a challenging proposition, as the participants initially perceived me as an advisor to lead the group in training. This initial confusion did cause issues to begin with however, I eventually was able to collect data and monitor participants' body image transformation journeys over an 8-month period. During this phase of the ethnography, I learnt more about how the male body was used in social contexts by participants to raise self-regard and social appeal. In turn, I spent a total of nine occasions with participants at social events to learn about the social derived motives to adopt a muscular body. The final group of participants were approached in June 2017 in the fitness club and subsequently, participation span over 9 months in which I got to know the participants and their training regime. I also accompanied the participants to a local boxing event, where I was able to socialise with these self-styled 'hard men'.

By following a participative approach, I was able to grasp the feel of workouts and the embodied journey, whilst also apprehending the affect this had on self-regard and perceptions of masculinity. The experiences also allowed me to adopt the behaviours and cultural mindset of my participants, in order to apprehend the cultural reality of weight training and masculine embodiment (Sparkes 2009). Such findings added a rich dynamic to my research, by being able to report upon intimate experiences of the embodiment journey and masculinity enactment. The main challenge as conveyed by Sands (2002) and others who have adopted similar ethnographic approaches involving participation (Bey 2014, Klein 1993), is to be able to perform at a similar level to cultural members. It is advised one needs to have the skillset, knowledge and body competency to be able to be in a position to experience what members experience (Sands 2002). Consequently, as a member I was required to know about the various muscles groups, how to manage the performing body, whilst also have experience of weight resistance training, the fitness club equipment and 'gym' vocabulary. Crucially, I was required to put this knowledge into practice through performative interactions. My previous knowledge and experience played a key role here in being able to apprehend the expectations of being a weight trainer.

#### **4.3.3 Ethnography limitations**

Like any research methodology, ethnography holds its own limitations which can affect the credibility of data collated and findings produced. Marcus (1986) argued within reflective ethnography there is a strong dynamic which implies the researcher is part of the context under study and in turn shaped by it. Subsequently it can be criticised that interpretations of reality are 'value laden' and can skew the accuracy of the data collated (Boyle 1994).

However Agar (1983) defends the ethnography approach by stating the data is not taken at face value, with the data interpretation process going through several phases of analysis in which hypothetical patterns are identified and their validity tested against logical reasoning and fit with other related studies. Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) have described how ethnographic approaches can open up more questions than what they answer and are not always conclusive. The nature of ethnographic research is also dependent upon access to the natural setting and spending time effectively capturing rich insights. Flick (2007) states participants can determine both the success and quality of the research therefore their cooperation is essential.

Experiential ethnography (Sands 2002) in particular, is said to pose some drawbacks, which researchers need to be aware of. Sands (2002: 125) himself shared it is important the fieldworker remains; “*objectively subjective*” in presenting findings, due to the increased nature of reflection in adopting this approach. The danger of simply becoming autobiographical is a drawback, which Monaghan (2001) also reported. To address these concerns Sands (2002) defined the importance of evidencing and critique of experiential findings through an explanatory qualitative analysis framework and the use of member checks to validate data (Sparkes 2009).

#### **4.4 Ethnographic Methods**

I now deliberate on the data collection methods used to collect research data. In doing so I discuss the reasons for selecting the method choices and how it complimented the ethnography approach adopted.

##### **4.4.1 Participant observations**

Participant observations are defined as both an overall strategy to research and a data collection method (Marshall and Rossman 2014, Berg 2004). The method utilises full immersion into the fieldwork setting, allowing me to fully observe and experience reality as participants do (Angrosino 2008). Consequentially, the method allows for detailed, natural, concrete descriptions to be developed, based upon longitudinal observations (Jorgenson 2015, Sandiford 2015). The act of observing according to Marshall and Rossman (1989: 79) is said to: “... entail the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting chosen for study”.

LeCompte and Schensul (1999:91) add: "*Participant observations revolve around the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting*".

Respectively, in this study, the observations surrounded the discourses and actors at play in the fitness club during workouts with participants. In observing I followed the guidance of Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003), by making systematic notes of events, behaviours, reactions and body performances of participants. It is regarded such a way of capturing the natural dynamics of the field setting helps to portray an accurate representation of what is occurring, through a definitive description (Strudwick 2019). My active participation involved being part of a weight training group and exercising with group members. I was expected to help setup training equipment and support other participants by guiding physical movement. During the fieldwork process, I was also asked to provide my opinions of workouts and the physical appearance of participants. I also socialised with the groups during social outings in restaurants, bars, pubs and visiting member's homes.

According to literature, participant observation encompasses various membership roles for the fieldworker to consider in relation to the levels of participation (Ashworth 1995). Respectively, a number of previous studies have referred to Gold's (1958) ideology, who referred to 4 membership roles (complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer and complete participant (undertaken here)) to rate the extent of involvement of the fieldworker to activities (Johnson *et al* 2006). Adler and Adler (1987) provided further guidance by arguing participative roles can evolve in the fieldwork and be undertaken through an overt, ethical research process (Musante and Dewalt 2010). The main benefit of participative roles is that experiences of activities and participation can be internalised by the researcher and be more easily documented (Nelson 1969). Angrosino (2008) proposes how active participation by the researcher, enables the entire context of an event to be included in the observations, as opposed to interpretation, recollection and reordering of the events. As a result, this provides an accurate portrayal of subject's lives, whilst providing credibility to data collection processes (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014).

Flick (2007) added that participation enables the ethnographer to learn about events, feelings, rules and norms in context as opposed to purposefully probing. The benefit of doing this is to focus on what actually happens, rather than what tends to happen (O'Reilly 2012) and to capture detail, which might not be otherwise discussed or necessarily desired to be discussed by participants (Spradley 2016).

I found this to be the case particularly on the subject of body performance in training and when participants did not achieve the results they desired and subsequently were reluctant to talk about their experiences.

#### **4.4.2 Participant observation in previous research**

Participant observational methods are apparent in consumer research and have been used to explore consumption routines of consumer groups (Hirschman 1986) and consumer behaviour (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Fellman (1999) argued, people do not always do what they say, with the author reporting how in consumer research there has been a strong call for studies which capture lived experiences of active consumer lives (Valtonen *et al* 2010, Sherry *et al* 2004). Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003: 215) argue consumers are considered as a social being and not just; "*attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural entities*". Consequently, there has been a push to explore consumer related behaviours in the wider context of social and cultural experiences in the life-world.

A strong reason for adopting the method was because of Bernard (1994) who argued, one of the motives for a researcher to explore participant observation is having a passion to learn from the participants and establishing rapport with them. It is regarded a researcher should integrate in such a way as to blend into the context seamlessly, so that its members will act naturally (Bernard 1994). This is stated to provide a means to immerse oneself, as opposed to removing a person from the setting and losing the contextual richness (Musante and Dewalt 2011). As discussed, previous sociological studies have utilised participant observations (Monaghan 2002ab, 2001), whilst others have used qualitative interviews and surveys (Sassatelli 2007, Crossley 2001). There are no known consumer research studies that have involved the researcher actively participating with males in workouts, whilst conducting research into embodied consumer lives. In this respect, I believe I was in a unique position in having access to body conscious males. This presented a number of benefits to the research process in being able to shed light on male embodied consumerism to benefit male consumer research. It has also been argued more qualitative, observational based methods are recommended in the humanistic inquiry and exploration in marketing research (Carson *et al* 2001) and consumer experiences (Singh 2011, Sherry *et al* 2004).

There are many challenges facing the participant researcher to effectively conduct observations and partake in activities to gain true, rich accounts of consumer lives. Elliott and Jenkel-Elliott (2004) point out, the researcher effect can sometimes have a detrimental impact on collecting accurate findings through a poorly planned approach.

The authors recommend identifying an ideal position whereby the researcher effect is minimised on the participants and in turn an in-depth account and maximum information can be observed and collected. Tedlock (1991) states this can be achieved when the researcher comes away from the researcher identity and acts as a member to avoid disrupting the natural flow and interaction between those and their natural environment.

Denscombe (2014) argues participant research is hindered by non-repetitive research results findings and that data cannot be checked for accuracy. Angrosino (2008) also commented upon the time-consuming nature of the method and commitment required from the researcher. It has also been argued, due to the small scale nature of such data collection methods there can be at times a lack of consideration to wider structural forces that shape individual's behaviour such as, social class inequality (Kawulich 2005). Although the research was mindful of the above drawbacks, participant observations were well suited to this study and the nature of the fieldwork.

It was suggested masculinity can be enacted by the performative male body (Connell 2012), hence working out with participants provided a first-hand account of how the individuals enacted their masculinity beliefs through embodied practices. It was also deliberated, body transformative results are achieved over time (Brewster *et al* 2017) and through negotiated embodiment activities (Clatterbaugh 2018). Therefore, by being able to see and feel such change by the combination of the research approach (ethnography) and primary data collection method (participant observation), these were deemed to be effective choices for this study. Other data collection methods were also considered, including in-depth interviews as undertaken by Bordo (2008), Sassatelli (2007) and Crossley (2001). However, these were dismissed, as I did not want to be limited by purposeful questioning (Qu and Dumay 2011) and gaining isolated accounts of embodied experiences (Valtonen *et al* 2010).

Through the primary research there was also the desire to go beyond the surface level to gain a deep insight into male embodiment culture and lived experiences of the male body. This was required to help explain the links between self, masculinity perceptions and the body. As a result, there was an important objective to not lose the contextual significance of experiences, achieving body results and the fitness environment. It was recognised participants opened up to me to share personal feelings and thoughts, through the level of trust established, as a result of the longitudinal, participative research process. I observed how our experiences we shared provided a common ground for us to naturally talk about our bodies, muscularity and masculinity experiences. Although interviews could have captured insightful findings, I believe they would have not resulted in the rich detail captured through the on-going participation and natural interaction I engaged in.

As argued in the introduction chapter, the ways in which males apprehend body image desires and work upon capturing these ideals, play out over time and through a lived embodied journey (McNeill and Douglas 2011, Sassatelli 2007). Consequentially, the research followed the actors and discourses over time to capture evolving findings to benefit this research. Through the ethnographic participative role, it was also found experiencing events such as, beating personal records in exercises or lifting a remarkable amount of weight were seen as monumental moments for participants and myself to experience. Such events provided great insights into the satisfaction experienced in self-masculinity affirmation.

Respectively, an overt participant observation process was adopted to adhere to ethical consent authorised and to keep the research process as uncomplicated as possible. All participants were made aware of the nature of the research, its purpose, background and possible publication likelihood. Consent was also sought and approved from the fitness club prior to seeking participants.

#### **4.4.3 Natural Conversation**

Natural conversation or natural speech data is deemed to be an instrument of data collection (Golato 2003). According to Jenkel-Elliott (2004:217) it is regarded: “.., *much of the richest data which ethnography can capture comes from the whole realm of informal talk between the researcher and informants*”. Fox *et al* (2013) posited, this form of data collection provides experience-near as possible of collecting natural data of an occurring phenomena. This is based on the view it allows participants to control the discussion, whilst answering the question in a natural, non-pre-conceived manner, which purposeful interviewing can sometimes be hindered by.

Golato (2003) added keeping a record of natural occurring conversations are particularly useful for studying emic perspective, such as people’s beliefs or values with respect to culture. This was particularly suited to this study, as the nature of fitness context and working out led to participants naturally discussing what they were doing and motives driving such endeavours. It was previously conceptualised that males often do not like to share personal issues, such as body image with researchers (Coles 2009); consequently, collecting such data in a non-obtrusive manner, avoiding outright questioning, proved to be beneficial for this study. There are drawbacks to the method with research methodology theorist Hinkel (1997) reporting such data instruments do not accurately capture peoples’ exact spoken meaning due to language interpretations. De Fina and Perrino (2011) highlighted the data collection tool can capture a lot of non-valuable data, due to its informal nature.



There is also the issue that the approach can generate a lot of work for the researcher in collecting, collating and then going through the data before any analysis can occur. This is said to be both time and labour intensive (Yuan 2001). Regardless of these drawbacks, natural conversations were held in their purest, simplest form to capture the moment and tone of the context in which the muscular body was being engineered.

Due to the nature of participation and conversations occurring during the time when the male body was performing and was subject to its transformation, recording conversational data was found to be on point and relevant to the type of insights this research desired. For example, there were times when participants and I were frustrated in not being able to lift a certain weight and not achieve the target number of repetitions. These experiences, together with celebratory moments when achieving milestones, were captured to paint an accurate representation of the routine in which body transformative practices unravelled.

#### **4.4.4 Online engagement**

During the fieldwork what quickly became apparent was the frequent sharing of online conversation, memes and jokes amongst participants. I found the groups frequently engaged on social networks to communicate amongst themselves. I found opinions, images and messages shared became revealing as the fieldwork progressed. The phenomenon of online engagement has seen great strides since the popularity of social media has arisen (Vaterlaus *et al* 2015, O'Connor *et al* 2003). Within qualitative research, internet communication is commonly used to refer to the nature in which people interact and engage on virtual technology-enabled platforms (Evans *et al* 2008). I found the online engagement I experienced in my research, became a very useful tool to gauge influential marketing discourses and the way in which participants' interpreted and acted upon muscular ideals.

I was able to witness the underlying views, emotions underpinning the behaviours and perceptions participants previewed. Consequently, integrating online interaction provided a valuable way of maintaining contact with participants throughout the study. Intriguingly, I also learnt more about some individuals that went beyond the confines of the fitness club and social settings. In this instance I only used the contents shared by the participants in our training groups. Due to having ethical consent and permission from participants to only use this data (to triangulate with other data collection) and not any other social media data, the analysis was strictly based on data shared with me as part of the training group.

I found having online access to participants provided a convenient way to keep in touch with individuals and check upon how they were feeling from previous training sessions and thoughts on progress. This informal chit chat became very insightful into learning about participants' motivations and commitment to gaining the idealised body. Additionally, the conversations helped to get close to some individuals, who were more vocal and opinionated during online engagement (Androutsopoulos 2013).

There have been limited male bodybuilding ethnography studies, which have utilised data from online engagement to supplement insights. Conversely, I have drawn upon methods used in fitness trends research (Kozinets 2010). For example, Deighton-Smith *et al* (2018) research into fitness discourses on social media, employed the combination of content and thematic analysis to analyse influential contents on a social media platform and those who had engaged with such contents. Furthermore Smith and Stewart (2012) research into online bodybuilding community was guided by Kozinets (2010) conceptualisation into internet discussion experiences. Kozinets (2010) argues internet based threads could be sampled based on; relevance to research question(s), the nature of online activity, interactivity between participants and data richness.

The online engagement I experienced with my participants included textual data, which was initially screened using Kozinets (2010) conceptualisation and then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). As images and internet based media memes were also shared and commented on by participants, this content was analysed using qualitative analysis. This involved images and memes being critically reviewed of their contents, message and meanings depicted by participants similar to what Deighton-Smith and Bell (2018) performed in their research of social media image sharing.

#### **4.4.5 Pictorial drawings (production of visual knowledge)**

Research suggests the use of drawings in research falls into the larger category of visual research methods (Webster and Watson 2002, Rose 2001). According to Weber (2008:44): *“Some things just need to be shown, not merely stated. Artistic images can help us access those elusive hard-to-put-into-words aspects of knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden or ignored”*. Mitchell *et al* (2011) define how pictorial drawings make part of the self, visible. Webster and Watson (2002) argued, drawings correlate to how the drawer understands a perspective or circumstance at that point in time. It is such insights that provides vivid understanding of how people see themselves and the world (Weber 2008).

Incorporating visual methods into the field of physical culture is useful for a number of reasons. According to Mannay (2015), visual data offers a different way of 'knowing' the world of physical culture, which goes beyond knowledge constructed and communicated through written and spoken words alone. It was arbitrated adding pictorial representations would provide a distinctive element to data collection, since previous related ethnography studies (Bey 2014, Crossley 2006) do not employ such methods to collect rich insights. It is argued from an interpretivist epistemological perspective, knowledge is produced through practices, interactions and experiences (Schwandt 1994). Consequently, it can be argued that methodologically, drawings depicted from participants' thoughts of body image and masculinity presentation, acted as visual products and portray meanings to these individuals to relate to self and identity desires.

During the fieldwork process, when I perceived the individual was comfortable to talk freely about their aspirations of body image and how they wanted to look, I requested the drawing. This occurred during the participation phase with the respective group. I specifically requested a drawing to capture their aspirations of how they wanted to look and what they were trying to achieve through our exercise regime. Thus, I wanted to establish the link between self-concept, identity and their idealistic, aspirations of what they wanted to be. Ghigi and Sassatelli (2018) state the masculine self is commonly related to and developed through the male body surface and its aesthetical image, hence drawings helped to tease out masculine self-aspirations.

Furthermore, Frank (2014) conceptualised the muscular body represented symbolic value, with various muscular features and aesthetics representing significant self-conceptualising connotations to fulfil masculine desires. I was keen to capture the notions in which the body was used to relate to masculine self and the symbolic meanings of muscularity. Consequently, I found conducting such an activity to be very insightful in identifying the underlying beliefs of the body project journey we were entwined within. I approached each participant individually to draw their aspirational body image in the fitness club's changing rooms (on occasions when it was quiet enough to not be disturbed). After the completion of the drawing, I asked the individual to describe their image, asking them to explain not just the contents but also the reasons for the overall shape, size and composition of the drawing.

Upon completing the exercise what emerged were powerful and vivid illustrations of body beautiful aspirations of each participant's desires and idealistic physical incarnations of their self-concept. The drawings and accompanying commentary provided by participants (section 5.7.1.4) intricately captured the emotional, as well as physical impact of muscular embodiment.

## **4.5 The data collection process**

Following the adoption of participant observations and collecting naturally occurring conversation data, I now discuss the processes in which data was collected in the fitness club with the various participant groups.

### **4.5.1 The act of working training**

Klein (1993) commented upon how a lot can occur during the process of exercising body muscles. Through his research with bodybuilders, he witnessed a number of eventualities play out including, psyching up before undertaking an exercise, frustrations when failing to achieve targets and posing in front of other trainers. Klein (1993) also advocated personal crisis are worked upon during this time to overcome perceived embodied weaknesses and areas of insecurities. Furthermore, from past experiences it was realised, the exercise effect on the physical body and participant's mind frame offered great insights into the symbolic role of exercise and developing muscle. Simon Fossil (2012) through his research, delved into the psychology of the weight lifter, stating how working out became a pinnacle point in which the body was forced to perform and all the preparation conducted outside of this time came into fruition. The act of weight training would normally be challenging in itself for the researcher, in being able to overcome the intensity of lifting heavy weights and dealing with muscle fatigue and soreness. In this instance, my job as a researcher was made easier as I was a reasonable performer in lifting weights and having the strength and agility to be able to undertake intensive routines.

My previous experiences not only helped on this basis, but also allowed me to share experiences with participants, including overcoming difficult exercises and working on techniques. This provided common ground to engage in discussion and unravel participant's thoughts, feelings and expressions constructively as a researcher and training partner. I was able to capture experiences such as celebrating when participants achieved remarkable results in lifting heavy weights, or getting through an excruciating exercise. Conversely, there were also times of deep frustration and even rage when dumbbells were thrown to the floor, when bodily strength was not to the level we desired.

#### **4.5.2 How data was collected**

The data collection process was structured over three phases for each participant group in the fitness club. Data collection involved participating in exercise routines, observing and participating in natural conversation, whilst making notes. This was challenging to begin with, as it involved trying to be an effective participant and competent researcher simultaneously. The task did become more manageable, as I became more settled into the participant group and exercise regime. The participation involved visiting the fitness club at an agreed time, meeting participants and proceeding with a weight training routine led by the group. The training was slightly varied for each group, but generally involved weight resistance training in lifting weights, activating various body muscles groups. The training involved four participants (per group) and myself and we would take it in turn to conduct the exercise in front of the group. On some exercises (bench press, shoulder press) I would 'spot' (support the individual performing the exercise by helping to pass the dumbbell or bar and be on standby) the participant.

During the process of exercising it was common for us to take short breaks between exercises, or when waiting for equipment to become available. Such phases allowed me to hold conversations and observe participants' behaviour and reactions to bodily performance. Throughout the fieldwork process, I found this to be valuable in collecting conversational data, whilst there was a clear focus on shaping muscles and communication of desires and goals amongst participants (Strudwick 2019, Balsiger and Lambelet 2014, Sparkes 2009). I used this period to engage with participants, whilst also make brief notes on my mobile phone.

In order to keep the data collection process as natural and unobtrusive as possible, conversational data was collected briefly using notes function on a mobile phone at the scene during rest periods or when waiting for my turn to exercise. Additionally, more detailed reflective notes were made immediately after the event when I was alone. I found this to be well suited, as it was common for participants to use their mobile phones between exercise sets and rest periods, allowing me to record data without drawing attention to data collection (Spradley 2016). Upon finishing a training session, when alone, I was able to elaborate upon the observations, experiences and participation accounts based upon what I saw, as well as what I experienced as a weight trainer.

A digital voice recorder was considered, but ultimately avoided in order not to disrupt the participant relationship (Rapley 2001). Due to the well adopted integration process with research participants, the opportunity to also socialise with individuals outside of the fitness club in local bars and participants' homes was also undertaken to gain deep insights that went beyond the workout environment (Sands 2002). This allowed participants to share more intimate thoughts away from the fitness context in familiar surroundings.

Following an adaptive ethnography approach (Edirisingha *et al*/2014), after 4 months training with the committed weight trainers, I reflected upon data collected and prepared the data for the first cycle of analysis. By conducting analysis at this stage allowed me to review the quality of data collected and its relevance to the research questions. This initial review also highlighted areas which were lacking in detail, this surrounded experiential accounts of masculinity, personal motives driving participants to work on body image and the impact of weight training. This allowed me to fine tune my data collection at the various stages of participation, whilst also constantly learning from the fieldwork process (Edirisingha *et al* 2014).

#### **4.5.3 Recording field notes**

The work of Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2004) and Spradley (1980) was followed in the construction of field notes. Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2004) prescribed how it was important to provide as much detail of the location and its appearance, together with details of how people were interacting, to capture an accurate description of the fieldwork setting. Prior to this Spradley (1980) defined how it was useful to capture the various actors and events occurring, together with feelings of the experiences. I found such guidance to be useful in constructing field notes of the busy nature of the fitness club setting and capturing the essence of my observations and experiences.

Through the regular, longitudinal observations, I was able to collect detailed notes of the atmosphere and actors at play during my time in the fitness club setting, whilst also elaborating upon participants' behaviour and how the fitness environment influenced its members. During the early phase I also developed notes on what I observed, experienced and general discussions between participants. At times these were not always relevant to the research; however, at that point I was not sure what would prove to be useful and continued to capture as much as possible. An extract of my diary notes are presented in appendix A.

The data collection process also involved keeping a fieldwork reflective diary and profile of each participant. Monaghan (2001) and Sands (2002) described how keeping a reflective account of experiences are at the heart of the experiential ethnography and allowed the research to draw upon the emic and etic richness of the research process. Following such recommendations, a fieldwork diary was maintained with all three participant groups. This allowed me to monitor progress and my thoughts, as I became entwined within the fitness culture and developing body muscularity. As a result, the research did yield a comprehensive amount of rich data, which was very challenging to manage and analyse. However, as indicated by (Murchison 2010), it is better to have more qualitative fieldwork data than not enough to answer the research statement.

#### **4.5.4 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity according to Roulston (2010: 116) refers to; *“The researcher’s ability to be able to self-consciously refer to him or herself in relation to the production of knowledge about research topics”*. It is advocated reflexivity is a tool for carefully constructed research that includes the researcher as part of the process (Patton 2014). In chapter three I ‘positioned myself’ in terms of my own experiences, background and attitudes towards the muscular body to declare my stance on the research topic. This informed how I interpreted the research findings and any potential bias. In reflecting upon my position I now engage in reflexivity in describing the influence of my ‘self’ on the research process.

Based on my positionality and beliefs of the muscular body described in chapter three I happen to discover when discussing the male body with participants I initially related to the muscular body in a positive light. I found as I personally related to my past experiences of the muscular body providing me with a psychological boost and confidence in physical activities, I elaborated upon the favourable aspects. Furthermore through reflexivity, I also found I was reluctant to share with participants my own personal areas of weakness in weight training and physical attributes. For example I struggled with leg squat exercises and was not happy with the mid-rift fat I carried. Due to training competitively with a group of males and in the fitness club there was always the salient pressure to present my idealistic self and to hide personal insecurities in front of judgemental males.

Upon reflecting on my recorded accounts of participant interactions and the fieldwork process in month three (committed weight trainers) I happened to find keeping my insecurities private led to participants not sharing personal insecurities. Consequently, I adapted my approach in being more open and sharing my experiences. When discussing our exercise routines I revealed my perceived weaknesses and areas of my body I felt I needed to work on.

I found this change had a profound impact on participants who reacted by also sharing with me more intimate feelings and perceived embodied weaknesses. Additionally, the impact of the fitness club environment and the pressure to present an idealistic masculine self led to participants (youngsters) perceiving me as a mentor. Due to presenting myself as a competent weight trainer and a 'muscular' male led to the youngsters seeking guidance from me to which I conformed to in order to build rapport. This continued for a period of two weeks until I critically reflected upon my position and the need to reaffirm my researcher role. My position in the fieldwork was also questioned during the latter stages when training with the seasoned weight lifters. Upon commencing training with this group I discovered my competency and loyalty to weight training was debated by the final group. Learning from the participation process to date I was aware I needed to share my own weaknesses in order to encourage participants to share theirs. However, I found sharing my personal feelings led to participants questioning my (training) abilities and whether I could cope with their exercise regime.

The seasoned weight lifters carried a superiority complex in that they perceived themselves to be the strongest men in the fitness club, consequently orchestrated a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001) relating to maintaining superior sense of masculinity. The seasoned lifters reaction to my presence led to me reverting back to my earlier position of demonstrating an idealistic self and masculine demeanour in order to gain credibility amongst this group. This experience led me to feeling the need to prove myself, show my embodied qualities and masculine character. Fortunately my previous weight training experience allowed me to participate and compete at an acceptable level. Incidentally not being able to 'bench' or 'lift' the same amount of weight as the participants led to these males perceiving me as a non-threat to their reigning masculine superiority. This allowed me to ask personal questions and participants to eventually share more details.

#### **4.6 Sampling**

The research was geared towards capturing deep insights and by no means was it to try and encapsulate a representative sample of the male consumer population. Instead the research was focused on selecting male body image conscious consumers, who were regular fitness club visitors and pursued body image goals. Gym goers as they are defined in previous studies (Crossley 2006) are an interesting reference group, as they show a strong desire to shape the body through high engagement with exercise routines and body transformation projects (Gill *et al* 2005). As stated by Sassatelli (2007), the way in which such groups navigate different discourses, norms and expectation can differ and are worth investigating.



Tables 4.4, 4.5, 4.6 illustrate the summary of my participants from 2016-2018. In order to safeguard their identities, I have used pseudo-names throughout this thesis and refer to them as participants, or through their fictional names as illustrated below. Corbin and Stauss (2008:143) argue the researcher should not halt sampling until saturation is reached. In this sense: *“Saturation is usually explained in terms of when no new data are emerging. Saturation is more than a matter of no new data. It also denotes the development of categories in terms of their properties and dimensions, including variation, and if theory building, the delineating of relationships between concepts”*.

Entering the fitness club, I did not have any idea on the numbers involved for the sample. This became finalised when I arrived at completion of the third group of participants, when I realised that the saturation point in relation to this research was reached (Corbin and Stauss 2008). This was determined by the richness of insights I had collated and the data collected for each participant's body transformation journey I became acquainted with. As a result, 12 participants were primarily used to collect research, whilst I also tested views and opinions through a number of other fitness club male members (6 male members) through casual conversations during the fieldwork.

#### **4.6.1 Selecting participants**

Due to the nature of this study, to get close to and spend a significant amount of time with body conscious, fitness-orientated males, it was crucial to identify and seek participants that would share personal thoughts and feelings through a trusting relationship. Connell (2012) and Gray (2009) have prescribed how it is difficult to gain access to males and get males talking about their feelings and thoughts in male gender studies. Coates (2008) has pointed out that males might only allow a selected few to get close to them, especially within a competitive, male dominated environment such as a fitness club (Monaghan 2002b).

As I was a familiar face in the club and was primarily seen as a fellow trainer, this proved to be very valuable in gaining acceptance to train with individuals and collect research data. Another distinctive research dynamic which I was keen to explore was to gain participants from various age groups and body muscularity credentials. Limited studies have explored the differences in perceptions, motives and attitudes of males at different stages of the body conditioning/muscularity development process. This I perceived offered new insights to contribute to knowledge.

Furthermore, previous research was focused on the experiences of college aged (16-21 years old), middle class, heterosexual, white males in the study of body image and eating disorders (Edwards *et al* 2014). Conversely, this research has taken a diverse sample group to offer a varied perspective to benefit both social and consumer research. The research involved a purposeful sampling approach, whereby participants were selected based upon having clear motives to work on their body image and muscularity. Marshall (1996:523) defines purposeful sampling as: “*The researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question*”. Patton (2002) adds the sampling technique is used to yield information rich cases following interpretative principles (Myers 2009). Suri (2011) states how purposeful sampling techniques are effective in exploring deep, cultural bound phenomena, where the discovery of meaning can benefit from an intuitive approach.

The study employed purposeful intensity sampling (Patton 2013) on selecting “*information rich cases of the phenomenon of interest*” (Patton 1990:170). This was deemed most suitable based on the assumption it involves selecting individuals that are particularly knowledgeable or experienced in the area of interest (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011). Therefore, I approached a known male who had been training for several years and was known to manage his body image through muscle toning. Steve, as he is known in this study, provided me access to his weight training partners, who similarly managed a muscular body through a regular fitness regime.

Steve and his peers formed the first group of participants, who were classed as competent trainers, with well-developed muscular bodies. It was found initially selecting a participant who was known to me in the context of the fitness club saved a lot of time and effort in seeking suitable participants. With the presence of a trusting, open relationship, I was able to collate a thick description of weight training fairly quickly into the data collection process. I then used the first group of participants to help me find other male participants. Consequentially, Andy introduced me to his younger brother and his friends who had recently joined the fitness club and provided access to young males who just had begun their body transformation journey. The third and final group was identified through members of the second group having some dialogue with the third group of participants who were able to formally introduce me and seek participation.

A sampling criteria was consistently used to only seek participants who weight trained regularly in order to be able to spend adequate time with individuals to develop, rich, meaningful insights. On reflection to the sampling approach used, a purposeful (intensive), random sampling using snowball sampling (Sharma 2017) was employed, as I personally did not know all the participants prior to the data collection process.

I found although I had individuals in mind who I witnessed training at the club, there was no guarantee these individuals would want to take part in the research. This proved to be the case, as individuals left the club or simply could not commit to the data collection process.

## 4.6.2 Participant groups

### 4.6.2.1 Group 1 – Committed weight trainers

The first group comprised of four males, age range from 24-37 years old, who had been weight training between 7-14 years. The participants were named the committed weight trainers, as they were very passionate about the established training regime and managing their muscular bodies. Pseudo names of the participants are detailed below, together with brief descriptions. The individuals possessed muscular, toned bodies and were proud of the fact they managed muscular physiques as identity markers of who they were. The group also had a reputation in the fitness club as being weight training fanatics.

Participant	Age	Time period weight training	Description
Steve	37	14 years	Great passion for training and body maintenance. Steve had the energy and enthusiasm to motivate others to join him to weight train and instil the belief working on developing a muscular body encompassed a number of health and fitness benefits.
Andy	24	7 years	Young, impressionable, self-admirer. Andy was very focused upon developing certain muscle tone and aesthetics for social appeal and self-confidence.
Dan	25	8 years	Dan was training to improve his quality of life. He had been dealing with weight problems since his teens and had been motivated to weight train to transform his body image.

<b>Luke</b>	35	13 years	Luke carried the belief a muscular body primarily defined him and his status as a masculine male. Luke had developed in-depth knowledge of health and fitness to which he applied in the management of his muscular body.
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**Table 4.1:** Committed weight trainers

#### 4.6.2.2 Group 2 – The Youngsters

The second group of participants included young males who had recently joined the fitness club. The participants displayed some prominent social, media derived motives to adopt idealised body images whilst also adapting to the gym culture. The participants were a close knit group who had grown up together, whilst they were partaking in others sports.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Time period weight training</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Gary</b>	20	1 month	The dominant individual in the group who persuaded others to join the club and “ <i>get muscles</i> ”. Gary was full of energy in having a positive attitude and drive to gain results.
<b>Matt</b>	19	1 month	A quiet, introvert to begin with Matt was a follower of his friends, who progressively developed a great passion for working out and living a body image conscious lifestyle.
<b>Colin</b>	22	3 months	Colin a mature individual who practiced his masculine authority frequently with other members. Colin was a fitness orientated individual, who joined the fitness club to improve his strength and stamina.
<b>Tim</b>	20	2 weeks	A non-typical weight trainer. Tim was a fashion conscious, on trend male who took great pride in his appearance through an explicit self-grooming routine. He did not possess a great passion for working out however, was vocal about which areas of his body he wanted to develop muscle tone.

**Table 4.2:** The Youngsters

#### 4.6.2.3 Group 3 – Seasoned weight lifters

The third group consisted of older males who had been working out for an extensive period of time and encompassed well adopted muscular physiques. The individuals had a wealth of experience in attending gyms and working out to manage the muscular body. The seasoned weight lifters ages ranged from 41-55 years old, whilst training on average over 24 years. This made them very valuable to the research to identify insights from males who had managed the masculine body image over a prolonged period in their lives. It was difficult to find a group of more mature males who trained together, as the fitness club mainly encompassed young males, typically in the age range of 20-35 years old. I was fortunate in gaining access to a member through a participant from the youngsters group who introduced me to John initially.

Participant	Age	Time period weight training	Description
John	46	29 years	John held a senior role at a local council authority, whilst also developing a muscular physique since a young age. Working in a professional role John shared how he took the ethos of regular intensive workouts and self-discipline to other aspects of life and found it rewarding.
Chris	41	18 years	Chris shared his background context to explain how he had developed his muscular body to establish a status symbol and to survive in daunting life experiences. Chris portrayed hegemonic masculinity traits and was embroiled in his body status.
Liam	45	24 years	Liam described himself as a 'well-oiled machine'. Liam was an ex-mixed martial arts fighter who had maintained an impressive physique. Liam was competitive he dominated the majority of the workouts and considered himself to be one of the strongest men in the region.
Paul	55	32 years	Paul an ex boxing coach had trained for a number of years and maintained a large muscular frame to which he stated was through weight lifting using traditional methods. Paul was a talkative club member stating he attended the club to remain looking and feeling young.

**Table 4.3:** Seasoned weight lifters

#### **4.7 Data analysis interpretation**

The data collection process yielded a large amount of data for analysis. This included the research reflective diary, researcher notes, participant profiles, participant's communication messages and pictorial drawings. Each of these offered rich, detailed insights to contribute to the research findings and required careful collation, organisation, cross-mapping to develop effective data interpretation and analyses (Newby 2010).

Qualitative data analysis does require a rigorous, systematic approach to its analysis (Pope *et al* 2000). As a result an analysis technique was carefully chosen to help accurately capture the essence of the data and present a compelling account of the fieldwork (Braun and Clark 2006). In this instance the data analysis and interpretation begun fairly quickly into the data collection process. In order to review and make any necessary adaptations (Edirisingha *et al* 2014), upon spending 4 months in the field with the first group of participants, data was compiled, organised and interpreted. This initial review yielded some informative observations, including the need to spend more time reflecting upon my own experiences and encourage further dialogue with those participants who were less vocal during training. When investigating data analysis techniques, various methods were considered including, grounded theory (Goulding 2005), interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith and Osborn 2007) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006). These were deemed to be most relevant to qualitative data and suitable to the interpretive philosophical framework (Miles and Huberman 1994) to depict rich, humanistic experiences (Angelides 2001).

Grounded theory follows an inductive process, whereby the data analysis process uses a bottom up approach (Alhojailan 2012, Glaser and Strauss 1967). Due to its emphasis on theoretical concept development, it is proposed data interpretation is manipulated to fit concept development (Hall and Callery 2001). One of the major concerns and the reason why it was not chosen for this study was to disregard previous knowledge and understanding prior to offering research conceptualisations. As the research stemmed from existent research and understanding, grounded theory methods were not applicable, as the development of theoretical concepts were not the only purpose of this research investigation.

Conversely, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was considered due to its close ties with phenomenological approaches (Pringle *et al* 2011). The approach was focused on hermeneutics and theories of interpretation, (Packer and Addison 1989, Palmer 1969) whilst its origins can be traced to psychological and phenomenological studies (Pringle 2013).

IPA primarily focuses on the individual's experience (Brocki and Wearden 2006, Giorgi and Giorgi 2003) and is concerned with exploring individual cognitions and analyses (Willig 2001). As a result of its theoretical roots, the approach is regarded to encompass a number of methodological limitations, one being that it is overly individualistic focused and as a result difficult to offer conceptualisations to broader contexts involving more than one instance (Pringle *et al* 2011). The research intentions for this study involved making contributions to male consumer research, using findings from twelve research participants. This allowed me to articulate the diverse experiences of different males and demographic variables.

IPA is normally suited to small samples, some encompassing a single case study (Smith and Osborn 2003). This was not appropriate here as the research intentions encouraged the exploration of varying cases to offer a diverse perspective of male embodiment practices. IPA was discounted on this basis, in addition to the fact this study had employed a social constructionist epistemological stance. IPA is regarded to fit more directly with a phenomenology inspired lens where experiential and reflective accounts are gathered (Lopez and Willis 2004). If this study had purely focused on a phenomenology philosophical lens then IPA would have been a logically derived choice. Although IPA was not entirely adopted, I still used some of its traits in my research approach and data analysis, including reflecting upon my positionality and how my personal characteristics affected my rapport with participants and data collected. Subsequently, Thematic Analysis (TA) was considered as a useful technique to analyse the comprehensive qualitative data collected. There are many loosely defined terms of what TA actually refers to. King *et al* (2004) proposed it involved the development of codes from the data which later form the themes used to explain research findings.

Alhojailan (2012) added the analytical process presents patterns to illustrate the richness of the collated data with the power of interpretation (Boyatzis 1998). Amongst the different definitions it is argued TA is focused upon depicting, analysing and reporting distinguished themes and patterns within research data (Bryman 2008, Braun and Clark 2006). Attride-Sterling (2001) described one of the distinctive features of the approach is its ability to unearth relevant themes in narratives at various levels, whilst facilitating the structuring and representation of key themes. Joffe and Yardly (2004: 57) posed: *“Thematic analysis... permits the researcher to combine analysis of the frequency of codes with analysis of their meaning in context, thus adding the advantages of the subtlety and complexity of a truly qualitative analysis”*.

What encouraged its adoption is the technique's flexibility, as it is not bound to a specific theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke 2006). By using TA, I felt I was able to relate to Elliott *et al* (1999:222) in their conception of data analysis: "*Qualitative research should strive to achieve understanding represented in a way that achieves coherence and integration while preserving nuances and perhaps it is when the researcher feels that their analysis has achieved these goals whilst telling a suitably persuasive story that the analysis may be considered sufficiently complete*".

Commentators have discussed how TA is flexible to suit numerous approaches, including the inductive approach with themes and domains emerging from the data (Joffe 2012, Alhojailan 2012). Furthermore, it is conceptualised TA is valuable when the objective of the research is to discover and comprehend participant's behaviours, actions and thoughts. This is due to its ability to depict salient features through the process of data interpretation (King 2004).

For this study thematic analysis was considered to be valuable in illuminating how participants developed perceptions of body image, muscularity and how these thoughts and feelings perpetuated through male embodied consumer practices in the context of socio-cultural discourses. However, like any other qualitative research analysis technique, thematic analysis's credibility is questioned (Laubschagne 2003, Attride-Sterling 2001, Hayes 1997a). The approach has been accused of being 'a light touch' in some respects (Laubschagne 2003). Attride-Sterling (2001) proposed there is limited detail and a lack of depth to its analysis processes. Similarly, Dixon-Woods (2011) advised the need to make clear coding practices and interpretative techniques to aid transparency and integrity of qualitative analysis methods.

Regardless of these drawbacks, TA was selected due its reputable profile in qualitative data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) and having clear steps for researchers to follow (Boyatzis 1998). In order to address some of the limitations identified, I explain and apply the analysis process rigorously to the data in order to present credibility to the data analysis and interpretation process (Braun and Clarke 2006). In order to overcome some of its drawbacks, I also employed traits of IPA in my research approach and data analysis, including reflecting upon my positionality and how my personal characteristics affected my rapport with participants and data collated as presented in chapter 3.



#### 4.7.1 Process of thematic analysis

Qualitative data analysis is described as a messy, time-consuming process of bringing order and structure to the data collected (Marshall and Rossman 2014). Accordingly, it is important to outline in detail the process in which qualitative data was interpreted and analysed. According to Alhojailan (2012) when data is collected mainly through observation, which is heavily influenced by participant's visions, feelings and attitudes, there is a requirement to combine the data with its analytical element. This follows what Clarke and Braun (2014), Braun and Clarke (2006) and Crawford *et al* (2008) highlight in being able to examine the data in order to discover the common themes from more than one instance.

Subsequently, the analytical process as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adopted to conduct thematic analysis the most effective way, considering the nature in which the data was collected through the ethnographic study. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue the analysis is not a linear process, conversely it is a long winding activity, which involves going back and forth over the main stages outlined below. I undertook a full analysis over an 8-month period to ensure to capture the richness and essence of the research. Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a simplified staged process, which helped to explain the analytical process the data went through.

Phase	Description
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	<p><b>To read the data over a number of times and record initial ideas.</b></p> <p>The initial step involved spending dedicated time reading my data repeatedly in order to become familiar with the all data forms (reflective diary, fieldwork notes, participant's profiles and group participation notes). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend immersing in the data and noting down initial ideas which helped me prepare for step 2.</p>
2. Generating initial codes  (Example of coding transcript extracts provided in appendix C)	<p><b>Commence the process of coding using a systematic method across the data set.</b></p> <p>The coding process involved identifying codes which highlighted a significant; "<i>patterned response or meaning</i>" that is apparent within the data set as described by Braun and Clarke (2006: 82).</p>

	Consequentially, I identified codes relating to motives to adopt a muscular body, symbolic meanings of muscularity and lived experiences of the body, which allowed me to begin organising the codes for step 3.
<p><b>3. Searching for themes</b></p> <p>Appendix D previews codes and corresponding data extracts after the process of organising codes to illustrate the development of themes.</p>	<p><b>Organising codes into potential themes, ensuring to capture all data corresponding to themes identified.</b></p> <p>This step was broken down into:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Organising and sorting the codes into potential themes</li> <li>b) Compiling the data extracts</li> <li>c) Collating the codes and organising manually into theme piles</li> <li>c) Developing initial draft of themes and sub-themes</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Reviewing themes</b></p> <p>Appendix E presents an extract of the themes developed through the analysis process.</p>	<p><b>Confirming themes related to coded extracts and the overall data set.</b></p> <p>I developed tables to illustrate codes, data, sub themes and broader themes in order to present the various levels of analysis, this then resulted in reviewing and confirming the themes taken forward.</p>
<p><b>5. Defining and naming themes</b></p> <p>(Appendix F previews the Thematic map development as part of the finalising the themes taken forward).</p>	<p><b>Further refinement of themes to develop clear, coherent themes and suitable names.</b></p> <p>This involved refocusing the analysis at a broader lever by reviewing the themes and producing thematic maps to illustrate the relationships between themes and finally the main themes taken forward. In reviewing the themes I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) advice in asking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the coded data fit the theme?</li> <li>2. Are there clear and identifiable differences between themes?</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Producing the report</b></p>	<p><b>Final analysis of data extracts and themes making comparisons with research questions and existent literature.</b></p> <p>This involved developing the findings and discussion chapter of the thesis.</p>

**Table 4.4:** Thematic analysis process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006:87)

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis phases formed the analysis process and the creation of themes I proceeded with. The authors are explicit in describing what counts as a suitable theme by advocating a theme fundamentally represents a significant; "*patterned response or meaning*" that is apparent within the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). Furthermore, themes are regarded to capture the significance of the data in relation to the research question and key lines of inquiry. Respectively, it was configured from the coded data, a theme had to be prevalent across all data formats and also inform key processes and motives for adopting a muscular body, nature of embodied consumer practices and socio-cultural influences playing on participant's beliefs.

Although the themes identified did not reflect pre-existing themes from existent research, Fereday *et al* (2006) views were considered, due to the fact that themes do not simply emerge from the data and in real terms, pre-conceptions of possible themes are pre-mediated in the researcher's thinking. The process of analysis and theme configuration focused upon the links and relations as they were interpreted. The analytical approach to data analysis adopted an inductive analysis stance, whereby the whole data set was considered in reporting a rich description as opposed to selecting a particular aspect. This was well suited to the overall inductive methodological approach of the study, where it was believed each data collection method would provide a different perspective and add to the rich description of male embodied consumerism. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) inductive analysis also favours an organic analysis process, whereby data is coded freely without it being confined to fit into pre-existing coding frame or analytical preconceptions.

The authors also proposed two forms of levels at which themes are to be identified. At the explicit level the semantic approach investigates surface meanings and explanations, whilst latent themes are regarded to examine underlying beliefs and conceptualisations that influence and shape the semantic level of the data. Such a perspective helped with the wider approach of using the data to conceptualise upon broader assumptions, structures and meanings the data analysis and interpretation referred to. As a result, the deeper analytical approach facilitated the process of exploring symbolic meanings and beliefs of adopting and managing the muscular body.

The epistemology stance utilised during the data analysis process followed that of a constructionist perspective, whereby the consideration of socially derived meanings and understandings were acknowledged in the contexts of working on and adopting the muscular body (Holstein and Gubrium 2008).

Braun and Clarke (2006) believe the constructionist view takes into consideration expressive constructs, such as language as being representative of meaning and reality of participant's perceptions and understanding.

Subsequently, these constructs were used to explore the assumptions underpinning patterns of meaning to provide deep, interpretative, conceptual analysis. I analysed data from the various sources described above by coding transcripts, participant's profiles and notes from my observations and reflective diary. This process of coding and analysing was performed throughout data collection, whereby each instance of analysis informed subsequent data collection (Strauss and Corbin 1998). As discussed previously with regards to my positionality in the research, it was understood my ideological beliefs and assumptions would come into the research. As a result, to maintain research integrity constant comparisons between multiple data sources and simultaneous analysis and data collection were adhered to. This helped to identify findings and contributions to existent understanding that were evidenced based. Furthermore, by following an inductive approach the research findings were developed through an ongoing process and checked for accuracy through regular member checks.

In order to validate and explore the authenticity of my interpretation of the emergent themes from the initial coding, I also held a series of casual conversations with non-participants in the fitness club. In these instances, I followed up on the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with the initial findings and to explore views further. I found this offered a valuable contribution to the research, to test the wider applicability of my findings and offer different perspective beyond the participant groups. I found sharing my findings with both participants and non-participants through casual conversations in the club helped validate my research contributions by supplementing them with clear depth and detail (Morse 2015).

#### **4.7.2 Analysis of pictorial drawings**

As part of the data collection process, I explored capturing pictorial representations of participant's aspirational body image. This added to the insightful nature of the research investigation, by adding another dimension into capturing personal thoughts and aspirations of idealised body image. Following the interpretivist philosophical approach, the sketches were analysed using Guillemin (2004) analytical method of answering a number of questions regarding when, where and how the participant was asked to draw the image and subsequently, the nature in which it was described. This particular content analysis framework provided a number of benefits including a rich, qualitative insight, which was well suited to the research.

Similar to other studies involving body image drawing analysis (Riessman 2008),

I adopted a similar approach to Zanin *et al* (2019) in adopting a reflexive process to the drawing activity and triangulating with other data collection methods.

The following questions were adopted from Guillemin (2004):

- When the drawing was produced
- Events preceding the drawing (participant's condition, researcher relationship)
- Where the drawing was produced

Specifically, regarding the drawing:

- What is being shown, components, its arrangement
- Relationships established between components of the drawing
- What is being represented, what the drawing signifies?
- What knowledges are being deployed?
- Does the image contradict other data collected from the respondent?

In following an interpretivist approach the drawings were analysed based on discovering the subjective meanings of participant's drawing and what they were trying to convey. In asking participants to describe what they illustrated on paper, I was able to capture the underlying thoughts and rationale for what the muscular body represented in the individual's mind and how this played out in aspirational beliefs. Following Guillemin (2004) the drawings were depicted to define what was being shown in relation to particular muscular features and body shape. Participants were also asked what inspired their drawings and where such knowledge had been acquired from, to identify social, cultural and biological influences relating to masculinity appearance.

#### **4.8 Data trustworthiness, rigour and quality**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the concepts of data validity and reliability are orientated towards a quantitative approach, conversely for qualitative research reliability and validity are conceptualised as trustworthiness, rigour and quality (Stenbacka 2001). Trustworthiness is said to consist of elements of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as a way to evaluate the quality of qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In following such principles, it is important to outline how I maintained a well-adapted, transparent approach in this study. Firstly, on the subject of credibility and transferability, I provided detailed information of the research setting and participants to allow readers to make judgements about the applicability of findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Secondly, effective data collection and thorough data analysis methods were employed, which although were extremely time-consuming and labour-intensive, provided credibility to underpin research findings and provide confidence in developing conceptualisations (Mertens 2005).

Furthermore, in order to test the dependability and confirmability of research data, I reflected upon my approach through the adaptive ethnographic approach (Edirisingha *et al* 2014) whilst also checking findings with participants. To provide further dependability I also checked research findings with other males, weight training in the fitness club to verify my interpretations and conceptualisations of findings produced.

On the subject of reflexivity, Steedman (1991) stated a researcher should be aware of his or her effect on the process and outcomes of a research project. Such a view was based on the premise a qualitative researcher cannot remain external to the process without impacting upon the research outcomes (Chenail 2011). Consequently, I reflected upon my positionality in the study following Merriam *et al* (2001) in outlining how my presence was perceived by participants and the impact on the data collection process. Dividing the process of data gathering to the various phases allowed me to collect data in a systematic manner, whilst allowing me to remain agile and tailor my approach as I progressed through the fieldwork (Edirisingha *et al* 2014).

The data analysis process of coding to develop themes, allowed me to make a connection with variables influencing embodiment practices, whilst allowing to test their applicability (Easterby-Smith *et al* 2012, Corbin and Strauss 2008). I happened to be fortunate enough to recruit a number of participants to enable me to make a judgement on my findings and interpret the data gathered (Brannan and Outram 2012, Bryman 2008). Due to this access I was able to check my participant's views with other male trainers: this provided me with peace of mind that I was drawing appropriate conclusions from my data interpretation and understanding (Lincoln *et al* 2011).

Smith (1993) proposed the criteria for research rigour in qualitative research referred to researcher's positionality, assumptions and prior experiences. I followed such protocols by outlining my previous experiences and knowledge of male embodiment practices, whilst also confirming my personal beliefs and assumptions when describing the research approach. In addition to this, I also acknowledged how my presence affected participants, the data collection process and consequently research findings. Due to the nature of qualitative approaches, reliability and validity are important for assessing the quality and value of the research (Lincoln *et al* 2011). Reliability is concerned with whether similar results are obtainable in repeat circumstances and conditions (Saunders *et al* 2009, Yin 1994).

Validity is determined by accuracy of answers provided in answering research questions and intentions (Then 1996). It is proposed validity is used to evaluate the integrity of research conclusions generated from the data analysis process (Sekarana and Bougie 2010, Creswell 2000). In following the above principles, I tried to ensure my approach was reliable and valid by constantly reflecting upon the research approach, its applicability and checking findings with participants (Thorne *et al* 2004).

#### **4.9 Research design approach limitations**

Like any research, this study presented a number of limitations. In addition to the research approach drawbacks discussed previously for individual data collection methods and research design choices there are other research limitations to the approach. Firstly, with the nature of the ethnographic process there was no guarantee that the information collected was wholly a neutral representation of participants and their embodied beliefs. It should be acknowledged that the narratives provided through the ethnography study were interpreted by myself. Secondly, the conclusions drawn from the study were based upon a relatively small group of participants, consequentially by no means can this research represent broader views of masculinity and male embodied consumption.

Although I tried to gain a variety of different participants and body shapes the research was limited to the number of cases and so conceptualisations are based on what was witnessed and told by these participants. Finally due to the nature of participation the research reported on group based experiences. It should be noted individual experiences of working out and muscular body construction could vary as the group dynamics here played a notable role in co-creating experiences, shaping exercise routines and competitive rivalry.

#### **4.10 Ethical considerations in male embodiment research**

As predicated by previous researchers, studying male body image is a sensitive topic (Coles 2008, Grogan and Richards 2002) that requires careful planning and consideration to trust, sensitivity and confidentiality concerns (McDowell 2001). Consequently, in planning the primary research, I followed the advice of Klein (1993) and Monaghan (2001, 2002ab) who published ethical principles in conducting research with male bodybuilders and males entwined within fitness practices. In such research the importance of explaining the research comprehensively and respecting individual's opinions was encouraged to gain participants and maintain their cooperation throughout the research.

In this study the participants were fully briefed of the research and upon agreeing to participate signed consent was obtained. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study, its purpose and nature of participation. Within this document, I outlined how participant's had the freedom to withdraw from the research at any point by contacting me and could also request to review what data I had collected from them. The primary concern amongst participants was the request to remain anonymous by not revealing any details that could identify who they were. Written consent from the fitness club was also obtained as part of the study and was anonymised in order to hide its identity.

#### **4.11 Chapter Summary**

The chapter has provided a comprehensive account of the research design and methodology underpinning the study. I initially clarified the philosophical stance of the study and my assumptions related to epistemology and ontology position. The chapter then explained the data collection methods and approach used with rationale for design choices. The chapter concluded by considering data analysis techniques and research limitations. The following chapter considers findings from the research process.



## **5. Findings and Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The chapter reflects upon the findings distinguished from the ethnography study. The research commenced in February 2016 with active participation in body workouts with three male participant groups. Respectively the male body has been studied in light of the social, cultural conditions male consumers engage with embodied practices and undertake body transformation. Existing male embodiment research offered general themes on influences that shape embodied understanding and experience of the male body with limited distinction of how such beliefs play out (Otterbring *et al* 2018, Bey 2014, Thompson and Hirschman 1995). In contrast this study employed a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) inspired analytical lens to study male embodiment and present novel insights into the nature of lived experiences of the male body. By reporting upon such intricacies, the research offers revelatory insights into how male body ideals are interpreted and used by men to make sense of their body relationships, lifestyle experiences and masculine self.

### **5.2 Findings chapter structure**

The chapter profiles my journey learning about participants and my experience of developing a muscular body of my own. The chapter initially deliberates on the participant groups that shaped the fieldwork portraying their varying characteristics and motives driving body transformation. This initial section captures my experiences of entering the participant groups training regimes in the fitness club, sharing my observations and feelings at that time. The section then moves onto detailing the social, cultural context of the fitness environment and its influence on males entwined within this context. Here I elaborate upon the internal dynamics of the fitness setting and preview how body capital and muscles were rewarded and appreciated by actors in this environment. This leads onto how ideologies of masculinity and nurturing masculine-self impacted on males entwined within the weight training culture. By focusing on the detail and intricacies of male embodiment practices related to body image transformation and fitness the research begins to develop rich insights to advance male consumer research.

Subsequently, I present an illustration of the wider culture of bodybuilding and weight training (figure 5.2) to help form a better understanding of this private but prominent culture participants were entwined within. Such a depiction helped me to contextualise the socio-cultural circumstances in which male consumers engage in embodied discourses and the profound effect it had on body relationships, experiences of masculinity and self-actualisation. Before introducing the main themes of the findings, the chapter considers how ideas of body ideals were developed amongst participants. I deliberate upon how the interpretive nature in which body ideals were mapped onto my participant's bodies included, personal desires to enhancing self (concept) but were dependent upon competency in weight training and commitment to body management.

The findings then move on to presenting the rich insights into male embodiment practices, through key themes the data analysis yielded. The first theme centres upon the significance of the muscular body in self-augmentation and fulfilling masculine desires. Theme one is configured by participant's beliefs and associated behaviour, whereby body image was placed at the epi-centre of all our efforts and consumption patterns. In the quest to carve out body muscularity for self-development, theme one deliberates upon the symbolic significance of muscularity. I draw upon key influences which drove my participant's desires to adopt muscular ideals and engage in body transformation processes.

Subsequently, theme two delves into the notions of body performances we enacted in the fitness club to their symbolic role in performing masculinity (Edley 2017, Coles 2008). This theme provides a number of original contributions to contemporary masculinity research (Clatterbaugh 2018, Gough 2018b, Powers and Greenwell 2017) in detailing how practices of body transformation represented a means in which to learn about masculinity and go on to practice it on a regular basis. The club represented a safe haven for my participants where physical capital and masculine credentials were rewarded through an enhanced status. The theme details how the fitness club environment was used as a symbolic bearer for my participants to practice hyper masculinity and enact masculinity beliefs.

The third theme choreographs the body transformation project journey I witnessed with the various participant groups. In order to study the nature of lived experiences of the masculine body, the embodiment journey was mapped against the achievement of body ideals and length of period training. Consequently, I was able to capture the consumption behaviour and market discourses interaction across different stages of body transformation. The theme presents detailed accounts of body transformation, whilst capturing the challenges and limitations when body ideals were not achieved.

These intriguing accounts present important contributions relating to lived experiences of masculinity and how body dissatisfaction can arise, whilst also providing a better understanding of male embodiment culture. In presenting my findings, I have followed the guidance of Shagrir (2017) who proposed the importance of presenting both emic and etic dimensions of ethnographic data. Subsequently, I have illustrated the richness of my findings by portraying the value of possessing a muscular body and its management, whilst also defining how it complimented sense of self and masculine identity. These insights related to the emic perspective of my research data (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994), depicting the subjective significance of experience.

Furthermore, the etic dimension of research data relates to abstractions and interpreted significance of experience (Shagrir 2017). In this sense, I reflected upon the meanings of having a muscular body for participants and myself and how these rich embodiment experiences justified our fitness regime and consumer lifestyle choices. By focusing on the richness of data, the chapter presents detailed quotes and citations to show the authenticity of my conceptualisations drawn from the research. These help substantiate the study's applicability to male consumer research.

### **5.3 Introduction to participant groups**

Before considering the main findings, I will initially deliberate upon my experiences of the fieldwork process and training with the various groups. In doing so I highlight the intricacies of male gym communities and weight training groups seen on display, which is obscured in existing research. I have purposely outlined such detail to begin with, to convey the tone and feel of the contextual environment I collected data from.

#### **5.3.1 Committed weight trainers**

In February 2016, I joined the committed weight trainers, as I named them, based upon the participant's experience and allegiance to working out consistently and maintaining a muscular body. The group comprised of; Steve, Dan, Andy and Luke who were all keen to share their experiences of living body image conscious lives through a structured training routine. The participants were well experienced and all carried muscular body images, with well-constructed upper body muscle tone. The group had developed a weekly routine, where they deconstructed the body into distinctive muscle groups and dedicated sessions on separate muscles. I spent 8 months participating with the group and also attending social events.

The participants throughout the research process showed me how managing the muscular body and weight training were part of a perceived healthy, fitness-orientated lifestyle. Individuals demonstrated and shared their daily routines relating to eating habits, meal preparation, taking supplements and the high level of discipline exercised in keeping away from undesirable foods.

*“If you are planning on training with us for more than a few days, you got to sort your diet out it needs to be clean and you need to get all the supplements in as the workouts are deadly. It is survival of the fittest”.*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, February 2016)

*“We don’t mess about, when we come here [fitness club] we focus on making gains, not to come socialise, it’s about improving ourselves, getting those gains and beat our last attempt”.*

(Luke, Committed weight trainer, February 2016)

*“We are in this game to better ourselves, it’s as simple as that, we want to walk out of here a stronger man, a more fine-tuned human”.*


(Andy, Committed weight trainer, February 2016)

Reflecting upon my diary notes, I found this initial group challenging to keep up with through the six workouts per week. The group trained at an intensive pace. Consequently, I found it demanding to consistently perform over the week. I recall from my reflective notes how the training was both painful and rewarding, in the respect that I experienced a lot of muscle soreness but achieved some substantial strength gains during the period. Although I assumed my muscularity would not drastically change, I found as a result of increased body muscle it did motivate me to continue to see what I could achieve. This did increase my confidence and feeling of masculinity, knowing I could explore my body further through strength gains and athleticism.

I also noted how the training became of remarkable importance in my daily life and as I progressed further I felt more entwined in body conditioning management (Bey 2014) and gym culture (Andreasson and Johansson 2014). This was partly due to the presence of social networking facilitating regular communication with participants outside of the fitness club. This led to the focus on body transformation being constant throughout the participation period and not only confined to our time in the fitness club.

Table 5.1 captures my time spent with the committed trainers group and my observations of participants and experiences.

The interactions between the committed weight trainers was that of friendly, competitive rivalry. I found there was a pecking order with Steve and Luke being the dominant men dictating the exercises and routine. The group; however, worked closely together in helping each other overcome challenging exercises and advising on ways to improve performance. As the members were well advanced in their body transformation journey, there was a clear embodied drive to perform well and show the value of the exercise regime through body strength and muscularity.

	Steve	Dan	Andy	Luke	Group experience
Feb 2016	Institutionalised to the 'gym life'	My exercise partner for the first 2 months	Working on body image to improve employment prospects and social popularity	Related his weight training practice to optimum health and fitness	Feeling nervous and questioning my performance competencies
	Introduced me to other members and their group training schedule	Silently struggled with training regime	Comparing self with movie stars and professional athletes believing he shared bodily features and a similar weight training regime	Training provided Luke a focus in life something to believe in and feel good about	Disciplining self, adapting to the weight training routine
	Working on muscular body to enhance health and wellbeing	Observant of other gym members to ridicule and praise	After achieving promotion at work, desired more body muscularity and size	Most committed member to the weekly sessions	Struggled with 6 day routine, however exercise performance improvements and body muscularity kept me motivated

Sept 2016	Keen to demonstrate the symbolic value of the muscular body in life  Believed his 'performing body' boosted his health and wellbeing	Witnessed weight loss and body muscularity results driving his enthusiasm  Eager to communicate weight training competencies and body muscularity results to friends and family	Closely followed daily eating/training practices of social media influencers  Enjoyed the occasion to show muscular gains in the social setting	Shared medical based articles publicising the health benefits of weight training.  Seen working on body image as a long term project to improve quality of life	I became more competitive and performance orientated  Feeling good about body muscularity results, increased confidence and self-regard
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**Table 5.1:** My experience with the Committed weight trainers

### 5.3.2 The Youngsters

Upon gaining access to a group of young males who had recently joined the fitness club I joined Gary, Matt, Colin and Tim to what turned out to be a real insight into young (twenty something year old) male lives. Although unplanned and unstructured to start with, the participation period was very different to the first group, due to the lack of experience the individuals possessed. Consequently, this shortcoming presented the challenge in avoiding to adopt a mentoring role. The youngsters, as they were named based on age and attitude to life, added another dynamic to the research. Here I witnessed at first hand the strong motives and pressure (partly placed on themselves) the group brought with them to the club.

It was intriguing to learn how the young individuals were very observant of the surroundings (both inside and outside of the fitness context) and as I recall 'like sponges' in absorbing media communications relating to idealised body image. Spending time with the participants revealed motives driving the obsession to adopt a muscular body:

*"I need that Insta [Instagram] body, it's what gets you noticed nowadays".*

(Gary, Youngsters, November 2016)

*“In order to be popular you need to look good, you need to look good on social media it’s what it’s all about now. We are just following the trend, you got to follow it otherwise you are a nobody and people don’t take notice of you which then makes you depressed and you get old all of a sudden”.*


(Gary, Youngsters, November 2016)

*“Muscles are what makes a man, it’s time to man up, lift them weights get the ripped look like I’m going to be starring in the next Fast and Furious”.*

(Colin, Youngsters, November 2016)

My reflective notes described how I witnessed transformative journeys of young insecure males to begin with, who were intimidated by older club members, to these individuals becoming confident, health and fitness orientated young men. I found these individuals both physically and mentally developed during the 8 months of participation. Intriguingly, I found the youngsters were trying hard to shape and strengthen their sense of self-regard whilst looking up to older masculine males in the club to depict inspiration from.

I also noted the over powering nature in which social media and self-inflicted pressure drove the youngsters to adopt perceived body image ideals, in order to look good in front of the camera (Plummer 2016). My participation revealed the emotional journey in which the hard effort and commitment was put in to enhance body image and enhance perceptions of self. The participants had developed their expertise in training and were eager to manipulate body image further through muscularity. This was influenced by self-imposed pressure to outdo peers and maintain a perceivably enhanced social image (Frank 2014). Table 5.2 highlights the youngsters’ character traits and my participation experiences.

	<b>Gary</b>	<b>Matt</b>	<b>Colin</b>	<b>Tim</b>	<b>Group experience</b>
Oct 2016	Eager to get results and embrace the gym culture	Strong desire to 'get big' and increase muscularity	Mature member of the group who would influence the thinking of other members	Joined the fitness club to accompany friends. Appeared to show little interest in training	Adapting to the 'newbies' group and avoiding to take up a mentor role.
	Sharing discourses of body ideals to motivate the group to train regularly	Initial struggle with weight training led to re-assessing expectations	Working on body image to improve his sporting image and get noticed by football scouts	Initial struggle resulted in quitting the training until group members encouraged him to return.	Exposure to social media discourses and pressure to conform to socially derived ideals
	As body image begun to change Gary commenced on providing a narrated journey on social media	Competition with Gary spurred on weight training and disciplining self	Eager to associate himself with big muscular males in the gym he could get advice from	Tim aspired to be a model and desired a muscular, lean body image	Motivating participants when body transformation efforts yielded little body aesthetic results
	Using his body image to enhance social appeal	Used muscular body image and muscularity to drive self-confidence and pride	Felt pressure to work on body image through latest tight fit sport clothing trends	Tim witnessed little change to body muscularity but continued regardless	Embracing the social appeal of the muscular body image in social contexts with participants.
May 2017	Competitiveness and aspirations increased as confidence continued to grow	Developed passion in training to consider becoming a Personal Trainer	Perceived to share commonalities with professional athletes he aspired to be with regular training he undertook	Perceived the gym as a social place to be seen in	Witnessing significant changes in participants confidence and self-regard

**Table 5.2:** My experiences with the Youngsters



### 5.3.3 Seasoned weight lifters

The final group comprised of John, Liam, Chris and Paul who I named the ‘Seasoned weight lifters,’ as I recall how they referred to themselves as bodybuilders, as opposed to weight trainers. This was based on their view they were superior and stronger, through their wealth of experience. The group of participants were well experienced, with an average of over 24 years of body training experience. The individual’s possessed big, imposing muscular bodies, through their large frames and alpha male personas. I constantly recall noting they were the essence of the bodybuilder culture in Middlesbrough and I had the opportunity to train with these individuals.

The participants were very different to the other groups, as individuals had personal agendas driving their embodiment projects. It was quickly noted how although the group trained together, each had their own motives in what they were trying to achieve and or maintain in this instance. Spending time with the individuals provided rich insights into the lives of older males who had developed and maintained a muscular body through lifestyle choices and being continually entwined in the gym culture. What became remarkably noticeable was how the body was used for self-actualisation and identity make up (Gough 2018b) amongst these males. Participants believed they were superior to most males, more masculine, a finer breed of man and counted themselves as the strongest men in the vicinity.

*“You will notice we are not the average Joe fella you meet on the street. We are another beast all together, look at my body it demands respect, you listen when I talk. It is there to intimidate, show power and strength of our characters as supreme beings”.*

(Paul, seasoned weight lifter, April 2017)

*“You are now rolling with the best, you can ask anyone around here, we are the most experienced in the gym world, nobody has trained as long as we have. We carry the body most 50 year olds can only dream of”.*

(Paul, seasoned weight lifter, August 2017)

The group members shared how they met each other and instantly build rapport as they had similar interests and ‘die hard’ attitude to life. It was observed how in the fitness club context, the group believed they were superior to other men, as they perceived their training regime was more advanced. This portrayed the symbolic value placed upon training and effort to maintain the muscular body (Eisenberg and Neumark-Sztainer 2015).

Individual narratives also revealed how the process of maintaining a muscular body provided the confidence that they were delaying the biological ageing process, as some participants perceived themselves to be fitter and healthier than their age equivalent counterparts and did not look their age. Table 5.3 details my observations and experiences of the time spent with these males.

	<b>John</b>	<b>Paul</b>	<b>Chris</b>	<b>Liam</b>	<b>Group experience</b>
June 2017	<p>Considered himself to be at the pinnacle of masculinity with body image and strength he possessed</p> <p>Believed maintaining a muscular frame kept him healthy and fit</p> <p>Enjoyed the occasion of meeting friends to train and spend time with like-minded individuals</p> <p>Perceived his muscular frame earned him respect and authority</p>	<p>Large muscular frame shaped Paul's demeanour and behaviour</p> <p>Believed he was the fittest 55 year old around</p> <p>Enjoyed putting younger weight trainers to shame</p> <p>Perceived training as social occasion enjoying the attention and spending time with young people</p>	<p>Maintaining a body he believed characterised who he was</p> <p>Perceived training and spending time with other participants had a positive impact on his life</p> <p>Enjoyed the attention and respect others gave him in the club</p> <p>Although rarely lifted heavy weights believed he was still a weight lifter</p>	<p>Considered himself to be supreme athlete with a mixed martial arts background</p> <p>Most committed member I came across training twice a day regularly</p> <p>Believed he trained at a superior level in comparison to any other fitness club member</p> <p>Very focused upon the training regime and would easily get frustrated if he did not perform to expectations</p>	<p>Training with local 'hard men' of Middlesbrough</p> <p>Weight training and strength tested by participants to judge my commitment and 'masculine' credibility</p> <p>Feeling appeased with self and strength levels by being able to keep up with 'weight lifters'</p> <p>Witnessing how muscular body image influenced the demeanour and behaviour of participants</p>

Feb 2018	Very proud of his body conditioning and self-regard	Suffered from health issues, however carried on training and ignoring any hindrances	Unlike other members Chris enjoyed going out to drink and eat unhealthy food to which he got ridiculed for	Did not socialise outside of the fitness club premises with anybody	Concerned about those participants who had health issues who carried on regardless to protect self-status
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**Table 5.3:** My experiences with the Seasoned weight lifters

#### 5.4 Commencing training

Upon entering each participant group and commencing training, provided me with a taste of what was to come, whilst more prominently the initial period presented the challenge of being accepted into the group. The initial group (committed weight trainers) involved Steve and his peers following a well-constructed regime. As I was already familiar with Steve and had seen Luke and Dan before in the club, I quickly integrated myself into the group. I felt this group saw me as a fellow trainer primarily and although they were aware of my research, paid little interest to it, as they were focused on the training regime. I found participants in this group worked tightly together and would closely watch each other's form and technique. I recall the first session when Steve introduced me to a workout:

*“Right lads there is another body training with us now, we need to keep the intensity up and train simultaneously, two men on and two men off, we will just circulate and see how it goes”.*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, February 2016)

I remember thinking Steve's instruction sounding like a military drill and we were following orders. Steve made a habit of deriving the routine and plan of action, as he was the dominant male in being able to lift the most weight, hence the rest of us followed. Within this group strength and body performance was desired and respect was earned if you showed progress in exercises. As a result, I found I became more critical of my body and its performance, as I compared myself with others in the group.

The nature in which we trained involved those who could not lift as much weight go first and the stronger men entering the exercise later when there was more weight loaded onto the equipment. Additionally, as we were training sometimes in parallel, direct comparisons could be made with other participants in terms of who had the better technique, who struggled and who completed the ten repetitions first. I remember feeling some pressure to perform well on these occasions, as I did not want to be the weakest link in the group.

There was an element of self-pride present and competitiveness to silently outdo your closest nemesis. I found masculine competitiveness did come into play and the rivalry was used to spur on our efforts and perform well. On reflection, we were conforming to socio-cultural trends through deep commitment to competitive individualism in the portrayal of masculinity beliefs, the aggressive display of the consumable muscular body and ultimately the great determination to represent a masculine self (Clatterbaugh 2018, Hall 2015, Orrells 2011).

*“You do have to deliver when coming in here, it is a case of showing how your body performs, how much heart you have to better yourself, it all comes out here you can’t hide. This is what keeps me motivated and disciplined, it’s always in the back of your mind to prep meals, eat properly, rest and be ready for the gym session”.*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, February 2016)

*“Training like this really shows your heart, how much do you want it, I always ask myself this when the repetitions get hard and I’m exhausted. For some reason I always think of Muhammed Ali when he said suffer now and then live your life a champion for the rest of your life”.*

(Luke, Committed weight trainer, February 2016)

Although body image was not a primary concern for me, I found it did become a focal point being entwined within the group training and the wider fitness culture. Within these contexts body image was symbolic to personal competence and illustrating ‘who you were’ as predicated by Lorber and Martin (2012). I found I was judged by several of my participants by my body shape and in turn how I fitted into the training group’s pecking order. Due to this high precedence, I became more critical of how I looked and how I came across. I learnt the visual culture placed great emphasis on not only how you performed, but also how you look in the fitness club (Coquet *et al* 2016, Sassatelli 1999). Consequently, these notions of self-presentation and desires to conform to ideals fed into the training regime and sculpturing the body to maximise its impact and appeal (Bey 2014).

*“It’s all about the look, your body is your front door to the world, how do you want to look is up to you, but I want that presence, that wow look at him”.*

(Andy, committed weight trainer, February 2016)

*“As men we get sized up all time, others want to see whether they can dominate you, while women want that guy who has something about him. Our bodies can be read like a book they tell the story of who you are, what you got and how much of a beast you really are”.*

(Andy, committed weight trainer, February 2016)

In contrast, the second group consisting of the youngsters was very different. Here as I had limited rapport with the group, I found the first two weeks trying to integrate into the group. The participants were hesitant at this early stage and not sure what exercises to do. Consequently, some saw me as an advisor, a more mature trainer to impart knowledge from. I did initially fall into this trap and in order to build relations with individuals provided them with advice on what they could do. This advisory role continued into week two. Whilst upon reflecting upon my time, I realised I needed to alter my position in order to collect research data. My saviour came from Gary, who was happy I was training with him and was eager to please me with his commitment and enthusiasm. Gary invited me to a social night out with all the other participants in the group.

It was at this occasion when cross dinner table talk and long conversations into the early morning, provided the opportunity to engage in discussion and learn more about the youngsters. Subsequently, I found the training sessions became light hearted, in the respect that individuals would want to talk and the ‘gym get together’ was not only about training but to also socialise. My embodiment experiences with the youngsters also brought my body image to attention. Due to my training expertise, participants were keen to learn about my training success and looked at my body and its muscularity through a critical lens to judge my credibility (Fabris *et al* 2018). This was demonstrated when Gary and Matt asked me to remove my top in the changing rooms in the first week of training so they could take a closer look at my upper body muscle.

*“Let’s see what you got, the body does not lie, muscles speak for themselves you either have it or you don’t”.*

(Matt, Youngsters, November 2016)

*“You do have good chest and shoulders, see we can see you been training you look well like you can be a dominant guy. I want that wide look and be more muscular on my arms to make sure everyone knows I workout and can look after myself”.*

(Gary, Youngsters, November 2016)

I recall feeling like I embodied body ideals the participants were chasing at this early stage in the participation process. Bey (2014) discussed the notions of visual, cultural experiences in bodybuilding. This study has been able to shed further light on how such experiences augment self-stature and perceptions of self. It also predicated how the muscular physique becomes appealing for males to strive for in contemporary culture (Gough 2018b), where bodily capital matters (Bourdieu 1986).

Moving on to the seasoned weight lifters and my time with bodybuilders of Middlesbrough: this group presented further challenges for me in the participative role. The initial meet-up with the participants was split into two occasions when Luke and Paul could not make the evening session. I initially met John and Chris after a spinning class and as we walked over to the training area John glanced over and muttered: *“it was now time to get real”*. Subsequently, Chris asked me to show John and him the palms of my hands. I remember being confused at the request and as I placed my hands in front, John and Chris smirked, whilst pinching at the small spots of hardened skin (callous) that I had at the ends of my palms. It was common for those who were gripping bars and bar bells regularly to experience hardened skin in this area of their palms. John stated he was impressed, as I had advanced hardened skin spots in places and stated how this was: *“A sign of commitment and loyalty to iron”*.

John elaborated:

*“No disrespect but you are small compared to us, I don’t want to torture you by training with us, it won’t be good for you and I will feel bad. I’ve had lads go home crying with pain, our training is next level, its heavy what we do to have our bodies, its real big boys stuff”*.

(John, seasoned weight lifter, August 2017)

Furthermore, I was tested of my commitment again when I met Liam and Paul a few days later when Liam suggested to undertake a circuit based exercise: *“To see where we were”*. I recall Paul stating he would set it up for us but would not partake, instead would watch how we got on. As the circuit equipment was laid in parallel and Paul standing at the side it looked like a direct race to the finish between Liam and I. I embraced the circuit and moved as quickly as I could. Liam began to get away; however, I was able to make some ground when moving from one exercise to another. Upon finishing the circuit behind him, I was greeted by a surprised Liam: *“You are fit, most lads can’t keep up with me”*.

I believe this moment and the encounter earlier with John and Chris were remarkable moments in which I got accepted into the group to train with these bodybuilders. I recall feeling relieved that I had weight trained before and had a respectable level of fitness, which allowed me to be accepted by these individuals.

Coquet *et al* (2016) and Klein (1993) have discussed the remote nature of bodybuilding and the various stereotypes apparent, consequently individuals entwined in these cultures are hesitant of outsiders and only trust a few to join them (Bailey *et al* 2017).

I recall how participants across the three groups judged me on my appearance and performance capability. These personal competencies provided me with the tools to gain access and become a fellow 'gym buddy'. Participants seen me as one of their own, a fellow male with the same mindset in seeking to achieve body image goals and improve self. Upon commencing training with Steve he mentioned how I was: *"Too relaxed and lacking aggression"* to be able to undertake intensive sessions he derived. Steve perceived me as carrying flaws both physically and psychologically. As a result it became his objective to improve me as a masculine male:

*"By the end of your time with us you will see for yourself, you will have more about you, not just through a better body shape but you will be more resilient, more confident and have that inner beast to perform anything in here".*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, January 2016).

*"You are getting better, you showing some aggression, you got some hunger now to better yourself, you can't be a beta male, there is too many of them nowadays. You are one of us a proper man".*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, May 2016)

Such participant beliefs illustrated the entwined nature of muscular body image and perceptions of masculinity discussed in existent literature (Barber and Bridges 2017, Parent *et al* 2016, Edwards 2016). Through this study I found how participants made links with a perceived lack in self to become motivated of the ensuing embodiment journey to better themselves and enhance perceptions of masculinity. Therefore the journey was of significance in not only improving physical credentials, but also mental and psychological aptitude, which are considered fundamental aspects of the self-concept (Mittal 2015, Sedikides and Brewer 2015).

## 5.5 Participants' weight training schedules

The research revealed the weight training schedule participants were entwined within provided rich insights into male embodiment. I found the groups believed they had nurtured the most constructive, intensive training regimes and were superior individuals as a result. Although essentially all participants were witnessed undertaking the same form of exercises and routines, there was a belief amongst two of the participant groups they were undertaking a more challenging routine than any other club member. This was particularly the case with the seasoned weight lifters who strongly believed no other members trained like them and consequently why they perceived themselves to be the strongest men in the club.

*“Not many lads have the same drive and passion as us to better ourselves that’s why we train like it’s our last session, we are complete maniacs, that’s what other people call us. I love it”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, August 2017)

Existing literature has portrayed the importance of training regimes in masculinity affirmation (Brewster *et al* 2017, Bey 2014, Sassatelli 2007). It was seen here the training regimes also related to masculinising processes themselves, with participants relating masculinity levels with intensity and complexity of the exercise regimes.

*“You have to train hard otherwise it shows you are not man enough. I don’t want to come across like a gimp I’m watching some videos and doing a bit at home so I don’t embarrass myself in the gym”.*

(Colin, Youngsters, December 2016)

*“Training separates the boys from the men, that’s why guys come in here once and crap themselves when they witness our beastly sessions and never return”.*

(Luke, Committed weight trainers, March 2016)

*“Only the brave survive, it’s easy to sit at home with a 4-pack of beer, coming to the gym regularly takes some balls. I’m not saying I’m better than the next man but I surely can stand with the best of them and show my character”.*

(Steve, Committed weight trainers, February 2016)

Such beliefs were also related to cultural knowledge such as professional athletes training and professional bodybuilding, which informed participant’s ideologies and practices of the making of the muscular body (Bey 2014).



*“We train with the eyes on the prize, it’s that amazing physique that will make you popular. Like boxers training for a fight, we train to get our rewards when we get noticed”.*

(Chris, Seasoned weight lifter, August 2017)

Across the three groups, it was witnessed how the structure of routines and chronological order was shaped by day of the week and more generally the time of year. Following commonality amongst the wider weight training culture the run up to Christmas and summer months brought with it a strong urge to train more intensely than usual to develop more muscle tone or lose weight to accentuate body shape. This was in preparation for social occasions, seeing friends/peers, vacations and social media photographs. As a result the three groups upped the intensity to gain body aesthetic results.

Reflective diary notes also revealed how the weekly training schedule accommodated other social and work commitment priorities participants had. The committed weight trainers, believed breaking the body down into muscle groups and dedicating a workout day for each muscle group was the most effective way to enhance body image. Interestingly towards the end of the month when the committed group attended social events, participants would partake in a dedicated muscle pump routine to enhance muscle aesthetics for the social occasion. Dan (May, 2016) remarked:

*“Do you know what, women do their make-up, hair and nails before going out on a night out we gents do the ‘pump’, we grow our chests and bi’s [biceps] for the night, that’s how we get ready baby”.*

(Dan, Committed weight trainer, May 2016)

On a more serious note, Steve (February, 2016) led me on a pre-birthday party workout by describing it as:

*“We are not bothered about our personal target routine now we are only in here to enhance our major muscles. I’m thinking of wearing my white t-shirt, it’s fairly fitted but want to make sure my pecs look prominent and guns (biceps) look good too. That way I will pull the look off well. We’ll do bench press, than free weights finishing with drop sets. We will definitely have the pump by the end I promise you”.*

Steve, Committed weight trainers (February, 2016)

Other groups were also fond of dedicated muscle pump training prior to a social occasion. The youngsters in particular would focus on chest muscles and biceps on a Friday in order to maintain an aesthetically pleasing look for social media photographs. Within this group there was debate around which exercises to do to accentuate muscle groups and also how to stand and pose for photographs to portray a muscular body image. Colin proposed:

*“We need to work on our shoulders and biceps. If you look at photos of big lads, what makes them stand out is their wide frame and big arms as photos be head on. It’s all about the overall body shape and wide shoulders make you look good”.*

(Colin, Youngsters, December 2016)

The seasoned weight lifters on the other hand were keen to look at their best during the Christmas period when they reacquaint with friends and family. The group then altered the workout routine to circuit based training with the objective of losing weight and becoming leaner to appear to look younger. It can be conceptualised the way in which training regimes were structured and played out were very much underpinned by personal motives and pressure to yield positive outcomes. Existent research offers limited knowledge in this area (Bey 2014). This study found weight training schedules were imperative in understanding how body ideals were mapped onto the body through embodied performances, whilst also signifying personal agendas and motivations driving the transformative routines. These key insights will be discussed further in the chapter.

## **5.6 The influential role of the fitness setting**

I will now discuss the fitness club environment and its culture the fieldwork process involved. In doing so I depict the setting’s significance in shaping participant’s perceptions and motives to adopt muscularity, by highlighting the lasting impression it had on the participants.

### **5.6.1 Body popularity in the fitness club**

Upon analysing the environment of the fitness club, it became apparent those individuals who possessed muscle tone and regularly visited the fitness club were popular amongst members and club employees. These individuals would regularly be acknowledged with members engaging in friendly conversations and small talk during time spent in the premises. As a result, it was witnessed some of the research participants who trained consistently and achieved muscle tone were seen to be desirable in terms of popularity and social status (Addis *et al* 2016).

This privileged position appeared to influence perceptions of self when other members acknowledged and commented upon participant's weight training regime and body shape.

*"A lot of people are asking me if I'm taking steroids, they think that is the only way you can look good, I tell them I work hard for this body as I have the heart to come in and work intensely day in and day out".*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, March 2016)

The fitness club staff members also influenced the social appeal of participants by selectively greeting and engaging in discussion with individuals and also asking some members to be in marketing promotions or to help out with fitness classes. Participants acknowledged this social trait and showed off muscular features inside the club.

*"We train at another level in here, that's why we get noticed and respected. I've had the manager in this place come up to me and say how people have come and joined us because I train here".*

(Luke Committed weight trainer, April 2016)

It was observed the social structures present in the fitness club were significantly influenced by body image appeal and the better in shape you were, the more chance of you being acknowledged and respected by others. Participants were aware of this and participated in this culture by speaking to those they believed were serious about weight training and whose body image was deserved of respect. This was demonstrated by individuals from the committed weight trainers group when Steve commented on fellow members training practices.

*"There are some in here who come here to talk have no muscle, no shape and they come in here to work their mouth. I don't entertain those. On the other hand there are lads like him [pointing to a member] who is in good shape, he comes in regular, has a strong pair of legs, he gets my respect and I say alright to him as I know he is serious about it".*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, April 2016)

Furthermore, Andy commented:

*"I only talk to people, who look good to be honest, I want to find out how they do it, what supplements they take and see if I can get anything out of them".*

(Andy, Committed weight trainer, April 2016)

It was noted those who were not distinctively muscular were commonly ignored by participants, as they did not possess the desired physical body capital. These traits echo wider social, cultural beliefs whereby it is apparent muscles are respected and body image is used to judge males (Clatterbaugh 2018, Edley 2017), whilst confirming the appeal of physical body capital (Frew and McGillivray 2005). It can be conceptualised the fitness club and working on the body, can become a method in which young males explore self-worth and dedicate time to optimise social appeal and self-regard (Mittal 2015, Stewart and Smith 2014). By utilising the fitness club and body transformation, I found my participants were exploring their social desirability credentials in the context where body image and muscularity was a focal point (Sassatelli 2017).

It was seen on several occasions, young males acting up and displaying their masculinity through embodied behaviour and vocabulary adopted. These instances included males flexing their muscles and regularly talking to staff members and attempting to attract the attention of female members. Participants would hold a number of conversations with other members during workouts, including playing jokes and laughing out loud to pose attention to themselves. Reflective diary notes also revealed participants considered themselves to be popular members in the club and made comments such as Paul (September, 2017): *"We bring entertainment to this place"*. John added (September 2017): *"I bet it's quiet when we are not here"*.

Such statements indicated participants perceived themselves to be highly socially desirable and enjoyed the attention they received in the club. Additionally, this also manipulated consciousness of self, in which the individuals sought to experience a desirable status symbol through body image (Lorber and Martin 2012). The atmosphere within the weight training area comprised a testosterone dominated tone, whereby males were constantly displaying masculine credentials through the display of physical strength and body aesthetics. However, this was undertaken in a non-aggressive manner, as members maintained a friendly and approachable demeanour. I found a number of participants would quietly observe the dynamics of the fitness club environment and passively adjust behaviour to be in-sync with cultural norms such premises exhibited (Sassatelli 2007). This was illustrated with diary accounts of Steve early in the fieldwork process and respectively Gary from the Youngsters.

I joined Steve on the treadmills this evening to warm down after our leg squat exercises. I noticed Steve was observing three males we had never come across in the club. Steve remarked he had seen them before and heard they had a reputation of being street brawlers.

I noticed Steve was hesitant of their presence this evening, he stated: *“I don’t know why lads like that come here, they not seriously training and just prat around”*.

Steve then shared how the fitness club was generally a friendly place but insisted: *“You still have to show you have something about you”*. Steve shared how young males had a natural tendency to see who they can dominate and pose authority over, whilst males in the fitness club were either flexing their authority or developing themselves to prevent being dominated. Returning to the atmosphere of the club Steve commented:

*“We have been here a long time and feel part of the culture, we are men and naturally compare ourselves with one another, this is the defacto place the majority of time it happens now as we are all at it showing who we are by lifting heavy weights, showing our determination and yeah you get respect. It is the jungle in some ways, that is why when other lads are watching me lift, it spurs me on like I can’t show myself up I have to perform to show what I have got”*.

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, June 2016)

Furthermore, diary accounts of Gary and myself talking about the fitness club environment were captured. Gary upon an occasion remarked how he felt comfortable in the club now and would not go anywhere else. I queried this with Gary who replied:

*“When we first joined you do feel vulnerable like you are in sea with sharks and some big guy might come and start bullying you. But I got to say it has been okay here everyone seems to be friendly even guys who are big and intimidating will help you if you went over to ask”*.

(Gary, Youngsters, December 2016)

I personally found the fitness club had varying atmospheric tones around the different spaces due to its large size and the age group of members. The environment of the weight training area was very different to other areas. Due to the masculine dominance and activity of weight lifting the area naturally exhibited a distinctive tone of competitiveness, masculine comparison in the midst of striving to gain physical capital. This I believed had a lasting impression on participants, as noted in my research findings as to how to act, behave and present self in the masculine environment.

### **5.6.2 'Muscle talk'- the value of physical capital**

Being entwined within a weight training routine and progressively building muscle, it was noted how physical body capital (Bourdieu 1984a) had a lasting impact on self-regard and behavioural traits amongst males. For example, it was observed amongst the seasoned weight lifters these males manipulated their behaviour to express hyper-masculinity and physical strength. I also found the youngsters portrayed behavioural changes through the transformation of body image as a result of an increase in muscularity. It was acknowledged how participants who inhabited some muscle mass grew in confidence and assurance, they came across to other males as an alpha male and someone you would not take advantage of.

I recall some participants portrayed a tough persona and elicited a certain type of attitude to accompany their physical presence. Fieldwork captured how participants would walk with more confidence, especially inside the club when coming and going from the weight training area. It was as if their masculinity was increasing in 'real time' after undertaking a lifting exercise resulting in a muscle pump which was then exposed to others to gain attention. Observations from the seasoned weight lifters particularly Liam, Paul and John revealed a number of mannerisms the participants commonly exhibited. John and Paul in particular were keen to make their presence felt when walking into the weight training area.

Liam walked with a focused look, fixated to a bench or equipment with his weight training belt on one shoulder and would give an occasional nod with his head to those who greeted him, rarely speaking. Conversely John would walk slowly with his chest muscles elevated glancing at members to acknowledge him and would engage in brief conversations. Paul would walk in a similar fashion and would seek to engage in discussion with other members before beginning a workout. It was also noted Paul would at times ask members how long they had left on equipment they were occupying, almost intimidating them to leave.

Conversely, the youngsters towards the latter period of the fieldwork, became accustomed to the fitness club and grew in confidence when entering the gym floor. It was noted how Gary, Matt and Colin, would all similarly walk with arms placed slightly away from the body, looking 'flexed' with shoulders and chest elevated to accentuate size and muscularity. Reflective notes also captured how Gary and Matt, who became very competitive, would take photographs during workouts. It was found such behaviour was fuelled by the pair's rivalry and the pressure to show others (through social media) muscularity progress.

The committed weight trainers who were focused upon the workout routine and self-development would regularly monitor and compare themselves with other members in the club. It was noted a number of participants whilst training, would constantly check themselves in the mirror and pose muscles when they noticed others were watching.

Reflecting upon the behavioural traits it became apparent, individuals desired to portray a masculine image both through physical looks and demeanour they explicated in previewing masculinity beliefs (Murnen and Karazsia 2017).

This was captured when Dan described how he seen fellow weight trainers:

*“It’s like they are acting as if they are the boss, you see it when they come over, pick up heavy weights, making grunting noises, so everyone looks at them, give a few dirty looks and they go, just massaging their own egos”.*

(Dan, Committed weight trainer, April 2016)

Steve added:

*“There are a lot of lads in here and it does become competitive, I just know who is real and serious about training, some are in here just to get some appreciation for being big. They are not serious about training just want to get noticed. There are two dynamics at play here, one is the training, and the other is the socialising”.*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, April 2016)

It can be conceptualised participants themselves became accustomed to adopting physical mannerisms as seen by other males in the fitness context, as well as professional bodybuilders and athletes through cultural knowledge (Bridges 2009). It was observed how some participants who possessed a muscular frame adopted a certain demeanour to illustrate an alpha male status. This was enacted by previewing hyper masculinity traits, typically through embodied behaviour. In this sense cultural knowledge of bodybuilders and the alpha male stature (Grogan and Richards 2002) was used to inform self-actualisation processes by my participants, who assumed this form of image would be rewarded for in society (Gough 2018a).

### **5.6.3 The fitness settings impact on masculine-self**

Based upon the analysis of the fitness club, I now explain the impact of the exposure of this environment to participants and the eventual consequence on male embodiment practices. Through the fieldwork, I learnt entering the fitness context introduced individuals to the cues and real time desires of hyper masculinity through muscular bodies on show and behaviour of resident trainers. The fitness context provided ideas of a self-enhanced concept (physical bodily capital, body image. alpha male status) with the processes needed to obtain the enhanced self-status: in this case working out, lifting weights and gaining a muscle pump.

The process of working out allowed participants to experience rich masculinity through an effort exerting, strength testing, competitive routine, where the body performs and muscles are worked upon. Experiencing this form of masculinity was a regular occurrence and as participants developed competencies in exercises, this happened to boost confidence, which spurred on previewing an enhanced masculine image. Through the enactment of hyper masculine traits and mannerisms (walking with chest elevated), it was witnessed how the experiential account of working out formed part of the participants habitus (Crossley 2004). I propose the augmentation of muscularity then acts as both a symbolic form and agent of the self-concept.

I found a muscular body image offered my participants a means in which to define self-concept, based on ideologies previewed in the fitness context. A number of benefits were realised by individuals chasing muscularity goals, including identity optimisation and confidence in fulfilling self-ideals. I argue, the agency nature of the muscular body is used to experience hyper masculinity through intensive workouts, where an individual intimately feels his strength, the muscle pump and the progressive increase of muscle tone through regular competitive sporting behaviour. I also found the muscular body manufactured the self-concept progressively to become the primary driver in which participants used to apprehend self-regard and set self-identity. It was witnessed how participants believed they were becoming more masculine through workouts and achieving muscularity, this in turn boosted self-confidence and the motive to continue.

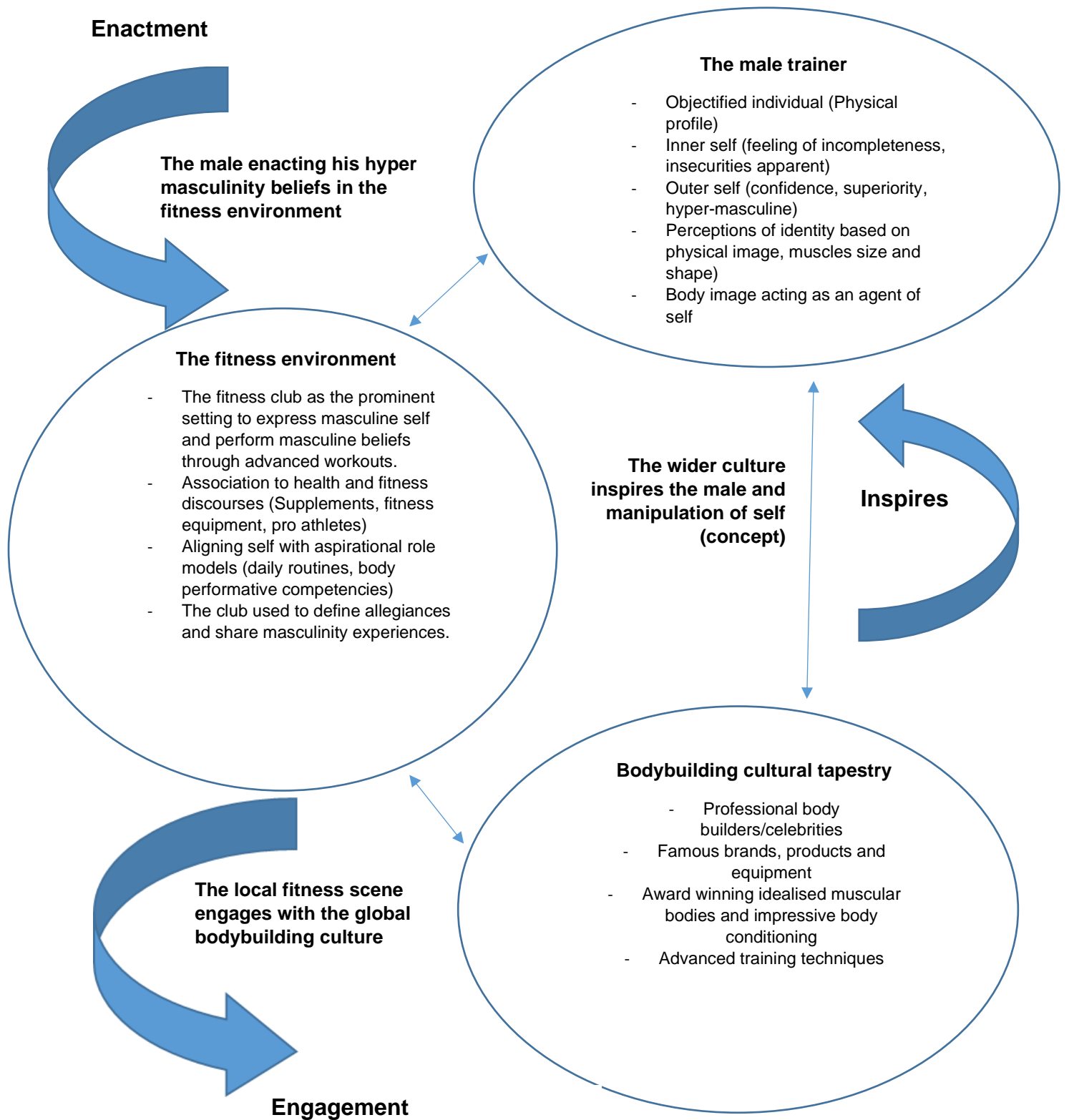
It can be argued the masculine body offers an array of symbolic meanings to males seeking to augment self, with a credible conception of a rich masculine experience through workouts. I found there was a positive correlation between body image satisfaction and perceptions of self-masculinity. I propose embodiment and bodily image manipulation is one of the richest forms and methods for a male to define self and set an identity to follow and preview in contemporary culture. Such thinking has been discussed by Csordas (2011), who implied how self and individualism was related to the body and unified with the body being an aspect of the self-concept. I can go further and state as an agent the muscular body provides a means in which to organise embodied practices, consumption behaviour and lifestyle choices. The muscular body harbours a process of close scrutiny and careful management, which involves the individual to partake in consumption markets such as vitamin/supplements and health and fitness discourses.



Working on and maintaining the muscular body also dictated other consumer behaviour and social lifestyle choices, including meeting other fitness/muscular males, previewing physique on social occasions and social media platforms. My research also follows on from Schubert and Koole (2009) views, who argued embodiment plays a fundamental role in social engagement, cognition and experiencing self. This research also links to Gadow (2003) on the subjective experiences of the body. Through my research, I learnt the fitness club, working out, seeing other muscular males and socialising with such individuals revealed the multi-faceted nature of male embodiment and the formidable role of the muscular body. It was experienced at first-hand, how the management of the muscular body dictated experiences of self, masculinity and shaped consumption choices. This was revealed when my participants arbitrated how self-identities and appearance choices were symbolically articulated to express masculine credentials, exploit manhood and show off a perceived enhanced self-concept through body image.

### **5.7 The culture of weight training**

Experiencing weight training in the fitness club and the behaviour of weight trainers allowed me to articulate the makeup of the culture and the actors operating in these contexts (Shilling 2012). By being personally entwined, I was able to capture the nature of interactions and the relationships existent in the fitness environment. Having knowledge of the background context of working out, I was able to articulate the associations of what was happening in the micro environment to the backdrop of the wider macro environment. Figure 5.1 depicts the cultural contexts, together with existent relationships of masculine-self in relation to the nature of the discourses operating in the cultural field. Consequently the relationship between the individual and the social context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) is deconstructed to highlight the underpinnings of masculine embodied consumption. Within this illustration I have situated participants as male weight trainers partaking in the localised culture of a fitness club to the wider culture of bodybuilding which spans internationally across the globe.



**Figure 5.1:** Bodybuilding cultural networks

Following principles of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2007, 2005), I now deliberate upon contextualising the socio-cultural environments in which male consumers engage in embodied discourses to enhance self through the muscular body. By depicting the key site (fitness environment) it was envisaged a deeper understanding of weight training males and cultural contexts would be gathered (Hallsworth *et al* 2005). Askegaard (2015) and Joy and Li (2012) believe a better understanding of consumer beliefs and attitudes can be obtained when investigating social, cultural contexts where such consumer traits develop. Consequently, I have paid particular attention to narrating the relationship between the individual and the cultural context, in the quest to discover the role of embodiment in consumer practices associated with masculine consumption.

Figure 5.1 illustrates how the cultural meanings and associations are adopted by the male trainer entwined within developing a muscular body image and interacting and engaging with the cultural networks present in the prominent discourses. Through this illustration, I have depicted the meanings of the masculine self, situated in the micro, macro environments of the local (primary) contexts and the wider, global culture of bodybuilding. In depicting these insights, it is anticipated a better understanding of the consumer male (weight trainer) and embodied-self entwined within the culture(s) can be gathered in relation to the nature of networks and cultural discourses. As can be seen the male weight trainer is characterised as the individual who is carrying the persona of a weight trainer or bodybuilder and a hyper-masculine male. The individual is objectified in the sense that personal physical characteristics (body image, size, masculine appearance) are perceived to be the makeup for expressing self and setting the masculine identity.

The body and its image are used to fundamentally shape perception of self-concept and the behavioural traits expressed through body language. Body image and embodied practices (working out) can also be used to disguise personal insecurities, as I witnessed with some of my participants. The weight trainer is confined within a local environment which is used to make sense of who he (self) is and express self-identity. Sassatelli (2007) prescribed how fitness centres were not only good for the body and its transformation but also instrumental to providing an opportunity for authentic expression of self. It is within the local environment context, where the muscular identity is used to mark allegiance and loyalty to a cultural movement, in this case health, fitness and bodybuilding (Brewster *et al* 2017).

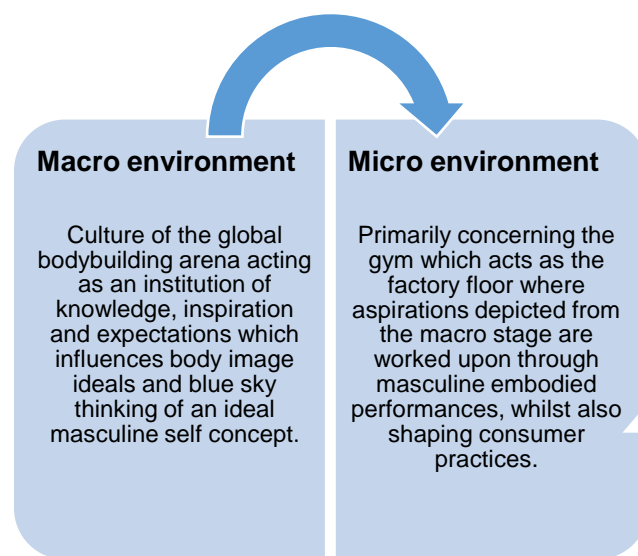
The masculine-self in relation to the environment also acts as method in which cues and consumption behaviour traits can be learnt and practiced by the male in setting their identities and self-personas. As discussed earlier, it is proposed body muscularity acts as an agent of self.

The local, micro environment encompasses contexts in which the male can engage in acting out masculinity beliefs and also demonstrate allegiance to the weight training scene and gym life (Barber and Bridges 2017). This local context includes the key site of the fitness setting, where masculinity experiences are shared with other weight trainers and the body performs to develop further muscularity and image enhancement. The fitness scene is paramount to the masculine male, as it is where notions of the correct ways to perform masculinity (how to carry the male body, practice hyper-masculine demeanour) are learnt and practiced. The fitness setting presents a dual role; its environment and the act of working out, can act as a cultural institution in the ways it offers guidance/expectations of masculinity, which are intertwined within social and culture norms. Secondly, it is one of the few places in contemporary culture, where masculinity beliefs can be practiced through muscle development via a sporting, competitive routine amongst other males.

In order to depict the essence of the fitness setting, the following diary account portrays its significance: *'The weight training area offers a dedicated space that's deeply rooted in a tapestry of iconic images of self acting, pain and pleasure seeking masculinity. There is significant amount of aesthetic appeal present from the varying muscular body shapes on show to the large mirrored walls and strong lighting'*. My fieldwork identified the significance of the local fitness environment to the male participant. It was found the fitness club offered a number of benefits and refuge to the body image conscious male that it becomes an institution to fully pledge allegiance and commitment to. For many it represented a safe haven away from the corporate, domestic world where masculine authority had been compromised (Gough 2018a, Edley 2017, Coates 2008).

It was found the fitness club was where operations of body transformations took place in retrospect to the strategic aspirations the wider macro environment and bodybuilding culture promotes (Waling *et al* 2018). The local environment (fitness club) is influenced by the wider bodybuilding culture through the weight training methods, clothing, props and health and fitness marketing communication. The wider culture of bodybuilding encompassing its rich legacy, acting as the prominent backdrop to the localised culture (Liokaftos 2014, Bey 2014). Here we see influential marketing and media communications such as celebrities, social media stars and iconic brands setting the tone for idealistic notions of masculinity and the symbolic role of the muscular body image (Andreasson and Johansson 2019ab).

It was witnessed how external embodied wealth (seen through cultural platforms) becomes integral in the adoption of the muscular body to become a constituted part of the individual male (Csordas 2011, Bourdieu 1984a). The masculine-self in relation to this wider culture centres upon the interaction with these discourses and the interpretations depicted from marketing messages. As will be discussed later the body project journey involved a number of sense-making, complex processes for my participants to overcome. Those who succeeded in achieving results used their body to augment self-image and meet perceptions of self-ideals through embodied consumption practices.



**Figure 5.2:** Micro and macro environment

Figure 5.2 draws upon the influence of the macro and micro environments and their impact on the masculine self. The micro environment takes cues through engagement with wider cultural discourses of international bodybuilding culture and knowledge (Green and Kaiser 2016, Gattario *et al* 2015). This can be seen through workout methods and health and fitness discourses promoting famous bodybuilders, their training routines and iconic brands to entice individuals to explore the rich culture (Coquet *et al* 2016). Consequently, the wider macro culture inspires the male to work on and develop self, through engagement and adoption of cultural traits, products and masculinity beliefs, in the process of self-augmentation and identity make up (Gough 2018a).

The engagement of cultural networks continues to develop on an on-going basis and as the individual entwines himself more into cultural discourses, the greater the cultural notions harbour the embodied self and enactment of masculinity beliefs. This was seen through my participation journey with the youngsters, who interacted with bodybuilding cultural knowledge and used their interpretation of marketing messages to inform physical embodiment development and self enhancement (Edley 2017, Murnen and Karazsia 2017). In order to shed further light on how males reacted to macro environment discourses, I now share how my participants interpreted marketing communications of the idealised masculine body.

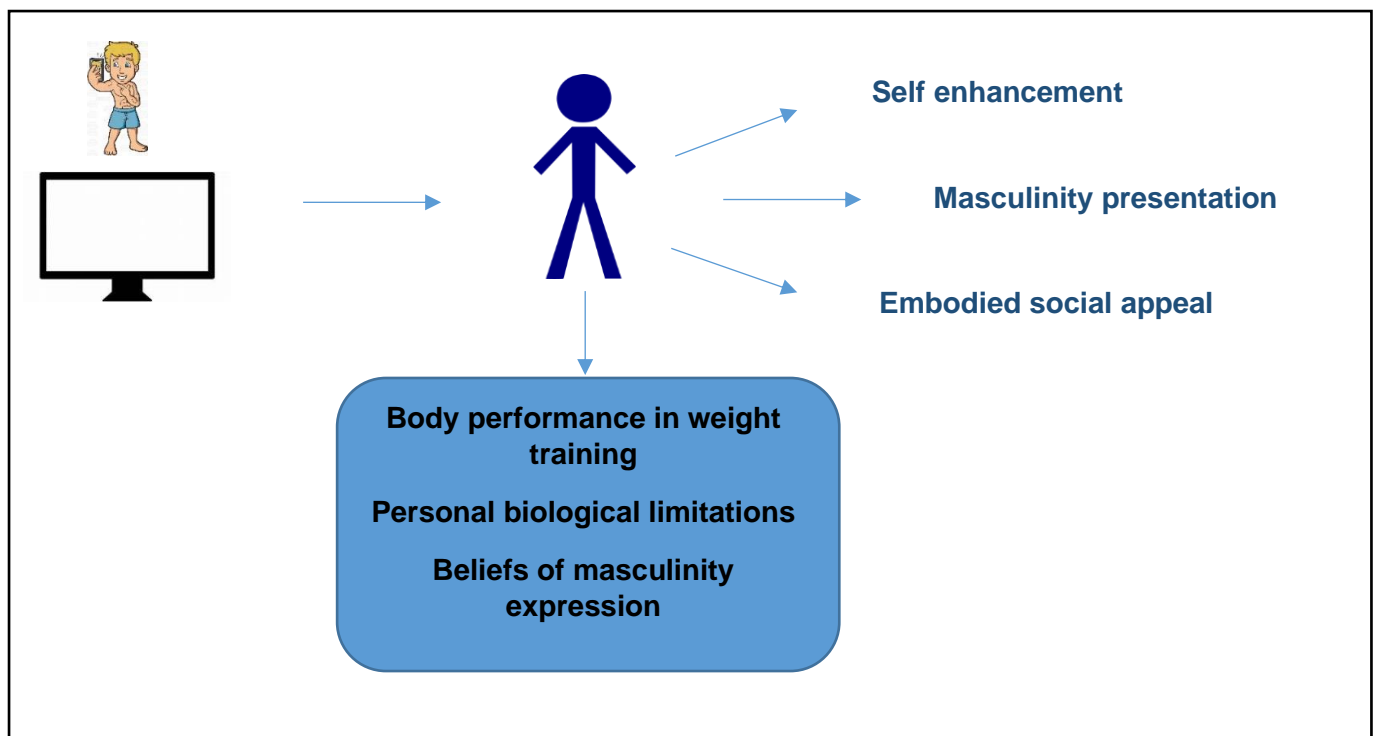
### **5.8 The construction of body ideals**

It is apparent from my research, male participants were pursuing embodied projects in the quest to achieve cultural ideals of body image and masculinity (Plummer 2016). These efforts to achieve ideals were negotiated through health and fitness initiatives, mainly derived from working out in the fitness club and taking cues from male health, fitness and bodybuilding media discourses. Whilst there are dominant cultural narratives of masculinity present, I found they were not necessarily constrained to a certain form of masculinity. For example, some participants chased hegemonic forms related to what Connell (2005) presented however, there were some who desired more contemporary incarnations, which mixed both traditionalist and quasi hybrid forms that were more inclined towards metrosexual iterations (Hearn 2015, Hall and Gough 2011). Consequently, it can be conceptualised the kinds of bodies my participants attained as well as the varying workout practices they engaged in, cannot be grounded in a singular narrative of masculinity (Connell 2005).

I found desirable body images and aesthetics were in tune with social, cultural desires and personal agendas individuals brought to the club. Although muscularity was a priority for all, the way in which it was shaped and mapped onto the body differed amongst participants. This was partly due to the variations of muscle and strength achievement (Raudenbush and Meyer 2003) whilst also being dictated by the individuals' competencies and masculinity expression beliefs (Gough 2018, Hearn and Hein 2015). I also found participants strived for different forms of cultural ideals based on where they were on the embodied journey (Figure 5.11).

As a result of these observations I argue the interpretation of masculinity representations in media discourses and the way in which these are mapped onto the male body are configured by:

- The individual male's personal desires related to ideal self (concept) and motive to capture these.
- The interpretative understanding of workouts/fitness practices and subsequently competencies developed in bodily performances (exercise) and overcoming personal biological limitations (how the natural male body reacts to weight training).
- Masculinity beliefs and the notions in which masculine norms are apprehended and followed.
- The consumption traits relating to health, fitness and supplement discourses and how well they are adopted.



**Figure 5.3:** Mapping of body ideals

I also propose the way in which masculine body ideals are mapped onto the male body evolve around what the individual feels he can benefit from (in terms of self enhancement), by adopting a certain muscular credential or bodily feature. In this case the benefits sought centre upon the symbolic value relating to enhancing body image or being rewarded for having a desired masculine feature (Addis *et al* 2016, Entwistle 2015, Crossley 2005).

This was witnessed amongst a number of participants who spoke of desiring certain muscular features to fulfil self-ideals.

*“I want big arms, they just mean so much, show a lot about you that you are a proper goodfella. You always have to respect a guy who has big arms it’s just the way it is, you know the meaning of it, it just portrays superiority and that you are a level above from the average guy”.*

(Matt, Youngsters, January 2017)

*“What I am looking to get is a well-defined upper body, it will fill me out more and I know I will have more presence on the street. It just adds thickness and makes you look a lot more appealing. So people be nice to you as you have something about you”.*

(Tim, Youngsters, December 2016)

As depicted in figure 5.3, it can be regarded media and marketing communications are interpreted by the male consumer who evaluates the relevance and value of the ideals for his self (concept). Existing research has spoken of muscle ideals having universal appeal to every man (Grieve and Helmick 2008, Leit *et al* 2002). I argue, the decision to act upon these body image desires vary and depend upon the perceived value and appeal to the individual male and his circumstance, as I witnessed through my participants. Accordingly, it is debated the commitment and discipline to working out and shaping body, is assessed on whether the effort is worthwhile to personal circumstance and significance to self-actualisation and identity pursuit.

In this study, I found the youngsters were initially chasing body ideals for symbolic benefit to enhance perceptions of self-concept and body image. Once participants developed some muscularity, the attention moved onto developing features to preview to friends, peers and online social networks to gain attention and be rewarded through positive appraisal. These traits followed that what was previewed in marketing communications of body image ideals, in the way in which males expose body muscularity (Waling *et al* 2018, Otterbring *et al* 2018).

Furthermore, individuals from the committed trainers, conveyed how they were focused on the exercise regime and managing a high performing body. Nevertheless, after a period of training it did become apparent individuals were also chasing aesthetic goals to communicate to peers the particular lifestyle choice of health, fitness and desirable body image. However, I noticed within this group the training and body management was very self orientated and participants were trying hard to remain competitive through a good level of fitness. The seasoned weight lifters used perceptions of idealistic masculinity and body image, to set their tone for self-personas and identity (Edwards 2016, Neale *et al* 2016, Mittal 2015).



Here the males had sculpted body muscle over a number of years onto their masculine bodies and spoke of how it was for health reasons and to remain feeling and looking younger. Intriguingly, it was found participants used their overt muscular build to dictate their behaviours to gain respect and authority in the confines of the fitness club and in the presence of other males.

## **5.9 Research findings themes**

The chapter will now delve into themes identified through the empirical research conducted in the fieldwork. The over-arching themes were formed through the comprehensive data analysis process capturing:

- Motives to adopt a muscular body
- Key discourses influencing perceptions of male body image
- How cultural messages and knowledge of body ideals are interpreted and used to inform training techniques and body image beliefs
- Maintaining and managing the muscular body
- The symbolic value the muscular physique posed amongst participants.

Following CCT principles I have explored the full consumption cycle (Arnould and Thompson 2005) including acquiring the masculine body, its possession through reaching perceived masculine ideals and how this influences lifestyle choices. As a result it is debated a better understanding particularly of male embodiment and masculinity in reference to self-concept and identity has been developed.

### **5.9.1 Theme 1: Muscular body image in Self-augmentation**

Theme one centres upon the unprecedented role of the muscular body image and its symbolic role on self-augmentation and setting a self-narrative. The development and maintenance of a muscular physique was a lifestyle choice for all my participants with consumption, interaction and engagement with market discourses focused on optimising body aesthetics. The primary motive for chasing ideals, was to fulfil perceptions of an ideal self-concept and live out ambitions of being a strong, stylish male. The theme configured through my participant's beliefs and behaviours reflects upon the value placed on body image, its relation to self-conceptualisation and how it encourages self-evaluation and transformation practices.

The theme also captures where inspiration of body image ideals are sourced from to shape embodied journeys and desired image goals. I then relate these consumer traits to theoretical knowledge and existent understanding to signify links between social, cultural traits and male embodiment practices.

The muscular body and its image was at the heart of all the participants' physical motives and lifestyle. From the early stage into the fieldwork setting I found the committed weight trainers deliberated upon a logically derived training regime and eating habits which centred upon maintaining a muscular body image. The youngsters, conversely, did not have the desired muscularity to begin with, but communicated their aspirations to establish a muscular body image so they could embrace the social rewards associated with its adoption (Entwistle 2015). Finally, the seasoned weight lifters demonstrated how their large framed body and overt muscle definition had helped them establish a perceived status symbol and subsequently respect from other males.

Body image was the commonly agreed motive to partake in a weight training regime and to achieve muscularity goals. Participants proposed how they wanted to improve body image by muscle toning and losing fat tissue, to feel good about themselves and reap preconceived rewards an enhanced image provided. Body image was seen as both a functional and symbolic tool in both my personal life. I personally learnt how developing a muscular body image provided the confidence and self-belief to perform at a tough exercise regime. It provided me with a psychological boost, in that I had the competency to perform, whilst experience a supreme sense of masculinity. Additionally I also found the muscular image depicted an individual's masculinity and a heightened sense of self and status, in particularly when muscularity conformed to perceived social, cultural ideals (Csordas 2011, Bridges 2009).

I personally found partaking in a regular training routine with the different participants, made me scrutinise my body more, due to expectations for it to perform competitively and to also demonstrate my 'self' through the masculine image. This in turn, communicated my discipline and commitment to the cause. Body image provided the basis in which to feel good about myself, in that it was an achievement of hard training sessions.

These feelings were also shared by participants:

*"My motivation is the connotation of the nice body has on other parts of my life. I mean a nice body allows me to have more presence at work. In the bar it helps me to get to places not just the women but in the sales job I do people pay more attention to me. It gives me confidence to strive for more and get further in life".*

(Andy, committed weight trainer, April 2016).

Conversely, Luke went further in describing how he believed his body image made him feel superior whilst also defining his character:

*“It’s got a lot of meaning, shows you are remarkable, more of a man. It shows you can work out and nurture yourself, your body. It helps in sending the message out you have something about you, you know better than the average guy. We live in a society where people do judge you on how you look, it tells people so much about your character, your mental strength, discipline and heart. It’s also satisfaction in believing in yourself and what you can achieve”.*

(Luke, committed weight trainer, March 2016).

The youngsters also portrayed the popularity of the muscular body ideal:

*“The muscular toned body is now a fashion icon something all young lads want although all do not admit it. The media, movie stars have influenced the trend and now all movie action stars wear their muscular bodies to show off on the big screen, it is the skin being the fashion material and not so much the clothing now. Look at Vin Diesel, simple white t-shirt, but it’s fitted and it’s all about his muscles which make him the alpha male character”.*

(Tim, youngsters, December 2016).

*“It’s just a sign you have something about you. A muscular body has purpose it looks good, feels good and you feel better about yourself”.*

(Gary, youngsters, December 2016).

John (seasoned weight lifters), who had maintained a large muscular body image over many years portrayed its significance in earning him respect and living a healthy lifestyle:

*“Maintaining my muscular frame has earned me authority, respect you know people think twice before taking advantage of my good nature. Without being big headed it has given me a type of status but only because I haven’t abused this respect earned, so people treat me well”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, August 2017).

John, after a period of training together, also discussed the health benefits he had experienced:

*“The biggest advantage I have got by sticking with this body is the motivation to stay focused, disciplined and live a healthy lifestyle. I have stopped indulging at Christmas, and tend to eat healthy because I think I have worked hard enough over the years to get in the shape I have”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, September 2017).

It is apparent body image and in particular body muscle, is multi-dimensional, carrying a number of subjective meanings to the male consumer (Barber and Bridges 2017). In agreement with Shilling (2012), I found the group of males placed image in high regard and consequently, spent a great amount of time and effort to yield the potential physical and symbolic value. Further to existing understanding, the fieldwork revealed how working on body image was also seen as a lifestyle choice, which consisted of working on body image as a live project. The project based effort involved an embodiment journey, comprising commitment to working out, the weight training group and becoming attuned to regular exercises, which brought the challenging, competitive opportunities to demonstrate hyper masculinity.

Working on optimising body image as a lifestyle choice also influenced consumption behaviour for these males. It was witnessed how individuals were keen to communicate their body image aspirations, through expressing the consumption of protein supplements, wearing tight fit clothing and engaging with health and fitness discourses. It was also noted how the achievement of muscularity goals further spurred consumption behaviour, such as wearing more revealing clothing (vest tops) and decorating the body through tattoos. Consumption behaviour was configured both during the quest to achieve the muscular ideals and also emphasised when achieving muscularity goals. It can be conceptualised embodiment practices further spurred on embodied focused consumption, through muscularity enhancing initiatives such as purchasing supplements, workout clothing and weight training equipment.

Shilling (2012) described the value of the fit body to encompass value and self-worth. The findings of this study revealed these males not only perceived their fit bodies to be instrumental to good health and performance, but also a symbolic sign of self (Mittal 2015, Sirgy 2015). As illustrated below Gary, John and Steve portrayed their views of the multi-dimensional role of the exercised muscular body and its meaning to their respective selves:

*"I have been training on and off for about 16 years now, it doesn't seem that long. It's about taking care of yourself and your body - your body is your temple. For me it's the one thing I have remained committed to in terms of looking after my body, even if I don't come here I wake up in the morning and do some press ups.*

(Steve, committed weight trainer, February 2016)

*"A good body is the one where you have a good chest and big arms, it makes you look good and as a result you get noticed by both lads and lasses because you are more popular and consequently intimidating to other lads".*

(Gary 19, youngster, November 2016)

*“Keeping hold of this body shape has provided me with the motivation to stay focused, disciplined and live a healthy lifestyle. It’s not easy but I think to myself if I can carry it on I will be in better health and it will pay rewards later in life. As you get old you do lose muscle so I have packed on a fair bit so it won’t be so bad for me. I also like the feeling when people say I don’t look my age, it gives a feeling you are doing something right and in a way delaying the ageing process”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, October 2017)

Luke went further and described the science behind the fit body he had apparently self-taught and respectively believed he had engineered a greater biological self, through his training and body conditioning:

*“Working on my body is a lifestyle choice. I know from looking after your body image a healthy lifestyle can be adopted which then makes you a better specimen. Like I regulate what I put into my body and take all vitamins and supplements. I go that extra mile and through training I know I have engineered a better body working out makes our hearts more healthy and regulate blood pressure and fat cell generation.*

*You know your body will be just more efficient and run more smoothly as you are getting in the right nutrients and not letting crap stuff in, so like the original man you have an organic, strong body that has been conditioned, you make it perform on the regular so it gets a good workout and then the goodness shows through a healthy, fit body image”.*

(Luke, Committed weight trainer, March 2016).

Shilling (2002) argued, body/self-dualism was a dynamic of cultural processes, which facilitated discourses and practices of embodiment in a fashionable sense. In this case it was attending the fitness club and interacting in its culture, my participants’ embraced body culture and worked on self (physically) (Sassatelli 2007).

Bourdieu (1984a) advocates the male body is a form of capital which can be used to characterise social classification, status and masculine credentials. Frew and McGillivray (2005) also presented the notion of the toned, muscular body encompassing physical capital which carries symbolic value in contemporary culture. I found participants used their body capital (Bourdieu 1984a) to characterise self as well as their perceived masculine status. In the fitness club (where body capital matters) an individual’s social appeal is heavily judged by his appearance. Consequently, those males who encompassed the desired muscle tone received attention from both males and females. I found this trait drove my participant’s enthusiasm further to capture body ideals, as it showed the value of body capital and its ability to perceivably boost self-status. My research findings echo those of Lefkowich *et al* (2017) in that the muscular body carries physical capital that is highly valued in contemporary culture.

Literature also indicates how physical body capital can be used to acquire other forms of capital such as social and economic capital (Rodgers *et al* 2019). Amongst participants I discovered individuals perceived having physical capital would help them acquire enhanced work opportunities (economic capital) and success in attracting female attention (social capital). Such prospects drove my participant's motives in acquiring desired muscular bodies in order to reap preconceived rewards the media helped portray.

### **5.9.1.1 Muscular body image and its meaning to self and identity**

Dwelling further into the meanings masculine body image carried for my participants existing research argues body image is strongly related to personal identity (Tiggemann 2015, Csordas 2011, Bendelow and Williams 2002). Consequentially, there have been calls to study body image from a multi-dimensional perspective involving perceptions, attitudes, feelings, relations and in-particular behaviours (Fernandez-Balboa and Gonzalez-Calvo 2017). This study was able to get close and investigate body image in relation to self and identity, whilst also highlighting the multi-dimensional nature in which body image was interpreted by males.

Intriguingly, the research revealed how body image impacted upon perception, attitudes towards self and others and its role in consumer/consumption behaviour. It was found participants together with other males working on their bodies were relating to their body image at various interpersonal levels affecting perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. This was witnessed through the way in which body image was described.

*“Well, it's you isn't it, like what you are made of, your physical presence. It describes you as a person, who you are, what kind of character, physical imprint you have”.*

(Andy, committed weight trainer, March 2016)

*“Body image is your projection to the world, its hello this is me, this is what I'm made of, we all have one, how it's shaped and performs shows how much time you invest in yourself and keeping healthy and fit”.*

(Chris, seasoned weight lifter, October 2017)

*I feel horrible if I don't work on my body, it's a domino effect if I don't train, I end up eating bad food then stop caring how I look this then reflects on my mood and I feel disgusted with myself”.*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer, March 2016)

*“It reflects how you feel inside if you are feeling good it shows through good body conditioning and a healthy exterior. If you are feeling rotten and been eating crap, it shows through a neglected figure”.*

(Liam, Seasoned weight lifter, November 2017).

During the participation period, I observed the high precedence placed on body image by the majority of participants and personally experienced the feeling first hand. Being entwined within the circle of males, the fitness club and health and fitness discourses led to scrutinising my own body image more. Consequently, I firmly believe it is an image of my self-concept (Mittal 2015). Working out regularly with participants led me to naturally paying more attention to muscle tone and body conditioning. I now carry the belief the whole concept of weight training surrounded characterising your visible image as a strong, stylish, masculine male (Gough 2018, Entwistle 2015).

The act of training became a moulding and shaping routine, where the body would be evaluated on a regular basis to evaluate the effectiveness of training relative to the achievement of desired appearance goals and self-actualisation. For myself it was realised the process was never ending and raised dissatisfaction in bodily confidence due to the close scrutiny and self-imposed pressure to apprehend body image ideals. I observed, particularly with the youngsters at the start of their quest there was a preconception they would achieve body image ideals and reach their peak. In turn this would allow them to enjoy the social rewards the muscular ideal encompassed (Frank 2014).

*“Give it 6 months I’m going to look like a beast and can then just walk around looking hunched. I won’t need to come here [fitness club] as much. I will be taking girls out every night of the week”.*

(Colin, Youngsters, December 2016)

*“When I reach how I want to look I will enjoy being me then, I am going to go to Ibiza most summers that’s when I have the body to die for and can just enjoy life as a player”.*

(Gary, Youngsters, December 2016)

However, as I personally learnt as time progressed, I acknowledged perceptions of body ideals cannot be satisfied, as there is always another level; a greater level of muscle tone and shape, a greater dynamic of leanness to reach. Additionally, there would be muscular features other males possessed which you admired. As a result, you scrutinise your own body image and compare with others and realise there will always be goals to achieve and desires you want relating to body features, muscle tone or overall image. Due to my previous experiences, I acknowledged ultimate ideals did not exist, as I felt there were body features I could always improve through further weight training and adopting a stricter diet.

I realised the self-imposed pressure was difficult to fend off especially when regularly comparing body image to other muscular males in the fitness context and media discourses (Bey 2014). I found this perspective of a never ending desire was questioned by the younger participants. These individuals could not acknowledge the view I did not yearn for further muscularity when they were so inclined on achieving such aesthetical goals.

*"I don't get it, once you look good you have made it. I don't think you really appreciate it what you have".*

(Gary, Youngsters, December 2016)

*"I think you are just getting old, you need to come out with us more often we will show you how to use that body of yours properly".*

(Matt, Youngsters, December 2016)

Respectively, I learnt the journey of working on body image becomes a long-term project and a culture embracing passage in my life, in which individuals interpret to their own ideologies to make sense of who they are (self-concept) and why they are involved in such a culture (masculinising process). The committed weight trainers and seasoned weight lifters groups who both encompassed more mature males and extensive length of time spent weight training carried distinctive traits. I learnt how they adopted to the culture and made sense of it based on their own beliefs.

Participants from the committed weight trainers believed the routine provided a purpose, it was their way of remaining masculine, competitive and they believed they were gaining health and fitness benefits by working out on a daily basis. Luke shared how he possessed an optimised biological body through regular weight training and supplement intake. He believed he had engineered a more dynamic self through his commitment to health and fitness. Steve also followed the training routine believing he had nurtured a desirable body image. Steve regarded it allowed him to stay healthy and allowed him to release stress, becoming a therapeutic means to work on something he passionately believed in.



Moving on to the seasoned weight lifters, here it was observed how working out and carrying a muscular frame provided reassurance, confidence to ailing muscular males. Research participants shared how coming into the club provided a place to be respected and possess a status symbol (Glick *et al* 2015). This was perceived positively amongst the individuals in comparison to the reality of dealing with the inevitable ageing process and in some cases health issues. Participants shared how working out provided a means in which to spend time with like-minded males and do something positive for their health. John shared his experience:

*“It’s a place that has given me a lot over the years. Going to a gym has helped me stay healthy, not be lazy and lethargic. It gives a focus in life we are creatures of habit, we get settled into work our careers and relationships. The years go by and you just cruise getting older and lazier all the time. Working out and looking after my body gives me a kick, I come in here and push myself, see what I can do even scare myself to see if I’m still with it.*

*I know people might look at us from the outside and call us roid heads but you know what we have achieved a lot over the years in terms of being a better person. We have improved ourselves we can perform, think and push ourselves to uncomfortable positions and still come back the next day.*

*Managing this body is a test of mind not just physical but mentally as well. Also I would have not met these guys with me today if it wasn’t for working out. These guys are friends, brothers and training partners. I found they are incredibly loyal, always there for me”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, December 2017).

Amongst the seasoned weight lifters and committed weight trainers, I found participants had a positive correlation between body image satisfaction and perceptions of masculinity. Individuals believed their mesomorph bodies embodied hyper-masculinity and physical capital was used in adopting a masculine, alpha-male persona. These findings agree with existing research such as Drummond (2020) and Brown and Graham (2008) who publicised masculine self-affirmation was associated with body image satisfaction. However, to shed further light on perceptions of body satisfaction, it was found this was to a degree amongst some participants (largely older males). I found complete body satisfaction was not apparent, consequently self-masculine affirmation was similarly not completely fulfilled. Amongst participants I found there was room for improvement and a sense further masculinity could be captured through body transformation.

Reflecting upon my own experiences, I witnessed my body image being transformed, which resulted in feelings of achievement and confidence. By being entwined within the training groups I was encouraged to demonstrate my strength which in turn spurred on my self-belief and perception of superiority over other males (Barber and Bridges 2017).

I recall from fieldwork (June 2016) noting: *'Working out with these characters you cannot help but develop a similar mindset and you start believing the muscle pump hype, feeling of superiority and hyper masculinity'*.

For example, upon one occasion after breaking a bench press record, Steve (May, 2016) was close by and witnessed my attempt he rushed over and stated: *"That's it champ, your hard work with us is finally paying off you have been trying to crack the 100kg attempt for a long time. How does it feel?"* I replied by stating it was a great feeling, like I had climbed a large mountain peak. Steve replied: *"You are now in the right frame of mind, you were too easy going before, too relaxed, and you now have more aggression in you. It's good that you have trained with us and seen how we can help build the mind and confidence"*. I remember at the time thinking Steve believed he had helped me develop as a person, a more fine-tuned self. He initially seen me carrying flaws and through the intensive exercise regime, I was now a better person and an enhanced version of myself in his eyes.

#### **5.9.1.2 Aspirational sources of body image ideals**

In order to learn more about body image perceptions and how participants carried different beliefs the research line of enquiry followed exploring how body image beliefs were formed. Research suggested interpretations of body image ideals were mainly sourced from media and social discourses, as conveyed by Gough (2018b), Blond (2008) and Gill *et al* (2005). A number of participants made reference to popular media and celebrities who were influential in illustrating the social appeal of muscularity.

The youngsters demonstrated the influence of social media and lifestyle bloggers acting as primary influencers for these young males. I found individuals in this group were seriously influenced by such discourses, to a point where two participants undertook extreme measures to gain body muscularity results. The influence of social media was not only limited to the youngsters. I found the committed trainers would regularly compare themselves to YouTube bloggers, but rather than taking the advice at face value were little more sceptical due to their own training experience. Furthermore, during the participation period it became apparent some participants were keen to share their views of body image being an authentic expression of themselves as individuals (Mittal 2015). The seasoned weight lifters remarked how their bodies told their stories as individuals. Paul shared his perspective:

*"I'm really sore from those squats, it's as if someone has stuck needles down my legs, really painful. I should have took it easy but you guys kept egging me on, so I got to show what I'm made of. I guess having this type of muscle man image you have to deliver when the going gets tough and afterwards live with the consequences. I know it's bad but that's just me, this body I have tells the tale, I might be old but I'm still game."*

*I have willpower, the heart to carry on fighting. I have engineered my body over the years for it to be resilient to still be able to compete with you kids. My body and way it looks has come from my heart, the hunger to be the best I can be. I didn't have a booming career, massive riches but I have a respectable body which I know can outperform a lot of men and it shows who I am as a person".*

(Paul, seasoned weight lifter, February 2018)

Paul, a 55 year-old bodybuilder was the pinnacle of this research study due to his beliefs and large, muscular frame. He was an individual who would look forward to visiting the fitness club and engage in discussions with a number of people mainly about his body image, eating habits and his workout routine. In turn Paul was popular and known as the fittest 55 year old around. Over the years Paul had established a reputation of being able to put younger men to shame through his brute strength and body muscularity, which was associated with a male 10-15 years his junior. Paul described himself as a *"bodybuilder"* whilst relating to himself through his body credentials and behaved in accordance with his embodied characteristics.

On a number of occasions Paul previewed his hyper masculine persona by being loud, intimidating other males and posing his muscular body (Hearn and Hein 2015). Paul elaborated he was inspired by; *"old school bodybuilders"* and stated how he was living out the legacy of the bygone era by showing and reminding young males of the original men who publicised: *"The beauty of muscle"*. Paul believed he was portraying such messages and encompassed a responsible role to educate young men on the muscular body and how to manage it. In contrast, I found the younger participants comprised a strong desire to use physical attributes to express self (Glick *et al* 2015, Sirgy 2015). During weight training sessions a number of males made comments conveying their motives to gain expressive muscular features. As seen below these remarks centred upon participants feeling the need to express themselves through muscular ideals:

*"Let's do another set of curls, I want to see some bicep muscle pump it will make us look good and proper beef cakes when we walk out of here, proper weight trainers".*

(Gary, youngsters, January 2018)

*"I want to spend more time on ab work, it gives that tight overall look and it's quite exclusive not many lads have it. I know once my pecs and abs start coming through people will know for sure I have been hitting the gym hard and that I'm a fine piece of specimen".*

(Colin, youngster, November 2017)

The research also discovered body image was also manipulated to align self with aspiring individuals (Otterbring *et al* 2018, Sirgy 2015). Early into the participation process, it was realised how participants compared themselves to professional athletes and sporting stars. Individuals shared their respective journeys of following exercise training regimes of popular personalities previewed through social media. Luke claimed he followed the training regime of professional fighters and perceived his body to mimic those he compulsively followed. Others in this training group believed by investigating and mimicking the training regimes of professional sport stars, they could share some commonality, including body image which allowed them to carry a heightened sense of self-regard.

On one occasion training with participants, Dan mentioned how he was captivated by the muscular biceps of Rafael Nadal (Spanish tennis champion) and consequently the group developed a bicep workout to develop these muscles. Due to the tactile nature of body image and its dominant presence in media discourses, participants believed they shared commonality with aspiring individuals when they sported similar body features (Waling *et al* 2018, Kirk 2002). This was demonstrated by Andy, who made it known to me he wanted a body like the movie star Dwayne Johnson to seek fame and strive for rewards the star had achieved through his muscular body. Andy commented:

*“It’s clear a big muscular image is the in thing nowadays and you get noticed. The Rock is a fine example and it’s his image which has got him noticed, he’s not a great actor but is a supreme athlete, being in impressive shape which is why he is enjoying the fame and film roles he’s getting”.*

(Andy, Committed weight trainer, March 2016).

### **5.9.1.3 Masculine body variance**

My research found participant’s perceptions of other male’s bodies and behaviours contributed to how they evaluated and assigned meaning to their own appearances, body practices and social standing. This follows on from what Gattario *et al* (2015) referred to when discussing the significance of the locality in shaping the appeal of body ideals for males. Intriguingly, the research revealed, although participants were chasing similar body ideals in terms of body size, muscularity and aesthetics, the biological process occurring on the body as a result of the exercise routine yielded varying results and aesthetical muscle tone. This was initially witnessed with the committed weight trainers, who all encompassed varied body shape and relative size. The desire to adopt overt upper body muscle resulted in the group undertaking a number of chest, shoulder and bicep exercises, which impacted on some participants experiencing muscle growth. For others body results were not as clear, which resulted in conflict in the group to overhaul the training routine.

Moving on to the youngsters, I found the initial enthusiasm to 'get big' and build muscle was replaced with more realistic expectations. During this phase the group debated on what was achievable based on their own body size and estimation. Colin and Gary, carrying the naturally larger body frames felt they could achieve more muscularity, whilst Tim and Matt felt they could work on a lean, toned body. Consequently, the participants paired off for a number of sessions to work on their respective workouts. The seasoned weight lifters, who sported big imposing bodies also had different opinions based on their own body shape and size. John and Paul believed further muscularity would aid their desires to remain looking big as they got older.

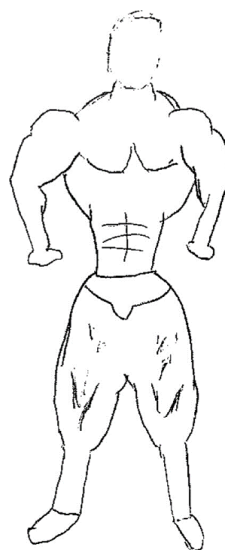
Liam, on the other hand desired further leanness, as he believed it was the most challenging body attribute to adopt and consequently more exclusive. It is argued although the basic desires to gain muscularity and achieve growth are common for males entering the fitness culture to weight train. However, as the natural body reacts in different ways, expectations are renegotiated based on what is achievable by the individual male. It can be regarded, body ideals initially set out are not always achievable by one and all due to personal genetics and biological limitations (Fabris *et al* 2018, Hubal *et al* 2005, Raudenbush *et al* 2003). I found participants reacted differently to the weight training regime. Most achieved muscle tone results which were perceived as being a version of desired ideals, although it was not complete and progressing to personal expectations. Conversely, for some individuals who did not achieve muscularity and the body they desired, they were forced to reconsider their intentions and manage expectations concerning what they could realistically achieve.

In reflection to my experiences, it can be conceptualised ideals of masculinity are interpreted for personal agendas and body. This in turn results in a range of masculine ideals being apparent amongst weight training males and body muscularity development becoming a never ending process. Crossley (2006) raised such a point, however due to the nature of his non-experiential study, his findings offered limited insights. It can be added here the genetic make-up and personal competencies play a significant role in which degrees of masculinity are experienced, whilst also dictating body image satisfaction and how close an individual feels to meeting preconceived ideals. Through the fieldwork, I found that body image satisfaction is a never ending process. It was witnessed even after 25 years of training and building muscle there was always improvements to be made to body image and if it wasn't outright muscularity, further tone and leanness was desired amongst males.

I found there was always something each participant desired and it normally related to an area of weakness they had tried to grasp but had not achieved. Therefore, complete body satisfaction was unobtainable and due to constant ideals being previewed in the media (Hearn 2019, 2015) individuals would be reminded of the features they did not possess (Hall and Gough 2011). Such influences did play on participant's views and reminded them there was another level of sophistication they had not achieved. The health and fitness industry is based on the premise of continually previewing changing desires and evolving body aesthetics to keep consumers at bay and constantly chasing body ideals as documented by D'Alessandro and Chitty (2011).

#### **5.9.1.4 Body image elicitation exercise**

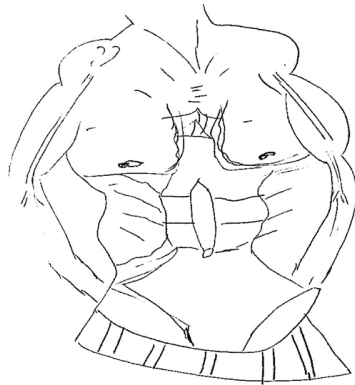
As part of the research process, I wanted to develop a thorough insight into the precise type of body and aesthetics participants desired. Consequently, an elicitation exercise involving individuals drawing their aspirational bodies revealed some captivating insights. It was the youngsters who spent most time mulling over their ideal image with Gary and Matt taking the pin board home and returning it with a carefully drawn image. The committed weight trainers were not confident in drawing an image independently and referred to images on the internet to base their drawings on. I found undertaking this elicitation exercise, revealed the symbolic aptitude of the muscular body (Bey 2014). As participants sketched out their bodily ideals the representational significance came into the spotlight once again through the research. Due to the strong focus on body aesthetics and capturing aspirations through the activity, the following was depicted from participant's conversations when asked to describe what they had drawn.



**Figure 5.4:** Body image drawing by Luke

*“You see it’s all about the toning and advanced muscle. I prefer leanness and some muscle tone and to have an athletic look. Most lads just want size and muscle. I have been doing this for years and learnt, it’s not about that, you need to have well engineered muscle like a well refined athlete, the body needs to be advanced with good supplement intake and quality muscle tone that is the holy grail of the muscle lined body”.*

(Luke, committed weight trainer, June 2016)



**Figure 5.5:** Body image drawing by Gary (Youngsters, February 2017)

*“So it’s a ‘body show’ look with tight, lean muscle that has all the creases and lines in the right places. I don’t want to have just big muscle I want to have a worked out body, you know the shredded look. That’s why I’m going to do a cutting routine next week just to get rid of body fat and make the muscles look better”.*

(Gary, Youngsters, February 2017)

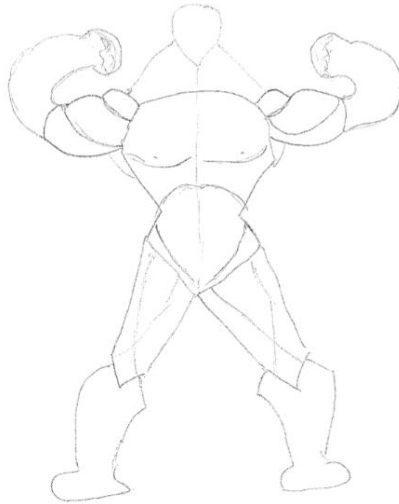


**Figure 5.6:** Body drawing by John (Seasoned weight lifter, January 2017)

*“For me it’s all about my size and presence. I am a naturally a large frame, so over the years I have built muscle in the right places including my legs to develop what I call a well-rounded*

*body. For me this body orchestrates presence, respect and authority, it supplements my personality and communicates to people of my strong character, sexy muscle and yeah I'm intimidating when I need to be".*

(John, Seasoned weight lifter, January 2017)



**Figure 5.7:** Body image drawing by Paul (Seasoned Weight Lifter, January 2017)

*"You see for me it's all about size and overall shape. This is me every muscle well developed which how it should be. I know it looks a bit over the top, but this is how a man who trains should like otherwise they are wasting their time".*

(Paul, Seasoned Weight Lifter, January 2017)



**Figure 5.8:** Body drawing by Steve (Committed Weight Trainer, July 2016)



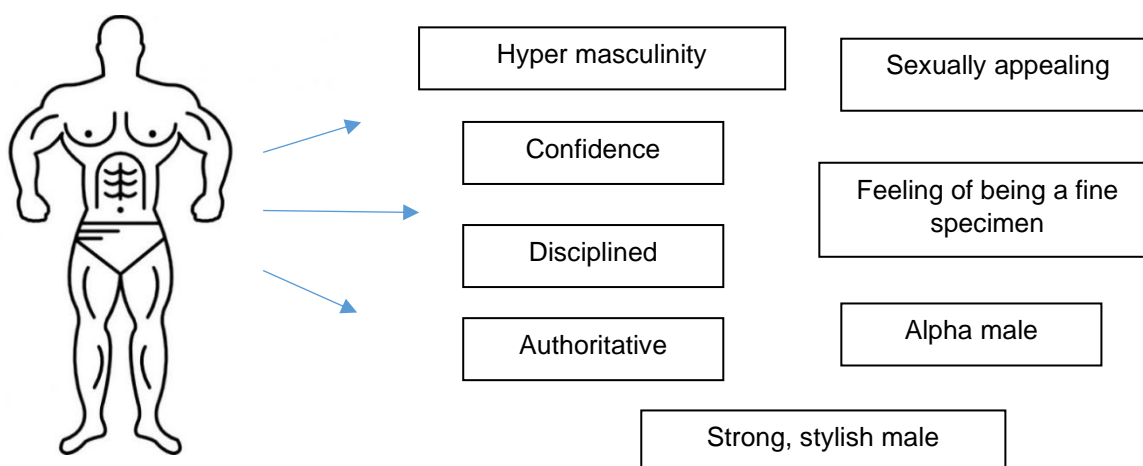
*“The perfect body for me should consist of ultra-lean muscle, with clear definition and lines. Anyone can get big but it is about having them muscle fibres to be well developed which is the hard thing and the only sign to show how committed you are with a good training regime, spot on diet and strict discipline. The body should portray this. This is what I am aiming for”.*

(Steve, Committed Weight Trainer, July 2016)

### 5.9.1.5 Body and Self paradox

As a result of the elicitation exercise and analysing my participant’s sketches using Guillemin’s (2004) analysis I have been able to propose the body and self-paradox (figure 5.10, table 5.4). I found the depictions of the muscular, masculine body constructed by participants related to self-conceptions and ideals they possessed. In representing the symbolic meanings of muscular features, the value of the multi-dimensional muscular body and its relation to self from the perspective of those males entwined within body image transformation was distinguished.

The body and self-paradox is inspired by Marcus and Wurf’s (1987) view of the self-concept being influenced by an individual’s motivational state and perceived attitudes and expectations of situational cues and agents. As can be seen from figure 5.9 muscular features carry symbolic meanings for my participants related to masculinity, ideal self-concept and identity. Ultimately, I found muscular features expressed a heightened sense of masculinity and set self narratives for conveying and practicing a masculine demeanour to form an egotistic elevation of self above other males (Murnen and Karazsia 2017, Parent *et al* 2016, Edwards 2016, Keane 2005).



**Figure 5.9:** Body and Self paradox (Muscular body image as an authentic expression of self)

Furthermore, participants were keen to break the muscular body down into muscle groups and body credentials. These bodily features were associated with self (concept) and symbolic representation (Sirgy 2015). Table 5.4 presents the value of muscular body (broken down into muscular features).

Body/muscular feature(s)	Symbolic meanings portrayed by participants
<p>Large pectoral (chest) muscles.</p> <p>Defined shoulders muscles</p>	<p><i>“It’s the authoritativeness, these muscles give. It’s all about the size and in turn respect you get by having defined upper body muscle”.</i> (Steve)</p> <p><i>“It’s the sign of weight training expertise and commitment to manage a high performing body”.</i> (Andy)</p> <p><i>“It’s what most lads want, it shows the foundations of being a good weight trainer and athlete”.</i> (Chris)</p>
<p>Abdominal tone, muscles</p>	<p><i>“Holy grail. They are one of the hardest to tone and shape because it’s all about high level self-discipline to eat clean, live healthy lifestyle”.</i> (Luke)</p> <p><i>“Having abs shows willingness to make sacrifices, your strength of character”.</i> (Gary)</p> <p><i>“Abs are sexy all girls love lads with clean abs, shows another dimension to your muscle lined body”.</i> (Matt)</p>
<p>Biceps/triceps muscles</p>	<p><i>“They are appealing to have to show off, it’s the old age scenario if you want to show your strength you show off your guns [biceps]”.</i> (Steve)</p> <p><i>“Biceps give you confidence, they show weight training expertise and strength”.</i> (Colin)</p>
<p>Leg muscles</p>	<p><i>“Having muscular legs really show your expertise and athleticism. Only advanced guys have good legs as its core strength and are the roots of muscular body”.</i> (Steve)</p> <p><i>“Legs show you have heart as leg squatting exercises are most excruciating aspect of training”.</i> (Dan)</p>
<p>Back muscles</p>	<p><i>“A big back is masculinity affirmation, you have seen it in the animal kingdom, the silver back is the boss. You too can be the alpha male”.</i> (Steve)</p> <p><i>“A well-defined back helps with core strength, and helps you get a good shape only proper trainers know”.</i> (Liam)</p>

**Table 5.4:** Symbolic value of muscular features

Respectively, I learnt socially constructed ideals were a posing influence amongst the participants. Although, the muscular body was not entirely constructed to meet social ideals, as conveyed by previous literature (Gough *et al* 2014, Bridges 2009, Downey and Caterall 2006).

I found participants brought with them personal agendas in their quest to adopting body muscularity. This will be explained in due course, however social ideals will be deliberated initially. Socially constructed ideals of aestheticised masculinity were a posing influence repeatedly seen across the male groups. It was observed motives to explore body transformative practices were fuelled by capturing socially derived ideals advertised through popular media and culture (Hearn 2015, Hall 2015, Plummer 2006, Hall and Gough 2011).

Spending time with the different participants, I learnt that understanding of social ideals differed from one individual to another and this became more apparent through the weight training regimes. In some instances, participants would clash and argue about the type of workouts and muscle groups they should be focusing upon. For example Steve and Luke (committed weight trainers) clashed on several occasions regarding bodily exercises and the structure of workouts. I learnt the two individual's ideologies of the muscular bodies differed and resulted in the groups weight training routine becoming staggered and conflicting. Steve was very keen to develop a lean, toned body image with well-rounded torso muscles and in turn focused upper body exercises. In contrast, Luke carried the belief an ideal body image was that built on core strength with legs and back being the areas to focus weight resistance training upon.

Similarly, the youngsters carried varying opinions of body ideals. Colin and Gary were keen to develop large, muscular frames at first and sought advice from muscular males in the club. Tim and Matt, who were smaller in natural build were more attracted to the toned body and portrayed how it was not just about size and muscle mass. It can be conceptualised that social ideals of body image do inhabit from media discourses, however I found amongst my participants interpretation and mapping of idealistic beliefs onto the physical body varied. I found participants were selective in which ideals to try and adopt and it appeared they desired those that were more challenging to acquire, but would settle for those they could realistically adopt.

This was illustrated when Gary and Colin challenged themselves to build their abdominal muscles and attempt to acquire a 'six pack'. Subsequently they both adopted a calorie controlled diet and limited their carbohydrates intake, whilst undertaking core and abdominal exercises. After a period of 5 days they got frustrated in not being able to see any real changes and decided to limit their food intake further.

After another week and further frustration in not seeing any real change they both decided it was too challenging to acquire and returned to their normal workout habit.

Upon probing Gary of this experience he commented:

*“I got to respect those who have good definition on their abs, it’s bloody hard to achieve, you really have to change your diet for good and do a load of shredding work. Colin and I came to the conclusion if we work on other parts like chest, shoulders we will become more toned anyway and we will come back to abs when we are stronger and can hack a strict regime”.*

(Gary, youngsters, December 2016)

In this instance, Gary had realised acquiring a ‘six pack’ involved long term sacrifices and the adoption of a strict diet regime. As a result both Gary and Colin transferred their desires to other muscular ideals and did not revisit abdominal workouts during the participation process.

The youngsters were keen to share what socially derived ideals they were chasing to begin with and then into the training regime once achieving some muscular growth, begun to focus on areas they developed some competency in. For example, Matt regularly worked on bicep muscles in order to build his arms stating: *“I want big arms, they look cool and intimidating.* Upon training for several weeks and seeing little muscle development, he sought advice from a fellow club member and began to work on his triceps muscles. Matt: *“You have to work on all muscle groups to see results, I have been just hitting the bicep head I’m actually a lot stronger with my triceps”.* Although social ideals played an important role in enticing participants into exercising muscles and nurturing the hunger for transforming muscularity. It was identified the personal journey of competency and muscle development was what these males then honed into and used as the motive to carry on through the trials and tribulations of body transformation.

I also found personal body size and credentials played an overarching role in which ideals to adopt. Participants played to their strengths and worked on muscles they adopted or were good in performing a particular exercise. For example, Steve expressed a personal love affair with the bench press chest exercise and lifting beyond 100kg. In turn Steve possessed large pectoral muscles and a proud chest. I found he believed having a muscle lined chest was a symbolic aid to his weight training regime and a way to express his masculine character. More remarkably the research revealed participants also brought personal agendas and motives for acquiring body ideals to the fitness club which were then used to inform the weight training routine.

For example Andy (committed weight trainer) stated in his sales job he wanted to carry a larger, muscular frame as he proposed this would improve his chances of a promotion in his sales role:

*“In the next 4 weeks you will see some good gains from me. I need to get bigger, I need to have presence at work, too many lads in there. I’m going for promotion but need to get noticed that’s why these muscles need to grow baby. I am concentrating on eating good food with big portions and exercising legs to increase my weight”.*

(Andy, Committed weight trainer, May 2016).

Andy was determined to develop his muscular body as he alleged his appearance would provide him with career and economic rewards through a job promotion. Andy carried a number of conceptions of the meaning of a muscular frame relating to confidence, authority, demanding respect in which he stated were key qualities needed to be a senior sales representative. Andy proposed how appearance was paramount for him and that’s why he trained regularly to gain a large muscular image which would drive his persona and confidence:

*“We get judged on how we look all the time. If you look like a nobody people just ignore you and trample over you. But if you have a good frame people look twice and think to themselves damn he’s a beefy unit don’t want to mess with him”.*

(Andy, Committed weight trainer, May 2016).

Similarly Gary described how being the youngest of three brothers and having an imposing father felt he needed to keep the family tradition up and look *“big and strong”*. Gary revealed how his family were looked down upon by relatives living in southern England and shared how he was told by his father to work on his muscular appearance so they would be *“on form”* for an upcoming family event. Gary was fond of looking like movie stars, but there was also self-inflicted pressure I witnessed, influenced by his family members to shape his body. The presence of pressure was also present for Colin who embarked on a 4-week training programme to look good in his football jersey. Colin a semi-professional football player received his new team jersey and consequentially felt the pressure to work on his upper body:

*“They [New team jerseys] are similar to xxx tops but what I’ve noticed is that they are very tight fit so when I tried it on you can see the outline of my abs, pecs and arms so I need to work on the whole upper body now to make sure I look good and intimidating on the pitch”.*

(Colin, Youngsters, December 2016)

Colin proposed he did now feel the pressure:

*"I now need to make sure I don't grow a belly or have flab on the sides I need to keep tight, work on my shoulders and chest as otherwise the tight fitting top will reveal it all".*

(Colin, Youngsters December 2016)

Astute to the social, cultural views Gary expressed his views on tight fit clothing relating it to sport:

*"It is normal now for sport stars to show their bodies off, I was watching Match of the Day and noticed how tight fitted the tops were and how each player had tried to do different things to show off their bodies. They get camera attention out of it".*

(Gary, Youngsters December 2016)

Subsequently, Colin related looking good to gaining attention:

*"I need to get a body like that ... so I can get noticed by football scouts hopefully and then I can show them my skills on the ball".*

(Colin, Youngsters December 2016)

Male body image pressure and dissatisfaction has been widely discussed by a number of sociology authors (Grogan 2006, Elliott and Elliott 2005, Pope *et al* 2005) relating to males experiencing scales of body image and masculinity dissatisfaction when not being able to conform to socio-cultural ideals (Gough 2018b, Krishen and Worthen 2011). Existing studies have blamed the role of the media exposing the sexualised, muscular body as the ever desirable masculine form (Otterbring *et al* 2018, Blond 2008). Such studies believe bodily dissatisfaction stems from the lack of muscle tone leanness and conditioning that impact upon overall body image (Bridges 2009). This was true to an extent amongst my research participants. The ethno-study revealed the youngsters in particular were observant of body image pressure. However, it appeared to be seen as a norm in contemporary culture rather than an outright burden posing on these young males.

Amongst the participants Tim alluded to latest clothing styles and fashion, which he perceived were more revealing for males and the tight-fitness accentuated upper body muscle tone. This was not only a passion for Tim to be wearing the latest styles, however he also admitted to feeling the need to work out to develop muscle tone to look good.

Gary also alluded to this norm as:

*“There is an expectation for young lads to workout that’s why there has been a big increase in gyms around here”.*

(Gary, youngsters, October 2016)

Gary and Tim acknowledged the pressure to conform as they were both working out they felt they were progressing to capturing bodily ideals, nevertheless it appeared motives were not always driven by societal pressure, instead personal agendas were also apparent. For example Tim posed:

*“It would be nice to look good in my tight fit t-shirts with some muscle on my arms and have a good chest... I will work on it but not going to kill myself over it in training as I don’t look that bad now as is and I can still pull of a good look”.*

(Tim, youngsters, November 2016)

Matt added:

*“I don’t let it get to me all this pressure to look good and be big and muscly. What drives me is one day when I come across some of those lads I use to go school with and when they see the size of me I will be yeah it’s me little xxx”.*

(Matt, youngsters, November 2016)

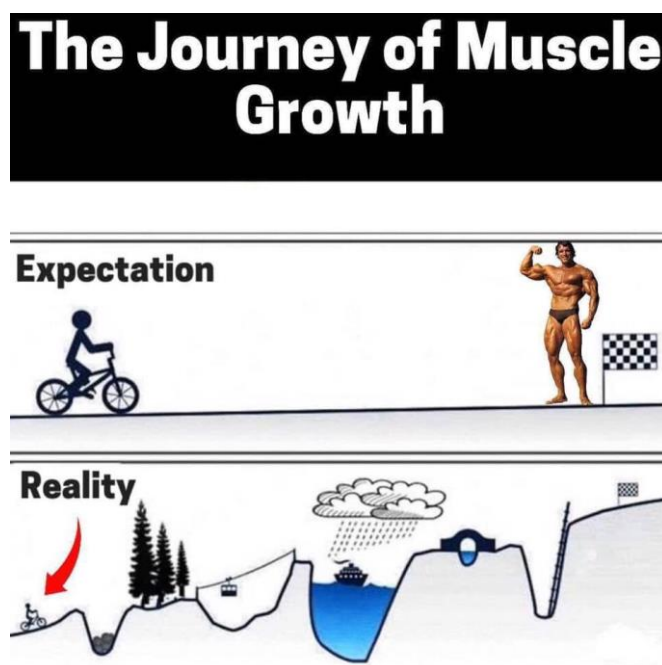
Further insights regarding pressure to conform to embodied ideals were exposed through the committed weight trainers. Here the participants were accustomed to mainstream health and fitness discourses (Waling *et al* 2018). Individuals including Andy and Luke admitted to engaging in such material however were regarded to know better than to believe the muscular hype. Luke was very vocal about his views of the contemporary media and shared:

*“Nowadays the media is just all about consumption, consume this and that and you can be like that lad on that reality TV show, all popular and liked. It’s not about exercise, look after your body and you will be healthier, happier and live longer. It is like society has been drummed down to become sheep, follow each other without having the ability to think for themselves.*

*I admit I did believe some of the marketing hype health and fitness magazines promote but after an extensive period in training, you realise everybody’s different and our bodies react in different ways, it’s about finding what works for you and not just following what the magazine says”.*

(Luke, committed weight trainer, March 2016)

The above account was captured during a talk in the fitness club's car park one evening with Luke who later that evening sent me the image presented in figure 5.10 and stated how it was a solo journey of: *"Making of yourself, finding what works for you"*. Luke elaborated how he believed every male going through body transformation would face a number of personal challenges and setbacks. Luke believed it was these challenges which the journey worthwhile and *"made the man"* and *"strength to overcome life's setbacks which is beyond body and muscle, it's you as a person you are developing"*. Luke's ideological thinking here previewed the mind frame he carried and how he attached such significance to working out and building muscular body.



**Figure 5.10:** Internet image shared by Luke (Committed weight trainers) (Pinterest, 2021)



### 5.9.2 Theme 2: Performing masculinity

Performing masculinity centres upon the practices of body transformation routines and their meaning to participants as masculinity earning and affirming processes in contemporary culture. The theme delves into the multi-dimensional role of weight training and the fitness club site acting as a symbolic bearer of hyper-masculinity through a dedicated environment to practice embodied performances. Participant's views were analysed to grasp an understanding of contemporary masculinity enactment and how this fulfils expression of a masculine self-concept.

The research revealed working out on a regular basis with a group of dedicated males brought with it the opportunities to experience masculinity and share collegiality with like-minded individuals. Attending the fitness club and weight training allowed us to act out perceptions of masculinity and be masculine in the way in which we conducted ourselves (Ghigi and Sassatelli 2018). The environment compromising of male bodies dressed in revealing clothing, previewing muscle tone and strength set the cultural tone. This was supplemented with the perception of being part of a supreme training group and feeling proud of the fact you were gaining admiring looks from female members and envious looks from males. Such experiences heightened the sense of masculinity and encouraged further narcissistic masculine behaviour.

I personally found working out with groups of males was a remarkable experience in itself. I experienced companionship, being part of a team and working out to fulfil bodily identity goals provided the essence of the participation process I became accustomed to. It was the heightened sense of masculinity and brotherhood that myself and participants enjoyed when working out collaboratively:

*"It's the highlight of the day, coming here to train, it is what gets me through the day, something to look forward after a boring work day".*

(Steve, Committed weight trainers, March 2016)

*"This is the life, I wish I didn't have to work and just train. Why can't it be like this where everything we do is true and about making yourself better. We lads don't cheat on each other, we just help each other and be true to the game of lifting and gifting our bodies".*

(Andy, Committed weight trainers, March 2016)

Spending time with participants did become a highlight of the day as it provided a sense of belonging and companionship. The fitness club became a place you could express yourself as a masculine male, a supreme being, be loathed by lesser (muscular) males and feel good about yourself. I found weight training vastly different to being an academic at work and a partner at home which heightened the appeal of visiting the fitness club and touching base with my masculinity (Sassatelli 2007). It was the seasoned weight lifters who on a number of occasions conveyed their thoughts on contemporary masculinity and how the act of working out provided a stimulating experience.

Chris would regularly remark upon masculine behaviour in the club:

*“It’s rumble in the jungle here today all the men are at it, getting those gains, It’s good to see lads are hitting it hard, upping their manhood”.*

(Chris, seasoned weight lifter, October 2017)

Similarly John (October, 2017) conveyed his thoughts:

*“It’s good to see young lads coming in and having a play on the weights. Society today is producing soft lads who don’t have it in them to come in to the gym and hit it hard. It’s just all playstations and social media”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, October 2017)

Upon probing John further on his views he revealed the perceived threat to hegemonic masculinity:

*“A lot of lads have gone soft all emotional softy, feely types and to be honest girls are getting pushed to be more game you know, gender equality is driving them to working out and lifting iron. It’s becoming more widespread and soon we will see the result of that in all aspects of life when women feel more confident, at ease to do high pressured jobs, whilst lads will be insecure and we will see gender role changes”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, October 2017)

John’s views here coincide with research relating to masculinity under threat (Gough 2018a, Reeser 2015, Williams 2013, Clare 2010). Furthermore upon talking to Paul during a session he revealed similar thoughts on masculinity enactment:

*“I can’t think of not being able to come in here and sweat and feel the muscle pump. Some lads really don’t know what they are missing out on... the workouts for me provide therapy I go home feeling relaxed, I’m not agitated or feel stressed, it helps me sleep.*

*That I think is the problem with lads who don't train, they get easily stressed, they not comfortable in under pressure situations. Plus you got to use the male body you got to perform at something, it's what it's designed for physical workout and high performance. So afterwards you feel better more at ease as the tension has been released".*

(Paul, seasoned weight lifter, December 2017)

In contrast the youngsters, also shared views and opinions on masculinity. Matt believed working out to gain muscular ideals would increase his masculinity traits: *"Some muscle tone will show I'm manning up, it's what needs to be done when you growing up"*. Similarly Gary perceived muscularity symbolised masculine credentials: *"Having muscle like a big chest and biceps for me shows that you are a man, that you have something about you, you are not a walk over and that you can handle yourself"*. The committed weight trainers believed training was at the heart of their embodied lifestyles and respectively conveyed how it was a way to express self and be healthy and fit. Steve regarded it as:

*"Our training is deserved of respect. It's a lot more than how good you look. A well-built physique is a status symbol, it shows you work hard for it, you can't just buy it and you got to work hard for it. It's about self-respect, hard work ethic and that you are a strong character, and that is what a man should be about"*.

(Steve, committed weight trainer, March 2016)

This research captured the way in which weight training workouts embodied masculinity affirming desires. It was initially seen through the youngsters experiencing weighted leg squat exercise the notion of masculinity affirmation came to the participants' attention. During a session I introduced supplementing leg exercises with a squat move whereby we would rest a weighted bar across the back of our shoulders and squat to help build our legs. Upon the first occasion Tim and Matt struggled and quit after two sets. Subsequently, Gary and Colin took it on themselves to show how they were stronger and began to put more weight on and strive for ten repetitions. This frustrated Matt: *"I am being a girl, I need to man up, next week when we do these, I'm going to smash it and might even shame xxx [Gary]"*. Gary replied: *"Squatting is all about how much of a man you really are". I'm only doing it as I have strong legs through playing football"*. This set the agenda for Matt and Gary who then went on a competitive quest to grow and strengthen their legs.

I also found the committed weight trainers used the workouts to naturalise their masculinity. Upon challenging Luke and I to a circuit based workout Steve was keen to express how he was stronger and fitter. Steve boasted: *"I know I am more of a man than you both, you both give up too easily let me prove it to you. Let's do a plank and then we will do the circuit"*.

Luke took this up as a challenge and quietly muttered to me: *“He’s getting too cocky just make sure you beat him on the circuit, he is good at the plank and will probably outlast us both but he will get tired on the circuit be ready to take over him then and show him what you got”*.

Such competitive routines were regularly undertaken by participants. I found it was a test of strength and to construct a pecking order amongst the group. It was also a chance to express hyper-masculinity for the likes of Steve and Luke to portray their dominance and alpha male status. Schenk and Holman (1980) drew upon the view of the situational self-image and how individuals act in accordance to present an idealistic self in environments they know are valuable. Respectively, my participants displayed an idealised self in the fitness club via embodied behaviour and masculine presentation which was rewarded for through desirability and envy amongst fitness club audiences.

In respect to Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of cultural capital and its embodied state relating to the habitus, posture and styles of interaction (Anheier *et al* 1995), I found my participants shared similar embodied state characteristics in that the body transformation routines, shaping of muscle tone and acting out the masculine performance, participants shared a common habitus. Participants across the groups encompassed common beliefs to masculinity and male body management, which was illustrated through how body image desires and workout intentions were communicated. Webb *et al* (2002) proposed how Bourdieu’s concept of habitus relates to the way in which individuals become themselves, develop attitudes, dispositions and the ways in which individuals engage in practices.

From my research findings I discovered how male participants engaged with their bodies, relating to masculinity and perceptions of self (concept) and identity. I discovered the interpreted meaning of attending the gym, working out with other males, the weight training practices formed my participant’s habitus of what it is to be masculine and how to develop the masculine-self. There was also the trait whereby performance in training was highly respected and noticed by club members. Having the knowledge and competency to weight train to an advanced level was desired by individuals, as it demonstrated level of expertise and cultural knowledge. Such cultural capital presented another means in which individuals could boost self-status and appeal in the fitness habitus.

I found participants by having physical capital through the body and social capital through the fitness network provided them with a perceived enhanced masculine status (Jenkins 1992). Participants believed there were superior and hyper masculine by encompassing such capital. The symbolic connotations attached to the muscular body, fitness environment and male weight training social network were what these males relied upon to make sense of what and why they were involved in this endeavour and to justify the lifestyle choice.

### 5.9.2.1 Contemporary masculinity beliefs

I found participants naturally shared their views about contemporary masculinity. The youngsters in particular were keen to express their views with Tim providing a valuable insight:

*“Today being a guy is adventurous, look at how many appearance styles a guy can have. There is now a lot of variety of fashion which guys can use for their look. Before guys could only have the option of a few looks, now they can be trendy, vintage looks as well as more modern looks. You see it with beards they now more popular but not any type they are well groomed, have fascial hair designs and they look good. Guys can also show off other looks, like more girly looks but they are straight guys and can wear fitted tops, tight bottoms that show curves, they look good”.*

(Tim, youngsters, December 2016)

Tim went on to explain how fluidity in masculinity expression allowed young males in particular to become more at ease and not be inclined to follow traditionalist notions of hegemonic masculinity. He stated how there was now enough diversity in society in order to be able to be influenced by global media discourses and follow personal interpretations of self-identity. Tim believed he was such an individual who had the freedom to explore and convey his own identity based on non-traditionalist views. However, from my time spent with the youngsters apart from Tim who I found was more adventurous in his self-identity, others followed hegemonic beliefs. I found Gary and Matt were influenced by older family members and other males in the fitness club, both followed media discourses which were related to conventional traits of masculinity. Colin was also in this camp and passionately followed athletic sport stars.

Upon probing their masculinity beliefs it was learnt that interests and hobbies played a significant role in youngsters' views of masculinity beliefs. Tim unlike the others had interests in distinctive areas such as fashion and music. This resulted in Tim taking influences from sources where masculinity existed in hybrid forms (Edwards 2016) and was more open to interpretation and self-styled (Parent *et al* 2016). The rich cultural tapestry of sport played a monumental role in Colin's beliefs and he openly took cues from professional football players and athletes who displayed conventional masculinity traits (Eichberg 2009).

I found such influences became imprinted on the participant's beliefs and perceptions of manhood. Interestingly it was Tim's insights into male identity trends which also unravelled the perceptions of masculine beliefs in contemporary culture.

Tim upon a social occasion revealed how young males in particular were now bombarded with varying views of what was masculine and how the male gender should look and behave.

By describing young males, Tim revealed how confusion existed in wider social, cultural trends which led to individuals interpreting their own 'mixed' perceptions onto the body and identity.

I asked Tim what type of bodies he found appealing:

*"There are so many nowadays I can't just put a finger on a certain type. For example that guy over there is nice and toned, he is not big but his muscle tone makes him look cut. I like that look it's not overly manly but shows he is masculine. Then the guy with the black top has a great body image and he has good hair and a nice trimmed facial hair. He looks trim and proper and you know he looks after his appearance".*

(Tim, youngsters, December 2016)

Tim related his views to metro-sexuality beliefs, stating how the likes of David Beckham and Justin Timberlake had allowed males to explore more adventurous looks and be more self-aware (Mitchell and Lodhia 2017b). He elaborated how young males were now confident in being able to explore various looks and be enthused by the prospect of self styling without being ridiculed. Furthermore, amongst the older participant groups it was apparent hegemonic beliefs were carried by individuals. Steve argued: *"Being a man through your appearance and how you carry yourself is what characterises who you are"*.

Steve carried strong masculine beliefs, although undertook self-grooming rituals such as permanently removing body hair and having an operation to straighten his nose. Elsewhere in this group the males believed they were practising masculinity beliefs through the weight training routine and fitness orientated lifestyles. Early in the fieldwork Dan posed: *"We are doing this [weight training] for everyman out there, our breed is in trouble"*. Dan conveyed his masculinity beliefs and suggested threat to masculinity in society. The following was captured during a conversation on a social occasion:

*"I know nowadays there are a lot of girly-ish boy looks where you see lads even wearing make-up but you cannot help to think, if you want to be seen as a man you do need to be rugged and have some muscle, it's just what makes us not a women".*

(Dan, committed weight trainers, May 2016)

Through the participation process Dan continued to make similar remarks communicating how he seen the fitness club and weight training as masculinising processes in which we could act masculine, whilst enhance our credentials.

Moving on to the seasoned weight lifters it was witnessed how hegemonic beliefs were at the centre of individuals' behaviour and motives to explore and maintain body capital (Bourdieu 1984). The seasoned weight lifters were entrepreneurs of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005).

I found John, Paul and Chris regularly commented upon how younger males were perceivably less masculine due to cultural trends. As a result these participants felt they could influence the local dynamics by attracting young males to the club and demonstrating 'authentic masculinity' through weight training. In reflection, my participant's views captured how hegemonic beliefs are still practiced by many in fitness settings. This study agrees with Orrells (2011) in prescribing the male body has aesthetic pride through muscle tone, however the research also highlights the importance of workout routines as masculinity finding and processing experiences.

#### **5.9.2.2 Co-creation of Masculine Experiences**

I found being part of a weight training group facilitated the process of sharing masculinity experiences as participants and myself were coming together to exercise our masculine credentials. The group weight training provided a heightened sense of self and status especially amongst those males who did not train (Monaghan and Atkinson 2016, Pringle 2013). The coming together of like-minded males who were on a similar (embodiment) journey provided a sense of supreme being as if you had gone above and beyond what others were accomplishing in terms of personal fitness and muscle development. The feeling of supremacy over others was carried with me outside of the fitness club. When in the presence of other males, I felt how my physical attribute advantage and being part of a training team provided feelings of superiority and hyper-masculinity (Gough 2018a). It was through the course of meeting 'gym buddies' and weight training together I realised how the process and experience of achieving a desired body image in itself was an appealing, entertaining, fulfilling experience.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social capital is particularly relevant here. I found the relationships between participants and close collaboration in weight training presented the perception of trust, dependency and reliance of one another through body transformation experiences. Participants spoke of brotherhood and having weight training friends as valuable benefits of their leisure activities, providing a support mechanism which could rarely be found elsewhere. The act of attending the fitness club, weight training and working on the body also presented the opportunities to engage in social networks of other male trainers, gym users and club staff who shared a similar (masculine orientated) habitus (Bourdieu 2001).

The fitness club was a network of similarly minded individuals sharing characteristics and the mindset to transform their bodies, perceivably improve health and wellbeing and masculine credentials. As a result the network provided a myriad of opportunities to learn from others, develop further awareness of exercises, equipment and bodybuilding which had a lasting impression on my participants.

This included participant's motives for capturing body ideals, attitude towards non training males and loyalty to weight training. I found the club represented a social institution and as Crossley (2004) distinguished a form of symbolic interaction and social network. The club acted as a sacred place where inspiration of body ideals could be nurtured as well as the operations needed on the natural body to transform it to a social ideal could be embraced and internalised by individuals shaping their habitus (Bourdieu 1984ab).

Across the three training groups, I sensed how the weight training sessions were a significant part of the day, walking through the fitness club's doors and being greeted by participants was an uplifting experience for both myself and others. There was a sense that we were going to go achieve something monumental. Such perceptions set the tone for the training sessions and fourthly influencing our self-regard. Upon leaving the committed trainers group Steve remarked: *"I have enjoyed training with you again and you have benefitted as you are in better shape"*. Steve was very passionate about the weekly training routine, commenting how he felt institutionalised to working out:

*"I am institutionalised to the gym life, I could never quit it's part of me coming to the gym and training. I sometimes think I will quit if I don't see results, I will quit and go get fat but to be honest I would never quit, I wouldn't know what to do it's a lifestyle choice and way of life"*.

(Steve, committed weight trainer, February 2016)

The act of working out regularly and performing masculinity was what Carrigan *et al* (1985) described as what men do to maintain dominance in the gender stakes and the maintenance of a masculine self (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). This was illustrated through the fieldwork and the way in which participants behaved. I recall early into the participation process Dan posed how we were training to confirm our masculine credentials in contemporary culture where masculinity was under threat:

*"We lads are doing it, we need those muscles we are men, it's what we do... If you look around there are lads out there carrying handbags, wearing concealer. We are under threat we need to do this for all the men out there"*.

(Dan, committed weight trainer, March 2016)



Furthermore training with the seasoned weight lifters group it was observed everything we did related to expressing our (hyper) masculinity. The way in which these gentlemen walked into the club, the way in which they intimidated other club members and the grunts echoed during exercises were all expression of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005).

It can be conceptualised fitness settings are one of the few places in contemporary society where men can act out hegemonic ideals of masculinity (Brewster *et al* 2017, Coquet *et al* 2016). It is the place where physical matter still counts for something and where masculine credentials are recognised and respected. A number individuals commented upon the practice of weight training as a positive experience to escape the modern world and engage with true sense of masculinity.

*“We come in here do what we do, it feels natural what a man should do. The corporate world outside is full of political agendas and corruption. We have seen it with what’s going on in the government and how some men do not have the balls anymore. Weight training is true, it hasn’t been spoilt. What you put in is what you get out, its personal about yourself, demonstrating what you are made of, feeling good, not hurting others but making positive gains for your own mental and physical health”.*

(Steve, committed weight trainer, March 2016).

Furthermore the seasoned weight lifters reflected upon their experiences:

*“The reason why I have stuck with it for so long is because it’s a place where you can be yourself, a place where you won’t get looked down upon because you are not wearing a corporate suit and have combed hair. It’s a place where smart arses cannot play mental games and put people down.*

*What counts is the basic, humble body and your heart to go beyond your comfort zone and feel good about yourself. Then walk away feeling a level of accomplishment and come back and do it again”.*

(Chris, seasoned weight lifter, September 2017)

John added:

*“I do wear a suit and comb my hair when at work, but for me I found it’s a place where everyone is in it together to improve themselves, its personal but also one of the friendliest places I know where people are genuine and happy to help each other. Over the years I have invited a number of young lads and helped them establish a routine then get them to help others. It’s a nice feeling that we have helped to turn some young lads life around in some way”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, September 2017)

Later in the training session John further reflected upon his time:

*“There are guys especially from Middlesbrough who do not have great career prospects or impressive life achievement goals. For them I have seen working on their bodies is something used to develop themselves mentally it’s a challenging, stimulating experience and something they can feel a sense of reward and feeling of achievement.*

*Working in a Tesco warehouse does not offer anything like that. Around here there is also the economic problems which have pushed lads into depression when they can’t have the comfortable lifestyle they yearn for. Again working out and attending the gym is an escape from this..., it allows an escape route and something to be proud of when you start looking like an alpha male”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, September 2017)

John referred to the nature in which body image transformation projects were used for self-augmentation. I then asked John why he thought looking like an alpha male was such an enriching experiences for such males:

*“It’s because a man feeling like a man, you know the status, power is natural for us and makes us feel good about ourselves. It is true that in today’s world men are losing the touch and women have gained ground and are rising in their statuses. The reason why that is because men have disengaged with manhood and the feeling it provides.*

*I will give you an example in the club this week I asked xxx [manager of the gym] how many new members had joined, sixteen members of which only six are lads and the rest are lasses. This is what I mean lads who are not training are not having the opportunity to experience the power of strength gains and muscle pump, its stimulation for us men and it feels good. But I thought looking at those members joining we have seen how many lasses are coming into the gym and weight training, they are taking on themselves to train, feel the buzz of working out and feeling good about themselves. Young lads are losing out big time, they don’t play football as much, don’t watch sport as much and just mess about on social media and watching music videos”.*

(John, seasoned weight lifter, October 2017)

John advocated how males who weight trained experienced (embodied) masculinity, which in turn provided positive, naturally enriching experiences. Those who did not were missing out on this. Due to the absence of experience John believed males were losing touch with their gendered self by not having the chance to be reminded of the rich masculine feeling workouts provided. As a result, John believed females were gaining ground and there was a shift in gender role in contemporary society.

Such views coincide with Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of Symbolic Violence (SV) as introduced in section 2.3.3 and 2.4.1.2. I found participants utilised their bodies and body transformation efforts to maintain masculine domination.

Our practices we engaged in weight training symbolically provided a therapeutic means to affirm perception of masculinity and practice masculinity beliefs. Similar to Brown (2006) I found the weight training practices acted as symbolic acts participants could regularly participate in and feel good about self in contemporary culture where traditional masculinity was under threat. I found the fitness club offered a safe haven for masculine affirmation.

Research by Ryan and Morrison (2009) highlights acts of SV appear to drive males to chase a muscular body image. I found desires were driven by SV including threats from feminist advances in contemporary society and social deprivation issues my participants experienced. The need to show others 'what you were made of' and the muscular body acting as a means of compensation for lack of achievement in other aspects of life were mentioned by individuals. Due to the local social demographics of the location, individuals mentioned having to prove self was a motivational driver to desire muscles and maintain a masculine image. Such findings affirm Bourdieu's (1977) views on SV in how social economic and structural SV can lead individuals to perceive the body in a certain way and work on body image.

Research findings relating to how males apprehend contemporary threats to masculinity was an interesting line of enquiry the research uncovered and although threats to masculinity has been raised by existing literature (Hunt *et al* 2013) the traits have not been explained as to how males are reacting and dealing with the perceived masculine loss. Following participant's comments the research explored the role of weight training in masculinity affirmation.

### **5.9.2.3 Experiencing 'authentic' masculinity through weight training**

The view of experiential masculinity and the role weight training and the fitness club played was of particular interest in this study. I personally found the fitness club was a key site where masculinity was on show and could be experienced. Existing literature such as Sassatelli (2007, 2005) and Connell (2005) and have confirmed this. My study agrees with their views, but it can also be advocated fitness settings play a wider, substantial role. These environments offer a sacred site where one can find and experience masculinity and try and fill the void in contemporary society, where masculinity is under threat (Gough 2018b). A number of participants portrayed their views on this matter and similarly believed manhood and masculinity enactment was becoming increasingly challenging to perform in a society where femininity had developed.

Dan described it as:

*“I like the hustle and bustle of this place [fitness club], it’s the place where guys can be guys and we can lift heavy stuff, grunt, and fart and be men. It’s a place you won’t get put down for being a man, it’s where you and I can be our natural selves”.*

(Dan, committed weight trainer, June 2016)

Furthermore Steve portrayed the essence of experiential masculinity workouts provided:

*“I think the muscle pump feeling is trivialised, for me you have to experience it, it’s like an injection of testosterone pumped into you, it reminds you of the distinctive manliness like a sexual orgasm it’s there. You can experience this on a regular basis like we do, and it does offer that climax and then a nice feeling of calmness afterwards”.*

(Steve, committed weight trainer, March 2016)

I found the participants were keen to express the masculine feeling the workouts and muscularity provided, whilst all the individuals recommended every male should experience. However, according to some those who didn’t had disengaged and had become embroiled with prevailing culture which promoted less hegemonic masculine traits. Existing research has conveyed contemporary masculinity expression is significantly influenced by media and marketing communications in shaping male consumer behaviour (Hearn 2019, Frank 2014, Schroder *et al* 2006). Interestingly, through this study it has been witnessed the purposeful, symbolic role working out played in these males lives in experiencing masculinity and how this influences perceptions of self (concept).

Previous masculinity research offers some insights which have been developed further here on the essence of experiential masculinity (Brewster *et al* 2017, Frank 2014). I found Frederick *et al* (2007) research investigating body image views and perceptions of young males was consistent with the findings of this study. This related to how males perceive bodies as surfaces to manipulate and portray masculine credentials. The study also revealed how masculinity for some increased in real-time. I witnessed individuals such as Chris, Andy and Steve after undertaking a heavy weight lifting exercise would stand tall and gaze in the mirror to see their pumped muscles. This would provide the urge to walk around with muscles flexed, whilst giving other males intimidating looks. Walking out of the club after an intensive session would also involve expressing hyper-masculinity to communicate the heightened sense of masculine-self.

Coles (2009) and Kimmel *et al* (2004) revealed how the recognition of masculinities were recognised as sets of social practices adopted by men within the wider gender structure. This was an accurate description of what I witnessed through the workout programmes and the behaviour of males in this context. It appears that the experience of working out stimulates the feeling of hyper-masculinity which then causes a masculine led performance occurring through behavioural and consumption traits. I also found that masculinity was used to reaffirm self-regard amongst the participants. Through my observations, I found the recognition of masculinity and its assertion went beyond social practices to the level of defining and characterising the individual (self) and bring meaning to the workouts and body muscularity goals.

Research undertaken in Sport Medicine and Strength and Conditioning have reported upon some associated issues (Hubal *et al* 2005). A study undertaken by Thomas *et al* (2011) found situational variables, including whether a male was working out or not significantly influenced feelings and perceptions of masculinity amongst a group of males. Such studies are entwined within scientific, positivist research, in contrast here I can provide an interpretivist perspective in the value of experiential masculinity (via working out) brings to males. I argue working out provides a basis to explore and incarnate masculinity through body muscularity, which is then used to perform and publicise masculine traits and allegiance to hegemonic beliefs. I found the nature of masculinity performances carried out in the fitness club helped my participants set their self-personas and traits as discussed through the body and self-paradox presented in section 5.7.1.5.

Witnessing individual's behaviour on social occasions, I seen how working out and building muscle augmented my participant's confidence, whilst fulfilling self-narratives in the way in which they communicated with other males and expressed their personified body. I recall a reflective diary note stating how it was like their bodies would talk for them conveying their perceived stature and hyper-masculinity. Kimmel *et al* (2005) argued the need to carefully consider social embodiment practices in order to understand the role of the body in society. This has been undertaken here in the context of the male body and working out to fulfil masculine ideals. Through this study, it has been highlighted the nature in which masculine consumption is co-created with other males through fulfilling experiences in the fitness context. Such experiences are then used to inform and shape embodied consumer practices a male can experience in the complex, challenging contemporary culture modernity presents (Hakim 2015).

### 5.9.3 Theme 3: Body transformation project in the pursuit of masculine ideal

Theme three introduces the concept of working on the muscular body as a transformative project. Through the process of tracking participants' experiences and spending an extensive period in the field the notion of project based efforts of body transformation and self-enhancement became well acquainted to me. It was learnt participants' ideologies regarding progression and milestone setting with short and long term goals followed the traits of these embodied efforts becoming a personal project for individuals. In this sense the body was a live project being worked upon which shaped consumption behaviour and market discourses interaction. Spending time with individuals at the various stages of the journey I was able to assemble the nature of this journey and the way it played out for the individuals.

Throughout the participation period it was repeatedly seen how participants considered themselves to be on a journey, involving body transformation. I personally found the journey involved a number of culture embracing experiences including; the gym culture, working out, overcoming the pain and soreness barrier progressively. These enriching experiences provided a lasting impression on self-regard and how you seen other males. By spending time with individuals, I witnessed how the weight training regime and meeting fellow weight trainers and keeping a mental note of personal progress correlated to body transformation as a live project. The project involved body performance and muscularity management being of central importance. This drove our enthusiasm and motivation to embrace the culture further to yield the personal benefits we were chasing (Murnen and Karazsia 2017, Edwards 2016).

*“You need to plan how you want to look with a clear training plan and eating regime. It's not about do whatever and you will look muscular. It's a long-term planned journey which takes some thinking and planning. That's where most lads go wrong”.*

(Steve, Committed weight trainer March 2016)

*“Think of your time training as a journey, you have started now there will be hazards you need to overcome. You not going to get results straightway, it takes time you need to grow mentally first before you see the results on how you look”.*

(John, Seasoned weight lifter, September 2017)

I found the more I embraced the culture and entwined myself in health and fitness discourses the more I became committed to the embodiment project. This then enhanced our desires of achievement and as intentions had been communicated to others (friends, family, peers) there was pressure to show progress and body muscularity development. Participants described these views as authenticating and illustrating seriousness of body transformation.

As we all spent a great amount of time training and making sacrifices there was an expectation muscularity ought to be developed and then shown off to illustrate the fruits of our labour. Managing the muscular body and disciplining self was at times very challenging. There was a great deal of self-policing in not succumbing to junk food or skipping workouts due to fatigue or laziness. The project involved a high level of commitment, as it was life changing with dedicated daily effort and time requirement. Participants also shared how they seen themselves differently in the sense that they were an athlete with physical skills and high strength levels which were required to be managed.

The research also discovered the project nature of the embodiment journey involved correlating competencies in workouts with measuring muscle tone to judge the effectiveness of workouts. Upon multiple occasions participants visited the changing rooms following a workout and stood topless in front of the mirrors to check on body aesthetics. What I found more apparent with the more experienced participants was the obsession on being able to perform in the exercise routine. I found the older member groups were a lot more competitive amongst themselves and although conscious of self-image, were more anxious of performing in the workouts. This I believe was related to these individuals maintaining a well-rounded body performance and respect from others around them. I believe such anxiety was also present to protect their (alpha male) status and feeling of superiority.

As discussed earlier, it was noted how in the confines of the club we were all entwined within the notions of appreciating body muscularity. This included showing respect to those who possessed body ideals and demanding respect from those who did not. The journey to obtain a masculine ideal consequently involved scrutinising own body performance in the fitness club and then its physical shape and aesthetics in front of the mirror. The level of scrutiny made me more self-aware, whilst this pressure drove motivation to train more and sculpt an enhanced muscular image further. It can be conceptualised, although muscularity and body size remain highly-desirable, possessing the know-how in workout performances was also equally respected by males and the fitness club community.

The embodiment journey and body transformation as a live project also involved interacting with health and fitness discourses and adopting certain products and services. For example the youngsters purchased supplements to consume before and following a workout. I found the committed weight trainers went further with Luke and Steve consulting health and fitness literature to read about the scientific principles of the muscular body and approaches to working out. Luke in particular would also purchase supplements and vitamins online and at times would share these with us as he believed it would improve our performance.

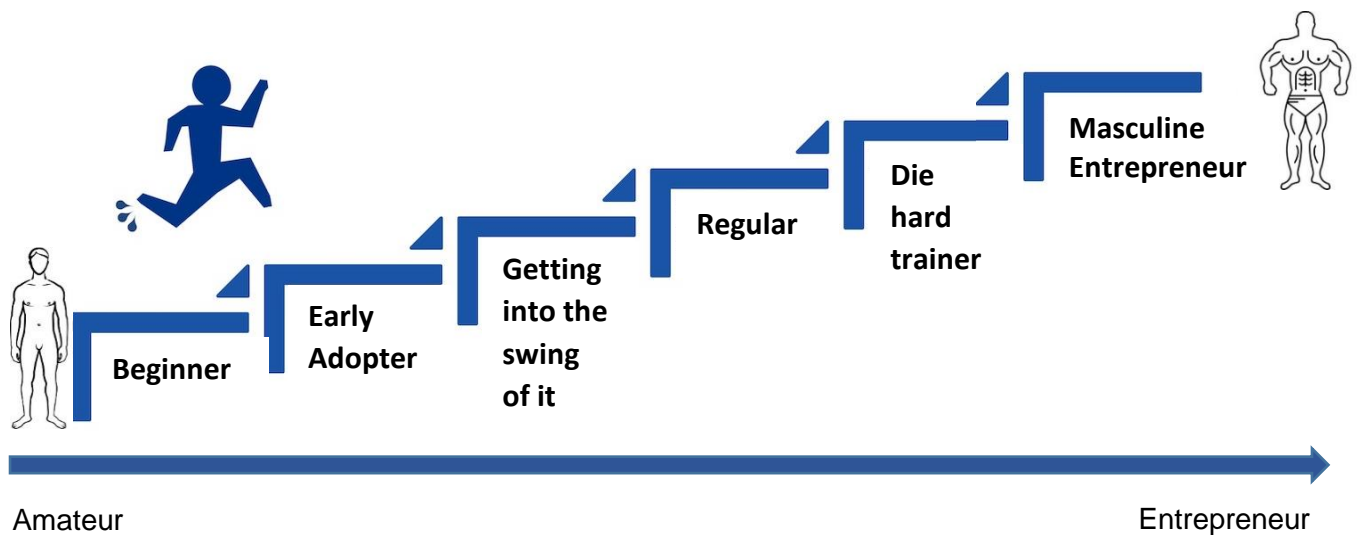
Remarkably, I found the value participants placed on observing and following video bloggers online became increasingly significant for individuals who would religiously follow such personalities. These became very influential for those participants at the beginning of the transformation journey who would relate their own desires with body image stars and acknowledge the self-fulfilling rewards advertised by the bloggers. These consumption habits fuelled beliefs in being able to reach idealised statuses and achievement of a muscular body. Through the research, I was also able to identify the value of the experiences in the quest of reaching a masculine ideal. The joy of competing in a weight training session, feeling the muscle exertion and prolific pump was 'hyper masculinity making' in action. Individual males grew both in physical shape and mindset through the routine and then used their body image and muscular credentials to illustrate achievement levels.

As a result males would determine their perceptions of self (concept) based upon how close they felt they lived up to masculine ideal beliefs, whilst using their body rich identity to express their masculine dominance (Murnen and Karazsia 2017). It was learnt the masculinising journey provided a number of symbolic benefits such as, heightened sense of self-regard and respect from other males. Additionally for those who shared the body transformation journey with friends the trials and tribulations of the journey were part of the lived experience of masculinity in an era where liberal strides and indistinct gender identities had threatened traditional hegemonic beliefs of masculinity (Gough 2018b, Coles 2009).

### **5.9.3.1 The body transformation journey**

As a result of my experience I was able to map out the nature of this journey and the consumer/consumption behaviour of male participants at the various stages. I have depicted the journey steps in figure 5.11. It is important to highlight the path defined is how body transformation was perceived by male participants. In reality the journey does not have an end point as I found through this research process, complete body satisfaction was never apparent amongst males I came across.





**Figure 5.11:** The body transformation journey

Through the participation process I witnessed participants at the various stages with the youngsters commencing the journey, embracing the workouts and towards the latter part of the participation becoming more acquainted to the routine. In contrast the committed weight trainers were progressing through their body transformation project journeys. I found individuals here were in a set routine to which they were very committed to. As some of these males had seen results in both body aesthetics and strength, this spurred on their motivation to continue and achieve further muscularity goals.

The seasoned weight lifters were at the upper scale of the stairwell journey as depicted in the figure. The participants perceived themselves to be weight lifters as opposed to regular weight trainers. I described the individuals as masculine entrepreneurs as they were embroiled in their perceptions of a supreme male being (Barber and Bridges 2017). As well as defining the various stages of the journey I was also able to map consumer and consumption traits each stage implicated for my participants. These traits have been collated through my personal reflective experiences and what I witnessed through my participants and market discourses interaction we engaged in.

Stage of workout levels/expertise	Consumer/Consumption traits
Beginner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personally identifies a lack in self or body image dissatisfaction leading to go work on the body.</li> <li>- Overwhelming nature of 'gym culture' and challenging workouts to apprehend.</li> <li>- Proactively seeking advice and guidance on exercise/weight training regimes.</li> <li>- Finding way around the daunting fitness context.</li> <li>- Purchasing of gym apparel/clothing to set identity and allegiance with weight training/fitness culture.</li> </ul>
Early adopter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some understanding/clarity established.</li> <li>- The start of a routine established with gym visits becoming more regular and some structure to workouts identified. The culture of bodybuilding inspires exploration and relation to self-development.</li> <li>- Copycat traits of key influences (online media, other weight trainers) adopted. The individual also seeks advice from gym member networks to help make sense of the vast amount of conflicting advice available.</li> </ul>
Getting into the swing of it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Competency in exercises drives confidence.</li> <li>- First signs of body muscle tone spurs on motivation allowing the male to begin to show off body image through more revealing, tight fit clothing.</li> <li>- Identity setting (gym goer, weight trainer) is worked upon further through props (protein shaker bottle, gym bag, fitness clothing).</li> <li>- Shares advice to friends/associates to communicate weight trainer identity.</li> </ul>
Regular	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As a result of body physique changes through muscle tone increases a strong motivation to fully pledge allegiance to an established routine becomes paramount.</li> <li>- Disciplining of consumption traits and commitment to weight training becomes a key aspect to avoid hindering self performance and progress. Gym visits become a highlight of the day, this influencing how the day is planned, including consumption habits relating to diet and supplement intake.</li> <li>- Workout routines become more intensive and sophisticated. There is a personal push to improve strength by lifting heavier or for an extended period.</li> <li>- Competitiveness drives motivation, whilst confidence is further optimised by comparing bodies with other males, whilst now looking down on non-training males.</li> </ul>
Diehard trainer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The muscular body at this stage has been well formed and working out and maintaining the body is a lifestyle choice and consumer norm.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The individual is accustomed to the culture and is well aware of the symbolic value of the idealised muscular body flaunting it on social occasions and social media.</li> <li>- At this stage the muscular male is an expert in weight training and is approached by beginners/early adopters to impart advice. This raises perception of self stature and masculinity through the acknowledgement of the respect awarded.</li> <li>- The male consumer is very much institutionalised to the 'gym' and when missing training sessions feels less worthy and lacking in self.</li> </ul>
Weight lifter entrepreneur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- At the pinnacle of masculine ideal and expert in working out. The male consumer is entwined within self-loathing and expressing uber-confidence.</li> <li>- The muscular male utilises his body to express a status symbol through a perceived heightened view of masculinity, sexual appeal and self-regard. The individual loathes in the alpha-male status.</li> <li>- Although a tough exterior is presented and behaviour incarnates this, there are personal insecurities present (age related health issues, body performance shortfall) and the male consumer looks to his body and muscle tone to reaffirm credentials to depart from negative thoughts.</li> </ul>

**Table 5.5:** The various stages of workout expertise and consumption habits

Previous research has promoted how muscular males naturalise their health and fitness practices based on social positions (Brewster *et al* 2017, Monaghan 2002b). As seen through this research it can also be added these practices are also dictated by the stage at which a male feels he is at on the embodiment journey in seeking the perfect masculine body. It was repeatedly seen participants on the various phases of the journey would inform their workout practices based on what they were capable of lifting as well as their desires to particular body aesthetics. Andreasson (2014) conceptualised men naturalise the texture and feel of working out to suit their perceptions and embodied goals. I propose that the extent to which a male feels masculine also becomes the subject of the embodied project and dictates the nature of the journey and consequently consumption habits. This was revealed through the participant's behaviour in the way they apprehended and handled the weight training routine and achievement of muscle tone.

### 5.9.3.2 Destination value

Through the project based view and career like journey of body image transformation my participants placed great significance on reaching end goals and achieving a body that was perfect in masculine depiction (Murnen and Karazsia 2017). I personally held the view there was no such thing as an end point in reaching body perfection. However, for some of my participants especially those at the early stages of the journey believed such endeavours would lead to end goals. Reaching the top of the stair level was perceived to be the pinnacle of masculinity, in the respect you had reached an undisputed level and were now deserved of continuous social recognition and reward (Clatterbaugh 2018). This would revolve around having an alpha-male persona demanding respect from males, whilst gaining attention from females who would appreciate you for your hyper masculine credentials.

*“When you get a body like The Rock, you have made it. The Adonis body frame, what real man should look like”.*

(Colin, Youngsters, December 2016)

*“I cannot wait to look big and buff and see people’s reactions. I know once I have put on size on my chest and arms I will look totally different and will have some serious presence by looking intimidating. I would have made it then to how I should look like and can just enjoy life then”.*

(Matt, Youngsters, December 2016)

Bauman (2005: 91) termed it as, “*Destination value*” whereby it is contemplated end goals are not simply seen as fit for purpose but ultimate value in its own right. Bauman (2005) proposes body transformation encompasses a means of turning the body from mere instrumental utility to autotelic pleasure in reference to its image and aesthetic qualities. Due to the great emphasis placed on reaching goals and achievements it was witnessed amongst participants a real desire to show progress and goal achievement in reaching a desired state.

Participants believed once reaching desired goals they would be rewarded through respect from other participants and club members, whilst also gaining social recognition outside of the gym context. Remarkably, I found as the embodiment journey advances, goals become more long-term and the whole notion of the body project becomes a lifestyle choice as opposed to reaching an end point. This was witnessed through the older groups who saw their respective journeys as long-term endeavours and to continue on the trip and partake in training for as long as possible.

Steve described it as:

*“It’s not about getting everything you want next month and then just quitting and living like a good fella. We are investing in ourselves for the future so that we remain healthy and fit and remain looking and feeling young. I have realised now that there will always be muscle tone I want in places I don’t feel as developed in. You don’t see this at first as you think it will all come through the routine, but you realise it is a journey of you shaping your character,, increasing your manhood and status to feel good about yourself”.*

(Steve, committed weight trainer, May 2016)

Similar views were also echoed by the seasoned weight lifters, who were now facing challenges of age related health issues. Paul provided the following perspective:

*“Sometimes it is seen as a bad thing, having all this muscle on my body as my joints and ligaments have more wear and your heart has to work harder to carry it all around on a daily basis. I’m glad what we are doing now is about not getting any bigger but just trying to lose the excess so I am in a better condition going into my 60’s. I know for a fact I will be in better condition than an equivalent 60 year old as muscle is what protects the bones and helps keep a straight back and not break our hips.*

*“Our bodies and muscle have served a purpose in making us who we are, who I am, it’s giving us that nice feeling and authority of being a man. I wouldn’t change that as its helped form who I am today.*

*We are still in the game now to help better ourselves even more and fight off the aging process. I want to be the healthiest guy around and people to be amazed by my body conditioning. There are still areas I want to improve on,-I don’t see it as I have reached the finish line. It’s an ever learning process about how to continue to improve yourself going forward”.*

(Paul, seasoned weight lifter, January 2018)

#### **5.9.4 Theme 4: Masculine body not performing**

Spending time with participants through the research also helped to uncover some of the underlying issues the lifestyle of chasing and maintaining a muscular body caused. By developing a strong rapport, I was able to uncover the less glamorous side of training and maintaining a status through a masculine body image. These intricate details supplemented the rich insights into lived experiences of masculinity, whilst capturing instances when the masculine body did not perform to expectations. This is particularly interesting passage of research and an area where existing knowledge and understanding is under-developed.

The theme also delves into the tensions experienced in body transformation as well as participant's insecurities, which help inform knowledge of males embroiled in body image transformation practices.

#### **5.9.4.1 Tensions experienced in the quest to achieve masculine ideals**

The research found the pursuit of supreme masculinity and acquiring astute muscular aesthetics involved a number of challenging factors, which hindered the process of achieving masculine ideals. These encounters caused issues for some participants in their quest to embody their idealistic perceptions of masculinity, whilst triggering body and self dissatisfaction. For example Tim from the youngsters group temporarily quit training due to the struggle to manage muscle soreness. As a result Tim opened up about his personal journey stating:

*“Having big arms and a muscly set of pecs would be nice but it’s not the end all be all. I still think I look ok. I could look better but think I will take it easy for now and when I get a bit older and be more of a man. I will then be brave and be able to carry on even with the muscle soreness pain”.*

(Tim, youngsters, November 2016)

Tim advocated that he was not at his masculine ideal both physically and psychologically. He conveyed his body did not possess the big biceps and pectoral muscles he perceived as being the masculine ideal. Interestingly, Tim believed he was not man enough to apprehend the workouts, but felt he would become *“more of a man”* in time to be able to overcome the pain. Furthermore it was also observed the seasoned weight lifters also encountered personal issues. Paul experienced a number of health problems during the participation period relating to his asthma to an extent where other participants questioned his health and wellbeing. Nevertheless, Paul continued with the training regime to protect his status and maintain a hyper masculine identity (Gough 2018a).

Upon spending time with him, it was acknowledged Paul held a number of insecurities and felt his status was under threat. As a result he admitted to continuing to exercise to maintain his masculine identity and to also prove to himself he could still workout. The issue of making sacrifices to maintain a hyper masculine image was also witnessed with Liam and John. Upon a social occasion a debate around the attitude of young bodybuilders and use of steroids arose.

John and Liam proposed how the easy access to anabolic steroids had ruined the fulfilling experiences of weight training and how young trainers were obsessed on gaining body aesthetics, without having the commitment and work ethic to engineer the masculine body. Liam elaborated upon how his lifestyle had been shaped to accommodate his commitment to training and maintaining his muscular body. Consumption habits relating to food, meal patterns, supplements and sleeping were all stated to follow a strict routine in which Liam believed made him a healthy, fit male.

Through my experiences weight training I could relate to what Liam was referring to. Maintaining a highly disciplined approach to eating habits and managing the relevant food was one of the most challenging protocols to adhere to. I personally struggled to minimise carbohydrates and increase protein intake. The lack of carbohydrates appeared to affect my mood, especially during the 'fat cutting' period with the committed weight trainers. During this period I trialled drastically reducing my intake to one single meal and only consume protein shakes during the day.

This method was advocated by Steve and Luke who appeared to follow their own advice but Andy, Dan and myself gave up after a few days due to the struggle of keeping hunger at bay, whilst still training. I believe as the discipline and body management was constant affecting everyday consumption, it was difficult to maintain over a prolonged time period, as it ultimately centred upon making permanent lifestyle choices. The commitment to weight training and attending the club was only part of the process. The most challenging aspect I personally found was regulating food intake and self-policing with regards to eating healthy and avoiding unhealthy foods. I recall how on a social occasion I attended a local restaurant with some participants and were all inclined to order healthy dishes in case we were shamed in front of the group. Such pressure did take a lot of willpower to maintain over a period of time and I found it was one of the main reasons why males would quit training.

#### 5.9.4.2 Masculine body dissatisfaction

The research did reveal one of the significant areas where body dissatisfaction arose from was when the individuals (across the groups) could not competently perform exercises in training. The body not performing to expectations was witnessed with Tim, who shortly after training for the first week temporarily quit the club stating he was overwhelmed by the workout.

Upon probing Tim, he explained:

*“As I can’t keep up with xx [Gary and Colin] I’ve been feeling quite crap in the gym, I feel like I’m not cut out for it, I’m not that strong I only wanted some muscle so I can look better but I can live without it”.*

(Tim, youngsters, December 2016)

Tim was persuaded to return by others and joined Matt by undertaking some additional sessions to build body strength. On one night I joined them both in the club and we discussed their training plans. Matt commented: *“I’m annoyed with my body now, it’s like it hasn’t got the capability to lift much so I need to make it by breaking it down”*. Tim added: *“I know it’s my strength I’m weak and my long thin arms get really painful so I stop and just give up”*. I observed how Matt and Tim were scrutinising their bodies due to not living up to expectations and in essence experienced body dissatisfaction related to body strength and stamina. I found they were looking at their tangible body credentials sceptically due to the lack of performance in the fitness context.

Dissatisfaction arising from body performance was also witnessed with Dan, who struggled with a body fat cutting routine and subsequently stopped training with the group. Upon probing Dan’s absence to others in the group, Luke commented: *“He doesn’t have the body conditioning to workout really intensively, I have told him to cut his weight down so he can work on his stamina”*.

Upon joining Dan one evening, he revealed his concerns:

*“My body isn’t built for that type of workout and it makes me miserable when I’m being watched and can’t pull out 25 reps. It’s not that I don’t have the heart but my body just doesn’t have that dynamic. Instead of feeling crap about my body I just focus on what I’m good at”.*

(Dan, committed weight trainer, March 2016)



My research found body dissatisfaction arose when the body did not perform to expectations in some workouts which resulted in participants scrutinising their bodies more and becoming sceptical of what they could achieve. These findings contribute to existing knowledge (Barber and Bridges 2017, Grogan 2016, Hearn and Hein 2015), whilst providing a better understanding of how body dissatisfaction can arise amongst males. Masculine bodies were compared amongst participants and rated by their performance and strength in the competitive environment. For some individuals this led to evaluating perceptions of self and masculinity through the body and its competency. The study also revealed dissatisfaction from the body not performing to expectations led to some participants exploring cultural knowledge on how to rectify embodied weaknesses and enforce change on the natural body. This is elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

#### **5.9.4.3 Varying muscularity achievement**

One of the common tensions experienced by participants and myself included the varying nature of success and achievement in weight training and body muscularity development. I found the group training provided a means in which to compare bodies with training partners and evaluate progress and exercise effectiveness. The close scrutiny and comparison highlighted at times the variability in muscle growth achievement. I found within the committed weight trainers group, Luke and Steve made remarkable progress with the training routine, as a result their body muscularity was optimised with clear muscle tone. Dan, Andy and I gained varying levels of success and at times felt we should employ other forms of exercises.

The trait of experiencing various levels of success at weight training is an area of limited understanding in existent research. I found some studies existed that were inclined towards human sciences field, as discussed earlier (Hubal *et al* 2005, Raudenbush and Meyer 2003). Profoundly, through this study it was highlighted body performance (in working out) and muscularity achievement played a monumental role in the experience of lived masculinity, whilst causing body image dissatisfaction for some participants. This in turn altered the way in which some individual males saw themselves, their bodies and re-negotiating aspirations of body image. Research residing in the field of human sciences, sport and exercise has publicised muscle size and strength levels can vary amongst male participants (Schoenfeld *et al* 2016, Wakahara *et al* 2010, Hubal *et al* 2005).

Schoenfeld *et al* (2016) offered an explanation on the relative achievement levels by elaborating how individuals reach their optimum muscle growth point at various points during the process of weight training. As a result it becomes progressively more difficult to increase muscle mass. Schoenfeld *et al* (2016) believes this is unique and can occur at different points based on muscle biological issues for the individual weight trainer. From my experiences, I found not all males were capable of achieving idealised masculine body traits, leading to complex tensions and frustrations that typify masculine body experiences (Sasson-Levy 2003). Consequently, the pursuit of pervasive muscular self is a progressively difficult task, those who achieved it basked in its glory. However, for some as I found there were physiological limitations, such as an individual's metabolism and the rate at which muscle tissue developed would undermine and compromise the achievement of the hegemonic statue.

Looking more specifically at the notion of body image dissatisfaction, I found this arose when the body did not live up to expectations and competitiveness when working out amongst other males. Due to the fact the body was forced to perform in the competitive arena where comparisons could be made and basic strength could be tested, this was a daunting experience for young males. It was seen for two of my participants this led to them temporarily quitting the training due to feelings of being ashamed and dissatisfied with body performance and respectively themselves.

For the more experienced participants, body dissatisfaction arose when they could not perform as well as their peers or at the level they previously could do. More intriguingly, I learnt within the older groups maintaining the hyper-masculine standard involved trying hard to disguise health and age-related issues which were perceived as a weakness. Amongst the seasoned weight lifters, I found the training to be slow paced and focused upon lifting a heavy weight for a few repetitions to maintain muscularity. I also found individuals trained for their own egos to prove to themselves they could still do so.

With some of the participants in this group reaching 50 years old and beyond, individuals suffered from insecurities in not being able to perform as well as they could do. However, as the training and their respective bodies were monumental to their self-personas participants were reluctant to give up and did their utmost to hide any shortcomings. This was witnessed at first hand during the fieldwork, when two males admitted they could not quit, as they perceived it would negatively impact on their general wellbeing and mental health.

Upon one occasion, a participant struggled with a circuit routine and had to leave early due to health issues, upon speaking to the individual he shared:

*“... you know in front of the lads you have to act tough it's the only way I get respect, I don't want to show any weakness or look like I'm giving up, I've gone through life fighting everything, it's the man I am”.*

(Anonymised)

The above account depicted the ideology carried by the participant in protecting self status from other males, as well as the wider fitness club community. The individual in question suffered from a serious health issue, but carried on regardless to express his hyper masculine character. The participant was eager to continue and was even encouraged by others to show his strength. It was also found amongst this group the threat of losing the masculine status was apparent with a number of participants expressing how masculinity was diminishing in modern society. Ironically, some proposed how they had a responsibility to upkeep their statuses, whilst providing inspiration to younger males. Such character traits have been discussed by Stets and Burke (2000) who discussed how social identity theory is entwined within uniformity of perception and behavioural actions amongst individuals in a group.

On reflection to this research, it can be proposed self and identity is forced to adhere to expectations deliberated by the social grouping. In this case the weight training group and wider gym culture where hyper masculine identities were adopted and protected endlessly. This was seen more generally across the participant groups due to the higher level of competitiveness in training. However, for the older males it was more than just competitiveness, which ironically impacted on the decline of health and fitness levels. The case of the die hard, hyper masculine attitude was what the older participants related themselves to; however, this caused some serious body performance dissatisfaction and insecurity issues amongst those experiencing health problems. This was distressing to see during my latter stages of the fieldwork process and something which I raised as a concern amongst participants who did not take it seriously and stated I was: *“A soft lad”* (Anonymised).

#### 5.9.4.4 Social body ideal versus the natural body

The research highlighted the constant conflict between achieving socially derived muscular body ideals and overcoming hindrances of natural body capabilities. Throughout the embodiment journey participants shared their aspirations of reaching a socially inspired body image ideal as seen through media representation. However, by delving deeper into experiential accounts, it became clear there was an internal fight occurring with natural genetics. As discussed earlier a number of individuals achieved variations of muscle tone and aesthetics through the workout routines. This caused tensions with some individuals overhauling the weight training routines, whilst others sought help from cultural knowledge of muscularity processes and experimenting with various supplement and vitamin intake. Steve portrayed his experience:

*“The training has allowed me to learn more and more about my body. I know what it is capable of and what it will react to. This has come about through the years of experimenting with different things like the routine, protein and supplements this has impacted what is going on inside like amino acid levels, blood sugar level and ultimately how it [body] performs. We all have our own personal genetics and this does affect what you can and can’t do in the gym and also what you will achieve”.*

(Steve, committed weight trainer, August 2016)

Steve mentioned natural body limitations, which I probed him further about:

*“We all have our faults and shortcomings. I know my weaknesses. I’m weak at this fat cutting routine as I have stubborn fat around my back which I cannot seem to get rid of. It is a fault but I also have a slow metabolism, especially when I don’t train and this then means I develop more retaining fat and water, I look bloaty”.*

(Steve, committed weight trainer, May 2016)

I asked Steve how he combats his perceived ‘natural shortcomings’ in which he responded stating:

*“I train hard, I make sure I punish the body in a way to force it to react. Like I will starve myself when we are cutting, it’s bloody hard but it is what it will take to get rid of my remaining fat”.*

(Steve, committed weight trainer, May 2016)

Through the fieldwork process, it became known participants blamed body genetics when they did not achieve desired body aesthetics or when scrutinising their body image. Furthermore, it was learnt through the embodiment journey participants were transforming the natural body (perceived to consist of flaws) to a body which met perceived masculine ideals. More importantly, these bodies fulfilled self beliefs of what the body image should encapsulate and portray to others (Mittal 2015). In the pursuit of capturing body ideals, I found participants would try to enhance the genetic make-up of the body through external aids and intensive weight training forcing the body to perform and react.

Luke shared how he had adopted his body through supplement intake for it to live up to the ideals and performance benchmark he desired. Early in the fieldwork, Luke proposed I should purchase a number of supplements in order to prepare my body for conditioning and the process of weight training. Luke regarded it as: *“You now need to see your body requiring time and investment in order to get what you desire from it”*. Similarly, John and Liam shared how they carefully selected supplements to manage their muscular bodies. John shared: *“Like professional athletes we need these extras as we are pushing our bodies beyond their natural abilities. I consult Liam as he knows his stuff. A lot of lads now consult social media for such advice, which is an insult to science and the complexity of the human body”*.

It can be conceptualised the body transformation journey consisted of modifying the natural body to yield its social value through the idealised aesthetics, social discourses promoted. The journey involved an operation of body genetics and challenging personal embodied abilities to yield its potential. For some participants, this was relatively a steady, progressive path, whilst for others it proved challenging. Accordingly, the ability to achieve an idealised body image varies upon a range of factors including, natural biological potential (Raudenbush 2003), meal patterns and nutrition (Thomas *et al*/2011) and training routine and intensity (Hubal *et al*/2005). However, what was common was the reliance upon cultural knowledge to learn about idealised forms of the muscular body and aids (exercise routines, equipment, supplements and cultural advice of male body) to help achieve the desired body state.

This research offers some valuable contributions to existent understanding going beyond social constructionism explanations (Clatterbaugh 2018, Frank 2014, Bridges 2009). By articulating how natural dynamics also play an important role in constructing a masculine body to enrich self (Charmaz and Rosenfeld 2016, Vannini and Williams 2016, Crossley 2006) the research has distinguished a better understanding of male body management. I found the muscular image a male can achieve is not simply socially constructed but a product of the interplay of multiple socio-cultural, biological and mundane discourses, entangled in the on flow of everyday life experiences of masculinity.

## **5.10 Chapter Summary**

The chapter has presented the in-depth findings yielded from the research study. As a result I have been able to distinguish key themes relating to the symbolic value of the muscular body image, its unprecedented value in fulfilling male consumer lives and self-actualisation processes. Additionally, research themes have also been able to distinguish the lived experiences of the masculine body and how fitness settings and workouts provide opportunities to obtain and practice masculinity on a regular basis.

Upon reflection, it can be deliberated the distinguished themes have captured the essence of the empirical work undertaken for the research. The research findings have been able to offer valuable conceptualisations by detailing both the etic and emic dimensions of the data collected and analysed. As a result of these insights, I have been able to provide convoluted details of male consumer embodied lives such as, the body and self paradox, the bodybuilding cultural notions and nature of market discourse interaction. Additionally, the concept of body transformation project journey and associated consumer traits have been highlighted providing a new depth of understanding into lived experiences of the masculine body. Such insights have allowed the research topic to move beyond social constructionism and pay closer attention to the male consumer. The chapter has helped set the scene for the forthcoming section on presenting conclusions and contributions to existent research in answering the set research questions.

## **6. Conclusions and summary of contributions to research**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter summarises the research findings and themes developed as part of the empirical study. I articulate how findings contribute to existent knowledge and research particularly in the field of consumer research. The chapter initially revisits the research intentions, before defining the contributions relating to a comprehensive understanding of male body image conscious consumers. I also deliberate upon the benefits achieved by the ethnographic approach in spending time with research participants and sharing their body transformation journeys.

### **6.2 Research achievement**

The research aimed to develop a better understanding of male embodied consumerism to enhance our understanding of a growing consumerism trait (Otterbring *et al* 2018, Fitchett and Caruana 2015). Acting as an inspiration to this study was the fact that little was known about the underlying conceptions males place on the importance of body image to sense of self (Sirgy *et al* 2016, Mittal 2015). From existent knowledge it was recognised the masculine body encompassed consumption value (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, Alexander 2006) for male consumers (Murnen and Karazsia 2017) and raised anxieties amongst males when the body did not conform to conceptions of self ideals (Grogan 2016). The research set out to explore the role of the body in male consumer lives to aid our understanding of embodied consumer experiences and the relationship between masculinity, body image and the self-concept.

Through the research, I have been able to encapsulate the nature of social and cultural influences on the male body and the way in which these powerful discourses are interpreted by male consumers. Similarly, embodied relationships amongst groups of males have been studied in great detail to identify the extent to which marketing discourses relating to masculine body ideals effect lived experiences of masculinity and the male body. By considering the socio-cultural environmental forces and their play on male consumers' motives, the research has been able to articulate the body transformation journey. In particular, a greater awareness of the ways in which influential discourses set destination value (body image ideal) for male consumers to chase, conforming to liberal, social, cultural trends have been established. Additionally, the nature of embodied consumerism has been unravelled to help deconstruct the consumption value of the muscular, masculine body.

Themes relating to; the role of the muscular body to embolden self-concept, performing masculinity in the fitness context and body transformation functioning as a live project for male consumers with tensions experienced in reaching a masculine ideal have been distinguished through the research findings. As a result I have been able to contribute to existing literature within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Askegaard *et al* 2015, Arsel and Thompson 2011, Patterson and Elliott 2002) and consumer research (Otterbring *et al* 2018, Fitchett and Caruana 2015, Chernev *et al* 2011, Bettany *et al* 2010, Downey and Caterall 2006, Joy and Venkatesh 1994). This has been achieved by mapping out the lived experiences of the masculine body in the realms of dominating social, cultural notions implicating on male consumers' embodied consumption behaviour.

The research has also been able to take a consumer based view, by considering the self-concept and identity in studying male embodied practices which have dominantly been studied from a social, cultural and gender perspective (Sirgy *et al* 2016, Neale *et al* 2016, Glick *et al* 2015, Mittal 2015). In following a consumer perspective, this study helps develop CCT research in studying a consumption phenomenon (male embodiment), which has been under developed in marketing and consumer research. The study has taken inspiration from previous research commentary mainly in the sociological field (Frank 2014, Shilling 2012, Featherstone 2010). The work of authors such as Joy and Venkatesh (1994) and Thompson and Hirschman (1995), provided great insights to build upon male embodiment in consumer research.

Existent research also publicised the consumer impact of the increasing objectified male body (Lefkowich *et al* 2017) on body image dissatisfaction (Grogan 2016, Shilling 2012, Blond 2008) and associated psychological conditions experienced by males (Murnen and Karazsia 2017, Sweetman 2000). However, what became apparent was these publications were mainly sociological entwined and somewhat dated, with few published research following up on preconceived ideologies (Murnen and Karazsia 2017, Lefkowich *et al* 2017). This study attempted to provide a contemporary perspectives of the masculine body and its relations to embodied consumerism using groups of body conscious males. A dedicated effort was made to contribute to self and consumer research particularly around masculine consumer dynamics and embodied behaviour. This was as a result of acknowledging current marketing and consumer research offered limited scope (Sirgy 2015, Kedzior *et al* 2016, Griffiths *et al* 2016, Avery 2008, Schroeder and Zwick 2004).



I found in particular very limited accounts had been published on the phenomenology of male embodied consumer lifestyles relating to the muscular body adoption. From current sociological research it was observed male embodiment was discussed in reflection to sociological underpinnings and principles applied to the make-up of self and identity (Entwistle 2015, Larsson 2014, Shilling 2012, Streeck *et al* 2011, Sweetman 2000). Social constructionism was commonly referred to in providing an explanation to postmodern ideologies surrounding the make-up of male body identities (Clatterbaugh 2018, Addis *et al* 2016, Entwistle 2015, Gorely *et al* 2003, Connell 2002). Profoundly, limited literature existed that went beyond discussing the implications of social construction on lived experiences of the male body (Crossley 2006). Commentators in the respective fields have followed the sociological line of enquiry to add to scholarly work without investigating the phenomenon at an intimate level, which previous studies had called for (Clatterbaugh 2018, Plummer 2016, Shilling 2012).

### **6.3 Methodology contributions**

The research followed an ethnography approach using various qualitative methods to collect rich data. Following its adoption, I can offer some valuable contributions to consumer research into male embodiment. Firstly, it is important to highlight achieving access to a fitness club, training groups and conducting research into the gym culture is a challenging feat for researchers who are not normally privy to such contexts. Being a fitness minded individual and a club member, I was able to adopt to the research well and utilise my personal credentials to provide detailed insights to benefit existing knowledge. There has been limited consumer research based studies, which have involved the researcher actively participating in body transformation routines with participants to collect research data. Similar studies exist in social research (Antonopoulos and Hall 2016, Monaghan and Atkinson 2016) which have focused on broader social issues. Through my research I can offer some contributions to existent male embodiment research.

Existent studies have publicised the sensitive (Elliott *et al* 2005), exclusive (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) meanings in consumer, consumption related to masculinity. It is well documented that gaining access to male groups to discuss personal issues is very challenging (Rochlen 2005) and time consuming (Shapiro 1981). Existing studies have tried to gain access to private gyms and bodybuilders with limited success (Corina *et al* 2018), whilst researchers have publicised the problems in teasing details about lived experiences from male participants (Stapleton *et al* 2016).

The majority of social based studies undertaken have primarily based findings on qualitative interviews with bodybuilders (Monaghan 2002b, 2002d, 2007, Klein 1993) or quantitative surveys (Pope *et al* 1999, Mitchell *et al* 2017a) to provide general overviews. Previous consumer research has merely observed cultural, marketing trends related to the male body in advertising and provided analysis using small scale research studies (Green and Kasier 2016, Avery 2008, Senic and Podnar 2006).

In contrast, this study was able to access the sub-culture of weight training via groups of males progressing through body transformation journeys in the private sphere of a fitness club. I was able to join males who would normally not allow strangers to join their friendship groups and partake in weight training sessions as a fully-pledged member. The research significantly benefitted from my access, the ongoing participation process and managing my own muscular body. This offers strong methodological contributions into the topical area of male body transformation through detailed experiential insights, forming a better understanding of weight training males through a naturally occurring journey.

Presenting findings from observations and participative experiences, has facilitated the research on multiple levels. I was able to fine tune the data collection process and gain deep insights based upon trustful and familiar relations with participants. I witnessed and experienced the body transformation journey over 25-months and the degree of social, cultural forces influencing and shaping body image to provide rich narratives and insights.

The ethnographic approach has been well-suited to the nature of this research and yielding a thick description of male embodied consumerism. In this instance, the approach has helped to investigate the mapping process of interpretative beliefs played out on body image and consequential impact on consumption behaviour. This offers valuable addition to male embodiment research, as previous related studies (Crossley 2006, Thompson 2004) have focused upon prescribing the theoretical and conceptual significance of their insights. It appears these studies have not delved into the research process of how a researcher should operate when investigating such sensitive research topics of male embodiment, masculinity and embodied consumerism.

This is imperative when in an exclusive, demanding field setting, which involves carefully observing and participating, whilst not disrupting the dynamics of existent relationships. I found going native involved learning and portraying mannerisms to demonstrate my seriousness to train hard and show my (masculine) worth. This research has also emphasised how being agile and adapting to the demands of fieldwork settings (Edirisingha *et al* 2014, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) significantly helps to sustain the immersion process to develop rich ethnographic data.

#### **6.4 Research contributions**

A number of important themes have been distinguished through the study to offer insightful knowledge that supplements existent literature. Using these findings, I now present a number of contributions to aid our understanding of male embodiment and its relation to consumer research. The study has helped to achieve a better understanding of male embodied consumerism, through adopting a phenomenological approach in exploring lived experiences of the male body and how it supplements male consumer lifestyles. The research has been able to develop intriguing insights into the relationships men have with masculinity, their body and perceptions of self.

Research knowledge gaps have also been fulfilled through the body consumerism framework (section 2.3.6) by cohesively presenting the myriad of meanings and purposes the masculine body poses for male consumers. Through the framework the research can offer theoretical contributions by integrating diverse research on male embodiment to precisely define the underlying meanings of body muscularity and the symbolic benefits driving the obsession to acquire muscle. The concept of body consumerism helps articulate the value of physical bodily capital as conceptualised by Bourdieu (1984ab) in acquiring social, cultural and economic capital. Studying these concepts in a single study has helped formulate a precise understanding of the multi-dimensional muscular body. The body consumerism framework presents a purposeful model in framing male embodied consumerism for future research to test its applicability to male consumer habits and lifestyles. Findings and contributions relating to the study's research questions are now outlined in defining the relevance of the research to the initial research intentions.

#### **Research question 1: What are the effects of the idealised muscular male body promoted through media on male consumers and how does this shape embodied consumer practices and perceptions of masculinity?**

The research found media imagery influences the symbolic meanings and value attached to the muscular body shape. Participants spoke of how the media emphasised the value of being muscular to social popularity and appeal in contemporary society. Furthermore, through participant's body transformation journeys it was witnessed individuals experienced the perceived positive benefits through masculinity affirmation, confidence and feelings of superiority over other males. The value of physical, body capital (Bourdieu 1984ab) was illustrated through participant's beliefs and body transformation journeys.

The significance of body capital in helping to achieve both social and cultural capital was witnessed in driving participant's motives. Participants shared their beliefs of acquiring muscle to be socially appealing and align self with popular culture. This was witnessed through participant's motives to look like movie stars and professional athletes who they believed are renowned for their appearance and body identity. I found the desire to capture muscular ideals dictated the relationship participants had with their bodies and consumption habits relating to diet, supplement intake and daily exercise routines. Furthermore, it was learnt there was a link between participant's perceptions of media portrayal of masculinity and body muscularity. Participants shared how the media orchestrated superior masculinity by how an alpha male was characterised through a muscular body shape, which allowed him to dominate and lead others. Such media interpretation happened to inspire my participants.

Masculinity acquired through body capital was a strong motive driving my participants endeavours to transform body image and present an optimised self to peers. Such insights help build upon the work of Connell (2002) and Bourdieu (2001) on masculinity and the role of body capital. In particular masculinity embodied through muscularity offered my participants a way in which to optimise perceptions of self and in turn carry the role of an alpha male. These insights develop our understanding of the relationship between the body and masculinity and how the body is used for self-augmentation and development.

The research also builds upon existing CCT research particularly around the themes of male embodiment and consumer identity projects (Arsel and Thompson 2011, Arnould and Thompson 2005). By reporting upon experiential accounts of male embodied consumer practices important insights have been distinguished to help advance male consumer research via more definitive knowledge of male consumer identity practices. Through the study I found the relationship between the individual male consumer and marketplace, centred upon raising the consumption value of the masculine body. In essence, the natural body was commodified to suit ideals by utilising market resources and knowledge to help develop body aesthetics to embrace its consumption appeal.

Participants shared how they felt lacking in self due to body aesthetics not fulfilling perceptions of masculine ideals, such insights offer intriguing insights into the relationship between the male body and self-masculinity. I found my participants relied upon market discourses and cultural knowledge to construct the masculine body, through understanding of muscularity development processes, supplements and diet. In essence hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) was produced and reproduced through my participant's body transformation journeys and through its subjective nature, was a never ending process.

Interestingly, I found the media and marketplace choreography of masculine ideals, invited male consumers to objectively view self-image and interact with the marketplace to attempt to gain body image ideals. However, these discourses were not powerful enough to keep individuals motivated and committed to transformation practices (weight training) long-term. Instead, I found only those participants who perceived the symbolic benefits of muscularity and improving perceptions of their self-concept (through the embodied journey) for individual circumstance embraced the courage to continue the challenging journey.

Therefore, it is proposed cultural knowledge is meaningful only when such knowledge is relevant to personal circumstances, consistent with immediate social milieu and aligns with an individual's embodied intentions. This offers important insights for consumer research (Maclaran 2015), in-particularly those related to male embodiment (Bettany 2010, Schroeder *et al* 2006, Otnes and Mcgrath 2001). It is argued males develop associations with masculine ideals and perceptions of self-image and attempt to capture ideals if they can overcome personal barriers. This can include the male body's biological limitations and competency in physical performance. Intriguingly, it was also realised marketing communications at times distorted reality in terms of what was realistically possible. This was illustrated with the youngsters group who were very observant of media discourses portraying body image ideals and tried hard to adopt such ideals, but initially failed and became dissatisfied with their bodies.

Conversely, the more mature participants conveyed how media ideals faked masculine ideals and consequently, these individuals were maintaining an interpreted, tailored version of a masculine body image they believed represented an authentic ideal. Such insights shed light on how media ideals are interpreted by male consumers and questioned before attempts are made to transform body image in this instance. I propose when studying male embodiment and lived experiences of masculinity we need to move beyond social constructionism and pay attention to individualistic self notions and other influences which were seen to shape my participant's experiences and motives to gain body muscularity. Clearly, market media plays a key role in providing cultural knowledge of muscular body in terms of delivering and confirming meanings of the muscular body. However, it is also visible that the agency of market mediations to inspire male body constellations is not given and all encompassing.

My research revealed males were reliant upon their natural body dynamics, cultural networks of support and success in training to embrace body image satisfaction and feeling of idealised masculinity. These findings contribute to both consumer culture knowledge of male embodiment (Bey 2014, Downey and Caterrall 2006), CCT research (Arsel and Thompson 2011, Thompson 2004) and how masculinity is apprehended and configured by males through the performative male body (Monaghan and Atkinson 2016).

I found the practices and processes in which body transformation occurs is limited in understanding in existing research. This study has been able to achieve a better understanding of the influences shaping embodied consumer practices through participative insights of sharing weight training experiences, comparing self with other males and striving to demonstrate superior masculinity. Such findings build upon the work of Bourdieu (2001) and Edley (2017) in how the masculine habitus is derived and shared amongst males and how masculinity practices are learnt by men. I found participants learnt mannerisms from fellow weight trainers, shared ideas of performing masculinity and basked in the glory of perceived masculine superiority in the fitness environment. The study inspires further research into comparing and contrasting different fitness environments to evaluate the impact of how these contexts effect an individual's habitus and perceptions of self.

### **Research Question 2: How are body ideals mapped onto the male body through workouts and body image transformation?**

Spending a prolonged period in the field weight training with participant groups, helped to appreciate how working out on a regular basis with similarly minded males was one of the appealing aspects of such a lifestyle. It was discovered the weight training regime, fitness setting and other members holistically posed a therapeutic means to engage in self-masculinising opportunities and experience hyper masculinity on an on-going basis. The journey to reach an optimum masculine destination was long, gruelling but one which was shared with others.

I found the expedition provided a means to set lifestyle choices and manage consumption habits, with the body and its conditioning being at the epicentre of the male consumer's lifestyle. I personally experienced a number of underlying meanings to the regime in the way it encapsulated an enriching experience away from the norms of everyday life. It involved engagement in a sporting, competitive routine, which allowed us to perform our masculine bodies and experience superiority through body strength, stamina and the much talked about 'muscle pump'.

In essence this became the notions in which self-concept was configured by young males and what made the training all the more worthwhile. Being part of a training group provided a real purpose to our endeavours and offered a support mechanism. Furthermore, reaching performance milestones provided an intricate feeling of achievement and success similar to what professional athletes experienced (Stewart *et al* 2013). This heightened the appeal of being entwined within the fitness context and contributing to an optimised self-status.

Such findings follow on from Ghigi and Sassatelli (2018) on the importance of fitness contexts and working out presenting meaningful experiences for males to learn about hyper masculinity and as I found, practice masculine beliefs through embodied performances.

The research findings also offer contributions on the gym habitus and social capital as presented by Shilling (2007) and Frew and McGillivray (2005) using Bourdieu's (1984a) habitus ideology. I discovered the meanings of attending the gym, working out with other males and the weight training practices formed my participant's habitus of body aesthetic preferences, cultural practices and lifestyle choices. Male participants used the fitness club to discover self, interpret meanings of masculinity and being socialised by the fitness environment (McNay 1999). I discovered the interaction and engagement in the fitness club nurtured particular ways of thinking and acting amongst my participants which distinguishes them from other males. Participants spoke of 'feeling superior to other non-training males' and 'developing the positive mindset to go achieve more in life'. These findings offer intuitive contributions to build upon Bourdieu's work on the fitness habitus (Frew and McGillivray 2005), male embodiment practices (Sassatelli 2010) and physical capital (Harvey *et al* 2014). I found it was not only physical (bodily) benefits participants were chasing but also social capital and self-development through the body transformation journey. My research reveals the substantial value of these experiences in shaping self-masculinity and as I termed; 'machoism in the making'.

It was witnessed the muscular body and its developmental journey are of significant importance to a number of males and consequentially help us to understand the male consumer entwined within body training. For example, through the research it was learnt participants did not simply draw upon social ideals of masculinity. The everyday enactment of masculine self was co-created with others in the fitness club and the cultural notions at play in such environments. These findings contribute to masculinity research (Gough 2018b, Clatterbaugh 2018) and the distinction of how masculinity experiences are co-created with other males, which act as both a motivator for embracing hyper-masculinity and shaping the muscular body with other performing male bodies (Edley 2017, Edwards 2016).

The study also highlighted the relative success of achieving body muscularity can vary, based upon an individual's performance in weight training and associated muscle and strength achievement. Consequently, it was found a tailored version of the masculine ideal is captured, which was used by participants to set self narratives. Existing research is lacking in considering other non-socially derived influences in developing the masculine body (Messerschmidt 2019b).

I have found individual circumstance, fitness environment, occupation, hobbies, interests and social circles all played a part in the construction of the masculine body. As a result, media discourses cannot solely be relied upon to capture body image motives. In this instance, I found cultural knowledge is shaped and re-shaped within body constellation networks, thus evolving the trajectory of male body constellations. Various forces and actors such as an individual's biology and psychology, training partners and gym facilities intervene to change perceptions significantly from the original inception. Therefore, the type of sculptured muscular body is a product of constant iterations between the market and individual's body constellation network. This knowledge offers important contributions, as such scrutiny is lacking in existent research and helps to develop a better understanding of male consumers and challenges faced by young men who look to cultural knowledge in carving a muscular body.

It can be conceptualised body capital through body image satisfaction although is yearned by many males is not automatically awarded, therefore its value remains remarkable. I found participants became significantly dissatisfied with self when not being able to achieve the body they desired, whilst others set themselves on intensive training routines to force physical change. Such findings have helped in reporting upon the masculine journey and the relationships male consumers have with their bodies. This adds to male body dissatisfaction studies (Blond 2008, Elliott and Elliott 2005) by grasping more details of how males negotiate social ideals of body identity and masculinity presentation. Interestingly the research reports upon actual experiences of not only success but also instances when males have not achieved their masculine ideal conceptions. These findings offer important contributions into male consumer research and contemporary masculinity for subsequent studies to follow themes identified in this research.

The research also revealed an existent relationship between body appearance and capability. I found my participants wanted to craft an aesthetically pleasing body to express its performance capability to audiences. In this sense, body size and shape was not the only aptitude in which masculine bodies were rated. Male body performance through workouts was also highly regarded, as it was perceived as having the capability to acquire hyper-masculinity. It became apparent body image also communicated symbolic meanings regarding an individual's physical strength and dominance. A number of participants were mindful of what their peers thought of them, in terms of masculinity and mental resilience. Thus, a number of participants would hide personal insecurities through presenting a muscular image, however when performing at physical exercise this happen to reveal shortcomings.



This resulted in what I termed, the masculine body not performing and led to a number of participants questioning their masculinity. It can be conceptualised for these participants pressure to conform to ideals was partly driven by personal agendas and did not exclusively relate to social, cultural norms. Existing research has conceptualised the self is transformed by society (Gorely *et al* 2003). However, I found participants took great pride in their own body transformation agendas by making statements such as: “*My body*”, “*I want to look like*”, and “*It will help me if I look like*”. Such statements conveyed the body is a subject under ownership of the ‘self’, as previously argued by Crossley (2001) who proposed bodies are used to create self-narratives. The research revealed participants were thematising their bodies through the workouts and orchestrating an elevated self. Consequently, the performing male body was just as important as its aesthetic appeal and its presentation of self for the individual.

In delving deeper into the performing masculine body, the study was able to shed light on the natural body and individual variations of body strength and aesthetic results. As distinguished through the findings, variability in strength and muscle achievement caused great personal dissatisfaction in some participant’s motivations and outlook relating to what they could achieve. The embodiment journey revealed working on the natural body in order for it to be transformed to a socially constructed ideal involved a number strains, due to variability and natural body genetics. This led to some participants quitting the training, for others the natural body was punished in order to enforce change upon it. It was witnessed, participants perceived their natural bodies to contain flaws to which the body transformation journey would focus on rectifying. In order to overcome the natural biological limitations of the body, cultural knowledge was relied upon through intensive training regimes, supplement intake to enforce change and shape the body to expectations.

Such findings offer intriguing insights into Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) concept of Symbolic Violence (SV) whereby males have expectations of their masculine self and male body capability. However, when shortcoming are revealed through activities such as weight training, I found individuals became very disappointed in not being able to live up to the masculine standards they believed they should encompass. Participants shared views of ‘being a man’ entailed having muscle and strength to rival other males, however when not being able to demonstrate such masculine qualities individuals felt they did not conform and questioned self-masculinity. These findings contribute to existing research on forms of SV (Edwards *et al* 2017, Monaghan 2008), whilst also crucially help shed light on how male insecurities and body image dissatisfaction can develop amongst males. My research helps to fulfil knowledge gaps where existing male consumer research is lacking in relation to contemporary consumer practices effecting male lives (Brewster *et al* 2017).

My research revealed the natural body was seen as being imperfect and malleable. Furthermore, the natural male body is worked upon using cultural knowledge to embody ideals males perceived as being appealing. Such insights offer new knowledge into male embodiment practices through a CCT inspired lens by reporting upon experiential consumer practices. The impact of the varying levels of achievement and how males react to body feedback was intriguing to learn through this study. My findings in this area offer a better understanding in apprehending how body dissatisfaction can occur amongst males, who are keen to adopt body image ideals and how social ideals are negotiated and mapped onto the male body.

### **Research question 3: How do males associate body muscularity with self-regard and identity?**

It was discovered, the muscular body for all participants was a definitive way to embody their perceptions of self (concept) and set a masculine identity. This study found Mittal's (2015, 2006) view on how self was entwined within a male's identity and happen to play out through a personal narrative was prominent amongst participants. Individuals carried bodybuilder identities through clothing and props, whilst carrying masculine demeanours. I found self was objectified and partly judged by the surface and aesthetic appeal of the male body. In turn body transformation acts were used to relate the male body to conceptions of self and identity (Mittal 2015, Bey 2014).

In contributing to existing consumer research (Maclaren *et al* 2015, Bettany *et al* 2010, Holt and Thompson 2004) and particularly masculine-self commentary (Messerschmidt 2019, Pringle 2013, Jewkes *et al* 2015, Gough 2016, Kimmell *et al* 2005) the research has been able to present the body and self paradox (figure 5.11). Such a depiction outlines how the muscular body acts as an agent for an individual's perception of self and how males learn about masculine self-ideals and go on to adopt such traits, through body muscularity workouts and development. Therefore, body image manipulation was regarded as a means for maintaining a harmonious self-concept as deliberated by Schouten (1991). Furthermore, masculinity was naturalised through workouts and portrayed through body aesthetics in representing masculinity perfection (Coquet *et al* 2016). Such findings add to our understanding of the male body's significance in attributing to the self-concept and importantly how the muscular body is seen as a cherished personal attribute as confirmed by Charmaz *et al* (2019) and Vannini and Williams (2016).

My research proposes important contributions to self and male body research by portraying the close links between body image and self-regard. Participants used their bodies and workout practices for self-actualisation and masculinity optimisation. Furthermore participants strongly believed their self circumstances would improve through a taut body image such as, Andy claiming it would help him achieve a promotion at work, boost his confidence and social appeal. Additionally, Gary shared how going through the body transformation journey would improve his resilience to life challenges and the mindset to strive for more life accomplishments. As a result the study presents important contributions relating to the muscular body's role as an agent of self and its value in being a primary vehicle in which self is developed and evaluated by males. Participants rated other males through their physical profiles and believed contemporary society did the same which further drove participant's desires to acquire muscle and present 'self'.

Through the research, it was repeatedly witnessed how individuals embodied their self-concept through personal masculine credentials and body image, which led to behavioural and consumption traits to be in-sync with body transformation routines. Due to the array of meanings the muscular body possessed, the body transformation journey involved exploring and depicting body muscularity value relating to increasing masculinity and achieving physical capital. This was followed by utilising embodied characteristics to optimise self-concept and express a superior alpha-male status. Drawing from research findings, it was also identified body muscularity was symbolically important when setting a masculine identity, I found there was a positive correlation between body satisfaction and perceptions of masculinity. With muscles signifying strength and dominance, a number of males worked hard to embody an identity to convey their long term commitment to reaching a perceived superior level of masculinity. This was managed and protected for as long as possible, in order for the individual to maintain his perceived superior stature and heightened sense of self regard.

Intriguingly, through the research it was also discovered the masculine identity was also used to mask personal insecurities such as, health issues and the inherent perceived weaknesses when not being able to reach performance goals in weight training. I propose embodiment and bodily image manipulation is one of the richest forms and methods for a male to define self and to also objectively review self through the body's performance and appearance. This research extends current understanding of the link between muscularity and masculinity (Brewster *et al* 2017, Entwistle 2015, Frank 2014) by shedding further light on the processes in which male consumers develop beliefs and fulfil self-concept intentions through embodied behaviour.

#### **Research question 4: What role does the fitness setting have on males and the enactment of masculinity?**

By spending a pro-longed period in the fitness club, I was able to deconstruct some of the key actors and cultural notions operating in this environment. This analysis revealed the fitness environment not only provided ideas and inspirations of capturing the masculine ideal, but also educated my participants on how to be (hyper) masculine and carry a masculine demeanour. I conceptualised the fitness club introduced participants to the cues and real time desires of hyper masculinity and importantly the processes needed to be undertaken to become an alpha male. Hyper masculine character traits were observed and replicated by participants through the way in which they would carry their bodies, walk and talk with others. Tim when observing his peers conducting such behaviour described it as: “*Doing their hard man routine*”. This follows the notions of modern day stylish hard men as portrayed by Alexander (2003).

It was found in contemporary culture where masculinity and its expression is surrounded by confusion and many hybrid forms, the fitness club offered a safe haven to explore and feel hyper masculinity. Consequently, the routine, meeting with other males provided a regular, salutary opportunity in a world where hegemonic masculinity identity is becoming less visible and threats are ever increasing (Parent *et al* 2016). The more mature participants shared how they received compliments and gained respect from other males in the fitness club, due to physical capital and body strength they had achieved. Amongst these individuals, it was witnessed the fitness club was where their perceptions of self was developed leading it to be a sacred location to uplift a male’s stature.

The research builds upon Bourdieu’s (2001, 1984b) concept of social capital relating to the fitness habitus. The act of attending the fitness club, weight training and working on the body presented the opportunities to engage in social networks of other male trainers, gym users and club staff who shared a similar habitus (Bourdieu 2001). The social capital achieved through the network was valued by participants and set lifestyle choices and self agendas. These findings offer contemporary contributions to the bodybuilding/weight training habitus which Klein (1993) and Monaghan (2005b) deliberated upon. I have been able to present findings from a more contemporary mainstream perspective of a fitness club to capture the impact on male consumers who are not necessarily competing but living bodybuilder like lifestyles. As a result this study helps to build upon the cultural meanings of male fitness as a body constructing scene to showcase self-identity and superior masculinity.

Through the competitive act of weight training and achieving milestones, participants related to their self-concepts and developed perceptions of self-ideals in the fitness environment. The study found some participants were embroiled in chasing recognition from other male trainers by spending a prolonged period in the setting to demonstrate self-worth and commitment to body transformation. Participants also shared how when visits to the fitness club were not possible, they felt lacking in self and believed they had let themselves and others down.

It was also discovered the cultural notions of bodybuilding and weight training were used as an inspiration to adopt behavioural and consumption traits. By mapping out the social, cultural influences I have been able to contribute to CCT themes by exploring the wider socio-cultural variables and their play on the masculine body. Bajde (2013) advocated, CCT invites researchers to disentangle culture so that it becomes less of a stable entity and more of a landscape which consumer agencies operate in. I have attempted to do this through the portrayal of the cultural make-up of the fitness setting and the wider weight training cultural movement (illustrated in figure 5.2). Through such a depiction, the significance of the fitness environment was highlighted in acting as a central location where males worked on body transformation aspirations and engaged in the bodybuilding culture.

I found masculinity enactment was regularly conducted in the fitness context to fulfil self masculine narratives for males seeking to touch base with hyper masculinity. It was discovered a number of participants wanted to replicate ideals portrayed through global discourses of bodybuilding culture at a local level. This included having large muscular bodies and wearing famous brands and clothing labels. This research follows on from previous work on the symbolic role of fitness contexts (Sassatelli 2017, 2007) and culture (Bey 2014, Shilling 2012), in providing a multiplicity of meanings to males in learning about masculinity and privileges of physical body capital. I found the fitness club had a lasting impression on my participants as it encouraged narcissistic behaviour. I argue through this research, these contexts can influence perceptions of self-concept amongst participants who used it to make sense of what embodied masculinity is and how it supplemented their gendered self. Such findings inspire further research into the contexts of fitness settings and the symbolic role they play in male consumer lives. This includes looking at the fitness environment's influence on perceptions of masculinity and as a sacred location to protect and engage in masculine behaviour.

## **6.5 Practical research implications**

Through a better understanding of those males entwined within body transformation the study can offer some valuable practical implications. It is important to highlight the prominent rise of the fitness, weight training culture I witnessed through my research. Spending the last 7 years studying this field, I have seen the exponential growth of social media stars and fitness brands occupying prominent virtual space in newsfeeds, visual imagery and podcasts across mainstream social media sites. In turn, embodied consumption relating to the muscular, toned body has become a lot more popular and embedded in mainstream culture.

This is of significant importance to marketers in particular those working in male consumer markets. Marketers need to pay more attention to male consumers and their needs. Research has implicated `males can now be classed as consumers and not only producers of consumer goods as previously advocated (Frank 2014, Alexander 2003). Marketers should acknowledge the lifestyle choices males follow and the symbolic representation of the muscular body and its relation to the self-concept. I found a number of participants carefully chose products and services to fit with fitness orientated lifestyle choices, whilst also selecting products to supplement perceptions of ideal self and identity. Consumer researchers should consider male consumers more comprehensively in understanding their needs and desires relating to body image management. There should also be consideration to the implications of media publicised male body ideals on masculine identity motives and the lived experiences of the male body.

## **6.6 Research limitations**

The research was geared towards capturing an in-depth understanding of male embodied practices related to health and fitness and how these orchestrated sense of self and identity setting. Focused on obtaining a thick description the research was not intended to produce generalisable concepts for wider scope, or to offer theories exclusively for sociological knowledge. The study involved following a relatively small sample of males entwined within fitness discourses and consequently, did not attempt to portray overarching findings that applied to the wider population of males. I paid particular attention to gaining deep insights into embodied consumer behaviour by getting close and experiencing the body changing journey myself.

A significant limitation of the research was that the approach was heavily dependent upon my skill and expertise to conduct effective research and to interpret the findings in a non-bias and uncontested manner (Bazeley 2004). Such drawbacks raise concerns about the interpretative approach followed, as it lacked the scientific rigour and validity of the research data collected (Rolfe 2006). The research was also confined to the local demographics of Middlesbrough, UK where participants resided in. This has resulted in the research being highly contextualised to the fieldwork setting and time period data was collected. Similarly, the sampling strategy limited the breadth of the research to my participants and their views.

The representativeness of my research findings is limited. I did check the wider applicability of my findings with other fitness club members and I also performed member checking (Cho and Trent 2006) to confirm the accuracy of my recorded accounts. The research data collection also focused on males working out in groups, as opposed to individually. This happen to occur in order to gain access to participants from those who were sharing experiences with others and consequently were more open for me to join them. The group dynamics of males working out together did happen to shape the experiences of body transformation through competitiveness, sharing ideas and workout routines. It is envisaged, engaging with individuals on a solo journey would result in capturing an altogether different perspective due to the group dynamics I witnessed.

## **6.7 Future research Implications**

The research has opened multiple avenues to explore male embodiment by encouraging the adoption of a cross-disciplinary approach, as opposed to only sociological based. There has been a real effort to link to consumer research, as this was identified where knowledge was lacking in male embodied practices and the muscular body's consumption value. Inspired by a consumer culture theory lens, the research has been able to establish the links between masculinity, embodiment, self and identity. It is envisaged this will now inspire further academic interest in several research disciplines. For example, research within consumer research should consider the consumption value of the muscular, masculine body and its role in consumer lives. Research should also consider the ongoing impact of social, cultural discourses and how these implicate and shape lived experiences of masculinity and the male body. Research within the domains of self-concept and identity would benefit from looking at the muscular body in greater detail, paying attention to its true significance, as a sign-bearing and sign-wearing phenomena shaping male consumers lives.

## 6.8 Concluding remarks

Through this research study I have offered a more focused analysis on the male consumer and male embodiment practices. I have related concepts of masculinity and body transformation to underpin sense of self and yield bodily capital for identity setting amongst a group of body image conscious males. My research findings have emphasised the significance of the figurative muscular body in acquiring physical capital (Bourdieu 1984a) and its unprecedented value to male consumers.

This adds to socialistic views posed by Plummer (2016) and more recently Bordo (2018) and Gough (2018b) in the aptitude of the idealised body image, in symbolically projecting personal self-worth and identity. I found existing research did not consider the navigation processes that males engage in around social discourses, which created knowledge and power of body, its image and value in consumption behaviour. Through this research, I have presented the case of embodied lives amongst a group of males. These individuals experienced symbolic benefits of adopting body ideals and consequently shaped their self-concept and masculinity beliefs through everyday lived experiences of the male body.

By training a theoretical and empirical lens on both the aesthetic and symbolic value of the muscular body, I have been able to contribute to and advance work in the area of male embodied consumerism and consumer research. In order to continue to increase our understanding of the male body, there is a need to capture its multi-dimensional value and how it augments self and identity. By framing the nature of embodied consumer practices using CCT principles the research has been able to scope the broader socio-cultural contexts where consumption habits exist and grow. Furthermore, the interplay between the male consumer and market discourses has been considered to drive the nature of embodiment journeys in capturing body image ideals. Respectively, the research has offered new insights into embodied consumerism and its impact on male consumers. My research has re-emphasised themes already present in existing literature (Clatterbaugh 2018, Frank 2014, Crossley 2006); however, I have tried to push the consumer analysis of male embodiment forward as a substantial, theoretical line of inquiry deserved of further research.

Through my investigation of male body practices, I have argued:

- Conceptions of body ideals are collectively shared in and through social discourses, but are individually rooted in self; hence why not all men work out or strive to obtain a muscular body image.
- Masculine ideals are diffused through social, cultural constructs, whilst individuals make sense of these messages for self-practices in the adoption of self-narratives to fulfil interpretive beliefs.



- The natural male body reacts in different ways, through an individual's biological make-up and genetics hence why there is a wide array of masculinity presentation forms and body aesthetics previewed by males. As a result males adapt an interpretive form of muscular body image whilst continually chasing ideals.
- Fitness settings act as cherished environments to learn about hyper masculinity and engage in practices to align self with perceived masculine ideals, shaping an individual's habitus.
- Body transformation projects act as a means of setting lifestyle choices and consumptions habits for male consumers, helping to naturalise masculinity and sense of self in contemporary cultural contexts.

In essence, my research has posed important implications for marketing and consumer research. By outlining the premise of understanding male consumers and embodied practices in particularly around the motives to work on body to fulfil desires of self and identity ideals in the midst of constantly negotiated, changing socio-cultural ideals of masculinity and body image. The significance of this study is focused upon the analysis of how a group of males understand the various marketing concepts of the masculine body and its appearance and correspondingly, how they navigate and mediate various discourses and cultural knowledge in carving out an idealised body. This draws the research to a close with the main contributions outlined above. I hope this study inspires further research into male embodiment and male consumer research, as I have found it is an intriguing phenomenon deserved of further research.

## **Appendix A: An extract from reflective diary/field notes**

### **A1: The Monday chest session**

9<sup>th</sup> May 2016, 17.10-18.30

I joined my now 9<sup>th</sup> chest session with the committed weight trainers group which happen to allow me to make some good progress with both the bench press and incline chest press exercises. I sensed Steve was proud of the fact I had broken the 100kg barrier today, it did feel good, everyone noticed by strength had been improved. The session today emphasised the feeling lifting weights provided, I felt hyper masculine after pushing 5 reps on 100kg. Due to the fact I got acknowledged by Steve and Luke it somehow confirmed by masculine credentials, like I was worthy of training with these guys, whilst also showing I could compete with them. The session also demonstrated the influence other males have on us trainers. We had at least 4 other males watching us and discussing our exercises. We were all well aware of this with Steve instructing us to show off what we could lift. I found both Steve and Luke adapted their behaviour and eagerness to break their previous records using the attention from other males to motivate them. This was also attempted by Andy who was looking for the same recognition. Luke stated Andy needed to lift more in order to get some respect. The competitive rivalry was ever present and Steve and Luke had continued to set the tone in pushing us to lift more and show how serious we were. This did act as a form of pressure for me and Andy today to improve our performance and show we could compete with Steve and Luke.

I noticed Luke was not his usual self today and was snappy at Steve, he appeared to be in a rush and did not stick around to talk with us at the end. Andy also mentioned Dan would return this (after missing last week) week to which Steve was sceptical, commenting he had not turned up today. Reflecting upon the session today I found the presence did push us to perform more and move beyond our comfort zones. The pressure did bring anxiety at times when waiting for my turn on the bench knowing I would need to perform and bench press a new record of heavy weight. Watching Andy and Luke go first set the precedence and I had to then follow and put on a good show in order to show my progress. Steve was insistent on pushing ourselves more, he was accustomed to doing this himself and expected the same from us. After breaking my last session's record it did feel good, a new achievement was secured under my belt and it did provide a good feeling. Being called a 'beast' by Andy brought a feeling of hyper masculinity. I found being labelled with such a term brought with it a new level of respect, I felt I had climbed the pecking order in the group. Steve's pressure for us to perform was not liked to begin with. I found his dominance over us to perform was not pleasant, however it was temporary and when we did perform that feeling of achievement was worth it. This I believe is what made the training so addictive. I was now seriously committed to improving my benching record and developing my pecs. The combination of body performance, masculine competitiveness and breaking previous records together with seeing aesthetical results on my pectoral muscles were powerful influences acting on my desires and I could not help but being loyal to the group and the training due to the psychological and physical embodied rewards I was experiencing.

## A2: Session notes

Steve noticed me pull in the car park and waited for me at the club entrance. I rushed over to find him speaking to XX about the nice weather and the desire to make preparations for looking good over the summer months. Steve remarked *"It's that time of the year to notch it up another level, get some good gains. The sun is just is a motivator, it lifts my mood and I just want to train harder"*. Upon entering the club XX was still accompanying us, we noticed Luke and Andy waiting near the flat bench press. Steve shouted aloud, *"Not the flat we going to do incline first"*. As we reached the weight training area Luke remarked, *"We can't do incline first, the benches are taken we will after do flat first"*. Steve, muttered under his breath, *"I wish some of these time wasters sitting on their phones on a bench would piss off"*.

It was nearly 5.30pm and the weight training area was busy, I counted 17 males in the area with the majority undertaking pectoral muscle exercises. It was international chest day for sure in the gym world! We setup ourselves up in the far left hand corner bench near to the weights and as Arctic Monkeys (Fluorescent Adolescent) came on the club radio station, we began warming up with the bar. Andy remarked, *"Let's focus on repetitions today I want to really stretch the chest muscles"*. Luke replied, *"I want to go heavy as well, I want to try and beat 6 reps on 130 today"*. I stated we could pyramid up and down so we get both repetitions and heavy lifts in. Steve was engaged with two males on the neighbouring bench who had asked Steve what was the routine he was doing. The males were fairly new to the club. They appeared to look in their early 20's and as both were wearing Gold's gym t-shirts Steve remarked *"Hope you are living up to the gold standard"*.

As we commenced putting more weight onto the bar incrementing by 10kg plates, Andy asked me spot him on 60kg. As I stood behind the bar Luke came and stood beside whilst, Steve remained at the front looking out to the training area, occasionally looking behind and stating to Andy to slow and feel the chest muscles contract. I noticed he was observing the two males beside us and upon realising I had observed him look, he came close to me and stated; *"The Gold twins are new here and want to know what we do, they seem to be watching our form and trying to lift what we are"*. I noticed Steve was inquisitive of them and as I took my turn on benching 80kg, Steve turned around and asked the two males where they had come from. One of the males explained they were from another gym and were just having a look around the club. Steve began engaging in further discussion with them. This appeared to annoy Luke: *"Look at him he is a little chatter box I want to get this session over with not make friends with newbies"*. Andy added, *"It's always the case lads always want to know what we do and mouth here spends more time talking then training"*. Steve overheard Andy, and as he turned to face him had a grin on his face, whilst stating: *"It's not my fault people want to talk to me"*. Luke at this point raised his voice: *"Let's get on I want to be out at a decent time today"*.

As we progressed through the session we moved to the free weight training area to undertake dumbbells exercise on the incline bench. Now there was more males around us training, including a group of three males we were familiar with. These males were at similar age to us and commonly trained at a similar time. This encouraged Luke and Steve to up the pace and attempt to beat their previous incline record. Luke went first with Steve and Andy close by watching Luke carefully and supporting the 55kg dumbbells on either side.

I noticed the other males now watching Luke undertake the exercise and as he took his first repetition, Steve quietly commented: *“You got an audience watching now so don’t let the team down, you can do this full 10 reps”*. As Luke successfully achieved the 10 reps and got up from the bench, he appeared to get a nod of approval amongst the males around us at the time.

Andy went next by undertaking the exercise at 40kg. He appeared to struggle at the first few, whilst I was spotting him but then managed get through the ten reps. Andy followed a similar style as Luke sat up with chest muscles flexed and glanced around to see who was watching. Luke noticed this and stated: *“You won’t get the attention yet until you lift some big weights”*. Andy smirked whilst still looking around to see if anybody had seen his attempt. I went next, Steve asked, what weight I was going to lift, I stated I would do 45kg. Steve responded: *“Don’t bother, get the 50’s, it’s about making gains you need to push yourself don’t be a wimp, we got you, the weights are not going to fall on you just get a feel of it and push out between 4-6 reps”*. I went along with it and manage to achieve 5 repetitions. Upon getting up of the bench, Luke remarked: *“You need to have some more self-belief, you are getting strong”*.

## Appendix B: Research participants profiles with coding extract

### B1 Participant group 1: Committed weight trainers

- Steve – Great passion for training and body maintenance.
- Andy – Young, impressionable, self-admirer.
- Dan – Very observant of surroundings, training to improve his quality of life.
- Luke – A pro at weight training, passion for reading about the science of the male body

#### Steve - 'Great passion for training and body maintenance'

Body image conscious

Steve can be described as a 'hardened' weight trainer who has been training since the age of 15 and has grown to become very **body conscious**. Steve has been the most valuable participant in the fieldwork as not only did he introduce me to other members, he has provided a great insight into his **embodied lifestyle** and training regimes. Steve has been very influential to a point whereby I have adopted similar traits during the research period which has had a long lasting impression on how I see my body and making **certain lifestyle choices** to develop a muscular body and **strong mind**.

Lifestyle dictated by managing and maintaining the muscular body

Body management lifestyle

Self-development

Steve began training in the gym at a young age as he recalls how attending a secondary school where he and his older brother were the only Asian pupils, meant they were the target of **bullying** and being picked upon due to colour and race. Steve described how his brother encouraged him to **toughen up** and learn how to "*look after himself*". Steve described his troubled childhood living with his aunt and uncle as his parents were in their native country. Steve explained his older brother made him aware of working out whereby initially the focus was to build strength. Steve mentioned how the first 8 months of his training life were about how much he could lift on a bench press and biceps curls as opposed to body aesthetics. "*My focus was to lift a respectable amount of weight in the gym so that other members would take notice. I wasn't concerned about my body I was naturally skinny and fairly timid looking*". Steve described how after training for a period of 6-8 months he began to **pay more attention to other weight trainers** and particularly their bodies.

Circumstances driving body transformation motives

Self character development

Get noticed by other males

Comparing self with other males in the fitness environment

*"There were two guys in my gym who had very big biceps and would stand in front of the mirrors curling free weights and watching themselves whilst talking about the 'pump'.*

Steve went on to describe about how on one occasion he was standing nearby picking up some weights when one of the bicep curling guys asked him to pass over a weight to him and whilst Steve stood nearby the guy mentioned the pump of his bicep. Steve was inquisitive and asked what he meant. Steve explained how he told him to squeeze his bicep as hard as he could, Steve recalled it was “solid as iron with veins popping out”. Steve described how he then like to curl biceps in the mirror like the guys and build supple bicep muscles. Steve defined it as a turning point when he went from purely a strength focus to aesthetics and started training in front of the mirror more often. Steve described how strength could only be tested when lifting weights from one week to the next, whilst bodily muscle could be monitored both inside and outside of the gym: “It was a way of checking on signs of progression to see which muscles have developed and where tone had been established”. I asked what motivated Steve to develop body aesthetics. Steve replied:

Learning about hyper masculinity in the fitness environment

Focus on body aesthetics as a way to monitor the masculine body

Insecurities present

“I wanted to show I was strong, I had a lot of insecurities at school when I was younger, I was lacking confidence, felt like I didn’t fit in. I wanted to show there was something about me and muscles apparently are the thing to have so that people would be more vary of you and wouldn’t mess with you. As I got a little older say 18-19 years old muscles seem to get more noticed by girls so I enjoyed that and that spurred me on to get bigger and develop more muscle. I would normally wear black, baggy clothes but as I packed more muscle I started showing my body of more, I started to wear t-shirts and was particularly fond of developing big bicep muscles, as they helped me being popular with the ladies. I think for me I developed my confidence with my body as I got older I didn’t have a gift of the gab or smartness, I only talked to people who talked to me. But as I reached my late teens I would compare my body with other males in my college class and who I would see around my neighbourhood and then I realised I was bigger than some, more toned and could overcome them physically. This in my mind gave me confidence to talk and socialise because then people wanted to know me and what I did. Although I don’t like to admit it I do have an obsessive type of personality I do need a focus in life that I can see hard work rewards you in some way”.

Muscles used as identity marker

Symbolic representation of a muscular body

Self augmentation through muscles

Develop confidence through muscular body

Muscular body as a social aid

Social popularity

I asked Steve to elaborate upon this:

“Exercise has become a way of life for me. I use it to focus my mind, my life to some extent, that’s why I find it hard to have a close relationship with a partner I need to exercise, I feel if I don’t do it my body and mind take a dive, it provides discipline and good feeling for me personally that’s why I have stuck with it for most of my life. It’s one of the few things in life you get what you put into it, all those hours in the gym, the training, drinking protein shakes and not eating crap pays off with a nice body you can be proud of and not be ashamed of showing it off”.

Self-fulfilment through exercise and adopting a muscular body

Sense of achievement

Steve described when he did not train he felt lethargic, as if he was missing something, he stated how his body felt stiff; **"I feel shit like my power has been sucked out of me"**. Steve went on to explain a time period when he underwent an operation on his back to remove a cyst and stated how the 4 months of non-training had a detrimental effect on his mind and body. Steve described **how his mood was negatively** affected due to missing the daily exercise routine and physically exerting his energy. Steve described he experienced a snowball effect where the non-training meant he had more time so he did not know what to do with so began to watch more TV and become lazier, eat more food and generally not look after his body. He stated **how training gave him the energy, motivation** to be healthier, live a more organised life and have a more positive mental attitude, as it proved to be therapeutic for both his body and mind.

Physical loss when not training

Depressed when not being able to train

Psychological boost achieved through training

Steve on several occasions discussed **his body as an 'identity maker'** and when asked about this he explained to me, **his body was seen as the surface upon which his personality, beliefs were mapped onto and wanted to portray to the world how he wants to express himself**. I provided an objective view and stated his body to me expressed: *"Masculinity, dedication and appearance conscious to a point of a narcissists"*. Steve found this humorous and replied how he agreed with my first 3 points but not the latter as he said that was in a negative light and that he was just concerned about looking after himself. I proposed how some people might find him shallow and naïve to which Steve replied: **"Some people might but I will have the last laugh when I will grow older gracefully and not suffer from muscle loss and look old quickly"**. I asked how Steve would avoid the aging process to which he replied: *"It's about keeping muscle on the body and continuing to use it if you stay lean and have some muscle definition your body will remain supple and you will still be able to move around freely without getting a crooked back or overweight to a point diabetes and the likes take their toll"*.

Muscular body as an identity marker

Muscular body acting as surface upon which personality, beliefs are mapped onto

Body as an expression of self

Perceived biological benefits of training

Body image management

Steve went on to state how working on his body made him look at his **food intake and assess what nutrients he needed**. He stated prior to weight training he did not take any multi vitamin tablets, supplements and working on his body made him review and take what his body needed. **"It has benefited me and my life on so many different levels I can't tell you and hope that it continues and constantly has a positive impact on my health"**. I stated how the intense training sessions were making us take our bodies' way out of our comfort zone and could have been sceptical to injury and fatigue. Steve explained the intense routines were purposely followed to shock our bodies and muscles, whilst stating how the intensity eventually eased off after the first few weeks of training as our bodies adapted to it and we saw results of those sessions through muscle and tone development.

Disciplining self through muscular body management

Perceived benefits of body transformation routine

Body transformation linked to health and wellbeing

Steve also commonly made the point weight training and body development pays rewards. He commonly spoke how it was a: *“fair game, what you put in is what you get out”*. He said it **was something he dedicated his time to, as it was something he had a strong belief for and would get personal satisfaction**. Steve explained he done it for himself and the rewards of **feeling superior** and **more masculine** were his personal uplifting experiences and having those feelings were an incentive to continue training.

Personal satisfaction  
 Doing it for himself  
 Masculine superiority  
 Body transformation positivity

I asked Steve to describe his idealistic body:

*“I would describe the perfect body as a well formed, toned body, not big or overly muscular just some muscle especially well formed shoulders, delts to give a broad top half and then a big chest like mine I do have a well-developed pectoral muscles with clear lines of the chest muscle groups. Then a tight mid frame which slims right down into the waist. It very important to be well toned in the mid-drift as this then accentuates your shoulders and chest if you look at **Axel** [Youtube body model publicist] you will see he does not have a big frame but his tight toned body looks big as the muscle tone gives the impression of bigger frame. **So a tight mid drift**. Arms should have some size especially the biceps and triceps. You should be able to grab your arm with one hand and feel the tightness and muscle, then you have decent arms. Legs not to be big but to have fairly sized quads as again this helps with overall body image. **So in essence I don’t like a big oversized muscle-bound bodies but a lean, muscle toned body is what appeals to be me”**.*

Influence from social discourses  
 Clear aspirations of body shape desired

Aspirational body image drawing produced by Steve.



*“The perfect body for me should consist of ultra-lean muscle, with clear definition and lines. Anyone can get big but it is about having them muscle fibres to be well developed which is the hard thing and the only sign to show how committed you are with a good training regime, spot on diet and strict discipline. The body should portray this. This is what I am aiming for”.*

Steve (committed weight trainer, July 2016)



**Luke** - *'A pro at weight training, passion for reading about the science of the male body'*

Luke was introduced to me through Steve who had known Luke a number of years prior to the research study commencing. Luke explained how he and Steve had been involved in gym circles for a number of years where they were both visiting the same gyms/fitness centres and training together at times. Luke was the most muscular and toned participant. I found he encompassed a well adopted body which he stated he had maintained since the age of 22. Luke has a Cypriot mother who now lives in her native country and father who was British who suddenly passed away when he was 24 years old.

Spending time both within the fitness and outside of these premises I observed Luke was a reserved character and as he was mature he did not really pose his body. Luke did have a very desirable body other participants were envious of and he did get a lot of looks from other males in social settings. When I asked Luke how he got into weight training and working on his body Luke explained how he was inspired by movies such as Rocky, Terminator and boxers such as Sugar Ray Leonard. I questioned how these inspired him. He stated how from a young age his father taught him to live his daily life in a regimented way and to exercise daily.

Influence to adopt the muscular body from movie stars and professional sport stars

Luke stated how his father was in the army and mimicked his home life to systems, procedures and rules he got from his service. Luke described how he would wake up at 6.30am every morning with his dad have porridge, take the dogs out for a walk and jog sometimes and do some house chores prior to getting ready for school. When returning Luke helped his mother deliver newspapers, take the dogs out for a walk again prior to having tea and then do some reading prior to going to bed at 9pm sharp. He stated how this was the routine he got so inclined to do that he felt lost when away from home and when his dad fell ill.

Daily exercise and discipline

In relation to inspiring film characters and sport stars Luke explained how he was intrigued by how boxers trained prior to a fight; through the intensive, daily routines. Subsequently, he told me his dad put him through intense daily exercise as a way of keeping fit and disciplined. He stated at the age of 13/14 years old it was not boxing itself but the training and regimented routines he was interested in. Waking up for early morning jogs, running up hills, doing 100 press up an sits up in a day broken down into 30 minutes bursts and then doing some boxing on the punch bag was a routine Luke stated he done consistently for 3 years. He stated it became a part of life and although he did not have particular goals in mind, he believed it was: "how you became a man".

Intrigued by professional athletes training routines

Daily exercise and discipline

Masculinity in the making

Luke stated how his dad was a very influential figure in his early life in working out and placing a **high importance on daily exercise**. He stated the movies with the likes of **Arnold and Rocky** just accentuated the lifestyle and gaining a big muscular body. He recalls how at the age of 14 years old he started to eat more, lift a cast iron weight in his garage to become big: *"I did get a little bit obsessed with getting big, I thought it was the thing to do and my **school friends use to spur me** on when we use to lift each other for a laugh and play rugby I obtained an identity of being a warrior so I just went along with it"*.

Perceived significance of daily exercise

Movie stars influence on training and developing a muscular body.

Social popularity to get big and muscular

Luke described how he got **moulded into working out from a young age** (8, 9 years old he recalls). However he states at the age of 15 he noticed how he had a muscular body which allowed him to be physically strong in school and playing sports with his school friends. Luke explained that he started paying more **attention to his body image at the age of 15**, he states that was when he had noticed other young males at school use to look at him topless in P.E lessons and ask to feel his biceps and press against his chest to feel how hard it was. **That feeling he explained spurred him on to working on his muscles** more and whilst exercising to monitor muscles and try and emphasise the various upper body muscle groups.

Moulded into working out

Focus on body image

Positivity of getting noticed by muscular aesthetics

Luke elaborated how at the age of 16 his dad was not keen on allowing Luke to go to the gym as he perceived it was where steroids were sold and that Luke would get into the wrong crowd. He stated how his dad sent him to a local boxing training place which he described, as a house converted into a boxing training setting with a small boxing ring and a variety of punch bags. Luke described how training in that setting involved some boxing training to keep his dad happy but he described how he would spend time in the corner of a room where there were a set of free weights and a mirror. **Luke proposed how he did look up to boxers** and their athleticism but stated he was not interested in taking up boxing: *"I use to spend the time curling weights, sitting on a bench and lifting weights and doing some compound moves"*. He stated he **wanted to put size on so could be distinctively largest male in his year group at school and be muscular**. *"The likes of Arnould and Mike Tyson were idealised in mainstream media so I tried to obtain a similar body"*. Luke posed how he thought **Arnould and Mike were the pinnacle of manhood** and used their bodies as a tool to obtain the spotlight and become famous. Luke remembers the influence of Arnould and how he made the big, muscular body popular and sexual to which Luke stated I could relate to *".. as I was no longer seen as a freak for **being muscular but a man, with a sexy body**"*.

Sport stars acting as a significant influence in transforming body shape

To share commonality with movie stars and sport personalities

Desire to become muscular and fulfil masculinity beliefs

Sexual appeal of the muscular body

Luke described how after leaving school he was not sure what to do and his dad pushed him to take up an apprenticeship in engineering. Luke explained how again he worked with young males of a similar age and again **adopted an identity** of a being a strong muscular lad which Luke stated help him **dominate other males** and allowed him to be select which jobs to do. Luke recalled how when he first met the group of co-workers at an

Identity setting through muscular physique

Able to dominate other males

industrial plant the lads came together and there was some show downs with the group intimidating each other. Luke described how he was the quite type so at first did not say anything but the group happen to undertake an arm-wrestling competition whereby the showdown separated the boys from the men and Luke happen to beat everyone including one of the engineering mentors so he then was **perceived differently: "with respect"**. Luke described how his body allowed him to adopt masculine superiority from a young age.

Perceived economic benefits of being muscular

Treated with respect

I asked Luke when he began visiting gyms/fitness centre as he stated how he faced resistance from his father initially. Luke explained how the boxing place near his home closed down and he and couple of other young lads started hanging on the streets which his parents did not like so he persuaded them to let him attend a local back street gym with his friend and father initially twice a week. Luke described how the first time in the gym he **felt at home**: *"I seen other older guys in vests, bulging muscles, benching big amount of weight, I was like yeah"*. Luke described how quickly after attending a few sessions **a few of the older guys gave him inspiration and spurred him on**. He described how a couple of the gym members stated Luke had a very strong foundation with a good muscular body and little fat which not many young lads had. Luke described they were like: *"Yeah son you can make some good gains"*. **Luke found this inspirational** and began spending a lot more time in the gym. Luke stated how he felt **he became part of a movement**, a culture the gym was no longer seen as a place for exercise but a **club for like-minded individuals** who wanted to better themselves both physically and mentally, *"feel they are part of something"*.

The influence of the fitness environment acting as a sacred place

Taking inspiration from the fitness environment

Weight training/body transformation acting as a cultural movement

Luke recalls how that initial gym and **other weight trainers made him feel superior** and special which he states he did not get from school or his father. Luke recalls how it helped him become **mentally strong**: *"As I had role models I looked up to in the gym with older guys they told me they seen talent in me which I had not heard of before and that enlightened me to training on the body and putting yourself through excoriating pain to increase your pain thresholds so that you could challenge anything"*. Luke prescribes this period as the time the passion developed which has since remained instilled in him.

Role models in the gym

Character building

Luke told me he had a child with a previous partner which at first he did not see however was starting to spend more time with his young boy now aged 9. Luke described how he thinks the UK schooling system fails a number of kids in developing mental strength skills and that he would be taking this upon himself by introducing the gym environment as soon as he could so that his son would develop such skills. Luke proposed how he sees **working on the body a part of life** for a young man and it's: *"Not about doing it for naivety reasons to become more appealing but the **mental strength and increasing comfort zone**"*.

Body transformation and weight training as part of life.

Working on strength as part of masculine experience

Luke commented upon how in today's society children are exposed to many potentially dangerous threats, whilst they are not educated to deal with such threats therefore it is up to the parents to school kids in developing mental agility and toughen them up. Luke had a lot to say on this matter but I felt the discussion was swaying away from the scope of my research so I stopped the conversation and moved on to discuss the relationship Luke had with his body and what he would pass onto his son.

Luke proposed he seen his body as a *"tool, it's our exterior selves"* he mentioned *"it is something we can invest in develop and use to get far in life"*. Luke mentioned how his father taught him to look after his body from a young age and not abuse it through alcohol and drugs. Luke proposed the body required nurturing as we were *"exerting it"* to get the best out of it through close conditioning, weight resistance training and cardio vascular activities. Luke proposed how he would consult literature which documented the lifestyles and training routines of athletes and use this for both himself and when schooling his son. I asked why athletes in particular Luke stated, *"Because in my eyes athletes have the best body image and the well-established body maintenance routines to ensure optimum body performance"*.

Body image as exterior self representation

Following routines of professional athletes

I asked which athletes appealed to him. Luke stated it was the little older professionals who had retired from the game but still had respectable bodies. Ryan Giggs, Joe Calzaghe were mentioned. Asking why in particular, Luke stated these professionals may not have enjoyed the best possible success but remained humbled and dedicated into looking after themselves. He stated he had followed these and other athletes online through social media paying attention to their lifestyles, daily routines and food choices which Luke stated he mimicked to adopt healthy, good body maintenance routines which would prove valuable as he is now getting older and stated how he respected these older athletes.

Following athletes through social media to get insights into lifestyle, exercise routines and daily habits.

I then asked what particular type of body/body image appealed to Luke. Luke admitted when he was in his early 20's he just wanted to be as muscular as possible as he felt that's what differentiated to other young males and 'it was the thing' to do. Luke stated he felt he did not have any major talent or intelligence to strive at something and instead focused his energies on working on his body as he seen results of the hard work he put in with the daily routine and high discipline was something positive in his life. Luke prescribed how at 25 he was persuaded into a body show where he was 'forced' to do unnatural things to his body to look aesthetically good. Luke prescribed that's when he realised the aesthetical side was not for him as he associated weight training and body maintenance as part of a healthy lifestyle and when he was asked to starve himself, drink no water and obtain fake tans he perceived things were going too far and quit the body show just before it was announced he made the finals.

Desire to be big and muscular to begin with.

Working on identity as compensation for other aspects perceived as lacking in

Body transformation offered positive feeling in life

Luke stated since the age of 28 (years old) he has been a lot more focused on strength and conditioning he states he has been a lot more attention to what the body can do through physical intensive training, stamina building, whilst body image looks and aesthetics was not a priority, although he stated it was a by-product of a good training regime. Luke also admitted, although training as a group made him look at his body image more and he had tailored some sessions to emphasise some muscles especially when he seen other participants muscles develop, Luke admitted it was a competitive, male trait which he could not help. He stated his body goals were now to not develop any more muscle as he felt he was well proportioned, but instead to **tighten up and become more toned**. Luke admitted he was now getting older and wanted to maintain the body which would make him **looker younger than what he was**. I commented he was not that old and could still outperform other participants in the training group. Luke then admitted he had misled me on his age and was not 33 but in fact just turned 38. This came as a surprise and I asked why he had done this. Luke explained how he did not tell anyone his 'real age' as he was a little insecure and wanted to remain looking younger as he was still not settled in a relationship and still in 'limbo' regarding his career. I asked him to further elaborate on this.

Group training encouraged comparing body image with other males

Working on lean muscle after training for a number of years

Desire to remain looking young

Luke then opened up a little more and stated he was on a personal mission to **defy age**:

Defy biological aging process through body management routines

*"I think it's all in the head, you say you are now in your 40's so you have to take things easy and do nothing to intensive as joints and muscles are not the same. Or when you settle down with a partner you think you can now let yourself go now and indulge in things as you have a partner. It's all in the head, I think age is just a number and mentally we need to train ourselves and bodies to defy age and get the most out of life without giving up. I take influence from the Mediterranean lifestyle and diet as my mum is Cypriot and as you might know they live active lifestyles and eat mainly organic natural foods which I tend to do.*

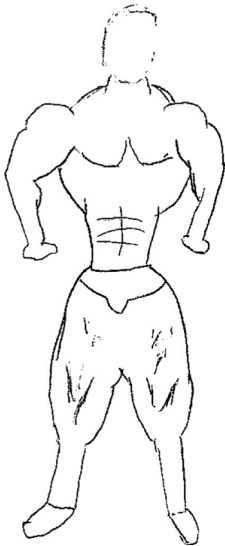
*I always say the way your **body is, is a reflection of your lifestyle and food choices and I want to stay looking good, feeling healthy and strong as long as I can because it provides so much mental positivity, inner peace and confidence to do and strive for more**. **So yes my relationship with my body is close, but also spiritual** I say it harbours a lot of my thinking and world view it reflects my beliefs, my attitude and how I think everyone can and should be. It does speak to me through the pain, tiredness etc and it's also **is a machine when I'm working out and on the punch bag. It gives the mind some mental simulation to as you focus your energies on techniques and exercises and discipline yourself, built your pain threshold, increase your resistance levels both in the sense of strength and resisting indulgence.***

Body and its image seen as a reflection of lifestyle

Spiritual connection with body

*So yes that's why I got into body workouts and developing muscles and why I intend to keep on doing it and pass it on to my son the many lessons it has taught me as a person to better ourselves more physically and emotionally".*

Luke's image of aspirational body image.



*"You see it's all about the toning and advanced muscle. I prefer leanness and some muscle tone and to have an athletic look. Most lads just want size and muscle. I have been doing this for years and learnt, it's not about that, you need to have well engineered muscle like a well refined athlete the body needs to be advanced with good supplement intake and quality muscle tone that is the holy grail of the muscle lined body".*

(Luke, committed weight trainer, June 2016)

**Dan** - 'Very observant of surroundings, training to improve quality of life'

Dan was an interesting case as he admitted he had been overweight for many years since the age of 18. Dan stated at the time he was conscious of the state of his body but after failing to lose weight his motivation would go and he would continue eating unhealthy food and generally not looking after himself. Dan stated as a child he was naturally big and strong and was distinctively bigger and more powerful than other children in his age group. When growing up he stated he took this for granted and did not really look at his body or the need to train and develop it. He recalls how at the age of 16 he went through a significant stressful period with family issues and begun to comfort eat and consequentially put a lot of weight on which he has struggled to get rid of. Dan comments, *"I got fat and as people noticed and said I need to lose weight I was encouraged to diet but then when the weight didn't come off I got demotivated and carried on living the way I did"*. Dan admitted how **he got bullied** during a phase at college when he was known as 'chubby' and was ridiculed. Dan acknowledged this made him feel depressed although he got accustomed to carrying the identity of being obese, whilst becoming thick skinned. Dan stated how he then carried the belief he would always be overweight and **not be proud of his own body.**

Previous circumstances driving body transformation motives

Reaching the age of 19 years old Dan stated how he met his girlfriend and who did not initially say anything about his body shape but would hint at them both to lose weight.

Dan recalled a time when they were both at a music festival in a small tent and it was a small enclosed space and the two were struggling to move around they initially joked they should lose weight as his girlfriend had also put on weight. He stated how they both made a pact to lose weight at which point Dan managed to lose a stone through walking and jogging and then subsequently joined the gym to lose further weight and tone his muscles. Upon asking Dan about idealistic body and his aspirations he commented, he wanted good overall shape and muscle tone he stated the ultimate tight muscular look was unrealistic and needed a high level of investment and found guys who did this were obnoxious and "loved themselves" too much. He went on to explain how there were now extremes of weightlifters and bodybuilders with some men going to great lengths to achieve what he deemed as cartoonish body images, whilst others were too conscious of grooming and having tanned muscular body models and that they were just copying media portrayals.

Negative connotations of professional bodybuilders

Dan stated he wanted to have some muscle size and tone but also stated some fat would be ok as he would never be able to maintain a surfboard stomach and therefore had no aspirations of having one. He stated how he was a 'realist' and was not inclined to be brought into the whole body aesthetic and metrosexual culture. Dan supported a short beard, a maintenance free hairstyle and a casual dress sense. He posed he was a 'normal' guy who was not overly fussed about his appearance, although stated he was not a tramp and would get his hair and beard trimmed from time to time and was clean but not overly conscious of his appearance. I asked whether this would change if he managed to obtain his aspirational body. Dan replied he would likely show it off more as he would be proud of it but would not turn metrosexual, as it was not him and found the whole Beckham-like image 'sad', followed by immature fanboys who were lacking in personality credentials.

During the research participation process Dan stopped training with the group for 4 weeks and then re-joined in the latter period of the 8 months. I asked Dan about his absence period and what made him go back. Dan admitted he felt his initial motivation staggered during the time spent with the group and stated how the high level of discipline, especially the limited amount of food became very difficult to upkeep and as the progression had slowed in terms of body development both strength/power as well as body aesthetics had lessened his enthusiasm and drive to work out and maintain the routine.

Dan also commented during the off period he felt down and went back to old habits of eating unhealthy foods, drinking more and generally not looking after himself as much as he was doing when training.

He stated how the training provided both physical and mind control to treat your body differently, as a machine as you were investing time and money into it and it provided some regulating and regiment to daily life. He stated:

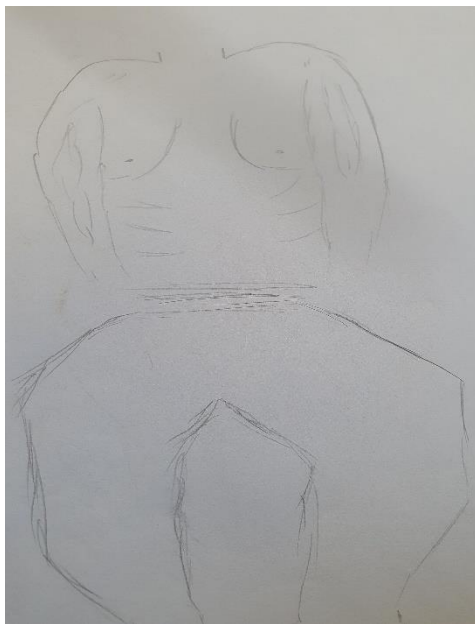
Body transformation and management influences how you see your body and disciplines self.

*"I sort of lost my self-discipline and interest before I was watching body training routines and techniques these guys would use, what they purchased like supplements and weight cutters and then when I lost weight I was buying more clothes and trainers and other accessories. But then when I quit I felt down and lacking, so I was watching more crap television, stupid youtube videos and started buying more takeaway food, booze and general crap I was consuming. My whole attitude changed I became a couch potato and then the body soon followed as I wasn't active as much".*

I asked what made him return. Dan elaborated it was that feeling of being proud of yourself, and the feeling of accomplishment, achievement he missed. He stated how his energy levels spiked when he was training and then he felt as if he had little energy and lethargic when he stopped: *"I have never been overly obsessed with my body image. but when training and seeing the outline of chest, shoulders and arms I thought to myself yeah I've got some shaping and I looked better in t-shirts so I thought I can show it off a little now. I think when you have some parts of the body you are proud off it gives you that something to want to show off to others and it gives that little spark to continue and train so you can develop it and then all of a sudden you are hooked on the whole body development, gym culture".*

Feeling of reward and being proud of self provided through group training experience and working on body image

Proud of self



*"For me, it's not just about the top half of the body, us guys need to have strong legs. You see it now women work on their legs more than lads. We should really be hitting legs more, it's the biggest muscle group but because it's all about aesthetics, media just promotes the top half. I focus on the legs as it carries the rest of the body. For me, legs make the perfect body as you can pack loads of muscle on them and just look like a proper Macoy".*

(Dan, committed weight trainer, June 2016)



**Andy** - 'Young, impressionable, self-admirer'

Andy was introduced to me through Steve who knew Andy from 5 a side football league they use to play. Upon meeting Andy the first time it became instantly known Andy was a self-admirer he was very self-aware and had a habit of looking in the mirror regularly, comparing himself with others.

Andy stated he had been weight training on an ad-hoc basis 6 years prior to joining the fitness club and had not been training long before he joined the group of participants. Andy was fairly open about his views and offered honest, blunt views which proved to be beneficial for the research. Andy was also the first participant to talk about his body and its value outside of the fitness context which was useful in seeing the social, professional role his body was perceived to have. Andy stated he initially joined a gym when he was 18 years old to 'see what the buzz was about'. He stated how at that age he realised there was a trend for young males to attend the gym and lift weights. Andy commented: "When I was 18 years old I left college and because I didn't go to university I didn't hang around people my age as much so then I heard everybody was going to the gym in my age group so I went to explore". Andy described how TV programmes like Big Brother where there were "hench guys" wearing vests with toned muscles influenced him to explore and adopt similar body traits.

Begun training as was inquisitive of the gym culture

Influence to transform body image through reality tv programmes

Andy stated upon joining the gym he was vacuumed into the gym culture:

Strong influence of the 'gym culture'

*"I initially use to go in and do some cardio vascular exercises on the machine, this was boring and bland so didn't really go in, however one time I went in and there was no cardio machines available so I went to the dumbbell weight areas where two older guys were lifting weights. I went close to them and tried to curl some free weights which I did wrong so one of the guys corrected me, told me I had a good big frame and what weightlifting exercises I should be doing. It was a turning point, John and Harry were so nice to me I use to go in whilst they were there and they helped me with exercises, spot me on the bench press and we use to have a banter and laugh at the same time. I never had anything like this in other aspects of my life. I was working for Orange at a call centre at that time and it was a horrible place, very secluded and no team spirit. So the gym was the place where I could be myself, socialise, meet new people, have friends and work on my body. I learnt many life lessons in the gym about respecting each other, helping where you can, becoming a gentleman and building mental strength. It was satisfying, felt I was part of something and then when my friends and girls started noticing my body shape and gains I was like yes, I'm onto a good thing. I can remember when work was getting me down as I hated what I was doing, it wasn't mentally simulating or offering me any development.*

Friendliness of other male gym users

Social appeal of the gym setting

Life lessons learnt in the gym

*I use to look forward to the gym that was the highlight of the day, I could miss a day off work but not the gym and I became so attached to training and then body development routine and meeting and talking to like-minded people like what we have now. It was like all those people who wanted to better themselves and work to achieve something all came together in the gym so we all have a common interest and were not like the average people who settled for whatever and won't really motivated.*

Gym setting providing an appealing location to a young male

Superiority over other males

*It's like all the better people came and met in the gym and we used the positive energy of each other to work and train hard physically, motivating each other to achieve something tremendous".*

Positivity of training together in the gym setting

Andy explained this was his early motivation however once he started going out with a particular girlfriend the gym was hard to fit in and stated he did miss the achievement and satisfaction feeling but having a healthy sex life did help to overcome it he joked. However, once he got bored of his girlfriend Andy stated he realised how lazy he became at 19.5 years old and apart from playing football once a week he was not doing any exercise. Andy stated how with his girlfriend although he cared about his appearance his social life became very busy and as he had been training prior he had developed some muscle tone in comparison to other males in his age group he looked ok and still got comments he looked muscular. Andy stated this period didn't last for long and when he realised approaching 20 years old he was losing his body shape and sensing he was not as strong as he was. He stated he was enthused to join the gym again and get back to a muscular shape. In 2013 Andy recalls how everywhere he looked he seen the sexy muscular body with many guys topless in TV shows, in the movies and social media which went into overdrive with muscular male body image.

Muscular body shape prevalent in contemporary culture

He commented since 2013 although he has not been training all the time as he has been away for work he has remained committed to maintaining his body, he shared: *"I've seen how a nice body can have a psychological effect on you and can help in life, so although I might not be training all the time I have tried to eat cleanly, do press ups, push ups 4-5 mornings a week just to keep me tight as I'm body conscious, I do look at myself in the mirror every time I go in the shower and check myself out. The body defines you doesn't it? You gotta look after it"*.

Psychological boost

Andy explained how he played football regularly as he enjoyed the game but also due to the incentive of exercise and keeping fat off his mid-riff. I asked Andy to describe his body and what he thought of it (May 2016). Andy proposed he was more satisfied with his body now then he was earlier in the year, as it now had more muscle tone and what he described as being 'tighter'.

Andy proposed, how training with other participants had allow him to find a good balance between weight resistant training, doing high intensity cardio through football and then maintaining the body through eating fairly clean and as he was busy working on the body 6 days a week he only went out (social night out) once a month to drink alcohol and eat a cheat meal, as doing this more regular would damage his "gains". Andy stated his body now talked to him: *"When training you pay more attention to the body and you pay more attention to your senses like when you need to consume a protein shake when the body and muscles are recovering and need fuel, when the body needs a rest, when the body is feeling good and can go further lifting heavier weights or running extra mile".* Andy portrayed a spiritual like connection with his body which he stated he got from working on his body and paying attention to it as he conceptualised: *"Normally we don't do this and abuse our bodies as we don't listen to them their needs and we too inclined to follow our desires of drinking more, eating more crap and general abuse. If we took the time to listen and care for them, young people would be healthier today and wouldn't binge drink, gauge on food as much because we would listen to our bodies and know when to stop. Going back to your question, yeah I like the shape I'm in, but we still have a good way to go yet, it will never be perfect but I do like looking at my reflection.*

Self disciplining through body image management

Spiritual connection with the body through body transformation

*I recently brought an Audi convertible and I do look at my reflection as I go past shop windows to see how I look and I think I need to work on my arms, biceps and chest more so that I look good in it. It's just things like that which keep me coming back to training and working on my body. I'm confident that I will have a good body and I just need to maintain it, like Luke even when I'm in my 30's and 40's because what we do is an investment for the long term, we have spent a lot of time in the gym for our bodies so it's worth it in the long term. I love it when I go out in some nice clothes and people look twice at you and see your muscles they sort of show you respect, there's something about you which gets noticed and a good body works wonders. It's your attitude, mental stamina, demeanour shown in a physical form through muscles, tone, tightness and you can't help with acknowledge, respect that. I think I have told you about my job and how my body works, I get respect, confidence and attention its helped a lot because normally sales people be all mouth and you need the gift of the gab to be persuasive, which I think I don't have, but I've found my body does the talking for me. I'm more confident at ease when pitching in the sales job and I can get clients to buy into things when I pay visits not by scaring them but because they see me and pay attention to what I've got to say. I don't intimidate but when I'm talking they take me seriously as my demeanour is now more serious because of my body".*

Self judgement

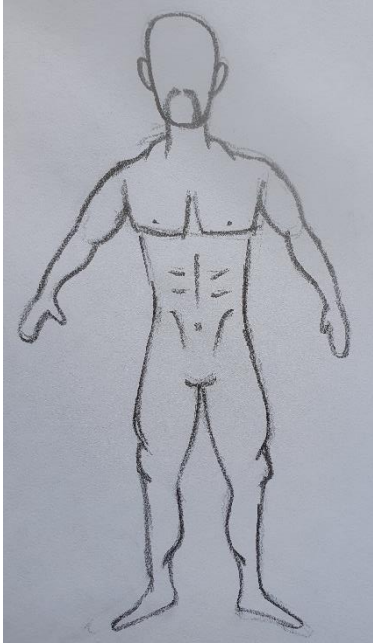
Investment in body

Getting noticed

Symbolic meanings of the muscular body

Purposeful muscular body in vocational role

Self augmentation via muscular body



*My drawing presents masculine perfection. I'm not a great drawer but you can see I've tried to put all the lines in and six pack along with ultra-toned body and stylish beard. You see it's about the overall look. That James Bond smooth mixed with muscle hunched, brute look which just oozes sex appeal, masculinity and yeah it's me all over. Like that you appeal to both lads by intimidation with the muscles and big arms and sex appeal with the girls who can't resist that smoothness and sexy muscle.*

(Andy, committed weight trainer, June 2016)

## Appendix C: Participant observation notes extract with coding

### *Step 2 generating initial codes*

Group 1 (Committed weight trainers): Experienced, committed weight resistance trainers with muscular, toned bodies. The participants have clear aspirations to adopt further idealised body aesthetics.

#### 1. Participation details

Training with the group involves undertaking 5 or 6, 1 hour gym sessions per week. Each visit initially involved building stamina to undertake the high intensity sessions whilst also getting to know each member of the group. The nature of the gym sessions involve meeting at the club at 6pm during the week and having a Saturday morning session. A set routine is in place which Steve has developed and leads the group changing on some occasions.

The sessions follow the weekly routine below;

**Monday:** chest (bench press flat, incline, free weights flat and incline, flys)

**Tuesday:** arms (triceps, biceps - skull crush, rope pull downs, z bar bicep curls, free weight curls)

**Wednesday:** shoulders (free weight shoulder press, smith machine press, shrugs, delts, front and rear muscles using lightweights and machine)

**Thursday:** Back and abs (deadlift, machine pull down close grip, wide grip, rear pull down, abs machines)

**Friday:** Legs, chest (squats with bar weights, front squats, leg press machine, variety of leg machines, free weight flat (chest))

**Saturday:** (2/3 instances per month): can include cardiovascular (treadmill, cross trainer, circuits), biceps (bicep curl) and/or shoulders.

Steve has developed the above routine based on his vast experience of weight training and through various material he has read on body conditioning and weight resistance training. Steve commonly reminds the group the training is to adopt a toned body and not to get 'big and bulky'. Steve finds the big body image vulgar and states it is associated with steroid abuse, having unrealistic expectations and not really looking after yourself. He states the routine works for him and people he has trained with over the years and commonly reminds group members of the goals of getting fit and toned. Steve has purposefully broken the body down to the major muscles and dedicates a 1/1.5 hour session for each major muscle. Working on chest is a particular favourite for Steve as he enjoys the bench press exercise and justifies an additional part-session by stating a strong chest helps with other muscle exercises.

A session will start with a warm up usually in the designated free weight area of the gym starting with light weights before progressing onto heavier weights. It is normal practice to undertake 4 sets of 6-10 reps of a dedicated exercise with 4/5 exercises performed in one training session.

At times when the gym has been busy the group splits into 2/3 members to undertake different exercises, however most of the time the group stay in close proximity to each other and train simultaneously.

Conversations with group members have occurred whilst waiting for my turn to exercise, in the changing rooms or the fitness centre's sauna/steam room after the session on Friday evenings. Conversations have been both one to one or in small groups. Questions posed have occurred naturally and at times conversations have led to non-relevant topics which have not been recorded. I have noted conversations on mobile phone using the notes feature and at times have audio recorded reflective accounts in the car after the gym session when alone.

## 2. Participation notes: February 2016

The initial month of collecting data for research purposes involved not really posing any particular questions and spend the month getting into back into the exercise routine as we had trained on an ad-hoc basis the past two months due to work and various other commitments. I personally made a point of making my presence in the group consistent by attending every day to demonstrate my commitment. Due the group naturally making references to some noteworthy points some useful conversations were captured below.

The month was difficult at first as I had not been weight training intensely the past 6-8 months and struggled with the high intensity workouts. Dan was also struggling and made it known to all group members. However it quickly became apparent group members were very supportive of each other and **provided motivational prompts** to carry on and get through the exercise and repetitions. Steve in particular is the main motivator of the group and keeps a careful eye on all participants. There is at times conflict between Steve and Luke both being the mature, experienced members, arguing about the exercises and techniques regarding how exercises should be performed. Luke is arguably more experienced although does not always express his thoughts. He undertakes his exercise technique a little different to the rest of the group. There is a **clear rivalry** between Steve and Luke in terms of who can lift the heaviest and cope with the stresses of the high intensity workout.

Peer support through group training

Competitive rivalry

The atmosphere whilst training is that of both support, light hearted competitiveness and 'mickey take' with humorous jokes and comments. Steve is serious and keeps the focus on the training routine instructing members to find free weights, find an available bench and timekeeping to ensure to get all exercises done in time we have. In the data collection mode It also quickly became apparent the group make a lot of reference to masculinity, body image in general terms, this has been captured.

I observed participants Steve and Andy were very self-aware and would admire their physique in the vast mirrored walls of the free weight training area. Steve had a habit of admiring his chest and would purposely stand tall to check this was more apparent than other group members.

Self-aware  
Admiring self-image in the fitness setting

Steve would also compare our exercise routine and activities we were doing in comparison to what other individuals or groups were doing in the fitness centre. Andy was also very conscious of his appearance and would spend the most time getting prepared (in changing rooms), having the latest fashionable gym workout attire whilst constantly touching abs, chest and looking at arms in the mirror whilst waiting for his turn. Steve regularly commented how the group's workout intensity was at a higher level than other members and consequently we were more masculine due to having the ability to train at a high intensity and come back the next day.

Male rivalry  
Masculine body performance  
Eagerness to demonstrate supreme masculinity  
Look good in workouts  
High self-regard

**Monday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2016, 6.15pm, whilst weight training on Monday's chest day on a bench press. 3 participants present (S (Steve), A (Andy), D (Dan))**

Conversation about how quick the week has gone and training chest again between Steve and Dan eluded to a discussion about commitment to training, it being part of life, whilst reference was made to masculinity by Andy.

Steve was sipping on water when he turned around to face Andy and stated;

S: I am institutionalised to the gym training life, I would feel weak, I could never quit it's part of me coming to gym and training. I sometimes think I will quit if I don't see results I will quit and go get fat but to be honest I would never quit, I wouldn't know what to do.

Part of gym culture  
Institutionalised to the gym training life  
Attending the club as part of self identity  
High commitment

Andy immediately joined into the conversation adding;

A: That's what being a man is about, to do physical strength stuff. In today's society men are turning feminine, you see it through what they are wearing, skin tight clothes, nose piercings, man bags. In the early ages men did the heavy lifting carrying logs being the breadwinner. We got to do this for all the men out there our breed is in trouble.

Masculinity affirmation  
Threat to masculine norms in contemporary culture  
Hegemonic masculinity under threat

Dan was performing his exercise on the bench press and during the time Andy was providing his account, Dan completed performing his exercise and came into close proximity to Steve and Andy whilst stating;

D: My **body is my health how I see it**, yeah I know a sexy body image is cool but I do it because I want to be healthy for me a good, **muscular body is a healthy body**.

Muscular body = healthy body

The conversation then moved onto finding free weights for the next exercise.

**19<sup>th</sup> February 2016, Steve invited me out to his birthday party on Saturday. A discussion in the car park between Steve and I eluded to body image and social appeal.**

Steve commented on how the pair of us should come and train biceps and chest on Saturday afternoon in order to 'get a pump' on these muscles groups so when going out into bars and clubs on the Saturday night **"we will get noticed"** and as he comments, **"It will give me confidence in walking around in a fitted top and will help getting noticed by the honeys (girls)"**.

Social appeal of muscles

Develop body confidence

This was an interesting proposition and provided some rationale for undertaking an exercise routine to specifically enhance the body image in some way for social appeal and facilitate self-confidence in talking to girls. This was something never mentioned before when in the larger group and appeared to be portrayed by Steve as we were the only ones present at the time in the car park.

#### **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> Feb Training session with Steve**

Steve and I attended the gym to do as Steve quoted the 'Pre night out pump session' the training was distinctively different to our routine training, here we trained chests and biceps whereby the objective was to do bench press and preacher bicep curls with the objective to lift heavier weights doing less repetitions to gain a pump on those muscles. **Steve was constantly looking at his chest and bicep muscles during the exercises admiring them in the mirrors and touching the body areas to feel the pump.** He stated, **"We are not bothered about our personal target routine we are only in here to enhance our major muscles. I'm thinking of wearing my white t-shirt, its fairly fitted but want to make sure my pecs look prominent and guns (biceps) look good too. That way I will pull the look off well. We'll do bench, than free weights finishing with drop sets. Then we can do biceps, curls and machine finishing with dropsets as well. We will definitely have the pump by the end"**.

Admiring self in the fitness club

Body aesthetics manipulation

Positive feeling of the muscle pump

The routine also included going on the abs machine which was rarely undertaken, again this was Steve's idea to enhance our upper body look for the Saturday night. Before the training session ended Steve strongly advised me now eat 'cleanly' avoid carbs as this would sit on stomach and bloat it. Steve stated **"We have trained for tonight well, so we now need to discipline ourselves for tonight and eat cleanly so we look really good tonight and everybody will be able to see our gains"**.

Training for social recognition

Appeal of the muscular physique in the social setting



There was also an essence of secrecy with the session, Steve mentioned not to tell the rest of the training group we trained today stating, *“Don’t mention it to the lads, they will think we are having secret sessions, but I want them to notice my gains tonight as Luke says I look smaller than him now but he will see tonight my chest and arms will definitely be bigger than his tonight”*.

Secrecy

### The ‘night out’

Steve’s birthday party initially involved meeting at his apartment with other research participants (Luke, Andy and Dan). I was the first to arrive to find other friends of Steve at his apartment. Steve was in good spirits wearing his white t-shirt. I joked you look good and looks like you have been working on the muscles. He reminded me not to mention it to anyone.

Steve’s friends who were unknown to me praised Steve on how well he was looking and stated he had a body similar to Jason Statham. Steve acknowledged the comments and stated he had been working hard in the gym so was relieved to hear people could see the gains. He made the point he was another year older so it was very important for him to look after himself and remain looking youthful which he believed training in the gym helped him to achieve that, as it involved living a healthy lifestyle and taking care of appearance.

Enjoying social recognition

Drive to remain looking youthful

When Luke, Andy and Dan arrived jokes were made regarding the tightness of Steve’s t-shirt with Luke joking it looks like an XXS size which Steve has squeezed into to get the ultimate skin tight look. Once the jokes concluded Luke in particular commented Steve was looking more trimmer and started to compare his chest and shoulders to Steve and regularly commented upon how he needed to work on these muscle groups to improve.

Comparing self with other participants

### Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb chest training session on a bench press. 4 participants present (S (Steve), A (Andy), D (Dan), L (Luke))

The first session back after Steve’s birthday party night saw the group come together for the Monday’s regular chest workout. Luke and Dan were quick to make remark about Steve’s tight t-shirt stating it proved popular and joked he was a poser. Luke in particularly was consciousness about Steve’s physique stating Steve’s body had developed well and was showing ‘more gains’ then the rest of the training group member and accused Steve of having additional training sessions to which Steve laughed off passively without giving a confirmative reply.

Competitiveness

Masculine rivalry

At the end of the session whilst Luke and myself was walking down to changing rooms Luke remarked, *“I’m going to get more serious about training and sorting my body out for the summer. I need proper discipline train early morning with cardio session and then do heavier weights with you guys”*.

Drive to work on body image for summer

Disciplining self

*But I need to sort my meals out eat properly, sleep more, I need to stop prattling about. It's about sacrifice if you want to achieve the body you want I'm going to stop drinking and just look after myself better".*

I posed the question to Luke where this motivation had come from?

L: *"I just seen Steve make some gains and I look at myself I'm not happy about how I look at the moment. I have some fat on me from not eating properly and generally my training has been hit and miss. So I need to discipline myself more extensively I say its not just about coming here and training but what we get upto outside of this place. I'm going to walk around more, stop using my car as much, get my bike out, starting waking up earlier so I more time to do my meals prep, do a little bit of exercises and just be more disciplined like sleeping earlier to give my body proper rest".*

Judging self and body image

Self discipline

Organising life around body transformation motives

### Reflective diary notes and participant observation notes from March 2016

Month two was a continuation from month one of data collection, I was still settling into the intensive routine, whilst mainly observing the dynamics of weight training and attitudes towards self-awareness, body image and the 'training life'. It was noted how weight training each day became a prominent part of the day and there was a requirement to plan daily routine and eating habits around the training slot of 6-7pm. Eating in particular became heavily regulated as you could not eat too much before the gym or too little. There was also a strong recommendation by Steve and Luke to measure what was consumed (protein, carbs) by using weight measuring scales and various smart phone applications to keep an eye on intake. Steve recommended eating 4 half boiled eggs in the morning, yogurt mid-morning, tuna steak at lunch with salad and chicken on the evening. It was suggested to limit carbs based foods and not to eat anything after 8pm, only consume protein whey shake before bedtime. This became a quite a chore as I would need to awake earlier and prepare meals, making time to eat more at work and have evening meal ready for when returning from training. There was also a considerable expense to purchase a variety of supplements and protein whey powder to consume to enhance muscle recovery and growth. Steve and Luke both agreed these supplements were needed by all participants as we were putting our bodies through intense training and required more than what the average person would consume. Steve used the ideology we were 'super human' and we should see ourselves superior to fellow males who do not train. Our bodies were becoming muscle machines and it was paramount to feed them with quality food. Luke posed how we should compare ourselves to other male friends who do not train and look at muscles, eating habits and feel a sense of superiority as we were bettering ourselves as humans, men by development of muscle and tone.

Daily life routine centred upon body management and training

Meal patterns

High level commitment in managing the muscular body

Athlete like self regard

We are 'super human'

Superiority over other males

Bettering as human,

Masculine superiority

It was noted how weight training and working on the body had a strong connotation **to looking after your health and well-being**. Luke strongly prescribed how regulating consumption, and losing fat were pinnacle of a healthy lifestyle and taking supplements such as iron, vitamin A and D and fish oils were what healthy people did and we were going that extra mile by optimising our bodies through training and working on muscles which would apparently make our hearts more healthy and regulate blood pressure and fat cell generation. I did ask Luke where he had learnt about this to which he stated years of **information collection and knowledge development by reading men's health books and mainstream magazines and now websites by Men's Health where there are 'medically approved statements'**.

Strong connection between body training and health/wellbeing

Men' health/fitness discourses acting as influential sources of knowledge

Weight training also initiated the adoption to a healthier lifestyle by watching what you eat and trying to limit fattening, sugar based foods which were now deemed to be undesirable and eating more fruit and vegetables. **It became apparent a distinctive attitude was being developed towards well-being and eating with regards to training everyday** and putting in a lot of effort to not waste it by eating fattening foods which would stager 'gains' and prevent getting the toned abs and torso.

Change in attitude towards wellbeing, male body and masculine performance

Steve had also become popular in **sharing body maintenance and advice** via social media and regularly forwarded body maintenance and weight training advice to each member links via facebook. The group had also setup a Whatsapp group and the habit begun to share articles links, memes to all members on a regular basis typically every other day.

Group sharing of information relating to weight training, male health and wellbeing

Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2016 Discussion with Luke in the changing rooms before the session. Luke and myself present with two strangers coming and going from the designated area we were occupying.

*I posed to Luke - What keeps you motivated to training?*

*Training is my time, time I **spend on myself improving, developing my body I do it for myself and it's therapeutic and satisfying for me. It makes up for other things I'm not the best looking guy or brainy so this is my strength it's what I'm good at, and what shapes me literally.***

Self-improvement through body transformation

*Training for me is **part of my life** it's a guy thing we come meet here have a laugh whilst adding a bit of competitiveness and having a good work out. I intend to this as long as I can there is no goal really, just to keep fit have a good body. I do want good pecs though, they especially **get noticed by other guys** and the girls. I'm not obsessed but would like to have some muscle and tone in the right places you know.*

Body image management lifestyle

Getting noticed

*You are now shaping up good now, you must feel more confident, see controlling yourself and being disciplined has good rewards for you. Keep it up mate, lets go'.*

Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2016, The gym had installed some new photos and cardboard cut outs of personal trainers and the various services on offer. Whilst walking to the changing rooms at the end of the session (Luke, Andy, Steve present) Andy commented upon how the personal trainers did not inspire him so the question was posed who inspires you?

Andy replied,

*"None of these numtys, these guys are just trying to sell their services. I'm personally aspired to adopt a good body by people like David Beckham, he has a good cut body and I like to think I will eventually have something in common with him when I get that body, so I'm good at footy and will have the body so will hopefully get the fortune and fame!*

Sport stars influence

*I guess he (DB) is considered cool so I guess I look up to him and be inspired maybe I will have some luck".*

Desire to share commonality with idols and share success

At this point Luke came into the changing rooms and Andy stated how we were talking about inspiration and people that aspire you to work on your body. Luke joined in the conversation,

L: *"For me I don't have a single person I want to look like, but sportstars like Giggsy (Ryan Giggs) who are getting on a bit but are still a top athlete and have that 'tight' toned body and can put younger guys to shame, works for me. That seasoned but fit athletic body is what I'm going for it shows you are resilient and doesn't let age defy you. In the future I want to go pick up my kids from school and look good in the playground with other parents talking about me. A nice body image will keep you looking younger and more attractive, trust me working on yourself now will be worth it later in life".*

Sport stars influence

Desire to maintain youthful image

**Monday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2016, 6.50pm, whilst waiting for Steve, Andy and Luke at the gym weight training area, I randomly posed the question to Dan, what keeps you motivated to keep coming here and training?**

D: *"I do it because I like training with our group of lads, we are good at what we do, we are successful in training look at our chests! It's a positive aspect of my life. I don't see an end goal of getting the perfect body it's a way of life for me and I will keep at it until I can. I have been training on and off for about 5 years now, it doesn't seem that long. It's about taking care of yourself and your body - your body is your temple. For me it's the one thing I have remained committed to in terms of looking after my body, even if I don't come here I wake in the morning and do some press ups, I go for walks, a little jog I've always kept an eye on my body I like being tight, having some tone showing it shows discipline, that you care about your appearance and for me it's been successful as I have a good body that has remained".*

Male group support

Training regarded as being a positive aspect of life

Way of life

Desire to look after appearance and body image

## **Appendix D: Grouping and organising codes extract**

### *Step 3: Organising codes*

#### **D1: Collation and organisation of data themes extract**

##### **Coding titles – identified from group 1 (Committed weight trainers) data and participants**

*Positive connotations attached to the muscular body*

*Muscular body associated with self-development*

*Weight training and body image management as a lifestyle*

*Characterising self through muscular credentials*

*Managing body image as way to characterise self-narrative*

##### **Coding titles – identified from group 2 (Youngsters) data and participants**

*Social appeal of working towards and having a muscular body image.*

*Social media conforming aesthetic body.*

*Weight training regime as a fulfilling lifestyle choice and positive experience*

*Muscular body helping to reach notions of idealised masculinity*

*Body performance associated with masculinity affirmation and capability to reach masculine ideals*

##### **Coding titles – identified from group 3 (Seasoned weight lifters) data and participants**

*Muscular body acting as a self-augmenter and identity distinguisher*

*Masculine superiority and social desirability of the muscular physique*

*Institutionalised to the gym life due to its positive impact on life*

*Threat to hyper masculine status when weight training performance hindered*

*Localised culture of bodybuilding shaping motivations, cultivations of muscular development practices*

**Initial draft of themes developed as a result of collating all data codes and organising manually into piles**

1. Positive notions associated with the act of weight training and experiencing body transformation
2. Body transformation and weight training used to encapsulate perception of ideal masculine beliefs.
3. Muscular body used to portray perception of self and develop character
4. Body transformation seen as a leisure career and self-development project
5. Threat to masculinity when weight training performances hindered
6. Group weight training used to share masculine experiences and encouraging the adoption of hyper masculine traits.

**Table D1: Coding titles and data transcript extract**

Coding title	Data transcript
<p><i>Body transformation positivity</i></p>	<p><i>It just gives you that buzz, the inner feeling of satisfaction.</i></p> <p><i>It gives that manly, masculine feeling.</i></p> <p><i>I feel really good, it's addictive that's why I come back every day for it.</i></p> <p><i>My motivation is the connotation of the nice body has on other parts of my life. I mean a nice body allows me to have more presence at work. In the bar it helps me to get to places not just the women but in the sales job I do people pay more attention to me and it gives me confidence to strive for more and carry a confident persona which has got me further in life to talk to more people, engage more, take no shit and be confident.</i></p> <p><i>Having muscle gives you that psychological boost, it's like come on I can take on anything I have strength and power.</i></p> <p><i>[Muscle] It is now the fashion material the skin and not so much the clothing itself.</i></p>

*Walking out of this place after a hard session just gives that feeling of achievement, you are walking out a better man than when you came in. It is self-development, you are bettering yourself, the process of working out and developing muscle is something in itself, muscles are not easy to acquire and the journey does make you the person you are.*

*Training is great, we come to work to feel better about ourselves and actually spend time making improvements. I like the fact we do it for ourselves and then do not need to rely on other things like media, clothing, and food to feel good about ourselves we do what we have full control of. What you put in is what you get out.*

*It makes me feel old, lazy and generally depressed if I don't workout, as I won't have the muscle and that will mean the body will be on a downhill direction after that.*

*Keeping an eye on body muscle and training helps my health all around. As the obsession to maintain muscle and perform well in training forces you to be disciplined, eat the right foods and to not neglect your body or health.*

*Muscles and the way in which they are built give you that feeling of superiority. There is no other way of putting it they elevate you above others as you are increasing your masculinity, your manhood and that feel good feeling has a permanent effect on how you look at yourself and how you rate other lads.*

*I am better person as a result. Working out, feeling the muscles lets me relieve myself of built up tension, you know you feel more at peace that allows me to think more clearly about things in life and as my partner says I am more calm, relaxed and in a better mood once I have had a good session, felt the muscle pump and go home relaxed.*

*Muscle pump is the icing on the cake, it is the fruits of the labour and graft you put in. It elevates you as a man, as a weight trainer as an athlete.*

*The feeling of the pump and soreness has had a psychological effect on me. I feel it has become part of me. I do miss it when I go through periods of not training, it's like something is missing in my life that makes me complete.*

	<p>Witnessing and training with these individuals you cannot help but start believing the muscle pump hype. Informants were quick to celebrate moments when weight lifting records were broken and personal goals were achieved. There was an expectation to throw your hands up in the air and shout out aloud during celebratory moments.</p> <p>The youngsters were keen to show me the value of muscles and invited me to a social night out. The event was used to show off body muscle using revealing clothing and behaving accordingly to portray a heightened masculine self. The individuals highlighted how the 'hard work' in the gym was rewarded in social occasions to intimidate other males, feel good about yourself in comparison to other males you seen and to appeal to females.</p> <p>The muscular body was regularly referred to during our sessions. The committed trainers regularly commented upon acquiring the muscle pump in order to look good. Steve was a great admirer of the muscle pump and stated how he felt 'deflated' if he perceived his muscles did not have a workout pump. Steve led me on a pre social event workout where the sole objective was to pump upper body muscle in order to look aesthetically pleasing for our social evening.</p> <p>I found these older males basked in their muscular bodies especially in the fitness club. The way these individuals walked in to the club, greeted males and took over the weight training area was like their bodies talked for them.</p> <p>The guys knew they were intimidating to other males and demanded respect from other males, whilst even scaring some members of equipment they wanted. The males although reluctant to admit it did use their muscular bodies to their own advantage and spoke of being popular, people wanting to be their mates and 'getting their own way' was mentioned as the benefits muscles presented for these males.</p>
<p><i>Defining self through muscular physique</i></p>	<p><i>Training is my time, time I spend on myself improving, developing my body I do it for myself and it's therapeutic and satisfying for me. It makes up for other things I'm not the best looking guy or brainy so this is my strength it's what I'm good at, and what shapes me literally.</i></p> <p><i>I am institutionalised to the gym training life, I would feel weak, I could never quit it's part of me coming to gym and training.</i></p>



*I sometimes think I will quit if I don't see results I will quit and go get fat but to be honest I would never quit, I wouldn't know what to do.*

*The training life and developing the muscle is a lifestyle, it is more than just a leisure activity.*

*We are not in here to waste time it's about making yourself a better person, a better man, fine-tuned so that you have a positive mindset to go achieve anything you want.*

*Lads around here don't have much going for themselves in terms of a booming career, riches and the home life is hit and miss. So they use the gym, transforming the body to make it their own and shape not only how they look like, but also how they feel, how they want to be seen and it becomes a positive aspect of a lad's life. It is sad in some respects but it is the reality of life. I think that's what people who don't train and see bodybuilders as freaks need to understand for some of these guys it is the only thing in life they have some control over and use to make themselves and feel good about themselves.*

*I want to get big and muscly, it will change the way I feel about myself, at the moment I feel weak, not game enough. But muscles just give you that boost, that inner confidence, it gives you that nice feeling you have something about you, like you are someone, you know a G.*

*Weight lifting makes you the man you are. The test of basic strength, competition with other guys, acting like a man in here [fitness club] it shapes you as the masculine male you are. There aren't many places left anymore where men can be men you know where we can act masculine, fart, have a laugh without being put down for being an old school man. There is something special about weightlifting which makes it so addictive, the test of strength, competition, improving performance as you progress, feeling good once you beat your personal record. It is a journey to something good, really rewarding and it has not been spoilt so there is still satisfaction you can get from it.*

*You see it in Hollywood and all the media now, muscles make the man. All the big screen actors now have big imposing muscles they are the in thing, popularity, respect, sex appeal are all gained through muscle.*

*You can't tell me The Rock, Statham and Vin Diesel have good acting skills, they just have the right muscular body image which makes them appealing to the eye and muscles are eye catching and desirable.*

*I want to present a muscular me, I want my body to communicate for me. Muscles are ultimate perfection in my mind, they just transform your skin and whole image. That's why we make so many sacrifices and take punishment because getting muscular results is worth it.*

*I have developed myself through my body conditioning and impressive performance in here training. There is nothing like it yeah you can play football, ride a bike, go trekking in the hills but the intensity of training hard nearly every day is the pinnacle of body performance and you having the will to continuously put yourself in uncomfortable positions, feel muscles working and then dealing with the pain. It is just something else.*

*I read somewhere the body and how you present it is your personal business card to the world. It is look this is me, this is what I am made of. So your body image needs to clearly emphasis wat you are about, it does need to be intimidating, show strength and agility. Otherwise people just don't take you seriously, they walk all over you. I have seen it time and time again. The body is you, it's like your personality, mental and physical state on show. So what I am saying you have to weight train, you have to build muscle.*

*You know what makes a man – it is muscle. You see because the process to acquire it involves some hard, gruelling work so the process itself shapes who you are as a person, as a lad. So muscles have so much weight, they hold a lot of value to the individual. They are gold dust for young lads to have that's why so many cheat the way to it as they want to be seen differently and want to feel good about themselves. Muscles are a man's best friend.*

*Coming in here you relate to yourself at a different level. You learn more about yourself not just strength and how fit you are but how far you can push yourself, stay cool under pressure. Compete with other guys you thought you never could do. It is a special place the gym, it is like a school to educate yourself and develop your mental strength, muscles and body.*

*Training is good for your head and body. You put yourself in horrible positions, painful experiences but come out the other side a better man. This is because you develop yourself, push to new limits and discover yourself.*

	<p><i>It's simple really if you want to feel good about yourself, one of the best ways is to get a muscular body so when you look in the mirror everyday it feels good, you look at your reflection and think at least you look good.</i></p> <p><i>If a young lad is getting bullied they look for ways to stop this by developing the expertise to fight and look intimidating. That is what training is about, it's about making something of yourself. In a world of beta males there are some lads still out there who don't want to be dominated.</i></p> <p><i>When you look like I do you can influence other people. Like when I come in here and want a bench, I will go over to a lad I see wasting time and I will ask him how long he has left. It might be a little bit of intimidation but you get to do that when you have an impressive muscle body. It gives you that authority that respect as you worked hard for it and in society it counts for superiority, that you know you are levels up from regular men.</i></p> <p>Witnessing the transformation journey Matt, Gary and Colin experienced it was seen first-hand how these individuals developed their self characters through muscle development and symbolic meanings taken from the weight training routine. I seen how confidence and self-belief developed amongst these young males who adopted to the routine and committed themselves to train in order to develop themselves. The males during the 8 months of participation used the fitness club context to learn about masculinity, perform it through embodied behaviour and take inspiration of older male trainers. The youngsters as I named them were afraid and timid to begin with to becoming self-assured individuals during the time I spent with them.</p> <p>It was interesting to see how these individuals men talked about themselves through their body image and muscular features. Simply asking how you describe yourself, Paul, Liam and Chris referred to themselves through muscular features and 'muscular men'. I found the muscularity and body image was used to define self amongst there informants and the threat of losing the body image they had acquired over the years was a frightening thought for those now getting older.</p>
<p><i>Adoption of weight training and body conditioning routine as a lifestyle choice</i></p>	<p><i>Training for me is part of my life it's a guy thing we come meet here have a laugh whilst adding a bit of competitiveness and having a good work out. I intend to this as long as I can there is no goal really, just to keep fit have a good body.</i></p>

*My body is my health how I see it, yeah I know a sexy body image is cool but I do it because I want to be healthy for me a good, muscular body is a healthy body.*

*It's a positive aspect of my life. I don't see an end goal of getting the perfect body it's a way of life for me and I will keep at it until I can.*

*it's part of me, I tell my girlfriend going to the gym and me looking after my body is me so she had to take that into consideration before going out with me as it effects when I wake up, what I eat, training with you guys most days and I don't hardly drink [alcohol] because I sacrifice it to have the good body instead.*

*What really gets me passionate about body training is its fair you get what you put in, life isn't that fair that's why I've stayed committed it's now the small aspect of my life I can be proud of in achieving something for yourself, by yourself and use for yourself.*

*You want to come back lift more weight, see your body develop. Then tell other people about it and you get respect as you are getting bigger and people notice your gains, it gives you satisfaction as we are doing something good all together and improving ourselves both physically and mentally.*

*I train not just because it benefits my health and mental health. It has kept me young, I feel good for my age, my bones are supple my muscles have protected my bones and when I go for a check-up I get remarked upon my impressive health. It's more than just training it is a lifestyle choice something that does take a lot of willpower but it does have some major benefits.*

*Because it effects other parts of life it does become a lifestyle. Think what you eat, how you sleep, what you buy like supplements, clothes is all tailored to suit your training. Therefore you cannot just do normal things if you are serious about training and make some big body image changes.*

*You can measure a man by what he wears, what he eats and what kind of shape he is in. If you weight train on a regular basis it shows through your eating habits, what you wear and clothing you have on. It does become very influential and shapes how you live your life. But it is for the better even if you don't train hard, you still exercising, you still watching what you eat most of the time. That is good thing and has health benefits no matter which way you look at it.*

*I enjoy my life because of the training, that's why I have been so consistent with it. Think other things in life are temporary, the good times, the holidays, the partying. It is short lived and only provides a high for a short while. But if you can get a high more regularly and feel good it is a great thing. This is what I have experienced that regular uplifting experiences through bodybuilding and training and the best part is that it is good for me and I'm not doing anything illegal.*

*Reflecting upon life this is the only thing I have remained committed to. The training and looking after how your body looks is something which is so real and about you. You do everything for yourself and it's so rewarding that is why I come back year after year.*

Spending 4 months now with the committed weight trainers, the experience highlighted the routine of training on a regular basis and focusing energies on shaping the muscular body was a lifestyle choice. It required permanent choices to which consumption, daily habits are impacted upon. The committed weight trainers demonstrated this through advising me on how to undertake my daily routine of exercise, eating habits and sleeping patterns. The individuals were great believers of living body conscious lives and expected me to follow pursuit in order to fit with the group dynamics. I found advice provided to me went beyond the fitness context it involved making permanent lifestyle choices and I was told to "up my game" by Steve as I was going to go above and beyond what "normal" gym males do. Subsequently I joined the group of males and expectedly the routine was very intensive and as we were training nearly every day it became a focal point and I was advised which supplements to purchase and diet to consume in order to get through. I did have some supplements which I had used before but still found my body muscles were aching and was then told by Luke to change my diet and to try and sleep more. Such changes affected everyday consumption and my everyday life was affected by training.

*Characterising self through muscular credentials*

*It's got a lot of meaning, shows you are superior, can work out and nurture yourself, your body. It helps in getting better jobs, people do judge you on how you look, it helps with my physical fitness I find already at work I'm quicker doing the manual graft and can get things done quicker working on my body has made me better at doing my job funnily enough. It's also a satisfaction helps your spiritual mind to rest at the end of the day.*

*Reason why lads go into body building is to command respect. It just changes how the way people treat you so you bounce of this and change as a person as you are being treated differently. That positive boost is worth every hard repetition you do.*

*You know when we super set and push, pull weights like there is no tomorrow, it hurts real bad and you sweat it out just keep going you tell yourself. This is the making of you. You don't realise at first as your mind is just on getting through the exercise. After a while you realise that it starts to define you as a person. You come here to test yourself and push it that little more, you can work under pressure, you can pull of something you think was never possible. This is what it's all about the making of you. I don't want to blow my own trumpet but I know I am on another level than the average guy. A lot of men nowadays just don't have it in them to push themselves to new heights, they let their women control them. We don't, we use the old school methods to keep us masculine and slicker than the average guy.*

*A lot of young men here in Middlesbrough do not have many things to be proud of in life. There isn't great jobs around or talent in general. The making of a muscular body and have an impressive gives a focus in life something you own to be proud of, show off and it helps you feel good about yourself. I have seen it many, many times now it is a common trait in this town. But it is good for the lads to come to a gym and train as during the process of weight training and shaping the body you learn so much. Life lessons can be learnt and you meet some real helpful, positive people to help you which is nice.*

*Coming to the club and training is just a magnificent experience in itself. You learn so much from lessons in here, about how to be a man, self-discipline, whilst also changing your body through muscle which changes the way you look and also who you are as a person. The experience takes you out of your comfort zone which increases your mental resistance, confidence and the willpower to do whatever. Great isn't it.*

*All the years of training and being loyal to a gym has made me who I am. My body and experiences tell my story, I have made myself through the muscle development journey.*

*I have developed as a person, how they way I act and behave, how I see myself and other guys has all been contextualised through the training journey. Working on how you look is hard, you need to make permanent lifestyle changes, cut back on dirty habits, stop hanging around lads who are not at your level. All this changes you as a person you see life differently, but you also have the tools to push yourself further in various aspects of life, it does make you or break you sometimes, that's the iron life for you.*

*Training and working on your body how I see it you got to do it, it shows you are hungry for something and these days young men have got to show their hunger for something otherwise you come across weak and faint hearted which other people both men and women will take advantage of even in the workplace and life in general. We now live in a society where it really is dog eat dog its survival of the fittest, those who look good, feel good and have the confidence which gets them to challenge other people and to strive forward.*

*That drawing you just made me do, tells it all. Each muscle group defines you as a whole. The muscular shoulders, big biceps and prominent chest all carry symbolic meanings to all men, Your body is you as a package. Muscles complete the body they give it that purposeful look. You not complete until you have muscles.*

*I do judge other lads by how they look. If a lad is muscular it just sends a message out. You are not to be messed with if you have no muscle and come across timid you are there to be taken advantage of. It's just how society is like today. I seen lads in here who have transformed themselves not just how they look and how they act, they get the confidence and belief in self to show they have something about them. It is about charactering building in the gym you grow and develop as a person.*

	<p><i>I want to be big and muscly, it just means so much about who you are as a person. People will think twice before taking advantage of you or getting cheeky. We do live in a society where you get tested especially when you are younger and out and about more. Lads especially want to be the big fish and they will try and take the mickey, if you look intimidating they will think twice no doubt about it.</i></p> <p>The fieldwork captured the dedicated effort and commitment from these males to improve themselves by gaining muscle. I found there was a clear link between self-development and body image transformation. My first interaction with Matt and Colin from the youngsters was centred upon how a muscular body image would define perceptions of self and how others seen these individuals. Such conceptualisations were highlighted again during the aspirational body drawing exercise where body muscular features were explained in terms of their symbolic value and how they defined the individual. The youngsters here were keen to explain how various muscles characterised how a male in terms of their mental resistance, masculinity, popularity as well as their physical strength and stamina which portrayed the meaning muscles carried for these young males eager to capture these self traits.</p> <p>Training with these older males it was emphasised how the training and maintaining the muscles was used by these individuals to express themselves and affirm their masculinity. The individuals were keen to show me how much they could lift and demonstrate their strength. As I reflected upon time spent over the last few weeks I realised these males were posing to me they were local hard men (as posed at the beginning of this groups participation period) and were displaying how they lived up to these perceptions through their aggressive display of masculinity (through the heavy lifting training sessions) and showing their muscles to supplement their hyper masculine behaviour.</p>
<p><i>Body dissatisfaction as a result of lack in performance in training</i></p>	<p><i>I'm not seeing results, think I've hit a plateau already, it's not good. I need to shock my body, give it some electric volts so it changes with packing on more muscle</i></p> <p><i>I'm not happy with myself, I can't keep up with the others which makes me think my body is not up to this level. Maybe when I get a bit older it will get better for me.</i></p>



*It's all about what you do in here, what you do to train your body to shape it to your desires. The hard work pays off when the body performs to a new level. If it doesn't you should re-think the whole thing again.*

*I hate it when the others are making gains and I'm not making any progress, I do look at myself, my body sceptically and think I need to hit those supplement hard, increase protein and train more.  
It's got to react that's what we are trying to do, challenge us to react and grow.*

*My training has been hit and miss lately and it's getting to me. I want to see development, more tone but I have not seen anything which really bugs me like I've hit the brick wall. It does bother me and I think about when I'm in bed. I promise myself tomorrow will be better but it's not happening at the moment.*

*If my body is not doing what it supposed to do, then I'm not happy and will be asking myself, why, what's happening as I don't want to waste time. My biggest fear is losing my strength, as you get old it is inevitable but I'm trying to put off as long as I can as it took so long to acquire and it is part of me, who I am Mr biceps.*

*I'm really annoyed with myself today, can't make any excuses I didn't perform when it mattered, maybe it's my body telling me I need to rest. I'm not cut out for this, my tiny arms are suffering today  
My body needs to learn, they say no pain, no gain and that's what's it all about.*

*I'm disappointed with my performance, thought I would smash shoulders today. I need to go think about what I am doing, maybe get more rest and eat more, there is something missing. It's not easy coming here and beating you guys week in and week out. I after prepare, eat well, sleep well to be able to perform when it matters. You guys don't get as much rest as me, hence why your performance tails off in some areas. You have to prepare both mentally and physically.*

*It's frustrating when you hit the plateau, the last few weeks I have been feeling crap about myself as I'm not seeing any improvements. I can't bench more than 120, even tried 120.5 and failed. I'm not making any progress with my shoulders and not even trying legs as it's going to be horrific. This is not easy what we do, people say it's good for the mind and body, but it's also not at times as I feel disgusted with myself, leaving this place some nights.*

	<p><i>Spending the last couple of days with Gary, I realised there was a lot of emphasis put on how you performed at each session. Gary was very observant of all our performances and would regularly comment on how he seen us, whilst comparing our performance with past sessions.</i></p> <p><i>I was surprised of his ability to recall such experiences and make mental notes of me and other participants. By the fact that Gary knew how many sets we achieved in an exercise previously and hearing it say it out aloud did bring some pressure to perform well. It was the eagerness to have some self-pride in the group and in the fitness club environment when naturally others paid attention to the weight you were bench pressing, how much you could shoulder press and how much you could squat. I noticed amongst participants when performance goals were not achieved, there was frustration expressed by individuals who blamed body credentials for their shortcomings.</i></p>
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## Appendix E: Collection of codes and process for searching for themes extract

### Step 4 searching for themes

#### E1: First draft of themes

1. Positive notions associated with the act of weight training and experiencing body transformation
2. Body transformation and weight training used to encapsulate perception of ideal masculine beliefs.
3. Muscular body used to portray perception of self and develop character
4. Body transformation seen as a leisure career and self-development project
5. Threat to masculinity when weight training performances is hindered
6. Group weight training used to share masculine experiences and encouraging the adoption of hyper masculine traits.

The following themes were taken forward as a result of reviewing first draft of themes.

1. Muscular body in self-augmentation (3)
2. Performing masculinity (6)
3. Masculine body not performing (5)
4. Body transformation experience (1, 2, 4)

**Table E1: Theme development**

Theme/description	Sub-themes	Codes
<p><b>Body transformation experience</b></p> <p>This theme captures the essence of body transformation relating to how participants assigned meaning to the body transformation experience and the role it played in enriching the individual's life through 'feel good factor' and perceived positive impact on self.</p>	<p>Positive connotations related to body transformation</p> <p>Living out masculine ideals through body transformation</p>	<p>Good health            Feel good about yourself            To get pump on muscles            Get noticed, feel good            Social appeal            Self-awareness            Looking and feeling good            Positive aspect of life – knowing you have a healthy body            Sexual appeal of muscles            Remain looking young            Self-improvement            Maintaining appearance            Helping overcome insecurities as you get older            Look good to optimise presence            Get noticed            Survival of the fittest/strongest            Get treated better</p>

		<p>Self driven  Therapeutic  Satisfaction of self  Feeling youthful  Sexual appeal  Body economic value  Positive aspect of life  Self-care  Getting excited about having a muscular body  Sign of character  Masculine affirmation  Social appeal of muscular image  Superiority over other males  Desirable status symbol  Muscles as physical asset  Feeling of superiority over other males  Status symbol  Superiority  Biceps being a sign of strength and power</p>
<p><b>The role of the muscular body in self-augmentation</b></p> <p>The theme demonstrates the link between the muscular, worked out body and its meaning to the self-concept which participants identified. The theme distinguishes the muscular body encompassing symbolic significance as well as acting as the surface to portray self-character.</p>	<p>Symbolic meanings assigned to the muscular body</p> <p>Muscular body relation to perceptions of the self (concept)</p>	<p>Muscular body perceived with 'who I am'  Body acting as an identity distinguisher  Muscularity related to masculinity and engaging with manhood  Muscular body providing self-confidence  Self-improvement  Therapeutic  Feeling a sense of satisfaction and pleased about self through body performance and muscularity development  Self-care  Status symbol  Developing muscle is part of growing up  Muscles provide a psychological boost  Benefits of having muscles in other aspects of life; playing sport, sexual appeal, social popularity.  Body is me  Self-identity  Personal journey to improve body, health and appearance</p>

		<p>Muscles signify personal character traits relating to hyper masculinity  Self-confidence and belief to challenge self and perform under pressure  Physically, mentally strong  Self-disciplined  ‘Head strong’  Muscular toned body – cool, appealing body  Helps share commonality with sport stars and personalities  Body aesthetics’ economic value  Muscular body appeal at work in employment, social engagement, sexual appeal  Muscular body presence in social settings  Perceptions of superiority over other males  Superiority over other males  Muscular body as a status symbol  Muscles as physical assets  Status symbol  Muscular body as a differentiation factor  Bodybuilding to command respect  North East UK identity – big muscular body</p>
<p><b>Performing masculinity</b></p> <p>The theme describes the notion of how participants made sense of their lifestyle choice and body transformation routines. The theme distinguishes how participants enacted their masculinity beliefs through embodied behaviour and shaping their bodies to live out their masculine ideals beliefs.</p>	<p>Lived experience of masculinity and practicing masculine beliefs through the muscular body</p>	<p>Lifestyle choice  Weight training as part of a healthy lifestyle  For the good of health and body  A way/method of managing life  Training life provides a purpose  As a way to discipline self  Substantial commitment  Financial, time and effort investment in the body  Get what you put in - fairness  Body as project to monitor, develop over time  Health and wellbeing  Healthy lifestyle choice  Building muscle – healthy body  Health consciousness</p>

		<p>Collegiality with other males - being around people who are at your level and have a same mind frame</p> <p>Therapeutic</p> <p>Satisfaction</p> <p>Compensatory to other aspects of life</p> <p>Way of managing life</p> <p>Making sacrifices to achieve body image aspirations</p> <p>Provides a focus in life</p> <p>Self-discipline</p> <p>Changed who I am</p> <p>More energetic – new lease of life</p> <p>Body transformation as a project with real time monitoring</p> <p>Perceived as a male leisure sport – weight training in the gym</p> <p>Developing muscle is part of growing up</p> <p>Bodybuilding – to increase mental strength</p> <p>Increase comfort zone</p> <p>Commonality with sport athletes – training, self-disciplining and managing body</p> <p>Body maintenance and development</p> <p>The gym acting as a sacred place to focus energies on something positive and true to self</p> <p>Mental and physical simulation</p> <p>Weight resistance training and working on the body as a form of mental wellbeing</p> <p>Fairness – with body training you get what you put in</p> <p>Do it for yourself</p> <p>Training regime and working on the body is a way of life</p> <p>Increase comfort zone</p> <p>Body is a reflection of lifestyle</p> <p>Body condition used to judge character</p> <p>Connotation to healthy lifestyle</p> <p>Weight training as an incentive to a healthier lifestyle</p>
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		<p>Working on developing a muscular body and process of weight training used to overcome personal depression          Working on the body as a method of overcoming stress          Therapy</p>
<p><b>Masculine body not performing</b></p> <p>The theme centres upon how body performances were acknowledged in the fitness environment and when expectations were not met (relating to lifting certain amount of weight, keeping up with peers), perceptions of body dissatisfaction and questioning of self-masculinity became apparent.</p>	<p>Pressure to maintain sense of superiority through body performance</p> <p>Body dissatisfaction as a result of lack in body performance</p>	<p>Lack in body performance related to lack in self          Insecurities of not being able to live up to the alpha male perception carried          Threat to masculine-self if failed to increase muscularity          Competencies in weight training related to the capability of being hyper-masculine          Participant feeling ashamed of self in not being able to keep up with peers and other trainers          Individual males judged by how much they can bench press          Individuals feeling the need to deliver in order to show masculinity to authenticate masculine superiority          Participants hiding health issues due to being perceived as a personal weakness effecting status in the group/club environment          Participants' highly-conscious of performing well during key exercises to maintain their hyper-masculine character traits          Individuals feeling depressed if cannot perform to previous levels on weight resistant exercises          Threat to masculine character, and reputation if seen not to be lifting heavy          Age-related health issues causing major concern for participants          Hiding health issue due to the threat of being ridiculed by other trainers.</p>

		<p>Pressure of body performance in the gym acting as a motivator to discipline body further</p> <p>Individuals feeling the pressure to deliver through a well-rounded performance each training session</p> <p>Participants believing hard work of body discipline, supplement intake comes into fruition during gym workouts</p> <p>Participants concerned about reaching a plateau and not seeing any further results or strength gains</p>
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## Appendix F: Thematic maps

Figure F1: Thematic map version 1

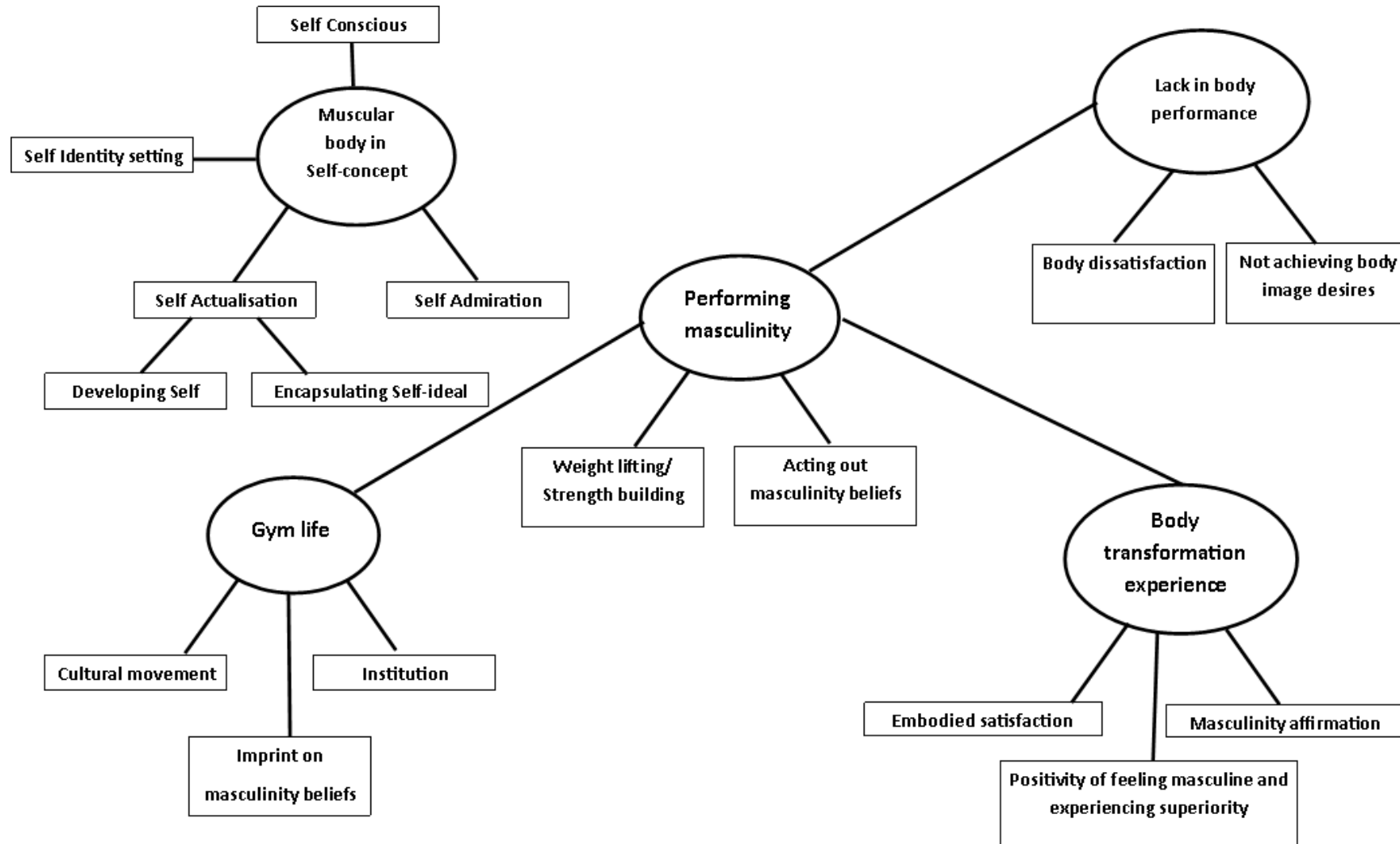
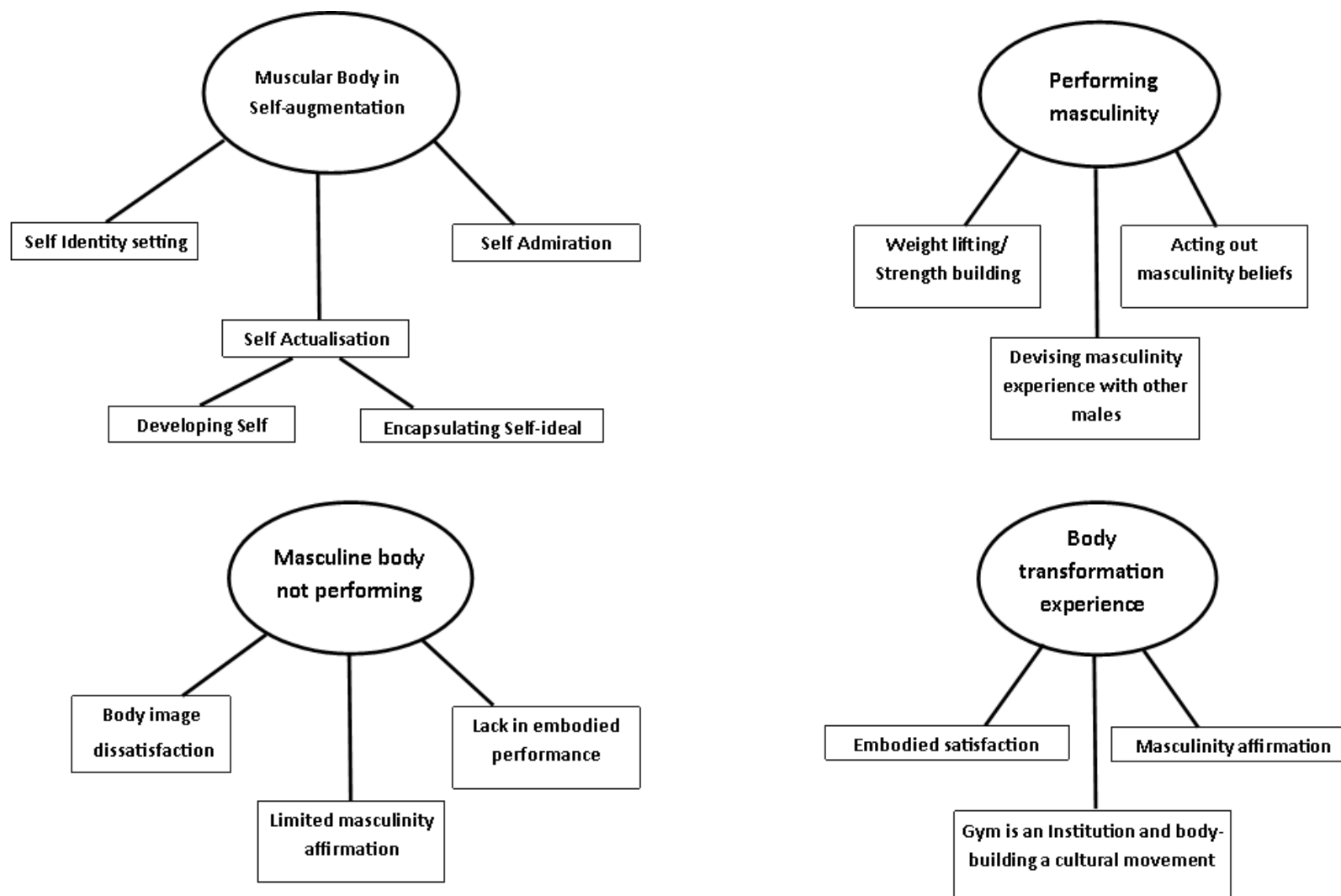


Figure F2: Thematic map version 2



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