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'It's not just you come into the gym and do your weight training': a narrative exploration of muscularity's role as identity capital

Ieuan Cranswick^{a,b}, David Richardson^c, Martin Littlewood^a and David Tod^d

^aResearch Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK;

^bSchool of Health, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK; ^cSchool of Psychology and Sport Science, Bangor University, Bangor, UK; ^dLancaster Medical School, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT

The current study explored muscularity and weight training's role as capital in people's identities across various contexts. Eleven weight trainers from two gyms were interviewed (three females, eight males) about their desires for muscularity and the role it played in their lives. Thematic narrative analysis identified narratives that framed the individuals' muscular desires, behaviours, and importance. Muscularity formed a versatile resource—identity capital—that was a key part of the individuals' body projects. These body projects and identity capital facilitated the individuals' identity performances in a range of contexts (e.g. occupation, gender). Three narratives emerged (*individualist*, *illusionist*, and *promoter*) that highlighted the intertwined tangible (e.g. leanness and strength) and intangible (e.g. control and self-empowerment) attributes associated with muscularity and weight training that facilitated successful identity performances. These narratives achieved goals of self-empowerment (Individualist), self-protection (Illusionist), or self-advertisement (Promoter) which enabled successful identity performances. The current findings advance existing literature by suggesting muscularity is a versatile form of identity capital that can facilitate multiple identities (e.g. occupation, gender) and contexts. The potential benefit to an individuals' sense of self also highlights the positive effect of muscularity weight training as a tool for self-promotion and personal growth.

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Muscularity; identity; narrative; gym culture; body project

Introduction

Identity can be described as the integration of multiple self-images over time (Erikson, 1968), which highlights the potential multiplicity and variability of people's identities in modern society. Constructing identity in late-modern society is a complex task that encourages people to individualise their identities, continually construct their sense of self, and adapt to obstacles and opportunities that arise within their

CONTACT Ieuan Cranswick  i.cranswick@leedsbeckett.ac.uk  School of Health, Leeds Beckett University, CL 604, City Campus, Leeds, LS1 3HE, UK

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ever-changing social lives (Côté, 2016). To negotiate late-modern demands, there is a need for 'self-work' as part of identity construction (Smith Maguire, 2008). Therefore, the body has become a site for 'production and display of self' (Smith Maguire, 2008, pp. 59–60) and thus a salient aspect of identity and self-expression (Erikson, 1968).

Sport, the gym, and weight training environments are spaces where individuals can engage in self-work and refine their bodies and muscularity as part of the construction and enactment of subcultural identities (Andreasson, 2014; Coquet et al. 2016; Monaghan, 1999; Smith Maguire, 2008). Modifying, maintaining, or improving body aesthetics and performance through dieting, going to the gym, and weight training represent 'body work' (Coffey, 2015; Gimlin, 2007; Shilling, 2011), which becomes part of a body project (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 2013). Body projects themselves, however, are not an end point, but instead they are an ongoing process of identity work that secures 'a sense of who one is and who one wants to be' (Orbach, 2009, p. 237). The interplay between body projects and identity work highlights the body a vessel for self-improvement at an existential level (Bordo, 2003; Giazitzoglu, 2018; Wagner, 2017) and the need to further understand the role of body projects, and specifically muscularity, in wider identity contexts.

Muscle-specific body projects are driven by two features: appearance (e.g. a lean muscular body) and performance (e.g. a strong and productive body; Stewart et al., 2013), both of which are acknowledged as forms of capital that are accrued through body work and aid peoples' body projects and identity performances (Cranswick et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013; Kling et al., 2018; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021). Currently, existing literature frames muscularity in several different forms of capital, such as bodily (Wacquant, 1995), physical (Shilling, 2013; Stewart et al., 2013), and masculine capital (de Visser et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2017). Despite the variations in their context, building these forms of capital appears to help enhance one's social worth, status, distinction, as part of multiple identities (Adams et al., 2010; Bridges, 2009; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Klein, 1993; Phoenix, 2010). For example, muscularity holds symbolic value in many gendered (e.g. Edwards et al., 2017; Wagner, 2017; Worthen & Baker, 2016), occupational (e.g. Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Johansson et al., 2017), and sporting identities (e.g. Giazitzoglu, 2024; Wacquant, 1995), which allows people to successfully navigate these contexts and identity performances.

Existing literature demonstrates an understanding of the interplay between the body and identity, but there seems to be a need for a wider perspective that embraces muscularity's utility as a universal resource across multiple identities and contexts. For example, existing studies often focus on muscularity's role in specific identities, such as masculinity (e.g. Edwards et al., 2017), femininity (e.g. Edwards et al., 2022) and contexts, such as fitness and sport (e.g. Cranswick et al., 2020; Harvey et al., 2014) and physical or masculine occupations (e.g. Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021). Additionally, assigning muscularity to a specific form of capital, such as masculine capital (de Visser et al., 2009), may downplay muscularity's versatility and transferability across multiple identities and contexts. The current study therefore aimed to explore the role of muscular body projects in multiple identities. Specifically, through narrative analysis, the study sought to understand the meanings, impact, and utility of muscularity within weight training individuals lives both inside and

outside the gym. What follows is a brief discussion of the theoretical concepts and existing research that informed the current study.

Theoretical background

The current study draws on the ICM (Côté, 2016) and identity performance and mastery theories (Goffman, 1959; Sampson, 1978) as a lens for exploring the narratives surrounding muscular body projects and identity management within the weight training individuals. Adopting a broad and non-specific subcultural or identity lens meant the current study could provide an insight into the wider meanings, impact, and utility muscular body projects, desires, and behaviours have on the wider context of people's lives and identities.

Identity Capital Model

Côté's Identity Capital Model (ICM; 2016) recognises the need to embrace multiple identities and sociocultural mobility. The ICM proposes two overarching forms of identity capital (tangible and intangible), which represent sociological and psychological resources respectively. Tangible capital is associated with palpable or socially visible concepts, such as wealth, professional networks, and reputations. Intangible capital reflects an individual's personality characteristics and concepts, such as self-esteem, cognitive abilities, and capabilities to negotiate various obstacles, environments, and contexts (Côté, 2016; Côté & Levine, 2002; Kroger, 2007). Developing a portfolio of both tangible and intangible identity capital can provide individuals with the agency and ability to negotiate the uncertainty and unpredictability of late-modern society, which minimises the risk of social exclusion, hindered development, and contributes to coherent identities (Côté, 1996, 2016; Côté & Levine, 2002). In doing so, individuals can achieve healthy identity transitions and functioning, as well as resolving adult and social identities (Côté, 1996, 2016; Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1959). Rather than reducing muscularity to a narrow category of capital, interpreting it through an ICM lens may allow a flexible perspective of the body as identity capital that does not attribute it to just physical resources (e.g. strength) or narrow identities (e.g. masculinity). In doing so it can be appreciated that muscularity and the associated behaviours have both tangible (e.g. appearance and strength) and intangible (e.g. self-esteem, dedication, and commitment) effects that can help build, revise, and maintain multiple identity performances (Caza et al., 2018; Giazitzoglu, 2018; Symon & Pritchard, 2015).

Identity performance and mastery

The identity performance theory is grounded in the proposal that identity performances are not just about possessing traits or attributes, but also about *doing* identity so that people can '*be* who they are and *become* who they will or should be' (Huot & Rudman, 2010, p. 73). Goffman (1959) proposed that people perform their identities in line with how they see others and how they are thought, or wish, to be seen by others (Huot & Rudman, 2010). Part of the performance is negotiating

the 'frontstage' (i.e. social identities) and 'backstage' (i.e. personal identities) to achieve a desired impression (Goffman, 1959; Huot & Rudman, 2010). This controlling of social images and personal qualities also reflects the concept of identity mastery, which consists of managing internal and external factors (e.g. personal feelings and others' impressions respectively; Sampson, 1978). Body projects, and muscularity as capital, seem to demonstrate a corporeal efficiency in constructing and *doing* identities by embodying and symbolising desirable skills and characteristics, which helps individuals negotiate the personal and social elements of their identities (e.g. Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Cranswick et al., 2020; Giazitzoglu, 2024; Harvey et al., 2014). Drawing on theoretical concepts, such as ICM, identity performance, and mastery could therefore help advance the understanding of how muscularity may be used as a broader form of capital to master and control various identity performances.

Existing research: muscularity and identities

Muscularity and gender: negotiating masculinity and femininity

Women's bodies have been commonly recognised as a salient aspect of their identities (Kling et al., 2017) and socially evaluated based on appearance (Murnen & Don, 2012; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). There is, however, an increasing realisation that men's bodies are also part of an identity performance that can display desired social images (Cranswick et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2017). With the diversification in women's body work and ideals towards bodybuilding, strength training, and a muscular and toned physique, it is apparent that members of both genders are engaged in muscle-related body work and projects as ways of performing and negotiating their gendered identities (Edwards et al., 2017, 2022; Hockin-Boyers et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Wagner, 2017; Walters & Hefferon, 2020).

Several studies provide an in-depth insight into the performance of masculinity through the body and gym practices in the bodybuilding and weight training sub-cultures (e.g. Edwards et al., 2017; Klein, 1993; Wagner, 2017). For some men, the body is a site of communication and symbolism of masculinity and a form of physical capital that embodies the skills and capabilities to establish and validate their masculine identities and worth (Adams et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2017; Giazitzoglu, 2018; Klein, 1993). The muscular appearance is also tied to the practices men endure (e.g. lifting heavy weights) and their capabilities (e.g. strength, pain tolerance) which in turn validates their masculine status (Coffey, 2016; Wagner, 2017). The conflation of masculinity and muscularity has positioned men's bodies at the core of their identities (Edwards et al., 2017; Wagner, 2017). Their bodies thus become something to 'tinker with'; a body project of value that represents what it means to be a man (Wagner, 2017, p. 583).

For women, traditionally a muscular toned physique goes against Western feminine ideals (Grogan et al. 2004; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). More contemporary views of female ideals, however, appear to hold muscular and toned physiques as more attractive and desirable than the traditional thin appearance (Bozsik et al., 2018), which potentially blurs the gender boundaries. But fitness media representations of the

athletic female body ideal (e.g. #fitspiration) still project thinness, as well as muscular tone, as a significant characteristic (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), which creates a 'paradoxical body ideal' (Ilief-Martinescu, 2016) that moves between a 'minimalist look and a solid, muscular, athletic look' (Bordo, 1989, p. 90). The oscillation between ideals preserves the need for women to carefully negotiate muscular body projects and feminine identities.

For both genders a visual appearance and strength is what gets noticed (i.e. tangible identity capital), so is crucial to identity, but the associated practices and consequences (i.e. intangible identity capital), such as pushing the body to its limits with weights, committing to strict eating and training regimes, developing independence and confidence, also serve to contribute to the overall identity performances (Edwards et al., 2022; Shilling & Bunsell, 2014; Wagner, 2017). As one's physique is a by-product of weight training, the two (the body and the training) become intertwined as symbolic resources within identity, so people will invest in body work to achieve and not 'lose that body' (Coffey, 2016, p. 181).

Muscularity and occupation

As may be expected, it is evident that the body, and muscularity, plays a vital role in identity construction and performance for health and fitness occupations, such as personal trainers (Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013) and strength and conditioning coaches (Edmonds, 2018). Muscularity in these health and fitness occupations embodies and advertises individuals' knowledge, skills, and credibility and thus becomes a significant form of capital within a context where the body is an object for consumption and professionals are pressured into following consumer industry standards (Fernández-Balboa & González-Calvo, 2018).

Outside the gym and fitness environments, however, the body and a muscular physique have also been shown to be a central feature of several occupational identities, such as security, firefighters, and the police force (Coquet et al., 2016; Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021; Perrott, 2019). Through bodily practices and developing bodily capital these individuals can project physical fitness, 'hardness', 'toughness', intimidation, and violence (Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021; Perrott, 2019). These instrumental qualities can facilitate job success and thus identity construction and performances (Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021; Perrott, 2019). Within these roles, there tends to be a consistent undertone of masculinity that mediates the relationship between muscularity and these occupational identities, which may not be the case in roles not governed or facilitated by masculine traits.

Some literature has demonstrated that a muscular, toned, and athletic physique may also be a commodity and source of capital for both men and women in corporate and executive working settings (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2015). The term managerial athleticism has been used to conceptualise a muscular and lean physique and its desirability in these corporate settings (Johansson et al., 2017). In corporate and executive roles, a muscular athletic body seems to be an external presentation of competency, worth, and control (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017). As a result of these social

connotations and potential stereotypes associated with muscularity, employers seem more likely to employ individuals whose bodies align with managerial athleticism (Meriläinen et al., 2015).

Method

The interviews and data in the current study were collected as part of a wider ethnographic study exploring the various subcultural identities within two different gyms. The two gyms were chosen as they represented some of the different cultures and body projects associated with weight training and muscularity, with one housing appearance-focused training cultures (e.g. physique competitors) and the other more performance-focused (e.g. powerlifters). The aims of the ethnography were to (a) explore the socially constructed body projects and meanings associated with muscularity in different weight training subcultures and (b) understand muscularity's potential role as a form of capital in weight training individuals' multiple identities. The scale of the findings associated with these aims was deemed too large to compress into one study without losing the rich detail, which was the rationale for presenting two separate articles. The current study presents the data and narratives associated with aim (b), which predominantly came from the semi-structured interviews. The findings associated with aim (a) and the detailed ethnographic observation methods will be presented in a separate article.

The ethnographic observations did not directly inform the current findings, but they helped identify 11 key figures across both gyms who demonstrated a clear investment in muscular body projects. Participants were invited for interview to discuss their experiences of the gym, weight training, and muscularity, which provided rich detail and narratives on muscularity's wider identity implications. The participants were purposively sampled based on their engagement in weight training at least 3 times per week, demonstrated their muscular interest through conversations and behaviours (e.g. discussing and evaluating their own or others' physiques or strength), and were seen to frequently use legal dietary supplementation. Of the 11 participants who volunteered for interview 3 were women and 8 were men. Despite this skewed distribution, it was a proportionate representation of the observed weight training culture at both gyms. The men were aged between 20 and 42-years-old, and the women between 29 and 52 years at the time of interview. This age range generally represented the age groups who were observed within both gyms. [Table 1](#) presents the demographic information and number of interviews with each participant.

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee. For the ethnography, all members were made aware of the first authors presence and role within the gym, as well as the study aims and procedure via the owners who had received a copy of the study information sheet and signed a gatekeeper consent form. Posters were also placed on notice boards in the changing rooms and around the gym to aid awareness of the study and my presence. When training and walking around the gym [insert initials] also made a significant personal effort to spread awareness to all members and those who asked about the project. For the interviews, the participants also signed individual consent forms that signposted the nature of the study and interviews, the audio recording, and confidentiality of their responses.

Table 1. Participant demographics and number of interviews.

Participant	Sex	Age ^a	Occupation	Training Frequency (days per week)	No. Interviews ^b
Annie	Female	29	Osteopath	5	2
Leanne	Female	52	Admin	4	2
Mohini	Female	31	University Lecturer	3	2
Thor	Male	41	Gym Owner	5	2
Loki	Male	20	Sports Coach	4	2
Dwayne	Male	32	IT Worker	5	1
Dorian	Male	42	High School Teacher	3	2
Milo	Male	27	Osteopath	5	2
Arnold	Male	31	High School teacher	5	3
Lou	Male	27	Nutrition Coach	5	2
Ronnie	Male	37	Nutrition Coach	5	2

Note. ^aAll ages refer to time of interview. ^bNumber of interviews are formal interviews in person, or via email, and do not include informal conversations.

To ensure confidentiality each participant was assigned a pseudonym and any identifiable information was removed or altered.

Philosophical underpinning

The current study was ground in an interpretivism epistemology (Balarabe Kura, 2015; Markula & Silk, 2011; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). The interpretivist philosophy draws on ontological relativism, which assumes ‘multiple realities’ exist and are socially constructed, malleable, and dependent on an individual’s psychosocial and contextual experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011; Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Caddick, 2012; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). The epistemological assumptions of interpretivism are based on social constructionism, which embraces knowledge as a product of relational interactions and not simply ‘out there’ (Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Caddick, 2012, p. 61). The interactional assumption of knowledge development aligned with the aim to understand the varied role muscularity played in the participants multiple identities. Additionally, drawing on social constructionism meant that the researcher’s values and involvement in the research process facilitated the data collection.

Situational context

The ethnography took place at two independently owned gyms in separate [West Yorkshire] towns. One, referred to as Cast Iron, housed established powerlifting and strong man training subcultures. The second site, Revival, was as health club and had a broader agenda, accommodating members looking to lose weight and exercise for health reasons as well as a variety of muscle-oriented trainers (recreational lifters, physique enhancers, sporting athletes, and both competitive and non-competitive bodybuilders). Over both sites there were approximately 150 and 350 yearly members respectively, all able to choose from a range of membership rates from £20.75 to £29.75 per month, along with a large number of pay-as-you-go users. Men predominantly used Cast Iron, with a small number of women inhabiting the gym floor. Revival demonstrated a more balanced demographic regarding sex, with women intermingling the men in the weights areas of the gym despite having an exclusive

ladies-only area. At both gyms, individuals from different social backgrounds and professions were observed and interviewed (see [Table 1](#))

Interview procedure

Audio-recorded, semi-structured, interviews with 11 of the gym characters were conducted. Each interview ranged from 30 to 90 min and were conducted at a time and place of the participant's choice. The interview settings varied with some taking place in the quiet staff rooms or corners at both gyms, or in Revival's open coffee lounge. Additionally, some participants would email [initials] any extra thoughts that arose from the meetings.

The formal interviews were semi-structured, with the aim of eliciting rich narratives around the individuals' experiences of the weight training culture and the underlying meanings they attached to building muscle. Each interview covered a range of specific topics that were informed by the capital and identity-related literature (e.g. masculine capital; Edwards et al., 2017, ICM; Côté, 2016) and the participants' own beliefs and bodily self-perceptions. During the interviews, an active-listener approach was adopted to allow the content to emerge naturally and minimise any researcher dominance, which also aided the flow of the interview. Rapport and relationships between [initials] and participants were built over time through his presence at the gyms, leading to more insightful and comprehensive interviews, revealing more personal and rich narratives.

Informal conversations also occurred which were often initiated during training sessions, at the reception desks, or after spotting another member (supporting someone during a specific exercise for safety). These conversations would often start with discussions of training routines and motivations, but sometimes provided rich insight into bodily perceptions and deeper contextual meanings to their muscular projects.

Narrative analysis

When analysing the interviews, thematic narrative analysis was used with the goal of exploring the 'told' content and 'what's' of individuals' shared experiences (Reissman, 2008, p. 58; Smith, 2016). Using a thematic approach allowed the identification of central and common elements in the events that shaped their experiences and meanings (Smith, 2016). Thematic narrative analysis focuses on specific stories and accounts to make sense of the 'events and cognitions' shared by individuals, which can then be theorised across large data sets (Reissman, 2008, p. 58; Smith, 2016).

The initial analysis involved narrative indwelling, whereby [initials] immersed himself in the participants' stories, reading them several times, listening to the audio recordings, and use inductive coding to generate initial notes, themes, and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith, 2016, p. 234). This process encouraged [initials] to think with the stories and identify a core narrative theme that participants constructed to frame their interaction with the gym environment and muscularity. Additionally, to facilitate the identification of narrative types, we applied and adapted a series of questions proposed by Böhm (2004; what, who, how, when, why, by what means, and for what reason). These questions were tailored to the current study's aims; what

is the importance of muscularity? Who is impacted by their muscularity? How does muscularity impact their lives/identities? When does muscularity impact their lives/identities? Why does it have such an impact? What strategies do they undertake to optimise muscularity? What is the purpose for optimising muscularity?

Throughout the analytical process we adopted an iterative and abductive approach, moving between the data, codes, and existing theoretical concepts to construct the selective codes. Abduction involves ‘imaginatively thinking about intriguing findings’ (Charmaz, 2009, p. 137) and ‘creatively inferencing’ findings to create a situational fit between the data and theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 168). Being theoretically sensitive without being committed to preconceived theories is key to abduction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) and allowed us to be open and bring a broad theoretical background to the emerging findings and coding process. Specifically, the abductive analysis aimed to draw on multiple theories to stimulate new theoretical contributions and concepts, such as the narrative typologies identified in the current study. The analysis of the data and the development of the current narrative typologies were informed identity-related theories, such as identity capital (Côté, 2016), identity performance (Goffman, 1955, 1959), and identity mastery (Sampson, 1978).

The analysis revealed three narrative types (internalist, illusionist, and promoter), which had three distinct goals (themes) that underpinned them; self-empowerment, self-protection, and self-advertisement respectively (see Figure 1).

Findings and discussion

The current findings demonstrate the identity-related meanings the current individuals assigned to their muscular desires and behaviours. Investing in weight training accrued both tangible (e.g. physical strength, muscularity) and intangible (e.g. self-esteem, coping strategies) capital (Côté, 2016), which, in line with the ICM, facilitated the

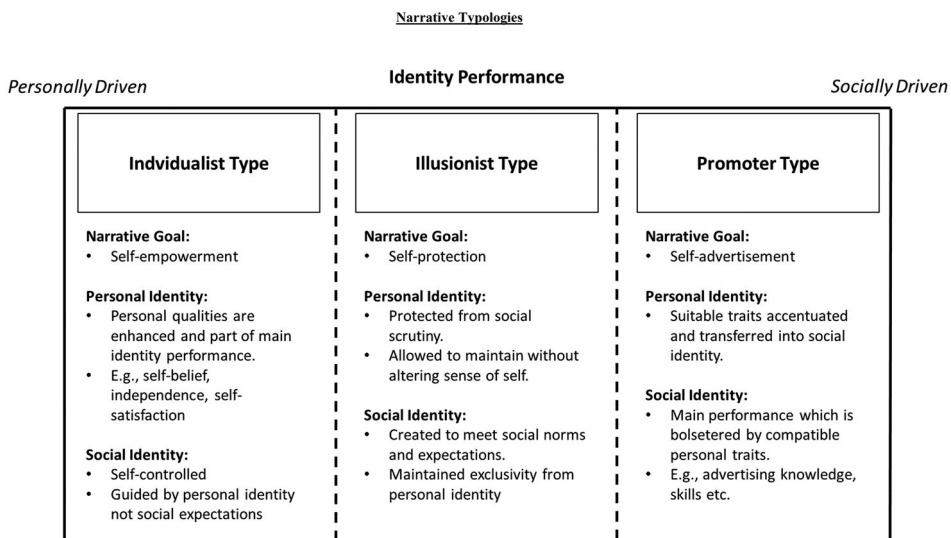


Figure 1. Outline of narrative typologies for muscularity's role in identity performance.

creation and enactment of successful and coherent identity performances in various aspects of life. Specifically, like Goffman's (1959) frontstage (social) and backstage (personal) identities and Sampson's (1978) identity mastery theory, the current participants drew on their muscularity and the associated identity capital to negotiate their personal and social identities within their overarching identity performances.

Three narrative typologies (individualist, illusionist, and promoter) that framed the participants' identity performances were identified in the current study, with the accrued identity capital facilitating self-empowerment, self-protection, or self-promotion respectively. These narrative typologies share similarities with the proposed motivations in the existing research, such as empowerment (Walters & Hefferon, 2020), compensation (Klein, 1993) and promotion (Harvey et al., 2014), that also aim to build identity capital and achieve a coherent identity. Adopting the current narratives allowed the participants to achieve successful and coherent identity performances within given contexts. The following discussions integrate and contextualise the narratives within existing research.

Individualist type

Two women (Annie and Leanne), but no men, expressed this narrative type, which may reflect the current sample but does not necessarily imply a gender difference, but could inform future exploration. The themes of the individualist type were self-empowerment and independence, which were internally driven, and focused on enhancing their personal, backstage, identity (Goffman, 1959). Enhancing personal identities allowed a perception that social images were more self-controlled, meaning the individuals could reflect their 'true self' socially (frontstage; Goffman, 1959), with less need to conform to instilled social norms or seek external validation. Muscularity, weight training, and increased physical strength formed tangible capital that empowered the individuals and increased their intangible capital, such as self-belief, independence, and self-satisfaction, which all facilitated coherent and successful performances across multiple identities.

The narrative explains how a commitment to weight training and the resultant strong body project provided identity capital that enhanced a personal sense of self and perception of capabilities, which allowed the individuals to construct a coherent identity performance across different facets of life as Leanne described: '[Weight training] has showed me I can achieve things I didn't think I would be able to do. I now use the same determination and positive approach to other areas of my life.'

Similarly, Annie expressed the impact powerlifting and her strength had on her personal capabilities, but also the ability to create a personal identity performance that was not dictated by traditional social norms or expectations:

It's not just you come into the gym and do your weight training...[powerlifting] has just made me realise what I am capable of I suppose...I don't feel like I need validation off anybody else anymore...I think most people will realise that they want to be more than what they are socially supposed to be, like a mum, or a wife... I'm a single mother...I want him [her son] to see me as a strong person, and that I can achieve these things [strength and independence], and that his mum is probably stronger than most men are (Annie, Cast Iron).

Similar to existing research, Annie reflects how weight training and muscular development, women offered an escape from traditional social ideals and a chance to rebel against restrictive feminine ideals (Edwards et al., 2022; Lyng, 2005; Worthen & Baker, 2016). Furthermore, it is apparent that for both women objective strength improvements and intangible effects of training provided the capital for to renegotiate their identities, create a 'different view of themselves' (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 416). This demonstrates how investing in such body work and muscular projects increased a sense of control, accomplishment, and personal enhancement that could be translated into the women's identities and wider aspects of their lives (Bunsell, 2013; Edwards et al., 2022; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009, 2014; Walters & Hefferon, 2020; Worthen & Baker, 2016), as Leanne described:

I am now a totally different person. The effects of that 'different person' who has new-found confidence, energy, determination and drive made me rethink a number of areas of my life which I hadn't previously had the courage to face (Leanne, Revival).

A strong and functional body provided Leanne with control over her identity performance, which created a new sense of security over her life and provided her with the personal capabilities to counter any challenging events that may threaten her identity:

When I doubt myself, or am finding things difficult, I remind myself that if I can achieve what I have done through my training and apply that same determination and effort... The discipline, determination and effort required [to build strength] is something I draw on hugely. Frankly before I started working out this way, I was rather an emotional mess, but not anymore. I can still have emotional issues to deal with, but I don't allow myself to get overwhelmed. It can be hard but feeling stronger in body and mind helps enormously (Leanne, Revival).

Annie also explained how her strong and muscular body project allowed her to control her identity performance and 'be different'. Although social aspects were still important in these women's identities, they constructed a performance through their body projects that did not need to conform to traditional expectations, as Annie explained:

I've just accepted that it's a good way to be different [being muscular and strong] because everyone else is just holding themselves back, trying to play [traditional] roles, rather than being themselves...the woman's always [expected to be] the small, weak, one kind of thing... [for some women] it's [weight training] almost the fear of stepping out of those social norms for sure (Annie, Cast Iron).

Some research describes a socially induced 'glass ceiling' on women's physical strength (Dworkin, 2001) and a fear of becoming 'too muscular' (Angier, 1999, p. 293) or 'looking too much like a guy' (Krane et al., 2004, p. 320). Additionally, the act of weight training and bodybuilding is often labelled as a masculine activity and therefore women involving themselves in such activities has been perceived as deviant and stigmatic (Chananie et al., 2012; Worthen & Baker, 2016). These social perceptions mean that weight training women are required to negotiate the 'edge' of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity (Bell, 2008; Worthen & Baker, 2016). The current findings, however, echo contemporary research showing that weightlifting

and a muscular body project can offer women liberation and empower them to challenge essentialist and oppressive feminine ideals (Edwards et al., 2022; Walters & Hefferon, 2020; Worthen & Baker, 2016). The act of pushing the body to its limits and developing strength allowed the current women to renegotiate and reframe the body as a personal process rather than a social object (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Walters & Hefferon, 2020). Reducing the social focus, through an individualist narrative, may help reduce the prominence of gender boundaries and challenge the gendered logic traditionally applied to women's bodies (Coen et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2022; Walters & Hefferon, 2020).

The individualist narrative type demonstrates a focus on weight training and muscular strength as valuable sources of identity capital that enhance one's perceptions of their personal capabilities. Enhancing personal elements of identity allowed coherent identity performances that could negotiate challenges, adversity, and societal norms, in ways that avoid their disempowering effects and provide a sense of internal control in all aspects of life. Identifying this narrative type provides an additional interpretive lens to understand identity-related reasoning for seeking strength and muscularity's role in constructing, mastering, and performing identities. Such findings may specifically help future studies explore the shifting female ideals and the more socially visible engagement of women in muscle building activities.

Illusionist type

Three participants (two male and one female; Milo, Loki, and Mohini respectively) expressed an illusionist narrative. The illusionist narrative had a goal of self-protection, but unlike the previous narrative there was no predominant focus on one aspect of identity, it was more about maintaining exclusivity between the personal and social. Muscularity helped mask the personal qualities perceived to be incompatible or undesirable within one's social identity performance. This allowed individuals to maintain their personal sense of self and worth, whilst creating an illusion for their social identity that met social expectations and resulted in a successful and coherent identity performance.

The two men, Milo and Loki, made the link between muscularity, lifting weights, and hegemonic masculinity and how building a muscular physique gave control over a masculine image and could compensate for not having an 'alpha' or masculine personality'. Specifically, their responses echo existing research that express a muscular and fit physique as tangible capital that carries intangible connotations of power, dominance, aggression, and self-assurance and facilitates a hegemonic masculine performance (Bridges, 2009; Klein, 1993, 1995; Monaghan, 1999; Wagner, 2017). For example, Milo alludes to masculinity's prominence in men's identities and how muscularity allows him to portray desirable characteristics:

[As a man] it's almost like the centre of everything, in some respects, is masculinity...the guys who are big they project the whole alpha male...everyone can't be the alpha male, they can't be. But everyone wants to be the alpha male...some people can be the alpha male in their personality without ever being big. [Through] their whole personality...I definitely would say that I am still insecure when it comes to my alpha maleness. Because I am not the loud aggressive one...you can actually control looking more like it [alpha male] this way, the rest of your traits may not go there [masculine] but you can actually

sort of control that aspect of it [muscular image]...So much is visual as well. So much of everything we do. Like you analyse a person in what 0.3seconds or something? It's the first thing, you will look at someone and it's the first point of call.

Loki epitomised the creation of a masculine image through his physique. He was a large successful powerlifter and well-known figure around Cast Iron. Many of the gym members described Loki as arrogant and 'big-headed', but also commented on the assertion and control his 'phenomenal' physique and 'ridiculous' strength brought to his role as a powerlifter. Like Milo, however, Loki described muscularity as a resource that created an illusion of masculinity that was not who he felt he was. Instead, he revealed a more timid and introverted personal identity:

I would say there is a lot masculinity attached to weightlifting... if there is any word to describe me it is not masculine...I am not a very alpha personality... an alpha personality is someone who is very dominant in their actions and psychology, the sort of person who becomes the centre of attention and thrives off it...[Dominance] is something that needs to come across sometimes because I do a lot of teaching and coaching in different things [school sport and powerlifting] and it's beneficial...but it's not something that comes naturally to me or that I thrive off.....[Being big and muscular] helps convey me as a more dominant personality, but it doesn't really affect how I am...

Echoing existing research (e.g. Coffey, 2016; Wagner, 2017), the muscular body, practices, and physical capabilities (e.g. being able to squat over 200 kg for multiple repetitions) Loki demonstrated in the gym and the resultant arrogance and dominance were all part of a masculine identity performance. This masculine performance was something that benefitted his coaching identity outside the gym (e.g. controlling and managing his athletes) and his identity as a powerlifter within it. Engaging in an illusionist narrative maintained a coherent identity story despite contrasting personal and social expectations and performances.

Existing literature discusses muscular development and physique enhancement as a compensatory resource for men's masculine identities (e.g. Klein, 1993). When one's body is perceived to be misaligned with a social identity performance or does not represent desired capabilities, some individuals may compensate by developing a muscular physique through excessive training, substance use, and risky decisions (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Edwards et al., 2017; Giazitzoglu, 2018; Klein, 1993). Engaging in such behaviours and increasing muscularity allows the men to earn 'man points' or masculine capital, which also recompenses any lack of masculine traits or marginalised behaviours, such as weakness, low self-esteem, and homosexuality (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Edwards et al., 2017). Compensation, however, suggests a loss, defect, or deficiency, but Milo and Loki's narratives did not refer to perceived defects or look at their personal qualities with negativity. Instead, the narrative was a way of creating an illusion of a different self that was compatible with social expectations and protected and separated their true selves. This echoes Goffman's (1959, p. 57) metaphoric term the 'mask' which represents one's ability to deceive in face-to-face interactions, without needing to 'become somebody else' (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102). For example, Loki explained, 'I was going to compare it to looking at something through a lens, the lens can change how something is perceived without any change to the object itself'.

The illusionist narrative, however, does seem to also offer compensatory benefits through muscularity, which echoes the aforementioned existing literature. Additionally, the current findings also demonstrated muscularity's role illusional role beyond masculinity and allow people to differentiate their social images and personal traits in other identities. For example, Mohini also alluded to masking and how the development of her physical strength allowed to her to 'hide' her personal sense of insecurity and timidity, and project a confident and robust image in her role as a lecturer:

I do feel that being in the gym and lifting weights really does add something to me. Like I often doubt myself, I get anxious really easily, and just generally worry about what people think, but that's just me I can't change that...When I am in the gym, this doesn't matter, my strength does away with it all...Being strong and looking strong adds an extra layer to me, it covers up the real me. That shy woman. Which is great when I have to stand up and engage with a room full of students, I can be confident, I can tell them what to do, and they buy into me...So yeah, the lifting and strength gives me extra layers to protect the real me.

The illusionist type enabled the coexistence of contrasting personal and social elements of identities without hindering the individuals' sense of self. Specifically, muscularity allowed individuals to navigate different social requirements, images, and expectations despite these sometimes conflicting with their personal and core values, characteristics, and beliefs. The current findings demonstrate a narrative theme that frames muscularity as form of identity capital that can act as a protective resource, creates a desired illusion, and allows one to perform multiple identities across ever-changing social contexts whilst maintaining their sense of 'true self' (Mohini) or 'real me' (Loki).

Promoter type

Six men discussed a promoter narrative theme (three health and fitness professionals, two high school teachers, and one IT worker). When adopting the promoter narrative, participants had a goal of self-advertisement, which was externally driven by their social identities and the socially instilled connotations associated with muscularity. Despite the social drive, there was more coherence between the personal and social aspects of identity than in the previous two narrative types whereby the perceived personal capabilities that complemented a social identity performance were accentuated and transferred. This coherence reflects one's ability to draw on personal identity to add to one's social identity performance (Goffman, 1959). Muscularity, strength, and weight training provided tangible capital that symbolised and advertised the intangible qualities (e.g. knowledge, commitment, dedication) that were suited to the individuals' social identity performances.

The health and fitness professionals demonstrated how the development and maintenance of appropriate bodies is central to their professional identity performance (e.g. PTs and S&C coaches; Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013). Specifically, muscularity formed tangible identity capital that highlighted their knowledge, skill set, and competencies. These findings echo existing literature suggesting the body acts as a 'business card' and an expression of expertise among personal trainers, which helps to attracts potential clients (Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013, p. 18), as Thor (gym owner and PT at Revival) explained:

Owning this place means that you have to look like you know what you are doing...You know, if a financial advisor turned up in a Ferrari I suppose you'd make damn sure you listened to him. If he's turned up in an Escort diesel you'd think well, you know, what sort of advice is this fella' going to give me...It's the same in here... They can tell from looking at me that I have been through the process, I have learned all the things that I suppose they need to learn that would be advantageous to them....So, for me I suppose it's commercially important to be muscular...it makes for a successful business, which puts money in the account and then the business can function so for me that's important (Thor, Revival).

Similarly, Ronnie (bodybuilder at Revival and nutritionist) described how the body work behind their physique was also valuable for their identity performances:

I think it [being muscular] just puts you, like as an expert [referring to health and nutrition knowledge]...Walking it [being muscular and in shape] and talking it, you have got to be your own business card. So, what people see is two guys [him and his business partner Lou] that are in shape, that is a much better advertisement...it shows that we know what we are talking about and that we put the hard work in ourselves, you know practice what we preach.

Engaging in aesthetic labour and body work allowed the participants to embody necessary competencies and accrue identity capital (Harvey et al., 2014; Shilling, 2004). Without engaging in the body work and investing in their own body projects the current individuals' knowledge and abilities may have been questioned by potential consumers (Harvey et al., 2014).

A muscular physique and a commitment to exercise, such as weight training, however, can also project positive messages and characteristics that transcend beyond the gym and health and fitness environment (Doğan, 2015). For example, two of the current men (Dorian and Arnold) discussed how their muscular body projects and associated identity capital helped them display desirable personal qualities in their social identities as high school teachers. Dorian, specifically, described his muscularity's ability to communicate positive messages about his personal qualities (e.g. professionalism, hard work, and confidence), which allowed him to generate instant positive impressions within his role as a high school teacher:

As part of my teaching consultancy role, I am very much aware of fitness, muscularity, and strength and what this lends to my appearance to others, as these people [Department for Education] don't know me, and I haven't had time to build up relationships with them. In that sense, strength and muscularity allows me to rapidly say something about myself to new people...I believe it [his physique] speaks to my disciplined professionalism, as it can be seen as a manifestation of my maintained routines and hard work. (Dorian, recreational weightlifter, Revival)

Similarly, Arnold perceived that his teaching role required control, ability to demand respect, and confident management of others (i.e. his students). A large muscular physique allowed him to project these personal capabilities into his social identity performance as a competent teacher:

It [muscular physique] has a massive effect...I can walk in and they [pupils] will instantly shut up and listen. It's like a respect, or fear, I don't know but I can stamp authority on it...Sounds big headed but like I said, I love that I can walk into a room and people, the kids will just shut up, and I can get control and get that respect. (Arnold, Revival)

Within the promoter narrative, a muscular physique (i.e. tangible capital) accentuated the individuals' possession of intangible capital—which represented their personal qualities (e.g. knowledge, confidence, and control). This promotional interaction between their personal qualities and social images achieved successful mastery and performance of their different identities, which allowed for an optimal navigation of their occupational roles.

The current participants conveyed a promotional role of muscularity that aligned with the idea of managerial athleticism and advertising one's possessed skills and capabilities that meet socially desired qualities and enhance one's identity performance. As a result, those who inhabit an athletic body and engage in associated body work (e.g. healthy eating and training) are seen to have higher capabilities to cope, manage stress, and tolerate high work demands (Johansson et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2015). This was expressed by Dwayne:

Like the work environment I am in, it's a very heated environment so it's a lot of, you have to present yourself...I think generally if I can look physically fit or present myself in a suit... look like I am carved out of stone...in a career sense [that] will instantly, my boss will assume that I'm just hardworking you know. Hardworking because I've obviously kept myself in shape. Er, I am well presented so that again that goes with hard work or conditioning. So [I am] organised and hardworking. So, before he even knows anything about me, you know what I can actually do in my job, the guy's got a great impression of me. Whether I can do the job or not by that point he has probably about 80%, his decisions are made whether I'm worth the time.

Similarly, Dorian echoed the teaching benefits that constructing an ideal executive appearance (i.e. athletic and muscular) had and how it created the impression of an active 'doer' who has 'high energy', which is admired by those around them (Johansson et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2015, p. 12):

I also believe this [physique] transmits a message to the students that you are active, lively and switched on, rather than the image transmitted of a tired, inactive and distracted teacher. Students tend to mirror their teachers, who often act as role models, so being in shape helps to make this a positive environment for students. (Dorian, recreational weightlifter, Revival)

The valorisation of an athletic and muscular physique in various contexts seems to create a culture whereby overweight, flabby, bodies are condemned (Giazitzoglu, 2022; Johansson et al., 2017). Some executive environments appear to 'correct' those whose bodies deviate from the muscular, toned, athletic ideal (Johansson et al., 2017, p. 1155), which serves to fuel the potential stereotype that overweight bodies lack seriousness, can be a source of alienation, and are bemoaned in some social contexts (Giazitzoglu, 2024;; Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2015). Arnold alluded to this stereotype in his teaching context and the perceived impact this had on their teaching capabilities:

...you see other teachers walking around who aren't in shape, you know a bit fat and out of shape, they often struggle to keep control and the kids don't always seem to respond to them...Having a good physique, and being bigger helps me portray my ability to do this, without it I wouldn't be able to bring that [into the classroom].

The suggestion of a promoter narrative theme builds on existing research (e.g. Coquet et al., 2016; Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021; Perrott, 2019) by offering an insight into how muscularity accentuates desirable personal qualities in people's social identity performances both inside and outside of the gym and fitness domains. The muscular promotion of desirable qualities in an individual's occupational identity, may help explain why muscularity becomes validated in some environments and why individuals then feel an increased feeling of competency (Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2021).

Conclusions

The current findings build on the framing of muscularity as various sources of embodied capital in existing literature (e.g. masculine, physical, and bodily; de Visser et al., 2009; Shilling, 2013; Wacquant, 1995) by suggesting a more flexible interpretation of muscularity as identity capital that is applicable in various social contexts. This broad versatility suggested that interpreting muscularity as a form of identity capital avoids imposing narrow and restrictive cultural assumptions, narrative, and connotations (e.g. masculine construction) onto the desire for muscularity. For example, framing muscularity as masculine capital or physical capital in the gym, may predetermine muscularity as a resource exclusive to those contexts or identities. The current study, however, demonstrates that muscularity can be versatile and coherently benefit a range of social environments and identities, not just the gym or men.

Identifying the three identity narratives and their different narrative goals provides a lens to interpret and better understand the meaningful affinities for muscularity and commitments to enhancing one's physique. The findings strengthen the concept that body projects are an integral part of identity and identity performance, but they also contribute to existing literature by offer a wider picture of the symbolic value muscularity and weight training has in multiple identities and contexts, such as gender, health and fitness, and occupation.

Additionally, the current narrative findings capture muscularity's tangible and intangible effects that contribute to coherent and successful identity performances. Specifically, the current participants appeared to align their muscularity with appropriate narrative types in attempt to successfully control and master the personal and social elements of their identities in multiple contexts (Côté, 2016; Goffman, 1959; Sampson, 1978). These findings support existing suggestions that a muscular physique is a resource that helps with production and display of self (Smith Maguire, 2008) and enhancement of self-perceptions, such as empowerment, self-esteem, and self-worth (e.g. Edwards et al., 2022; Klein, 1993; Walters & Hefferon, 2020). The narratives also capture how muscularity does not simply 'cause' these intangible effects but is entwined and synonymous with them. Thus, muscularity becomes a symbolic representation of the intangible capabilities and characteristics achieved through muscular body work.

The current findings may inform future research of the potential in exploring muscularity through an identity capital lens, and its potential benefit in aiding identity construction and performance in multiple broader contexts, which may help transition from an apparent gender and fitness focus in the muscularity and identity literature.

Additionally, the current narratives are only three of potentially many, so future work could build on the current study and explore additional narratives that may frame people's muscular desires and their maintained investment in muscularity. Such exploration may inform a move away from a focus on muscularity within an inadequacy and compensatory narrative and increase the awareness of other roles of muscularity, such as promotion and personal growth. The current study might be seen to suggest that the narratives were exclusive to the individuals, but the ability to move between narratives was not explored and so future research could investigate the flexibility of narrative use as people move between contexts.

Limitations

The current study explored the narratives in two specific gyms, whose demographic may differ from other gyms. The narratives in the current study may be some of many and represent the socially constructed nature, diversity, and complexity of muscular desires. The findings, however, do inform the future research and inspire an exploration of other weight training subcultures and the personal stories they may shape. A second limitation was the potential for withholding of information due to the potential sensitive and personal nature of the topic area. When exploring muscularity and bodily concerns and desires, especially in men, the issue of emotional integrity may limit the findings. Traditional societal views may restrict people's willingness to share their true feelings and desires through a fear of being judged or marginalised, which could encourage them to withhold or exaggerate information and experiences (Shepherd & Rickard, 2012). Prolonged engagement with the individuals as part of the ethnographic study developed rapport and helped build trusting relationships, which reduced the participants' fear of judgement.

Similarly, all members of the research team had their own biases regarding muscularity, for example during the interviews the first author's investment and interest in muscularity may have unintentionally influenced the participants' accounts. The aim of narrative analysis, however, focuses on subjective, multiple, realities and the social co-construction of stories (Papathomas, 2016). The researcher's interests, therefore, were potentially beneficial in constructing individuals' stories and perceptions through shared experiences and muscular desires. The co-construction benefits became evident during participant-interviewer interactions, for example by sharing his own experiences [initials] encouraged the participants to further share their own stories and agree or challenge [initials]. Excessive researcher partiality was minimised by emphasising individual experiences and expressing interest in the participants' own experiences.

Implications

The current study demonstrates the different roles muscularity and weight training plays in supporting various identity performances. This could help inform professionals who work in sport, health, and exercise settings of the need to embrace muscular desires, body image concerns, and related activities as integral parts of peoples' identities. In doing, so we can provide adequate support for individuals who may

display maladaptive or dysfunctional behaviours in relation to their bodily perceptions and practices by ensuring interventions align with the narratives that house their motivations and desires.

Additionally, understanding how muscularity can aid identity negotiation in various contexts, it may inform employers and managers of the added benefit of allowing time and space for weight training and exercise. Specifically, embracing the importance and utility of body work in people's identity performances may help optimise their 'sense of self' and allow them to successfully manage their identities within occupational contexts, thus optimising positivity, self-worth, and productivity.

To conclude, the current study demonstrates muscularity's role, as identity capital, in multiple identity performances and contexts and proposes three narratives that highlight the potentially positive effects of muscularity and weight training on people's sense of self and social and psychological development.

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