Exercise dependence, social physique anxiety, and social support in experienced and inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters

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Abstract

Objectives—To investigate psychological correlates of exercise dependence in experienced and inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters. Secondary objectives included measuring social physique anxiety, bodybuilding identity, and social support among bodybuilders and weightlifters.

Methods—Thirty five experienced bodybuilders, 31 inexperienced bodybuilders, and 23 weightlifters completed the bodybuilding dependence scale, a bodybuilding version of the athletic identity measurement scale, the social physique anxiety scale, and an adapted version of the social support survey-clinical form.

Results—A between subjects multivariate analysis of variance was calculated on the scores of the three groups of lifters for the four questionnaires. Univariate F tests and follow-up tests indicated that experienced bodybuilders scored significantly higher than inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters on bodybuilding dependence (p<0.001), social identity and exclusivity subscales of bodybuilding identity (p<0.001), and social support scales (p<.001), and significantly lower on social physique anxiety (p<0.001).

Conclusion—Experienced bodybuilders exhibit more exercise dependence, show greater social support behaviour, and experience less social physique anxiety than inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters.

Keywords: bodybuilding; exercise dependence; social physical anxiety; social support; athletic identity

Numerous studies have shown that exercise can produce both chronic and acute mental health benefits. However, for some people, exercise can become an obsession, known as exercise dependence, defined as “a process that compels an individual to exercise in spite of obstacles, and results in physical and psychological symptoms when exercise is withdrawn”.1

Early research on exercise dependence emphasised possible biological antecedents and medical consequences2–5 for aerobic exercise, but little evidence has been presented on the motivational components of excessive exercise.6–8 To date, most exercise dependence inventories have been aerobically based and unvalidated, but much anecdotal evidence9–12 indicates that people can become dependent on bodybuilding.

Noting this gap in the exercise mode literature, Smith et al13 began validation of a bodybuilding dependency scale (BDS) designed to assess exercise dependence in bodybuilders. Exploratory factor analysis disclosed three subscales (social dependence, training dependence, mastery dependence). Results appeared to strongly support the construct validity of the social dependency subscale, but were less supportive in the other two subscales.

Recently, a new psychological phrase, “muscle dysmorphia”, has been coined for the exercise dependence syndrome in weightlifters based on research with anabolic steroid users.14 Muscle dysmorphics have been characterised as people with a distortion of body image including a preoccupation with gaining muscle size and definition and a fear of being perceived as weak or thin. These authors noted similarities to a “reverse anorexic” state which included disturbed body image, strict nutritional practices, willingness to ingest dangerous anabolic supplements, dependence on a strict exercise regimen, concealment of their physique, and low self esteem.

The exploratory study by Smith et al13 hypothesised that the apparent prevalence of exercise dependence in bodybuilding is related to the fact that weight training can significantly enhance self esteem.15–19 They predicted that some people begin bodybuilding training because they suffer from poor body image and low self esteem,20–22 and they may become dependent on it to feel good about themselves. Preliminary evidence20–22 supports a possible relation between bodybuilding experience and personal body changes.

This possible relation between exercise dependence and self esteem was supported by the finding of Smith et al13 that bodybuilders scored significantly higher than weightlifters and fitness trainers on the physical self perception profile (PSPP)23 subscales. Experienced bodybuilders seem to develop high levels of positive perceptions about their bodies after extensive training. Similarly, bodybuilders scored high on an adapted version of the “exclusivity” and “social identity” scales of the athletic identity measurement scale (AIMS).24–27 which suggests that bodybuilders may also narrowly identify with the bodybuilding role (A Cornelius, annual conference for athletic counseling, Springfield College, Springfield, MA, May 1999).
Earlier findings on exercise dependence and self esteem suggest a possible link between social physique anxiety and bodybuilding dependence. Social physique anxiety\(^\text{26–27}\) refers to the degree to which people become anxious when others observe or evaluate their physiques. It is possible that, as bodybuilders become more muscular, they may overcome inferiority feelings, becoming dependent on feeling good about their physiques.\(^\text{28}\)

Another important social factor that may be related to bodybuilding dependence is social support. This is defined as “the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value and love us”.\(^\text{29}\) This sense of social acceptance has been found to lead to a sense of self efficacy, low levels of anxiety, a positive self image, expectations of desirable outcomes of social interactions, and a benign view of others.\(^\text{30}\) It appears to take some time (months) to become an accepted part of the social scene in the gymnasium.\(^\text{30–32}\) So both dependence and strong social support may be more prevalent among experienced bodybuilders.

This study will examine some of the motivational antecedents that lead to exercise dependence in bodybuilders and examine how the social climate of bodybuilding gyms may encourage exercise dependence. It will use the BDS,\(^\text{13}\) the social physique anxiety scale (SPAS),\(^\text{26} a\)n adapted version of the social support survey-clinical form (SSS-C),\(^\text{31}\) and a bodybuilding specific version of AIMS\(^\text{25}\) to examine further the phenomenon of exercise dependence. It is hypothesised that significant correlations will occur between the BDS, SSS-C, SPAS, and AIMS scores. It is also hypothesised that experienced bodybuilders will score significantly higher on bodybuilding dependence, bodybuilding identity, and social support, and lower on social physique anxiety than novice bodybuilders and “power lifters”.

**Methods**

**SUBJECTS**

Thirty five experienced male bodybuilders (more than two years of bodybuilding training) aged 20–47 (mean (SD) 27 (4)), 31 inexperienced male bodybuilders (less than one year of bodybuilding training) aged 16–45 (mean (SD) 25 (4)), and 23 experienced male weightlifters (at least one year of power lifting training) aged 16–55 (mean (SD) 28 (3.5)) volunteered to participate in the study.

**PROCEDURES**

Informed consent forms and questionnaires were distributed to and collected from participants at a major bodybuilding championship, at a bodybuilding gymnasium in Manchester, UK, and at a National Sports Centre weightlifting club in the Midlands.

The BDS\(^\text{13}\) consists of a nine item, seven point Likert scale questionnaire constructed to measure the degree to which athletes identify with the athletic role. Initially factor analysis\(^\text{33}\) produced a unidimensional construct with adequate test-retest reliability, internal consistency and some evidence of concurrent validity, more recent confirmatory factor analysis\(^\text{34}\) (A Cornelius, annual conference for athletic counseling, Springfield College, Springfield, MA, May 1999) found a three factor solution with four items comprising a “social identity” factor, four items forming an “exclusivity” subscale, and two items creating a “negative effect” subscale.

The first two subscales were adapted\(^\text{35}\) to make them specific to bodybuilding by changing the word athlete to bodybuilder and the word sport to bodybuilding, and then these eight items were included in the questionnaire. A recent comprehensive analysis of several studies using the multidimensional AIMS (A Cornelius, annual conference for athletic counseling, Springfield College, Springfield, MA, May 1999) has produced internal consistency values of 0.87 for the social identity subscale and 0.88 for the exclusivity subscale.

The SPAS,\(^\text{26}\) 12 items on a five point Likert scale, was developed to measure the construct of social physique anxiety. Initially the questionnaire was thought to be a unidimensional measure, but recent confirmatory factor analysis\(^\text{36–37}\) suggests that it is a two factor multidimensional scale composed of five items in factor 1, representing feelings about comfort of presenting one’s physique, and seven items in factor 2, representing expectations of negative evaluation of one’s physique by others. Some evidence\(^\text{38}\) for acceptable internal consistency was presented for factor 1 (α = 0.76) and factor 2 (α = 0.90), and acceptable levels of concurrent validity were shown by significant correlations with the physical self worth (factor 1, r = −0.70; factor 2, r = −0.73), physical condition (factor 1, r = −0.48; factor 2, r = −0.43), physical strength (factor 1, r = −0.42; factor 2, r = −0.42), and sport competence (factor 1, r = −0.40; factor 2, r = −0.46) subscales of the PSPS.\(^\text{25}\)

Finally, an adapted version of the SSS-C,\(^\text{31}\) consisting of 32 items on a seven point Likert scale, was included to measure the degree to which a person feels that they are receiving social support in areas of their lives. The eight
subscases include listening support, emotional support, emotional challenge, task appreciation, task challenge, reality, tangible assistance, and perceived assistance. The eight subscales can be added together to compute a person’s overall perception of social support. The SSS-C has been shown to have adequate content and structural validity,31 moderate to high correlations with the social support questionnaire31 as evidence of concurrent validity, no sign of social desirability, and substantial evidence of construct validity. Test-retest reliability has been shown by significant correlations ranging from 0.44 to 0.87 across the eight subscales.31

**Results**

Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated between the three BDS subscales and the two scales of the AIMS, two subscales of the SPAS, and eight subscales of the SSS-C to test for further construct validity of the BDS. As the correlations showed moderate to high values (table 1), a multivariate analysis of variance that included all the dependent variables from each questionnaire was calculated to compare the scores of the three groups. If a significant overall multivariate effect occurred, then univariate F tests and Tukey’s HSD tests were used to control for unequal sample sizes. For both the exclusivity subscale (Wilks’ λ = 0.072, F_{2,86} = 12.05, p < 0.001) and the social identity subscale (Wilks’ λ = 0.072, F_{2,86} = 12.05, p < 0.001), the BDS social dependence scores of experienced bodybuilders were significantly higher than those of inexperienced bodybuilders, whose scores were also significantly higher than those of weightlifters (table 2). For the BDSS subscales, those of experienced bodybuilders were significantly higher than those of both the inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters (table 2).

For the two bodybuilding adapted scales of the AIMS, univariate F tests were significant for both the exclusivity subscale (F_{2,86} = 94.80, p < 0.001) and the social identity subscale (F_{2,86} = 88.81, p < 0.001). Tukey’s HSD tests showed that the exclusivity scores of the experienced bodybuilders were significantly higher than those of the inexperienced bodybuilders, whose scores were also significantly higher than those of the weightlifters; social identity scores of the experienced bodybuilders were significantly higher than those of both the inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters (table 2).

For the SPAS, univariate F tests were significant for factor 1 (F_{2,86} = 18.26, p < 0.001) and factor 2 (F_{2,86} = 4.40, p < 0.05), showing significant differences between the weight training groups. Follow up tests showed that BDS social dependence scores of experienced bodybuilders were significantly higher than those of inexperienced bodybuilders, whereas scores were significantly higher than those of weightlifters (table 2). For BDS training and mastery dependence scores, those of experienced bodybuilders were significantly higher than those of both the inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters (table 2).

For the SSS-C scale, univariate F tests were all significant for the overall score and eight subscales: for total SSS (F_{2,86} = 28.37, p < 0.001), emotional challenge (F_{2,86} = 6.35, p < 0.01), emotional support (F_{2,86} = 18.04, p < 0.001), tangible assistance (F_{2,86} = 25.72, p < 0.001), task challenge (F_{2,86} = 25.52, p < 0.001), task appreciation (F_{2,86} = 25.41, p < 0.001), perceived assistance (F_{2,86} = 27.29, p < 0.001), and reality (F_{2,86} = 17.98, p < 0.001). For all the above scales except task challenge

**Table 2. Means (SD) for psychological inventories for experienced bodybuilders, inexperienced bodybuilders, and weightlifters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Experienced bodybuilders</th>
<th>Inexperienced bodybuilders</th>
<th>Weightlifters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BDS-SocDp</td>
<td>24.77 (4.43)*</td>
<td>19.29 (3.68)*</td>
<td>12.91 (4.58)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDS-TrnDp</td>
<td>16.69 (3.07)</td>
<td>14.13 (2.94)</td>
<td>13.00 (4.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDS-MstDp</td>
<td>12.74 (1.38)</td>
<td>7.29 (2.29)</td>
<td>6.39 (2.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIMS-SocId</td>
<td>21.54 (2.96)*</td>
<td>12.97 (3.50)*</td>
<td>11.48 (3.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIMS-Excl</td>
<td>18.29 (2.83)*</td>
<td>14.19 (3.33)*</td>
<td>16.13 (1.42)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPAS-Fac1</td>
<td>14.85 (5.00)</td>
<td>18.58 (5.71)*</td>
<td>17.04 (4.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EmotChI</td>
<td>18.80 (3.08)</td>
<td>16.48 (1.63)</td>
<td>17.61 (2.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EmotSp</td>
<td>23.63 (3.09)</td>
<td>18.68 (4.08)</td>
<td>18.30 (3.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen</td>
<td>21.46 (2.83)</td>
<td>16.74 (3.02)</td>
<td>17.87 (3.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PercAss</td>
<td>24.31 (3.18)</td>
<td>17.29 (4.78)</td>
<td>19.17 (3.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>21.60 (3.58)</td>
<td>15.94 (4.49)</td>
<td>17.78 (3.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TanAss</td>
<td>23.34 (2.97)</td>
<td>17.48 (1.69)</td>
<td>17.48 (3.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TasApp</td>
<td>23.20 (3.24)*</td>
<td>17.54 (3.96)</td>
<td>18.48 (3.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TasChI</td>
<td>22.83 (2.96)*</td>
<td>16.77 (3.67)*</td>
<td>19.22 (3.88)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS-Tot</td>
<td>176.11 (18.26)*</td>
<td>136.94 (22.53)</td>
<td>145.78 (26.43)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significantly different at p<0.001 except for SPAS-Fac2, where p<0.05.

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and emotional challenge, follow up tests indicated that experienced bodybuilders scored significantly higher on components of social support than inexperienced bodybuilders and weightlifters (table 2). For the task challenge subscale, experienced bodybuilders scored significantly higher than weight lifters, whose scores were more than inexperienced bodybuilders. For the emotional challenge subscale, experienced bodybuilders scored significantly higher than inexperienced bodybuilders.

In conclusion, these results indicate that there is a relation between bodybuilding dependence, bodybuilding identity, social physique anxiety, and emotional challenge subscales. The results also provide strong support for the validity of all three BDS subscales. This is in vivid contrast with the findings of Smith et al., which is probably due, at least in part, to the larger sample and the differentiation between experienced and inexperienced bodybuilders.

Despite these positive results, it should be noted that research on the BDS is still exploratory. The processes of exercise dependence, muscle dysmorphia, and bodybuilding dependence have not yet been clearly defined by replicated designs with adequate samples. CD Lantz, DJ Rhea, annual meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology, Cape Cod (1998). It must be cautioned that, although this sample provided adequate statistical power, the high number of dependent variables analysed could lead to inflated type I error. In addition, the BDS items need to undergo further psychometric and confirmatory factor analyses to test this model of exercise dependence thoroughly.

Future research should examine differences between competitive and non-competitive bodybuilders and men and women. In addition, recent hypotheses suggesting that muscle dysmorphia is a type of reverse anorexia need to be examined with exercisers at risk for exercise disorders and steroid users.

6 Ogles BM, Masters KS, Richardson SA. Obligatory running: a comparison of competitive and non-competitive male and female distance runners, and men and women. In addition, recent hypotheses suggesting that muscle dysmorphia is a type of reverse anorexia need to be examined with exercisers at risk for exercise disorders and steroid users.

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Commentary

This article looks at a fascinating area of sport—exercise dependence—focusing on a group of athletes well known for their devotion to training—bodybuilders. The relation of various areas within exercise dependence (social dependency, training dependency, and mastery) are well demonstrated in this study of experienced and inexperienced bodybuilders and experienced weightlifters. The results may have potential for identifying factors of concern with bodybuilders and potentially addressing these as needed.

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